



Wars, Honours and Heroes

It was National Day, 9 August. After assiduously reading the newspapers, I had this sudden, unexplained and irresistible urge to visit one of the largest bookshops in town and spend the late morning in the War History Section. It has one of the best war history book collections in Singapore.

I wanted to look for books on the Chinese Civil War (1945 – 1959). Strangely, there was none. Maybe that war was a little too esoteric, so I looked for books on the China-Japan War (1931 – 1945), which included World War 2. There were numerous titles on World War 2, but there wasn't any on China's involvement in it. One may be forgiven if one thought China was not involved in the War by going through the many shelves of war books.

And it dawned on me that the collection of history books had much in common with something I had read earlier in the day and the saying that "In war, the first casualty is truth."

World War 2 was not just about Germans and the Blitz, the Americans and British fighting through North Africa, Sicily and Normandy to Berlin. Neither was it just about Pearl Harbour, Midway, and the Atomic Bomb.

There were many more bloodier, massive battles NOT fought by the British and the Americans. The Germans suffered their greatest defeats under the Russians in Moscow and Stalingrad, without which, there would undoubtedly have been no El Alamein, Sicily, or D-Day. The Japanese too were held in China and Burma. For every amphibious landing in Europe, there were two others in the Pacific, and the Americans and Japanese fought heroic battles in places such as Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Leyte Gulf, etc. Only, these little forsaken islands in the Pacific were less well-known than European war landmarks.

Going through the shelves, there was very little about Russia's involvement in the War and nothing on the Chinese. Nothing much too on the heroism of the Germans and Japanese in battle. And nothing could be further from the truth.

GREAT LEADERS FROM THE PAST

But at least, I found one book: "*Panzer Leader*" by Heinz Guderian. This is a book I had read years before. It's a classic written by the father of modern German tank warfare. The man, whose other seminal work was "*Achtung Panzer!*", gave rise to the military doctrine behind the Blitzkrieg. "*Panzer Leader*" was actually written by Guderian when he was in jail, and was a memoir of his experience in World War 2.

The contribution of Guderian to modern ground warfare cannot be overestimated. He had transformed what was the prevalent post-World War 1 thinking of positional warfare, to that of shock, speed and penetration (this is 65 years before the so-called "shock and awe", folks). He changed war.

And how did his masters treat him? In the Siege of Moscow, Guderian had concluded that the German Army had overextended itself, and their worst enemy: winter, had settled in. The Army was completely unequipped for Russian winter, exhausted, and for every German injured or killed by Russian

troops, there were two incapacitated by the cold. Although the Army was less than 50 miles from Moscow, they had to withdraw and to resupply, recuperate and reorganise. His pleas fell on deaf ears in higher command (which of course, as we all know, is the sole privilege of staff officers: to turn a deaf ear to field commanders). He flew to East Prussia to meet Adolf Hitler, to tell him the truth of the Eastern Front. Hitler also denied his request and ordered him to dig and encamp around Moscow (where the ice was so hard even the stakes and shovels were dented by it). He was later removed from command when he refused to obey orders. But as truth would have it, he was right and half the German Army was wiped out when the Russians counterattacked.

He was recalled in 1944 to be the Chief of General Staff of the Army, but by then, all was lost and the Germans lost the war.

And history is littered with such examples of great men treated badly by war and little people in power.

Guderian's contemporary, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, was forced to commit suicide by Hitler. The "Desert Fox" was legendary in war, winning battles in North Africa, with limited supplies and troops against a more numerous and better equipped enemy. Even Churchill had praise for him in the House of Commons in 1942. But he met a terrible end.

Able German field commanders were not the only accursed lot. Arguably, the greatest American field commander was General George S Patton Jr (immortalised by George C Scott in the movie "*Patton*"). He never got his fifth star when less illustrious men did. In fact, he never took part in the D-Day landings (because he had slapped a "malingerer" in Italy and was reprimanded and made to apologise publicly). He was only given command of the Third Army to execute a breakout from the coastal areas around Normandy where Bradley (who got his fifth star in the Korean War) and Montgomery had been stuck for weeks. And breakout he did. He also saved the entire Western Front when he anticipated the German offensive in the Battle of the Bulge, and turned his army of 300,000 men 90 degrees and travelled 100 miles in only three days in winter to relieve the 101st Airborne Division in Bastogne.

Of course, the worst and most tragic fates befell those in the most conspiring, closed and insecure of societies, and we need to look no further than the Chinese.

Zhang Xueliang, the patriotic warlord who kidnapped Chiang Kai-Shek in the Xian Incident in order to get Chiang to cooperate with the Communists against their common enemy – the Japanese – at a time when Chiang was more bent on wiping out the Chinese Communists than in fighting the Japanese. Zhang was never forgiven by Chiang and he spent some 50 years under house arrest under the Kuomintang government in a prison cell.

More tragic still is Field Marshal Peng Dehuai, the Number 2 of the People Liberation Army (PLA). Together with Chu Teh, he is seen to be one of the greatest PLA generals who developed the PLA's three-phase guerrilla military doctrine. (Like Guderian,

The Problem of Speaking Up as a Medical Association

There is a movement to encourage more openness nowadays. Remake Singapore. Speak up. Voice your concerns. If your intent is good and patriotic, there are practically no OB markers.

But life is not so simple when you are a national professional organisation. There are some things that should be said, but cannot be said. There are some things that are said, but need not be said. There are many things that are not said, because they must never be said.

There are really very few things that can, and should be said in real life – especially in public. Because face is important in an Asian society and authority IS authority.

So, when the powers that are, ask for feedback, a national medical association has to weigh many factors. Not because its leaders are cowards. But because we have to ask, "Does giving feedback serve the members' interests best?"

Can giving feedback, solicited or otherwise, be detrimental to the association's interests, one may ask? That really depends on the motives of the party requesting for feedback.

Two examples come to mind, and it does not surprise that it comes from good old complicated China.

The first comes from China in the Chin Dynasty, more than 2,500 years ago in the reign of the second emperor of Chin (i.e. the son of the first Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, who unified China and founded the Chin Dynasty). His Prime Minister wanted to overthrow him. So, he called a party with the Emperor and the officials present, and he displayed a deer. He made the remark, "What a beautiful horse!" The Emperor said instinctively, "That is not a horse, it's a deer!" Some of the officials echoed the same sentiments aloud. Some kept quiet. The Prime Minister made a note of those who reinforced the Emperor's remark and knew as such these were NOT the Prime Minister's supporters. Over the next few years, he got these people killed one by one, thereby slowly wiping out the Emperor's support base.

There is a Chinese proverb for this event: 指鹿为马, which commonly means an act that distorts/conceals the truth. To me, the proverb has an additional meaning of an act to flush out your enemies.

The second example was more recent in the last century in the 1950s. Chairman Mao said that the new Communist regime needed the support and input of new ideas from intellectuals: academics, scientists, artists, and others, beyond the Chinese Communists Party's usual support base of peasants. The leadership then made overtures to these groups as part of Mao's "Great Leap Forward", in addition to other more publicised economic moves to form communes to increase agricultural and industrial production (the latter ended with widespread famine). The call for more openness and feedback was coined "Let a hundred flowers bloom." – 百花齐放. The intellectuals voiced their opinions on how China should progress, quite sincerely. However, later, the Chinese leadership cracked down hard on the very intellectuals who had voiced their thoughts earlier on. Hence, the cynical alteration of "Let a hundred flowers bloom, but debts are settled after autumn." – 百花齐放, 秋后算账.

So, feedback is a double-edged sword. When members ask an association to give more feedback to the powers that are, they must first think, how will the message be taken. If the message is taken wrongly or in bad faith, then the effect may be the exact opposite of what is desired. When some powerful body asks for feedback, an association must make a call: is this a sincere call or an attempt to flush out enemies?

Because dialogue at the institutional level is definitely a lot more complicated than an individual-to-individual conversation, and the stakes are a lot higher as well. Members should try to understand the difficulties of their association's leadership, and be patient with them when they appear rather reticent. ■

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he too changed war.) Victorious in numerous wars, including pushing Macarthur back to the 38th parallel, he was stripped of all his posts by Chairman Mao for his criticism of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" (which we all now know was a bona fide disaster). He died in ignominy in a prison cell.

Lastly, the most tragic is the famous Yue Fei of the Southern Sung Dynasty. On the verge of liberating Northern Sung, the all-victorious Yue was betrayed by both his traitorous Prime Minister and his insecure Emperor. He and his sons were executed for treason that they never committed.

FORGOTTEN HEROES OF TODAY

And so, the present is not that different from the past. Wars are remembered in a way most expedient to some parties with something to hide and those with the most to lose with the passing of the status quo. And wars often honour and

glorify some that are the least deserving. Wars may even discriminate against the able, the honest and the dedicated, especially when they speak the truth and against their inept superiors.

For those of you who have fought wars out in the field, led men and women into life-and-death situations and returned, and seen blood curdle in your comrades as life left them, you'll know what I mean.

But we can rest consoled that all the above paradigm examples of great leaders on the battlefield – though they be forgotten, and even maligned by men in power pregnant with deceit, fear and pomposity – are respected and revered by the common folk as heroes. The medals bestowed by vacuous minds have no meaning. The conscience of the man in the street and the trust of your fellow-in-arms is the ultimate laurel.

But wars, they can recur sooner than you think. ■