

## COMMENTARY

# The Enlightened Soldier – Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801–1805

*Major Kelly Dunne, Australian Army*

I have always considered myself a passionate supporter of professional military education (PME) through-out my career. As a junior officer, I was fortunate to be posted to the Royal Military College – Duntroon, and be exposed to units such as 1st Armoured Regiment, both of which had a rich culture of professional development, thanks to strong leadership that consistently prioritised not only training but also the education of their staff.

When I became a sub-unit commander, I planned to carry on the tradition of developing my staff through unit-based PME sessions. I was soon hit with the challenges I had overlooked by setting such an aspirational goal for my geographically isolated, resource-limited health company. Like many units, we were very short on staff, and we were extremely busy supporting units all over Australia. Our company battle rhythm was often not worth the paper it was written on, as time set aside for our own training and PME was almost always trumped by the higher-priority support tasks of other units.

I was initially stubbornly determined that my company would pursue a weekly PME program covering a breadth of topics, even though at times I might only have an audience of 4–5 people because the rest were allocated to support tasks or away on essential courses. But as the months went past and preparation for major field exercises meant working many weekends and long hours each day for weeks on end, away from families, I felt guilty about taking precious time off staff for PME pursuits. I stopped prioritising their education and adopted a less consistent, more sporadic approach, primarily aimed at addressing obvious gaps in their immediate knowledge and experience, with no investment in longer-term skillsets.

I let myself off the hook from the more difficult, less familiar topics that I found challenging to teach, such as military history and strategy. I largely avoided the professional reading that I knew would enhance my knowledge in these challenging areas, regularly bypassing the



military section of bookstores, and opting for lighter, more enjoyable novels that required little concentration.

I justified this by declaring that I wasn't an academic, so I would leave those areas to 'smart people' and focus on tactical-level training and getting the immediate job done. I was biased towards prioritising the perceived short-term advantages of training over the longer-term benefits of education. I didn't see many practical examples of those who had invested heavily in military education becoming better leaders or better education translating into increased levels of success on operations.

In early 2017, when Brigadier Mick Ryan handed me a book titled *The Enlightened Soldier – Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801–1805* by Charles White and told me to read it, never have I been more guilty of failing to adhere to the phrase 'don't judge a book by its cover'. Antique in appearance, plain text embossed on a green cloth-style hard cover, and void of even a single image, you would be forgiven for thinking it belonged alongside a volume of vintage encyclopaedias on a dusty shelf in a library.

Visually, the book did nothing to entice me to read it. But when I opened it and saw countless handwritten notes from Director General Training and Doctrine contained within the margins—I knew there must be far more to this book than meets the eye. Reluctantly, I started my journey of professional reading and, after only a few pages, it became immediately obvious to me why Brigadier Ryan had suggested I read this book. It was about the birth of PME as a concept.

*The Enlightened Soldier* introduces us to Gerhard Scharnhorst, a Hanoverian-born officer who advocated better education for all ranks, a merit-based system of promotion, and the abolition of 'mates rates' nepotism for the wealthy. His attempts to innovate, reform and legitimise the army system in Hanover were unanimously rejected. Fortunately, the Prussian army recognised his talent and was able to convince Scharnhorst to transfer across.

Scharnhorst argued that the lack of professional study had caused the army to become 'hopelessly anachronistic'. In response, he established a first-of-its-kind military society

dedicated to the study of war; he convinced others that soldiering was not merely a craft but a profession that required continuous study. He wanted a mechanism to bring young soldiers together with more experienced soldiers so that they may learn from them. He proposed a curriculum that, despite being over 200 years old, is still remarkably relevant today, covering military history, strategy, elementary tactics, applied tactics, topography, engineering, artillery and a diverse range of general education topics (mathematics, chemistry, languages and physics).

As I read page after page, the brilliance of Scharnhorst became more and more apparent, as many of the concepts he introduced into being are still used by many militaries today. He spoke of the need for quality instructors and close moderation of instructor standards, modifying curriculum and procedures to increase flexibility to suit the learning needs of individuals, using emotional intelligence and clever techniques in influencing others when implementing cultural change, and creating a healthy atmosphere for learning across all ranks. His concept for PME involved papers, lectures, debate, discussions and essay competitions, as well as public recognition and reward for dedication to military studies.

Greedily, I wanted more from the book to convince me all this dedication to academic pursuits was worth it. I didn't want the end result to be that Scharnhorst simply produced a bunch of smart army people who sat around pondering deep intellectual concepts. I needed a practical example of something real that actually happened out of all this investment in study—and it didn't disappoint.

As any keen military historian will attest, a short French guy by the name of Napoleon was quite a force to be reckoned with if you were around in the early 1800s. In just six years, Prussia fielded an army that played a significant role in the defeat of Napoleon; the decisions made by the Prussian army were primarily influenced by staff officers assigned to each general who had been personally trained by Scharnhorst. Scharnhorst, the 'intellectual father' of the Prussian army, had helped change the course of history through dedicated commitment to PME.

If that wasn't enough to convince me just how important PME is to producing better quality

officers and soldiers, there was one further gem hidden in the book that you might skip over if you aren't paying attention. Carl von Clausewitz, arguably the most famous military theorist in history, studied under and received mentoring directly from Scharnhorst well before he published *On War*. Defeating Napoleon and producing students like Clausewitz was all the proof I needed that there is a very real benefit to prioritising PME within the workplace, despite the tempo of units today.

*The Enlightened Soldier* is unfortunately no longer in common circulation, so purchasing your own copy of the book is quite an expensive undertaking, unless you can find it at a second-hand bookstore. For those in the ADF, however, it is available on loan through the Defence Library Service. If you would like to borrow a copy, please email [askalibrarian@defence.gov.au](mailto:askalibrarian@defence.gov.au) For PME enthusiasts, it is a short, worthwhile read and, despite its plain appearance, is captivating for those interested in the professional development of themselves and their subordinates.



