

## Commentary and Reply

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### On “The Centurion Mindset and the Army’s Strategic Leader Paradigm”

Allan R. Millett

*This commentary is in response to Jason W. Warren’s article “The Centurion Mindset and the Army’s Strategic Leader Paradigm” published in the Autumn 2015 issue of Parameters (vol. 45, no. 3).*

In Major Jason Warren’s thoughtful article on what he perceives as the lack of strategic vision in today’s Army general officers, I found an assertion that needs a bullet. Major Warren says the lack of combat experience or even service in France in World War I deprived World War II’s generals of an essential professional experience. The author’s precise claim is clear enough: “In 1943 the majority of the Army’s ‘elite’ senior leadership lacked combat experience prior to that conflict.” They had missed the 1918 campaign in France.

Assuming that assertion is true, I still wonder why fighting a war at the battalion level or below shapes fighting a war at the division, corps, and army level. The calculations at the strategic level are considerably different and shaped by factors far from battlefield operations.

If combat experience was so important for senior leadership, then the United States was blessed, for its wartime army, 1941-1945, had a wide number of officers in high command who had seen war at its worst in 1918. Contrary to Major Warren’s claim of inexperience—a specious claim advanced by British officers and newsmen—the wartime Army of the United States had a majority of former AEF officers directing America’s ground forces and filling the senior ranks of the USAAF.

Irritated once more by the erroneous claim about the lack of combat experience, I made a cursory study of the careers of officers who might qualify as “elite” Army leaders. I defined “elite” as officers in the rank of general and lieutenant general who exercised command responsibilities or high level staff billets at the War Department-Army Staff level and the theater, army group, army, and corps level. In my pool of “elite” generals I included major generals who commanded divisions and then moved to corps or higher levels or staff positions at the theater, army group, and army level. I have included some corps commanders who were relieved. I believe my criteria for selection, data, and analysis are appropriate. My numbers show that few of the Army’s elite missed World War I. Whether that experience made them better World War II commanders is a question of a different order and has no statistical answer. I suspect it did influence command styles, but had little or nothing to do with strategy.

The “elite” officers who missed service in the American Expeditionary Forces or those forces sent to Italy and Russia are easy to find. Certainly some can claim “elite” status as Army-influential

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leaders during and after World War II: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar N. Bradley, Matthew B. Ridgway, H. H. Arnold, Jacob L. Devers, and J. Lawton Collins. I would add Simon B. Buckner, Jr. (KIA on Okinawa), Geoffrey Keyes, Lucian K. Truscott, Ernest J. Muller, and Ira B. Eaker. Timing is everything. It is virtually impossible for anyone commissioned after June, 1918 to have been in France that fall. Most of the AEF officers went into combat in May to November, 1918, not before. Some “elite” officers, like James M. Gavin, were too young (at least in the career sense) to have served in the AEF. Although I may have excluded someone by not including them as “elite” or by not yet finding biographical data, I think this list of non-combat veterans is complete enough for initial, tentative analysis.

With a few exceptions I have counted only officers commissioned in the cavalry, artillery, and infantry, though a few officers of coast artillery, the signal corps, and the Corps of Engineers found themselves in combat. Officers of the Air Service came from many sources. The dominant source for all generals was graduation from the US Military Academy at West Point.

Second, in compiling a list of AEF veterans who became “elite” Army officers in World War II, I included not just senior commanders, but officers who held senior staff positions at the theater, army group, and army level. I did not include corps or division staff officers. Almost all of my “elite” generals ended the war at the rank of lieutenant general (even if temporary) and then served in the postwar army at that rank or higher, even if they retired in the permanent rank of major general. As for the service in the AEF, it might be tempting to exclude those who held division, corps, army, and AEF senior staff positions, but the duties of AEF staff officers certainly exposed them to danger and the pressures of decision-making under fire within the context of limited time and information. Would anyone argue that George C. Marshall did not see combat in France, though he never held a field command?

I also took care to include officers as “elite” who served in the four major theaters in the war with Japan. I have observed over time senior officers of the Army who served in that war are overlooked in accounting for service in World Wars I and II. I do not mean, of course, Douglas MacArthur or Joseph Stilwell (both AEF veterans), but officers like Stephen J. Chamberlin (USMA, 1912) who did not go to France because he managed the Hoboken, New Jersey port-of-embarkation, 1917-1918, for which he received a Distinguished Service Medal (DSM). Chamberlin served as the G-4, G-3, and Deputy C/S of the Southwest Pacific Theater, 1942-1945 (Navy Cross, three DSMs), then commanded the Fifth Army before his retirement as a lieutenant general in 1948. Yet he is not mentioned in the same breath as Generals Walter Bedell Smith (an AEF veteran) or Joseph T. McNarney (an AEF veteran).

My research to date has produced this set of statistics that correlates overseas service in World War I with “elite” Army status in World War II.

	Elite World War II Service	World War I Service Abroad
Zone of the Interior (U.S.)	4	4
United States Army Air Forces	9	4
Mediterranean Theater	11	9
European Theater	30	23
War With Japan	13	11

In assigning generals to a theater, I have credited them to the theater where their service confirmed their “elite” status (e.g. Eisenhower, Bradley, Smith, and Patton to the ETO) or in case of division commanders who became corps commanders (e.g. Truscott, Ridgway) to the theater where they assumed corps command.

At the end of the war in Europe, Eisenhower asked Bradley to compile a list of ground officers whose performance proved they were competent to command in the continuing war with Japan. Of the thirty names Bradley sent to Ike, only nine had not served in the American Expeditionary Forces, and four of these generals were too young and not yet commissioned to serve in France. The only generals who might have gone to France and did not were Collins, Eaker, Devers, and Ridgway.

Even though I will reevaluate what is an “elite” general and review the nature of a general’s World War I service, the statistics above confirm that World War I service abroad was the common experience of World War II senior general officers, not the absence of such service as asserted by Major Warren and many others. Just what effect that service had is another question that counting and categorizing cannot answer.

## The Author Replies

Jason W. Warren

I am encouraged by the number of thoughtful and positive responses that my article has inspired on Tom Ricks’ *Best Defense* blog and elsewhere, further identifying the lack of education and broadening for Army leaders. The Army has recently initiated a number of programs to produce better educated leaders, but the results are mixed. For instance, a number of colonels at the War College with PhD’s or in PhD programs have been identified for separation from the service with the ongoing force reduction. This is counterproductive and makes little sense given the renewed push to create better educated officers. Creating more officers with PhD’s is only one aspect of improving strategic development, however. The industrial-aged personnel system still mindlessly moves officers every three years regardless of individual talents, desires, or potential (and creates unnecessary expenses in an era of limited budgets). This hamstringing the broadening aspect of strategic development. Yet

no senior leader has successfully taken on the personnel bureaucracy to demand improvement.

Moreover, the Army has just cut deeply into its talent pool of combat experienced officers (a 60 percent promotion rate to lieutenant colonel this year, along with the continued separation of senior field grade officers), not only indicating the Army “value” of Loyalty is but a catchphrase, but also hampering any headquarters’ ability to perform. This was a self-inflicted wound; the Army’s leadership decided to break ranks with those who sacrificed much during the Long War, to maintain a chimera of more ready Brigade Combat Teams, whose readiness evaporates mere months after combat center rotations, when not employed. Along with reduced retirement and GI Bill benefits and stagnated income adjusted for inflation, an officer retention and recruitment crisis is looming on the not-so-distant horizon.

I also commend the esteemed military historian Allan Millett’s excellent analysis of “elite” US Army leaders’ combat experience in WWII. We are in agreement many WWII Army officers had some overseas experience and direct combat experience was not an indicator of future successful strategic leadership. I argue this point throughout the article and in the sentence immediately preceding the line Millett highlights: “The cases of Ike, Bradley, and Fredendall indicate that combat experience and pre-war training may be desirable, *but are unnecessary for adequate performance.*” The majority of “elite” Army leaders in 1943 did not have *direct* WWI combat experience. I concur with Professor Millett: many WWII generals had valuable service overseas and on the homefront during WWI; however, today, these men would not be promoted to general for failing to command in their respective maneuver branches in combat. This is another obvious shortcoming of the current Army personnel system.

Further, WWI on the Western Front was a classic linear campaign, where, unlike contemporary wars, senior headquarters and training facilities in the rear were far removed from enemy salvos and assassination attempts. There was really no appreciable difference in terms of stationing in France away from the front, and say, Fort Dix, NJ, in the United States. I referred to Walter Millis’ study from early 1943 which determined only seven of 17 senior Army leaders had experienced *direct* combat in the Great War. I have expanded Millis’ survey (including some officers mentioned in Millett’s rejoinder) in the table below, examining senior staff, theater, army, corps, and division commanders’ WWI direct combat experience. I chose to examine the year 1943 because historians widely acknowledge it as the turning point of the conflict against the Axis powers, as Millett himself argues in his monumental *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, “The period between May 1942 and July 1943 witnessed a major shift in the fortunes of war” (303). I focused on ground combat as opposed to air combat in the Army Air Corps, as my article is concerned with ground operations and today’s Army leadership. A majority of the US Army’s senior leaders participating in this shift of fortunes had no direct WWI ground combat experience, and Professor Millett and I agree this did not negatively affect Allied strategic outcomes in 1943.

General	Key Staff Positions and Combat Commands 1943	Yes Direct WWI Combat Experience	No Direct WWI Combat Experience; *AEF/Corps Staff Planner; **Rear Training/School Duty France; ***Siberian Expedition
George Marshall	War Dept	Yes	
Thomas Handy	War Dept	Yes	
Lesley McNair	War Dept		No*
Albert Wedemeyer	War Dept/CBO		No
Brehon Somervell	War Dept	Yes	
Lucius Clay	War Dept		No
Frank Andrews	ETO		No
Jacob Devers	ETO		No
Dwight D. Eisenhower	North Africa		No
Mark Clark	Italy	Yes	
Douglas MacArthur	Southwest Pacific	Yes	
Robert Eichelberger	Southwest Pacific		No***
Walter Krueger	Southwest Pacific	Yes	
Stephen Chamberlain	Southwest Pacific		No
Joseph Stillwell	CBO		No*
Simon Buckner	Alaska Defense		No
Robert Richardson	Hawaii Defense	Yes	
John DeWitt	Western Defense	Yes	
Walter Smith	North Africa	Yes	
Ben Lear	2nd Army	Yes	
Alfred Greunther	5th Army CoS		No
Walter Muller	7th Army G4		No
George Patton	I Armored Corps/7th Army	Yes	
Omar Bradley	II Corps		No
Lloyd Fredendall	II Corps		No**
John Lucas	II Corps	Yes	
Geoffrey Keys	II Corps		No
John Millikin	III Corps		No**
Leonard Gerow	V Corps		No**
Earnest Dawley	VI Corps		No*
Gilbert Cook	XII Corps	Yes	
Alvin Gillem	XIII Corps		No***
Oscar Griswold	XIV Corps		No

Alexander Patch	XIV Corps	Yes	
Wade Haislip	XV Corps		No*
Frank Milburn	XXI Corps		No
John Hodge	XXIV Corps	Yes	
James Gavin	ADC 82nd		No
Terry Allen	1st Div	Yes	
Lucian Truscott	3rd Div		No
Charles Corlett	7th Div		No*
Manton Eddy	9th Div	Yes	
J. Lawton Collins	25th Div		No
William Gill	32nd Div	Yes	
Charles Ryder	34th Div	Yes	
Robert Beightler	37th Div	Yes	
Horace Fuller	41st Div	Yes	
John Hester	43rd Div		No
Matthew Ridgway	82nd Div		No
John Hodge	Americal Div	Counted above	
<b>Totals</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>28</b>

**Sources:** Shelby L. Stanton, *Order of Battle: US Army, World War II* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1984); Robert H. Berlin, *US Army World War II Corps Commanders – A Composite Biography* (Leavenworth, KA: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1989); Ed Cray, *General of the Army: George C. Marshall, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000); Mark T. Calhoun, *General Lesley J. McNair: Unsung Architect of the US Army* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2015); other biographies.