

IN MEMORIAM

The Constructive Contrarian: Roger J. Spiller remembered

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On 13 August 2017, Professor Roger J. Spiller passed away in Leavenworth, Kansas at the age of 72 after a long bout with cancer. Professor Spiller was a leading American military historian and theorist of war who served as the inaugural George C. Marshall Chair of Military History at the US Army Command and General Staff College for over two decades. He had a deep fondness for Australia and he mentored many Australian Army exchange instructors who taught at the Command and General Staff College, including the future generals Peter Leahy and Craig Orme.

Between 1997 and 2007, Roger Spiller was a regular visitor to Australia, serving as a keynote speaker to several Chiefs of Army History Conferences organised by Professors Peter Dennis and the late Jeffrey Grey. On these visits, he offered sage advice to Australian scholars who chose to work for the Defence Department. Indeed, Professor Spiller influenced the intellectual development of the Australian Army's

think tank, the Land Warfare Studies Centre, which was partially modelled on the Combat Studies Institute of the US Command and General Staff College.

Roger Joseph Spiller was born on a ranch near Bonham, Texas on 19 October 1944. His father Joel was a Texas Ranger and his mother, Verna, possessed a love of reading which she passed on to her son. In 1962, the young Spiller enlisted in the US Air Force and served as an air rescue medic in assorted Cold War danger spots. Of note was his service in the Congo during the crisis years 1964-65, when the country was wracked by civil war, *coup d'état* and foreign intervention involving European, South African and Rhodesian mercenaries as well as incursions from Che Guevara and a contingent of Cuban revolutionaries.

After completing his military service in 1965, Spiller returned to Texas and completed a BA in English literature and international relations



and an MA in History, both from Southwest Texas State College in San Marcos. He married Irene Nicholis in 1971 and they moved to Baton Rouge where Spiller completed a doctorate at Louisiana State University under the supervision of the leading historian, T. Harry Williams.

In 1978, Spiller became an associate professor in military history at the US Army's Command and General Staff College, where he helped found the Combat Studies Institute as an in-house Army think tank for the study of war. For the next 27 years, he would serve as an influential force on the educational development of the US Army officer corps. In the 1980s, he became Special Assistant to the Commander in Chief, US Readiness Command in Tampa, Florida and he was subsequently appointed as the first George C. Marshall Distinguished Professor of Military History.

A parallel appointment saw Spiller also serve as Personal Historian to the US Army Chief of Staff for three years. In later life, Spiller became the Ewing Distinguished Visiting Professor of Military History at the US Military Academy, West Point; a contributing editor to *American Heritage Magazine*; and a historical consultant to the leading documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, for two of his major PBS television series, 2009's *The War* and 2017's *Vietnam*.

Spiller's publications include the editorship of the three volume Dictionary of *American Military Biography* (1984) which won the American Library Association's Award for the best reference work of the year; the prescient *Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century's End* (2001); and the discursive *An Instinct for War: Scenes from the Battlefields of History* (2005). However, it is as a brilliant essayist that he is likely to be best remembered. The quality of his essays can be seen in the collection of his finest compositions published in 2010 by the University of Nebraska Press under the title, *In the School of War: Essays*.

To read these essays is to be in the hands of a master craftsman—whose skill in being able to say more with less by combining economy of language and elegance of prose—is an art now seldom evident in contemporary academia. Spiller's last work was a new translation of, and introduction to, French combat theorist Ardant

du Picq's *Battle Studies* (2017). Historian Dennis Showalter has aptly described Spiller's translation and analysis of du Picq's work as 'the definitive English version of a seminal analysis of men in war'.

As a person, Roger Spiller lived a life of many parts: an air rescue medic, a military intellectual, a combat theorist and educator; an advisor to generals; an avid cyclist and a television consultant. Above all, he was an American type that is rarely encountered today: the graceful Westerner, a laconic blend of Randolph Scott and Sam Elliot—tall, lean and gentlemanly but a natural sceptic—a man with no patience for stupidity, hypocrisy or pretension.

When confronted by pompous senior US Army officers who stacked their offices with books they seldom consulted, Spiller would dismiss them 'as monkeys in the box at the opera'. When assailed by negative criticism or ignorant views, Spiller counselled, 'never wrestle with pigs. You both get dirty. And the pig likes it'. If you came up to Spiller's grade as a man he would say: 'I'd ride with you'. It was the highest compliment one could receive and a reference to the horse riding days of his Texas youth.

Spiller was, as his fellow historian John Shy once remarked, a 'constructive contrarian'—a politically-incorrect, heavy-smoking Texan—seemingly straight out of the pages of the novels of Wallace Stegner and Larry McMurtu. Yet, if Spiller sometimes cut an old-fashioned figure from the American plains, he was possessed of a powerful intellect and a razor-sharp wit and he was never afraid to puncture sacred cows and orthodoxies.

For example, despite working for the US Army, Spiller perhaps surprisingly, strongly opposed the Vietnam War and assigned Michael Herr's searing *Despatches* as reading for his students—a book on men and war that is best described as 'Dante goes to hell with the music of Jimi Hendrix'. Moreover, Spiller upset many defenders of Southern honour when he suggested that Robert E. Lee was an overrated general and a traitor to his country. And he successfully annoyed US Army traditionalists when he demonstrated with meticulous scholarship that the revered American combat historian, S.L.A. Marshall, was an inaccurate guide to the human dimension of warfare.

It was entirely in keeping with Spiller's character that he would take Australian visitors to the Last Chance Saloon in Leavenworth and introduce them to assorted Western writers and movie buffs. Indeed, the author vividly recalls being introduced to consultants involved with the production of Ang Lee's 1999 Hollywood film, *Ride With the Devil*, about Confederate guerrillas fighting pro-Union Jayhawkers on the Missouri-Kansas border during the American Civil War.

Spiller loved to spin yarns over drinks and a good meal. On one occasion, he told a group of Australians of how his father, a Texas Ranger, quelled a riot single-handed in a nearby town. Disembarking from a train, Spiller's father was met by a group of anxious town elders demanding to know 'where's the other Rangers?' To which Spiller senior laconically remarked: 'One riot; one Ranger' and proceeded to restore the peace.

Spiller's Texan quirkiness and natural irreverence endeared him to Australians—especially West Australians—whom Spiller considered to be close cousins of Texans. When invited to this country for a conference or seminar, he would often send a single line e-mail simply stating 'I'm coming. But where's the beach?' Yet another wonderful Spiller yarn was his 'rubber chicken treatment' for lecturers deemed unworthy of a military audience—a tale that is lovingly reproduced in an essay in his book of essays, *In the School of War*:

Legend has that the inmates of one of the classrooms [at the US Command and General Staff College in the 1970s] built a Rube Goldberg machine of pulleys and levers that dropped a rubber chicken from the rafters to the lectern so that the chicken came to a stop just in front of the instructor's face. When a lecture was going badly, someone would saunter to the back and pull the lever, and drop the dreaded chicken, effectively terminating the class amid gales of laughter.

Spiller had little time for traditional military history which he regarded as sanitised, disembodied and mechanistic. He believed that military history needed to be replaced by the history of war in the broadest and deepest sense. His inspirations were not campaign historians but the French combat theorist, Ardant du Picq, and noted writers on the human face of warfare such as Stendhal, Stephen Crane and Ernest

Hemingway. His historical and literary models were John Keegan and Paul Fussell.

Like these scholars, Spiller believed that battle was the one subject history analysed poorly. He had no time for the intellectual sterility and artifice of today's 'megastore military history writing' in which battles unfold like an orderly stage play. Spiller's interest was fixed on what poet Walt Whitman called 'real war'—the psychological battlefield of soldiers and marines as symbolised by the combat careers of figures such as Audie Murphy and Eugene Sledge. He attempted to enter what he called the 'combat soldier's special world, a world largely undiscovered by either military theory or history'. In his intellectual journey into combat history, Spiller described how he jumped at the chance to teach and write on warfare at the US Command and General Staff College:

Imagine a place ... that seemed to be built around your own interests, with a library full of works on your speciality, a large faculty whose work was related to your own, and students who practiced what you studied. What would you give up to spend a year in such a place? If one were a religious historian, it would be a little like teaching at the Vatican.

And a military Vatican it proved to be with Spiller spending 22 productive years at the institution. During his time at the Command and General Staff College, Spiller became a close observer of the doctrinal revolution that swept the US Army between 1973 and 1986, led by generals William DePuy and Donn Starry. He wrote perceptively about the road that led from the disillusionment of defeat in Vietnam to the military triumph of a reformed US Army in the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

As an educator, Spiller also did much to try to impart a philosophy of historical-mindedness into mid-career officers as a key component of their military professionalism. He was never under any illusion about the challenge of this task for a civilian scholar. As he wrote, if one serves as a scholar in and to the military, credibility and relevance are everything and one must learn to 'apply the historian' as much as 'applying history'. Failure to match the scholar to such a task only courted a rubber chicken fate. His insightful account of the formation of the Combat Studies Institute and of the navigation of the



treacherous shoals in the sea of closed politics that constitute the world of American military hierarchy in his anthology, *In the School of War*, should be standard reading for any scholar who seeks to work in a defence department.

Roger Spiller was always versatile and graceful with his pen and his interests were wide. He wrote on Japanese combat doctrine in the Second World War; on America and the Vietnam syndrome; on urban warfare in the new century; on Hollywood and its treatment of war films; and on the philosophy of history, including the construction of counterfactuals. We are all the poorer for the passing of this American original.

We may no longer be able to 'ride with him' but we can take comfort from a body of scholarship that is a testament to the pursuit of excellence. Ever a literary man, Roger Spiller would take comfort from Prospero's farewell in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: life's revels must come to a close and dissolve like spirits 'melted into thin air.... We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep'.

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