

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of "Hunter Liggett: A Soldier's General"



Michael Shay, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press (2019)

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No senior American officer from the Great War, or perhaps even from all American military history, has been more overdue a biography than U.S. Army Lt Gen Hunter Liggett. Liggett was the most experienced corps commander in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), and after replacing General John J. Pershing as commander of the American First Army in October and November 1918, he led that massive, modern force—a million men strong, equipped with hundreds of airplanes, tanks, and long-range artillery—to its greatest victories in the final weeks of the war. Michael Shay, the author of a number of books on various AEF subjects, has done readers and scholars a great service by taking on the challenge of writing this first-ever full biography of Liggett.

Shay scoured numerous archives (even tracking down Liggett's supposedly destroyed official service record) as well as many valuable published accounts to assemble this concise but complete account of Liggett's full life. Beginning with a brief family history and Liggett's upbringing in Reading, Pennsylvania, Shay examines his years in the West Point class of 1879; tours of duty fighting Indians on the closing frontier; service in Cuba and the Philippines (twice); his time on the General Staff and at the new Army War College, first as a student and faculty member, and later as its President; service as a brigade commander during Mexican border troubles; his extraordinary contributions in France during the Great War; and his post-war life in San Francisco.

While uniformly acknowledged to be an outstanding officer—hard-working, competent, thoughtful, judicious, respectful of others, as well as composed and courageous when in danger—Liggett's defining characteristic was his extraordinary commitment to mastering his own understanding of the military profession. Liggett was known throughout the Army as a voracious reader and a diligent student of war and military affairs. Disregarding the fear that his professional studies, which earned him a reputation as a man of "studious habits and wide reading," (p. 78) would cause others to think him "a military highbrow," he persisted in his efforts— eventually getting the reputation of having "unusual intelligence" (p. 86) and possessing "one of the finest minds in the Army" (p. 66). While commanding an infantry battalion at Fort Leavenworth in 1908-09, Liggett voluntarily audited, on his own



time, both PME courses then being taught there—the School of the Line and the Army Staff School. To complete these courses, Major Liggett studied under the direction of Lieutenant George C. Marshall, a recent (but phenomenal) student himself, then serving as a new instructor.

Liggett's life-long commitment to reading and professional study—from military history to current doctrine, weaponry, and tactics—yielded that most precious capability in a senior commander: good judgment. Clausewitz labeled this rare but essential capacity "*coup d'oeil*"—the ability to see at a glance, even through the fog of a complex and apparently chaotic situation, what needs to be done. Liggett's colleague in France, Lt Gen Robert Lee Bullard, who served as a division and corps commander before taking command of the new American Second Army late in the war, wrote that Liggett "had the valuable faculty of seeing what was important and what was not; and he did not waste his time or attention on what was not going to count. Faster, and with less concern (yet without offending) than any other that I know, he could dismiss trifles or unimportant things; he just good-humouredly [sic] but effectively passed over them without notice, no matter who brought them up." (p. 104)

The essential question, especially for institutions committed to developing military leaders, is how to cultivate good judgment in its members. Clausewitz stressed the importance of experience in the development of *coup d'oeil*. Liggett appears to have understood that, even in a long military career, one officer would gain naturally from a limited and comparatively narrow range of experiences. The only certain way to increase one's personal experience was to read widely—especially in military history and affairs. As another colleague once privately wrote about Liggett: "No officer with whom I have been associated in the service has so profoundly impressed me with his zeal for the study of his profession, the depth and accuracy of his knowledge of the literature of it, and his practical familiarity with

all its details." For Liggett, this enthusiasm allowed an American officer—whose personal experiences yielded only opportunities to handle problems that arose in a small frontier constabulary—to be prepared to successfully lead the largest and most modern field army in the nation's history against one of the world's most professional and experienced forces on foreign fields that no American of his own generation could have expected to fight on.

While many politicians and pundits, as well as statesmen and strategists, offer predictions regarding the kinds of national security challenges that will eventually confront young American military officers, we cannot be sure which projections will come to pass. But we can be confident that the path taken by Liggett (as well as by other leaders such as George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Andrew J. Goodpaster, and Brent Scowcroft, among others) will best prepare those officers for whatever the future holds.

Shay begins this work with a quotation from Secretary of State, and later, Secretary of War Elihu Root: "The real object of an Army is to prepare for war." Of course, this is equally true for all the services, individually, and all together as a joint force. Even deterrence, the other great object of a national military, is based on the belief that a military force is prepared for war. But this assertion also is reducible to each individual member of the U.S. military—the real object of the professional military member is to prepare oneself for war, as well as for the myriad tasks along the spectrum of operations that the nation may call those military members to perform. Liggett understood this, and he made the serious study of his profession—its purpose, its tasks, and techniques—the core of his professional life.