



SLAM-FEST: A DISCUSSION OF S.L.A. MARSHALL'S WORKS – PART 1

By Matthew Ford, Robert Engen, Rob Thompson and Tom Bruscano April 6, 2021

<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/podcasts/slam-fest-pt1/>

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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 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.

TB: I'm here in Pennsylvania at the War College. So just a bit of background on our subject. Marshall was born in 1900. He joined the Army in late 1917. As an enlisted man, saw some action with the 90th Division in World War I, got a commission, became an officer in 1919, and then returned to civilian life. He became a journalist in the interwar years, eventually focusing on

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military affairs and writing his first book, called “Blitzkrieg” in 1940. He joined back up into service as an officer in World War II in the Army, went to the historical division of the General Staff and then conducted interviews with officers and troops after battles in the Pacific and Europe. Thereafter, he covered all of America's wars until his death in 1977. Most of his dozens of books consist of historical accounts of wars and battles, often from the up-close perspective of the troops he interviewed. His most influential commentary on war was a 1947 book called “Men Against Fire.” This podcast today came from, of all places, a Twitter thread by Matthew on Marshall, which led to the rest of us chiming in with our thoughts because Marshall tends to draw out historians. He's never a green subject for military historians and analysts, but maybe is not so well known by wider audiences and especially by the military professionals who have felt, if not known, his influence. So let's talk about that. Marshall has often been called a historian and many of his works are treated as histories of action and wars. Rob Thompson, in your work on Vietnam, you've encountered Marshall's publications about battles and more. Tell us about those. Did you find them valuable? How well do they hold up?

RT: For my work I've read “Fields of Bamboo,” and what led me to that book was that a veteran told me that it covered battles in Phú Yên. So I read it. It's very vague, no real place names, it could be talking about almost anywhere, but if a veteran had told me it was about Phú Yên, I probably never would have believed it. But it was at least a starting point to give me a feel for the province, but I did not cite it specifically. I didn't feel like I could trust everything Slam was saying in the work. There just weren't enough specifics, no citations, so it read more like a good war story than history.

TB: Robert or Matthew, have either of you ever used any of his histories of battles, accounts like that as opposed to this... we'll come back to “Men Against Fire”... but have you guys ever had a chance to use any of his stuff?

RE: I've read a great deal of his work, and while there are elements of getting to know the soldiers on the ground, there are some good stories that come out of it, I've never seen Slam as a particularly credible source, and as you said, we will get back to talking about “Men Against Fire,” but it kind of casts something of a shadow over my view of the rest of his body of work and the credibility of what he was bringing to it. So I don't treat his work as history. I mostly treat it as something to talk about.

MF: Well, in contrast to Rob and Robert, I have had to use Slam Marshall. You'll find some references in my book “Weapon of Choice,” but the question as to how good he is a historian, this is why I put the Twitter thread together in the first place because I knew that it would provoke historians, especially Robert. I wanted to see if I could needle Robert into responding on Twitter because Slam Marshall, it seems Slam is a red rag to a bull for historians because what we want as a historian is we want all the evidence to be set there in the background for us to be

able to go back through the evidential and causal chains to forensically establish whether he's speaking the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and for historians to discover that he's actually a bit of a hassle, the worst thing for historian is to be an academic historian surely must be something to be described, something along the lines of being a journalist. If you said a journalist to an academic historian, everyone would run to the hills. You can't be a journalist. We do proper research, proper writing, and Slam Marshall, for all of his wonderful prose, I really think his prose is very, very good. He mobilizes you to think about battle differently and he is thoroughly engaging, a really solid and interesting read, got me really interested. I read his book on the Korean War and our use of small arms in the Korean War, just really provocative, but only then to find all these historians moaning and whinging about how accurate it was. It was just too much for me really, which is what prompted me to write this Twitter thread. And I can talk to the academic reasons why I like Slam, but you know, historians complaining about Marshall, of course they're going to do that. They have got to defend their profession from journalists.

TB: Well, I hear you Matthew. I would only say that he called himself a historian, called himself a military historian.

MF: That says something about military historians doesn't it?

TB: Well it does, but it also says something about historians in general, that we want to be...

MF: Storytellers.

TB: We want to be storytellers, but we also want to be able to track back the sources and where they came from and confirm them and use them as best we can. So what ends up with Marshall, I think, is that while he's claiming to write these big accounts of telling you what happened in a battle, what he really is, if you can trust it, which is a problem with him, what he is really doing is giving you a perspective of maybe some of the soldiers, some of the individuals involved, if he told their story well. And it's really hard. Like Rob said, you might not even know where it's at from that perspective that soldier. So he's putting it into the context and telling you what it all means in a way that doesn't tend to meet the standards of what we would count as history.

MF: Evidential standards.

TB: Yeah, so I would say, if you compare him to somebody like Ernie Pyle, and I think that he would probably belong more in the category of an Ernie Pyle had Ernie Pyle survived and maybe wrote some books about accounts or articles about the battles he saw and started to make larger conclusions and then maybe we would have that same issue with Ernie Pyle. But as it is, we say, oh, well Ernie Pyle was a great combat reporter, we can use some of his stuff. I mean the title of

my master's thesis is from him. So yeah, I trust him a lot more that way. And I think the other thing when it comes to Marshall as a chronicler of battles, he takes, and a lot of us have given him great credit for setting up the battlefield interview, for going into units immediately after they come out of action and talking to them about what happened and trying to reconstruct what happened from their perspective. It's pretty valuable and has led to in the historical profession, and as Kurt Peeler, a historian down at Florida State has pointed out, the massive expansion of oral history as a source in the historical profession, particularly in military history. Military history sort of leads the way in that entire historical profession and it kind of comes out of this World War II experience. So he gets great credit for it, but sometimes we forget and I think this is partially Marshall's doing, kind of blowing his own horn, a lot of other people did it too, Forrest Pogue went out there. Hugh Cole, a lot of these guys were out there doing these battlefield interviews and actually a lot of battlefield interviews are actually kept. You can read them. They are on microfilm or microfiche out there. I don't know if they've been digitized yet, but you have all these unit actions and they're fascinating if you want to go through them and dig through them. But the difference is, the professional military stories tended to do it with much more care when they used those, and that's where Marshall tends to sort of fall flat. And Rob who kind of comes in on it on the more back end in Vietnam, goes hey, there's this great, interesting well-written account, but I can't use it.

RT: Yeah, exactly, that's what I faced. It was great reading, evocative, but at that point, I'm trying to piece together what happened in the province and I'm left with vague descriptions of locations, maybe some place names that don't quite mean much to me like I don't understand why that place is important, no one else has mentioned it. So it was like a puzzle piece to a puzzle I didn't know where that puzzle was if that makes any sense.

TB: Yeah, you're doing a puzzle that didn't have the picture of it.

RT: Yeah.

RE: Yeah, and one of the characteristics of Marshall's books as well was a tendency to do a lot of name dropping as he believed that every time you actually put someone's name in a book, then you've sold ten copies to that person and their entire family as well. I don't know. Matthew, I don't really have a problem with him as journalist, well maybe there's a bit of academic snobbery involved in this, but it's not his journalism that I take issue with. I don't fault his methods in terms of gathering soldiers and talking to them. There are some innovative things there and I certainly don't fault any of the questions that are ultimately raised because of him, but I think that Slam went into particularly his interviews during the Second World War and thereafter as well with a very well developed idea already formed in his mind of what the main problem was and what he was going to talk about and what his findings were going to be, and that whatever discussions were had with the troops were ultimately going to reflect the opinions and the

findings of S.L.A. Marshall rather than listening to what was going on on the ground. One of my favorite anecdotes from *Slam* was taken straight from his memoirs when he's talking about his first combat experience as a combat observer, as an official historian going into Makin Island in 1943. And when they went in there onto the ground, he said that his overwhelming sense was that the soldiers were shooting too much. They were panicking. They were trigger happy. They were shooting at everything, including things that did not indeed and should not have been shot at, but that he consciously chose to downplay this and ignore this because he didn't think that that was the real problem. The real problem was soldiers not shooting their weapons enough. And there are some details, Marines versus the conscripts in Europe, and you can get down into the specifics here, but my point is that he went into Europe and he went into a lot of these interviews knowing what he was going to find, and that speaks poorly of both his journalism and his credentials as a historian, I would say, and therefore makes a lot of what he ultimately came up with quite suspect.

TB: Yeah, so let's transition to that. So I think that if he had only been a reporter who wrote the types of accounts that we've been talking about, he probably would have faded from memory. Maybe be kind of an Ernie Pyle, probably not as loved as Ernie Pyle was but something like that, and maybe not even that that prevalent, but the problem or the issue is that he set his heights higher, especially in this book, "Men Against Fire," which spelled out an argument, and for our audience's sake, this ratio of fire argument and all of the many responses that followed that we have alluded to. So Robert, in our discussion of Marshall, you summed him up as a snake oil salesman. So I take it you have strong views about him as we pointed out in this issue. So can you tell us about the ratio of fire? What is it? What does it mean? And then tell us about the controversy over it and then your take on the subject.

RE: Alright. In 1947 Marshall published a book called "Men Against Fire." That was what he is best known for. It was supposedly a study, a compilation of many of his analytical findings from the field, doing interviews with infantry rifle companies during the Second World War. And the main point that he settles upon is... and there are many points in the book... but the main point as I see it and that is drawn from it for the most part by historians and analysts is this idea of the ratio of fire—that in any given American infantry rifle company, you would only have 15-20% of soldiers who would make any use of their weapon whatsoever in combat, and that included people who were firing a shot for suppression, who threw one grenade, who made any use of their weapons, only 15-20%. And Marshall was of course curious as to why this was and postulated a number of theories about a generalizable and universal trait of humans in combat that we fear aggression, that we fear killing, and that this is observable far outside of the context of the United States Army in the Second World War. And there are variations on it. He said that at best you never got more than a quarter of your soldiers firing their weapons. There were some variations in terms of who served weapons. There were a few other circumstances. Your really well-trained soldiers, you could get up to maybe 25-30%, but it was still only a minority who

were ever firing. And this raises all sorts of questions and it raised a lot of questions at the time about motivation, about morale, about cohesion, about the fitness of soldiers to actually be in combat, about selection procedures for how we select who is going into combat. I co-wrote an article with the now sadly deceased professor Roger Spiller from Leavenworth recently on S.L.A. Marshall and the kind of the cultural milieu that he was writing in and there was a lot of this stuff, this critical aspect of thinking that the American male was no longer fighting fit. There's a lot of that in the air that Marshall was kind of picking up on and you can see elements of it in his ratio of fire argument. And Marshall made quite the career for himself thereafter, not just as a journalist reporting on war affairs and on what was going on, but as something of a self-made social scientist. He was commissioned to do similar studies on the ratio of fire in Korea and Vietnam using his specialized methods of infantry company interviews. And according to Marshall, thanks to the innovations in training that had been introduced because of him, by the time they get to Korea, the problem has been reduced sharply and only about half of soldiers are no longer firing their weapons, and by the time they get to Vietnam they've really fixed this problem and practically everyone is making full use of their weapons. And this has been treated by many military historians, many people within the military profession on both sides of the Atlantic, as a general principle of warfare, that only a tiny number of soldiers will actually take part in combat. And there's been a lot of exploration over decades as to why this might be. And just to kind of bring that full loop, I don't think any of that's right. I think that Marshall had come to this conclusion based upon his own reading, his own extremely simplified reading of Ardant du Picq, a French military writer from the 19th century who made a similar, but I would say better grounded assertion, about the combat that he had observed in the late 19th century. And Marshall's observations during the Second World War were very tailored to what he wanted to find. There's no evidence that he was collecting statistics, that his ratio of fire is anything more at best than his own impression. And we have some conflicting evidence from other countries that were fighting alongside the Americans that this was certainly not a universal experience of infantry ground warfare.

MF: I think you've just lost us all out from talking for the next 10 minutes.

TB: Okay, so Matthew let's go to you then. Let's ask this question. I think your point is will be made and I'll maybe add something on here in a little bit but Matthew, this started with your Twitter thread right? And you looked at Marshall from a different angle. And you said—and I'm going to put it out here because I want to maybe make this a little more accessible to a general audience—what you said though is that that Marshall's work and the response thus far has, in your words, “failed to foreground the socio-technical relationship between the soldier and their weapon.” But you credit him with identifying a problem with users, in this case soldiers, that engineers already knew about and were working on. Can you explain that for the common listener out there and what that means and why it matters?

MF: Yeah. So I think all of what Robert has just said is a set of answers that I've come to know and love when it comes to how historians, generally speaking, think through the importance and the significance of Slam. But the angle that I come at this from is one in which after the Second World War, you have a series of challenges around what types of technology to take forwards for the infantryman, an infantryman in battle. And the question arises because we've got battlefield problems that engineers understand, especially in relation to whether to introduce automatic weapons into the infantry section of the squad where S.L.A. Marshall effectively sloganized, identified, named, pointed out where issues are in the way soldiers use their weapons. And in particular, what engineers are doing is saying well, can we come up with a series of technical solutions that will help the user use their weapon more effectively? In this respect, engineers have understood that soldiers haven't been able to use their weapons. I glibly described this on Twitter as soldiers can't shoot straight, and whilst that sounds glib, there is plenty of evidence to show that soldiers have never really been good at marksmanship or shooting and I can check that, if you have a look at weapon of choice by book, you'll see some of the evidence for that. The question for engineers is can you design a technology that actually addresses or alleviates some of the problems that are associated with soldiers shooting skills? And in that respect, you're running into an institutional culture that doesn't want to admit necessarily that it's got a problem. In the infantry, generally speaking, there already under attack from people, service arms like the Air Force like people in their tanks, artillery. You've got a nuclear battlefield emerging. What role will the infantry have in this future battlefield? And they are struggling to defend themselves in this new context. One thing that they will want to say is that they've got good skill at arms. Their institutional identity is associated with this skill. Well, what happens if you're an engineer and you know that that's not entirely an accurate description of how they tend to work right? And so Marshall kind of raises that as an idea and sloganizes it and somehow manages to push the idea through and past various parts of the infantry to the point that there's an acceptance that there might be a problem. In that respect, it gives room for engineers to actually start putting forward suggestions about how to improve shooting prowess of soldiers more broadly, how to address questions of fire, fire discipline, whether they can hit targets, at what ranges, and how to open this up to a set of conversations that engineers might understand that hadn't previously been something that could be discussed easily when basically the establishment was much more focused directly in on things that were institutional markers of status like marksmanship. So once you switch, I think that the point for me is, once you switch out from looking at Slam as offering a statement about how battle and the battlefield works and were the soldiers shooting on, or whether there's any evidence, how strong the evidence is in relation to whether they shoot, 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 it's very persuasive amongst a bunch of people who were actually resisting change rather than embracing it.

And that seems like a great place to take a break. Matthew Ford has just laid out his approach to studying and utilizing the works of S.L.A. Marshall, and in the next episode, we'll let the historians respond with their views on Slam's place in their fields of study. Join us again on the next episode of A Better Peace, the War Room podcast for the rest of the discussion.