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Mentorship: A Critical Component of Life-Long Learning

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While many members of the military understand the importance of “who you know” in the context of career progression, many don’t think about it in the context of intellectual development. Mentors can significantly impact mentees’ effectiveness as life-long learners. They can inspire. They can intellectually challenge. They can shape professional study habits. General (ret) David Petraeus, reflecting on the role his mentor played in his self-development, commented that “General Galvin both encouraged me to get out of my intellectual comfort zone by going to grad school vice another infantry assignment, and he also suggested a number of books over the years – some that were classics in history or our profession, some that caught his eye at the time. He was a life-long student and encouraged me to be the same.”¹

History is ripe with examples of mentors who shaped the study habits and assisted their mentees along the way. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), author of *On War*, is known as one of the greatest military theorists, but his rise to intellectual immortality was not an individual effort. Gerhard

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Johann David von Scharnhorst (1755-1813) played an instrumental role in developing Clausewitz' theory of war from the time Carl entered the Berlin Institute up to Scharnhorst's untimely death in 1813. On reflection about her husband's time at the Institute, Marie von Clausewitz wrote, "At first it was very difficult for him to follow the lectures because he lacked the necessary prerequisite knowledge. He was near despair, and might have given up on the troublesome undertaking if Scharnhorst had not taken notice of him early and encouraged him with such characteristic kindness and empathy."² During their time together at the Berlin Institute the relationship between the two men grew from teacher and pupil to mentor and mentee. In a biography on Clausewitz, titled *Clausewitz and the State*, Peter Paret examined the influence Scharnhorst had on his mentee and writes, "Scharnhorst's conviction that the study of history must lay at the center of any advanced study of war confirmed Clausewitz's tentative attitudes on military theory and on the role of education, and guided them further."³ It was the mentorship of Scharnhorst that aided a struggling military student to become the top student of his class at the Berlin Institute in 1804.⁴

Another great example of the role mentorship plays in self-study can be found during the interwar years in the United States Army. Most military professionals know who George S. Patton, Jr. and Dwight D. Eisenhower were; but few recognize the name Fox Conner, a man that was instrumental in the lives of the two famous military figures. During a chance encounter on a train ride in the fall of 1913, Captain Fox Conner met a young Lieutenant Patton and the two immediately found a common interest in history, literature, and knowledge in general.⁵ The two remained in contact for years, and while visiting Patton at Fort Meade in 1919, Conner met Patton's neighbor, Dwight Eisenhower. As Conner and Eisenhower got to know each other, Conner became impressed with Eisenhower and invited him to serve as his executive officer in Panama.⁶ After Eisenhower joined him in Panama, Conner realized that the young officer wasn't prone to personal study, and began offering him books from his library. In addition to providing books, Connor also engaged him in discourse about the topics in which he read, thereby helping Eisenhower gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Eisenhower later claimed that his discussions with Conner were "a sort of graduate school in military affairs and the humanities, leavened by the comments and discourses of a man who was experienced in his knowledge of men and their conduct."⁷ If not for Conner's mentorship, Eisenhower may not have been intellectually prepared for the future roles he would play in world history.

While many view life-long learning as an individual endeavor, military professionals should follow the example of Petreaus, Clausewitz, and Eisenhower and connect with those who offer the potential of a mentor/mentee relationship. Additionally, like Galvin, Scharnhorst, and Conner, senior leaders should seek subordinates who possess a spark for the military profession and strive to mentor them so that the spark becomes a flame, transforming them into life-long learners.

¹ Interview with General(ret) David Petreaus on March 26, 2014.

² Charles White, *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the Militarische Gesellschaft in Berlin 1801-1805*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 101.

³ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵ Edward Cox, *Grey Eminence: Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship*. (manuscript., The Institute of Land Warfare, 2010), http://www.ausa.org/publications/ilw/Documents/LWP_78W_Fox_Conner.pdf.

⁶ Diana Bodner, "The Relationship Between Fox Conner and Dwight Eisenhower." (master\., The U.S. Army War College, 2002).

⁷ Mark Bender, *Watershed at Leavenworth: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Command and General Staff School*. (manuscript., Combat Studies Institute, 1990).