

Of Military History and War Diaries

Colonel Mandeep Singh (Retd)[®]

Abstract

The study of military history is as old as the history of mankind itself. Earlier the accounts of battles and wars were recorded in the form of epics and ballads. The forms of recording military accounts and events evolved with time, with war diaries being used as the primary source for writing of military history since the turn of the twentieth century. As the military histories are used to examine the past and make decisions about the future, it is essential that these are written honestly. Timely and honest generation and maintenance of war diaries is essential so that not only the military histories are written correctly but the right lessons are learnt from them.

Introduction

War is a serious business. It may be the last, and at times the only, resort to resolve disputes but it represents the failure of civility, of reason, of humane means of resolving conflicts and disputes. It is against the civilisational norms as it allows for the concentration of power in a select few and infringes on human rights.

The conduct of war is a complicated and difficult affair. It is also the most chaotic and stressful activity in which humans engage. It needs total attention of the military professional as not only the adversary but the very nature of warfare has to be fought and overcome to achieve the desired end-state. But as Sir BH Liddell Hart stated, the “direct experience is inherently too limited (for most military professionals) to form an adequate foundation either for theory or application.”¹ The armed forces

[®]Colonel Mandeep Singh (Retd) served in Army Air Defence. A graduate of Defence Services Staff College, he commanded his Regiment during operations against Pakistan and later, along the Line of Actual Control. He has authored seven books including “History of Indian Air Defence Artillery 1940-1945” and “Forgotten: History of Hong Kong Singapore Royal Artillery.”

need to study the past in the hope of finding tools for understanding war and preparing commanders and units for it.

It is also important to bear in mind that while war may be fought by states through their armed forces, it is ultimately fought by individuals who are scarred by their experience, both physically and mentally. It is, thus, not only the nations and societies that are affected by conflicts but these impact human psychology and psyche as well. This makes the study of war important to understand its impact and avoid past mistakes.

As history is filled with stories of war and conflicts, the field of historiography—the writing of history—is often rooted in recording military accounts and events. The early records were based on oral accounts of the conflicts but as wars evolved, the methods of recording history also evolved with the written records providing most of the information. Over time, the war diaries and historical reports generated by units and formations became the basic tools and foundations of official histories and are the essential primary source for such historiography.

Use of War Diaries and Historical Reports

The war diaries have been kept and maintained for centuries but its format, as is known today, was standardised during the South African War 1899-1902, though it was during World War I that daily record-keeping was initiated when the British Expeditionary Forces implemented the same.² Generally written by the regimental adjutant or nominated junior officer, the purpose of these reports, known as war diaries, was to provide a record of operations for the official history of conflict and to provide information to allow the army to wage war more effectively. The war diaries were kept by all units and formations including every branch of staff of general headquarters. The Indian Army adopted the same practice and there is a rich collection of the war diaries that offers invaluable insight into the conduct of military operations by the Indian Army. In later years, the practice of generating annual historical reports was adopted to cover the period when the units and formations were not involved in active operations. They are today the primary source of history writing in the army.

At the functional level, Army Orders 7 of 1983 (AO 7/83) and 8 of 1983 (AO 8/83) lay down the detailed mechanism for initiating

and writing of war diaries and historical reports. AO 7/83 pertains to the generation of historical reports, the purpose of which is to “provide a record of activities of formations and units”.³ It is required to be submitted by all formations/units when not committed on actual operations or internal security duties and should include the following:

- Location of the unit.
- Change in organisation.
- Postings and transfers of officers.
- Exercises carried out.
- Nature of training carried out and lessons learnt.
- Administrative problems and how these were solved.
- Morale of personnel and matters affecting it.
- Weapons and equipment, with some details of their performance in the case of new items.

The guidelines for generating war diaries are laid down in AO 8/83. These are required to be compiled half yearly, prepared in triplicate, when the unit or formation is employed on actual operations and on internal security, including counter-insurgency operations. When the unit or formation is employed on ‘actual operations and during mobilisation’, two copies of the war diary are to be sent to the Military Operations Directorate (MO-6) under the Army Headquarters, General Staff Branch but when deployed on internal security, including counter-insurgency operations, a copy each is to be sent to the Historical Division of Ministry of Defence and Records Offices by the units, whereas formations are required to send them to the Historical Division only.

War diaries are generally written and maintained by the regimental adjutant or nominated junior officer and though they may not be of great literary merit, they can provide a unique insight into a unit’s and individuals’ experience of an operation or the war. They are of importance as these are the basic records to provide a detailed and accurate account of the operations that can be used to prepare the history of the operation (or war).

Observations

With such import, the moot question is - are the war diaries maintained in a manner that they meet the required standards? As the war diaries are to be maintained during operations on a daily basis, it is generally not a popular task, or something sought after, within a large number of units as it is regraded to be something that interferes with more important tasks. However, in spite of a large number of war diaries kept in a tardy manner, there are some very well-kept war diaries with a detailed account of the operations. In this regard, it is interesting to note that it is generally a unit in the thick of action, involved in heavy and bitter fighting, that kept the war diaries in a detailed and meticulous manner and the units under the least pressure had poorly maintained war diaries. One reason for poorly maintained war diaries is that these are not written on a daily basis, as the events unfolded. If the war diary is written after a lapse of several days or even weeks, factual errors are likely to creep in and the account may not be of any value thereafter. A large number of war diaries unfortunately fall under such a category.

Even with historical reports, the lessons learnt, problems and shortcomings, matters affecting morale, lapses, and details of performance of weapons and equipment are generally not included, and the emphasis is on visits and perceived achievements, which are not of much historical relevance. This disturbing trend can be observed in recent war diaries also. Both, historical reports and war diaries are increasingly being used for publicity (for want of better word) with emphasis on including large number of photographs to showcase activities of little, if any, historical import while tiding over the failures and shortcomings which invariably will still be existing.

Shortcomings Noted

A major shortcoming of war dairies and historical reports is that most of them are less explicit than what they should be. They provide insufficient details and information included is not adequately definite. Yet, there are enough war diaries of yester years that provide detailed information that is usable for any historical study. War diary of an artillery regiment noted in 1945 that "Reaction of almost all Indian officers to new pay code is very unfavourable as they feel that the new pay code is not good enough to attract any capable man into the Army"⁴ while another

noted that “The morale of the men is good although many wonder just what are they doing sitting on the gun site when there appears to be no apparent likelihood of hostilities. To these men, war seems to be dragging on and with no prospect of an early finish”.⁵

The war dairies of yore also contain details of trials and new equipment. War diary of HQ (RA), 33 Indian Corps records that 8 Medium Regiment, RA carried out trials to “decide the relative effectiveness with different permissible fuses now that 117 and 118 fuses are not allowed to be used”.⁶ The war diary goes on to record the details of the results and recommendations made by the regiment. Similarly, the war diary of Camp Commandant, Headquarters 15 Indian Corps noted on 27 Jul 1944 that “Orders received for reorganisation of infantry battalions of 25 and 26 Indian Division on standard infantry Division will be carried out as soon as possible”.⁷

As can be seen from aforementioned examples, war diaries and historical reports, if properly maintained and recorded, can be a rich source of information that can be used to write the military history and also draw relevant lessons for future. It is not that only the war diaries of pre-independence era included details of operations. War diaries of recent times, including of units committed in counter insurgency operations, are also an invaluable source of record of operation and lend to a serious study of conduct of military operations.

Recommendations

The AOs mentioned above lay down the guidelines on writing and maintenance of war diaries and historical reports and they need to be followed while recording the daily events but it is important to remember that the main purpose of these two records is ultimately to write the military history and draw lessons for future. This is the most important aspect that needs to be kept central to the task of maintaining these documents. To this end, the details being recorded should be factually correct, honest, and avoid any hyperbole. It is worth noting that war diaries are not hagiography. They are simple, honest records of daily occurrences. The following may be of use:

- Operations and activities should be recorded in as great a detail as possible.
- The war diary should be maintained on a daily basis, with the activities being recorded on the same day on which they take place.

- Comments on experience gained, or any lessons learnt, should be included. This can be done personally by the commanding officer in case of a unit or by a senior staff officer in case of a formation headquarters.

Regarding historical reports, it will be wise to ask the following while writing the same:

- Are the details mentioned (or being recorded) of any relevance or use?
- Have the shortcomings noticed, or lapses been included?
- Can the details included in the report be used to draw any lessons?

A major lacunae in generation of historical reports is that the AO 7/83 states that, if required, appropriate security classification may be given but generally secret/top secret material should be avoided. As the unit/formation may err in appropriately classifying information, it results in a large amount of information being left out from these reports which rightfully should have been included.

Conclusion

India unfortunately does not have a culture of serious study and writing of military history. Most of the war accounts are personal narratives or hagiographic accounts written mostly by retired army officers. There are hardly any objective analyses by trained historians on the *les affaires militaires*. Even the recent trend of writing operational accounts and narratives is too jingoistic to be of any real learning value to any military commander. A major reason is that the primary sources themselves, that is the war diaries and historical reports, are either poorly written and/or are not accessible for study. While the issue of developing this culture needs to be addressed at multiple levels, one thing that can be addressed and implemented without much ado is that the units and formations maintain the war diaries and historical reports in a truthful and honest manner so that they can be used to learn the right lessons. These lessons are essential for military leaders to develop critical thinking and decision making skills while facing ever increasingly complex challenges, as it is only by drawing from a wealth of lessons learned in past conflicts that a commander can prepare himself (or herself) for the next battle. The present generation of commanders owe this to the future generations.

Endnotes

¹ Hart, B.H. Liddle, *Why Don't We Learn From History?* (London : Sophorn, 2012)

² Kleynhans, Evert. (2012). "The War Diary as a Historical Source", Paper presented at Access to military and regimental archives in Southern Africa, Pretoria, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325060721_The_War_Diary_as_a_Historical_Source

³ Army Order 7 of 1983

⁴ War Diary 28th (Punjab) Para Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, September 1947

⁵ File No 601/2439/WD, War Diary of 4th Indian LAA Regiment (Now 29 LAA Regiment)

⁶ War Diary of HQ Royal Artillery, 33 Indian Corps (File No MISC/566/H, Identifier: PR_000004032985), National Archives of India, New Delhi

⁷ War Diary of HQ Royal Artillery, 33 Indian Corps (File No MISC/566/H, Identifier: PR_000004032985), National Archives of India, New Delhi