



SLAM-FEST: A DISCUSSION OF S.L.A. MARSHALL'S WORKS – PART 2

By Matthew Ford, Robert Engen, Rob Thompson and Tom Bruscano April 13, 2021

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Welcome to Part 2 of SLAM-FEST: A DISCUSSION OF S.L.A. MARSHALL'S WORKS. We'll let Tom Bruscano introduce all the guests once again, and then we'll get you right back into the conversation where we left off in Part 1.

Tom Bruscano: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace, the podcast from War Room, the online journal of the United States Army War College. Thank you for joining us for another episode. I'm **Tom Bruscano**, Professor at the War College and an Editor for War Room where I work on the Dusty Shelves series where we take new looks at older or forgotten books and documents. In keeping with that, our subject today is Brigadier General Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall, better known as S.L.A. Marshall or sometimes by his byline Slam. I'm joined virtually today by three guests. **Matthew Ford** is a senior lecturer at the University of Sussex, now awaiting publication of his second book, "Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st century." His first book is on small arms innovation and is called "Weapon of Choice: Small Arms and the Culture of Military Innovation." **Robert Engen** is an assistant professor in defense studies at the Canadian Forces College and the author of two books on infantry in the Second World War and multiple articles and chapters on S.L.A. Marshall. **Rob Thompson** is a historian with the Films Team at Army University Press out of Fort Leavenworth. He is the author of "Clear, Hold, and Destroy: Pacification in Phú Yên and the American War in Vietnam." Matthew, Robert, Rob, welcome to A Better Peace. It's great to have you all here today.

Matthew Ford: Very pleased to be joining you from London.

TB: Very good.

Robert Engen: And very pleased to be joining you from Kingston, Ontario.

Rob Thompson: And I'm happy to be joining you from frozen Kansas City.

CB

TB: I'm here in Pennsylvania at the War College.

MF: Now once you switch from that and start to think about how Marshall can be deployed rhetorically within the organization as a way of framing arguments that lead to technical change and technical improvements, what you get is a completely different interpretation of Marshall. Because in those circumstances, if you like journalism, he's very persuasive and is very persuasive amongst a bunch of people who were actually resisting change rather than embracing it.

TB: So I guess my issue and I think all your points are well taken, I would only say that I think that the slogan he made was useful for military professionals and when you're saying engineers, you're not talking about military engineers as a branch, you're talking about weapons designers and things like that.

MF: Absolutely.

TB: But I think for the military professionals writ large, officers especially who are trying to figure out the new tactics for this new battlefield, he created a slogan that was useful for them, and so they used it, but I don't think that his actual understanding of tactics, modern tactics was anything beyond extremely elementary. So to me, the big problem I have with the ratio of fire thing, he was kind of asking the wrong question or asking only part of the question and Robert kind of hit at this earlier, when he talks about the various weapons that are available to them, and he primarily focuses on rifle fire and I think he picks this up from a World War I argument. So this is the John Pershing riflemen argument: we build our fighting formation around the riflemen and everybody gets this focus that thinks that what Pershing was saying... and it's not just Pershing, it's the whole leadership of the American Expeditionary Forces and First Army in World War I... what they're really saying in preparing troops is this is a training thing for individual soldier motivation. I think Patton says it later on, if you shoot, you move. So there's a connection between firing your weapon and then going, and it's really that the movement, the maneuver with the fire is most important for an individual soldier. But that's all they're talking about with the riflemen. At no point does John Pershing wander off to the front in the Meuse-Argonne or Saint-Mihiel or anywhere else and go to the guys like, hey, you guys need to fix bayonets, fire your rifles, and take that position. Not at all, not even close. The tactics aren't like that. What I think that Marshall, and actually I know this, I know what Marshall is missing is that the dilemma really is how do you build a combined arms team and he hints at this, but he ducks it. He ducks the question because I don't think he really understands small unit tactics. So he points out and Robert pointed this out too, that he says, well, the guys with Browning automatic rifles and flamethrowers, they move more, they fire more. Well, right, that's the point. The point is there are plenty of reasons not to fire your rifle. There are plenty of reasons it's stupid to fire your rifle in a fight because you have artillery and you have air power and you have tanks and

you have mortars—which he hardly talks about at all, if at all—and you have all of these other weapons that you're trying to use in concert with each other. You're trying to teach these guys how to fight with all of this stuff together, not win with rifle fire, which is what he's really saying is that fire does not just mean rifle fire, and in fact rifle fire is wildly ineffective in many, if not most tactical situations on a battlefield. So if you're using it to move and flank then it's okay, but if you're using it just because volume adds up, which is what he sort of seems to be saying, you're being pretty dumb in how you are fighting.

MF: There are two things I'd say. The first thing in response is that it seems to me that Marshall opened up the possibility of employing more operational researchers through Johns Hopkins and elsewhere to try and actually start quantifying and analyzing in a detailed sense how the infantry uses their weapons in battle or what's the ergonomic relationship between the rifle and the soldier and the propensity of the rifle to actually hit a target when the trigger is pulled—the bullet manages to hit the target when the trigger is pulled. And once you start quantifying this then you can start to redesign the equipment around that kind of analytical activity. But Marshall provoked that as a possibility in a way that previously hadn't been considered, and in fact some of the stuff that came out in the 1950s in response to that provocation led not to the idea that you should acquire or you should hand out automatic weapons around the place, but that you should have salvo weapons around the place, and the chance of increasing your hits would go up because you were effectively taking the soldier out of the loop. You were relying on the technology itself to deliver the ordnance in such a way that you could increase your chances of producing a kill. That's number 1. Number 2 is that my view on some of these things around the tactics and techniques employed by soldiers is that it's a regular case of changing in relation to what's going on in the battlefield, in the availability of equipment and in the training and confidence of the soldiers involved and that there is no sort of fixed approach for achieving the kind of result that sometimes... So my view is that someone who does histories is that there's a tendency to look at tactics as if there's sort of a rule about how they work. That starts being understood with the first World War and goes right up to the present day. You can trace this line as if it's a sort of elementary line, there's a sort of line of progress, and I just don't think the evidence supports that observation despite the fact that regularly in military and historical circles that tends to be the way we portray and understand the relationship between tactics and technology. So sorry Tom, I talked over you but that's my response to your observation. I read your paper and it's a good paper, but that doesn't just quite hit the mark, especially if you start looking at this from, as I said, engineers, as in people who are designing equipment for the users.

RE: Tom, can I can I jump in?

TB: Yeah, go ahead, Robert.

RE: First of all, I'll repeat what I told Matthew during the original Twitter thread that we were all involved in. I think that the points here he is making are probably the best articulated defense of SLA Marshall that I have heard. I don't think he's fully right, but I think that he has done a better job of articulating the importance of Marshall and the legacy of Marshall than anyone else that I have heard. So Bravo, Matthew.

MF: Thank you.

RE: We don't see eye to eye on this, but you've really impressed me by approaching this from a different angle. I do agree with Tom more that one of Marshall's problems is that he doesn't understand tactics and that he is ultimately diminishing all tactics down to the individual, and he sees that if the individual is using their weapon, then surely the platoon is using all of their weapons effectively, and the company is using their weapons. So he's scaling it and without any appreciation of combined arms or any of the nuances, no appreciation of terrain, of the ground, it's all about the individual and their relationship to that weapon, and that is the ultimate bedrock of military effectiveness. My own research has shown that from similar studies that were done that I would actually classify as real studies in Canada, in New Zealand and their armies during the Second World War, there's very little sign of any of this ratio of fire stuff that Marshall was talking about and that the emphasis is instead on fire discipline. How you don't fire your weapon. The soldiers who fired their weapons the most are the ones who are the least well trained. They're doing it to calm themselves down, for a sense of empowering themselves in an extremely dangerous environment, and that the well-trained soldier is the one who knows not to shoot unless there's really a call for it. And that's really the perspective that the Canadians and the New Zealanders have at the end of the Second World War and Marshall challenges this and starts to affect the thinking throughout NATO countries, throughout most of the Allied countries in the decades afterwards. Now, in terms of Marshall's legacy to get back to Tom's question, I didn't want to let this opportunity go because we've got a Vietnam War historian in the room with us here and I'm really curious about this. One of the things that I've always wanted to know about Marshall and one of the things that I've never been able to research is the legacy of the training or the technical improvements that he helps to spur on and now, I'll put out right there that Matthew is right and that Marshall is extremely influential and I see that influence as something that is worthy of historical research in and of itself, exactly where and how he gets his tendrils into military thinking is a fascinating story in and of itself. But I want to ask Rob Thompson about the legacy of Marshall when it comes to Vietnam because by the time we get to Vietnam, Marshall is on the ground there. He is writing more of his books. David Hackworth is one of his assistants and has nothing flattering to say about Slam. But he has made the claim that the technical and training improvements that have been brought about in the U.S. Army because of his research and truly or falsely, because of him, his ratio of fire arguments and so forth, that this has been largely cured by the time you get to Vietnam and that everybody is making full use of their weapons. They're behaving aggressively. They are shooting at everything now, and

there's a real technical aspect to this question, but there are also training and motivation and morale questions, and I also wonder, within the context of the Vietnam War, where you see... Rob, you are the Vietnam expert here. The behavior of American troops, I'm thinking about the My Lai massacre, there's a lot of problematic things that are going on in Vietnam, and it seems very perverse to me to hold Vietnam up as some kind of ideal of infantry behavior from an American point of view. If this is ultimately the war that benefited the most from the innovations that SLA Marshall helped to create and those seeds that he planted in the 1940s and 1950s, is this a good thing? I don't know. I haven't done the research on this. I'm not the Vietnam historian, but we have a Vietnam historian who's here on this podcast with us and I'm really interested in your thoughts on this, Rob.

RT: I am flattered he thinks I am the Vietnam War expert. That's reassuring. So for my personal research on Phú Yên... this is probably a useful anecdote... during the Tet Offensive there are firefights. Well, they end up capturing a PAVN soldier and in the interrogation, he mentions how much better the North Vietnamese soldiers are because they have fire discipline. They're not shooting at everything that moves. They only have so much ammo and they use it wisely in comparison to the Americans and South Vietnamese who are just shooting wildly, burning through ammunition. And there's physical proof behind that, and I always found that really interesting, because with Vietnam, there's like this, I guess you could say, cloud hanging over the entire war that the Americans were just literally shooting at everything, overwhelming firepower—you mentioned My Lai. There are other instances where entire villages are just destroyed in firefights because the amount of ordnance being used. And you can go on YouTube and watch any clip from Vietnam, and you might see helicopters just pouring fire into whatever patch of jungle. So there is a lot of visual evidence and you can look at footage from Way. You just see Marines blindly firing over walls. So I would definitely say Vietnam is not the best example to look at of, how to use firepower. There's a lot of weight behind arguments that say we used too much there.

RE: That's what I thought, and that was always my impression of Vietnam as well. I just throw it out there that Matthew is right in that these soldiers and the people who have been training them have been influenced by SLA Marshall before going to Vietnam. He was widely read, and these arguments about, well, nobody is using their weapons were taken to heart, and so you have training regimes that are trying to make everybody use their weapons as much as possible as a remedy for what was seen as a defect during the Second World War. I would pose as a hypothesis anyways that this is actually creating a whole new set of problems and is not actually creating more combat effectiveness overtime and was perhaps barking up the wrong tree.

TB: Well and it's this point that is often the case with military historians, and it's strangely about both World War I and World War II, this intense criticism of the side that won. I get it. We always want to improve, but we often forget to ask the question in these after-action reports.

There are a couple of ways of doing these. One is the most common way which is you raise an issue and then talk about solutions and by an issue you usually mean a problem. And then there's the other way of doing it, which I think has been under emphasized in the United States Army, which is after something happens, what are the things we sustain and what are the things we improve with equal emphasis on both. And Marshall seems to be... reading his book you're like, well, I mean, I get it, you seem to have this problem, but the record is fairly clear that United States military took those islands that you're criticizing them for not firing enough on. They took the ground in France and in Europe that you're criticizing them for not firing enough in. So what is the point, really? To take it more effectively? Okay, maybe, but your solution, your identification of the problem, your solution doesn't seem to be really helping in that regard, and as you guys say, in a war that the United States lost in Vietnam, his solution was applied, over-applied and the results sort of speak for themselves. So we're kind of in agreement on this stuff. And I would say in terms of a response to Matthew, I agree with Robert, I think it is the most cogent and the best defense I've heard of Marshall and it's a great point, but what I would say is I think that, sort of like George Kennan gets this credit for sort of being this guy who invents containment as this great overall guiding principle for what we come to call the Cold War, the reality is, is that what Kennan did was say something that everybody was kind of thinking it, but just say it well. And so he kind of becomes the symbol guy you put out there, like you said the slogan, the slogan for what we're doing. He puts a good word on, he writes the long telegram. It's great. Similarly, I think with SLA Marshall, I think he says something that a lot of guys were kind of thinking and I don't think they're thinking exactly the same as him—that these guys aren't firing enough—but they're thinking, okay, well, this is a good way of sort of emphasizing that we need to put a little more focus on how we use fires together. He's come up with a good slogan. He's kind of a catspaw for them, like we'll throw him out there and we'll use him because he's a good writer, he is influential, we can use this. And so I don't think he drives it as much. They use him as the slogan and then I think the slogan gets out of control which can sometimes happen when you choose somebody who comes up with a good slogan and I think that would be my only response. I think Matthew is right, but I think that that would be the response to Marshall's influence there.

MF: Well you are very generous, and I think you have all been very generous with me by conceding that I've been on to something when it comes to the relevance of Marshall and engineering problems and trying to achieve different or new or innovative technical solutions to problems. How real they were? I can't say but I think you as historians have already described and pointed out that they weren't necessarily real. However, for those working in U.S. military establishments in the war immediately afterwards, they certainly were bought into the idea that there was a problem that could be solved by taking Marshall's slogan and thinking through engineering problems in terms of trying to help users more adequately make better use of improved technical solutions and in this case generating greater fire. But the broader point that you were making about Vietnam and you could run that further forwards now into the 21st

century about engineers and Marshall sloganizing the importance of firepower in terms of winning the firefight, I think, and in terms of winning the battle, I think a little bit of me is reluctant to say that it's the fault of engineers and those looking to optimize the employment of military capability to suggest that they are somehow at error for political choices that are part of a broader strategic challenge associated with, in Vietnam's case, containing communism and subsequently as the Cold War progressed, I think I can absolutely say that engineers have provided exquisite solutions that are tempting to use by those in the armed forces and by politicians, but I'm a little bit reluctant to say it's all the engineers fault. This increased ratio of fire, if only they hadn't come up with a solution to a problem that we didn't really have, we might have not gotten ourselves into a sticky situation in Vietnam. In the background I'm thinking to myself well possibly, but also there's a lot more going on in relation to whether to go to war and what types of techniques and procedures, tactics and operational approaches you might adopt when it comes to fighting an insurgency in Vietnam, and we've seen more recently as we've found ourselves embroiled in a number of difficult situations. The technical solutions don't always provide the answers. We might be tempted to assume that they always will, but that requires some kind of political moderation and the description about what the political intent is as we employ these types of equipment.

TB: I think the technocratic turn of the post-World War II world... there's a whole another podcast to be had there and all of its far-reaching effects. So I think we're out of time for this one and I'm not blaming the engineers. I'm blaming SLA Marshall for Vietnam. If anybody takes anything away from this...

RT: Here, here.

TB: I want to thank you, Rob Thompson, Robert Engen and Matthew Ford for joining us to talk about SLA Marshall. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments and suggestions on this program and all the programs we offer through War Room. We're always interested in hearing from you and please subscribe to A Better Peace and after you've subscribed to A Better Peace on the podcatcher of your choice, we hope that you will also rate and review and share. We look forward to having you all join us again soon, and until next time from the War Room, I'm Tom Bruscano.