

# History and Leadership: Molding and Shaping the Future

MSgt Ellery Wallwork  
TSgt Randy Bergeron  
TSgt Mark Stanley

## Introduction

We live in an ever-changing world, but over the past decade technology seems to have quickened the pace of change. In the year 1990 alone, more change took place than in the entire decade of the 1970s. In the 1990s at least a fourth of all knowledge and practices became obsolete. Though change has always been present, it is the pace that has become alarming. For example, the overnight letter, an innovation of the 1980s, is now used when you are *not* in a hurry.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most effective ways to deal with this rapid change rests with understanding history. The Air Force defines history as “informed perspectives based on historical information [that] enable the Air Force to understand the present and plan for the future.”<sup>2</sup> That is, Air Force leaders need to learn from the events of the past. People armed with an analytical view of history can avoid repeating past mistakes, foster present innovations, and more effectively plan for the future.

## The Value of History

The value of the past can be found in those who internalize history as an inherent component of living. In the broadest sense, history structures the existence of mankind by giving perspective to the constantly changing world. Through this perspective, history shows us where we have been, gives us an appreciation of where we are, and enables us to envision what might come in the future. Thucydides had such a perspective in mind when he wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War* in 431 B.C. Thucydides stated that history is for “those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Gen Michael E. Ryan, chief of staff, United States Air Force, offered a more contemporary view on the value of history in his foreword to *Air Force Basic Doctrine*:

The authors are instructors at the USAF Historian Development School, Ira C. Eaker College for Professional Development, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. MSgt Ellery Wallwork is the school director, TSgt Randy Bergeron is the director, Historian Apprentice Course, and TSgt Mark Stanley is the director, Historian Journeyman Course.

The lessons of air and space power history are replete with examples of the dedication and sacrifice of those who have served their nation through our proud history as the Army Air Service, the Army Air Corps, and finally the United States Air Force. These lessons survive today and are reflected in the principles of war and our own tenets of air and space power.<sup>4</sup>

The ability to substantiate conclusions drawn from history resides within documentation. Such evidence increases the value of history by pointing to a source of information. Extracting, weighing, and condensing information from documentation strengthens the ideas, analyses, or conclusions imparted through history. The real value of history is therefore inextricably tied to the process of collecting and then preserving significant information for future use.

## The Process of History

Four processes comprise the art of history: collecting, preserving, accessing, and analyzing. Technology has improved access to preserved information but has had somewhat of a negative impact on the process of collecting information. The advent of electronic mail and cellular phones lessened the reliance leaders and managers once had on paper-based products. Consequently, the collection process for historians must change with the times. Historians must rely once again on interviews to collect oral history from participants in significant events and quickly search out electronic mail before decision makers cast their sent messages into the wastebasket of the global network.

The Air Force writes periodic histories for organizations at or above the wing level. They become a permanent record that serves as the unit’s corporate or institutional memory. Periodic histories also serve as a reference tool from which historians can develop publications, answer inquiries, and “provide timely background information relevant to current issues and actions.”<sup>5</sup>

In writing periodic histories, historians are faced with several dilemmas, but perhaps the most difficult to overcome is perspective. When writing about the recent past of an organization, the perspective is very narrow. Often, the historian is a participant in unit events, compounding this problem of perspective. One historian depicted the dilemma this way: “Air Force historians frequently describe their work as creating the raw materials from which more definitive histo-

This article was prepared especially for AU-24, *Concepts for Air Force Leadership*.

ries will be shaped later, and doubtlessly future historians will reinterpret what we write from new and unforeseeable angles.”<sup>6</sup> Once information is preserved, analysis can take place in the future as part of a more focused study on the event, or in a broader study of similar events. More importantly, the preservation process is a way to buy time, and time fosters the perspective needed to understand and measure the importance of history-making events.

Accessing and using the information stored in repositories and archives can tap into lessons learned in the past. Applying those lessons learned can only come through the process of analyzing stored information. In this sense, accessing and analyzing information become essential elements of the four-part process of capturing history. While all the processes work together, the act of looking for answers and analyzing empirical evidence to effect improvement is the end that justifies the means. In many ways, the process of capturing history reflects the sentiments the Spanish philosopher George Santayana expressed when he said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>7</sup>

Leaders need to understand these processes in order to maximize their use of history. Effectively using history implies not only analyzing information as part of the decision-making process, but also preserving the historically significant information used in those decisions.

### **Air Force Uses of History**

Air Force people use history every day, and often they do so because history has become ingrained in their decision-making process. The following examples are but a few where Air Force leaders have used history to mold and shape the future:

- Air Mobility Command (AMC) historians worked with AMC planners to develop an exercise scenario for moving Patriot missiles. Historians accessed and analyzed data from the Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise NOBLE SHIRLEY, a Patriot missile deployment from Ramstein Air Base (AB), Germany, to Nevatim AB, Israel. Planners were then able to build a realistic scenario that would require at least 45 C-17 Globemaster III missions to transport 165 passengers and 1,070 short tons of cargo.<sup>8</sup>
- Historians at Air Combat Command sent Third Air Force the study on Haitian refugee support in Cuba and other humanitarian studies to help them prepare for refugees from the conflict in Kosovo. The Third Air Force staff examined these documents and extracted lessons learned to prepare for the influx of ethnic Albanian refugees. Applied lessons ranged from constructing camps with appropriate sanitation provisions to logistical support of humanitarian supplies.<sup>9</sup>
- In January 1999, Dr. Daniel Haulman, an historian from the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, briefed the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) on Air Force responses in

major regional crises since 1980. The briefing illustrated the background and relevant lessons learned from those deployments. A follow-up question to the briefing regarding 24-hour response times for Air Force deployments highlighted applicable details on the Composite Air Strike Force (CASF) that existed from 1956 to 1962. The SAB used the information presented to complete an Air Force chief of staff-directed study on “Technology Options to Leverage Aerospace Power in other than Conventional War Situations.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Air Force Leadership**

As seen in these few examples, history provides an important tool for today’s Air Force leaders (officers, enlisted, and civilian). Despite its intrinsic value, the Air Force History and Museum Program remains a much under-used program. Many action officers are unaware of their unit history program. A history office with a well-maintained repository can reduce research time, establish facts quickly, and show what a unit has accomplished, or more importantly, what lessons a unit has learned.

Air Force leaders need to grasp the value of an historical perspective in dealing with fast-breaking issues. To ensure leaders have this perspective available, historians cannot just sit back in their office and quietly wait for documents to come to them. Such a ludicrous approach would soon find the historian hopelessly behind and unable to draw out information needed by the unit. Leaders and historians must work together to ensure the Air Force maintains a viable repository from which this historical perspective can be drawn now and in the future. More is being done—hence, historians need to work harder to capture events going on in their organizations. Even more can be accomplished: perhaps inclusion of a “history program presentation” in professional military education courses or the wing commander’s course. You, as an Air Force leader, need to be aware of what your History and Museum Program can do for you.

#### ***Major Functions of the Air Force History & Museum Program***

- Collect, record, and preserve valuable information in both peace and war
- Research and analyze historical information and distribute objective publications on past AF activities
- Provide historical perspective, advice, and factual data to AF leaders at all levels
- Answer information requests
- Promote institutional heritage and awareness of air and space power

**Source:** AFP 84-1, “Historical Information, Property, and Art,” 1 May 1997.

## The Enlisted Force

The enlisted force is equally challenged to make the best use of Air Force history. All Air Force professionals understand the service's most important mission component is its people. Because of their vital role, our enlisted force needs to possess the Air Force's core values of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. However, they need more than this moral compass, they need a grasp of history. An enlisted force possessed with national understanding is an enlisted force possessed with national will.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, one of the most important improvements the enlisted force can make has to do with the human dimension—with the education and motivation of its people. Gen Merrill A. McPeak, former chief of staff of the Air Force, noted, "Our history, our legacy, our heritage plays an essential role in these human values."<sup>12</sup> Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) had it correct when it began on 22 May 1990 and soon after listed six goals, one of which was to "build and maintain a respected force of highly motivated and qualified people." In order to accomplish this goal, AFSOC listed four objectives, one of which was to "promote our heritage, value, and accomplishments."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, according to the Promotion Fitness Examination (PFE) study guide, it is not enough for enlisted members to simply be able to outline the Air Force's role in our nation's history. Enlisted members also need to understand and reflect on the many examples of professionalism, duty, and honor exhibited by their predecessors. Doing so will intensify their pride in the Air Force, which, in turn, will help them enhance their own professional identity.<sup>14</sup>

To accomplish this goal, the Air Force must take its newest, most impressionable airmen and instill an interest in, not just a knowledge of, Air Force history during basic training. This interest must be expanded throughout their careers. Examples of ways the Air Force is developing this interest include the PFE study guide, professional military education, the Air Force chief of staff's reading list, and the Enlisted Heritage Research Institute at Gunter Annex, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

In March 1995, Bob Galvin, CEO of Motorola, wrote as follows:

The term heritage conjures a historical event but, as a matter of fact, history is always in the making. As we practice sound principles and perform to the high standards, we are literally creating the heritages of tomorrow. The heritages we create become our legacy. There is almost nothing more valuable for any one of us to create than a legacy worth others inheriting.<sup>15</sup>

If a civilian company can understand this simple truth, surely our enlisted force can apply the principles of heritage. Doing so not only advances its education and motivation, it also improves the Air Force.

## Conclusion

In order to cope with the pace of change in today's Air Force, history and leaders at all levels must come together. Both history and leaders mold and shape the present and future. Leaders who account for history are able to share an understanding of where we collectively are and can provide a vision of where we want to be in the future. In other words, leaders not only use the past to resolve current situations, but their present actions become the heritage of the future.

## Notes

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