

Book Review

Crusader: General Donn Starry and the Army of His Times by Mike Guardia

Reviewed by¹

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Establishing himself as a military historian and biographer, author Mike Guardia has published well-known books in military circles, chronicling the leadership of General Hal Moore, the Battle of 73 Easting, and the history of combat platforms such as the Mig-25 and the F-15. In his latest book, *Crusader: General Donn Starry and the Army of His Times*, Guardia draws from the General's memos, personal correspondence, and interviews to present the reader with a detailed account of arguably the greatest institutional leader to emerge in the Army since George C. Marshall.

The book is less of a complete biography and more of a detailed account of Starry's military career. Guardia focuses the book on Starry's military assignments and accomplishments. Starry did not fight in World War II or Korea but commanded the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Vietnam and advanced to command the Armor Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky, the V Corps in Germany, and the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC).

The author examines Starry's early career experiences as a junior officer in peacetime to include assignments in post-WWII Germany and relates them to how Starry implemented the lessons learned at the strategic level. For example, in reflecting on the lessons of WWII, Starry understood that units arriving in theater were up to the task of warfighting. At the same time, the individual replacement system degraded collective performance. Sadly, the Army did not take heed of this observation while fighting the war in Vietnam. Guardia also points to Starry's experience as an armored unit commander in the jungles of Vietnam as unique in the Army's history, and this led to an influential study on the use of armor in unconventional operations titled *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*. Starry would carry these lessons with him when he began his institutional reforms at TRADOC in the 1970s.

It is institutional reform that defines Starry as a reformer. Guardia informs the reader of how Starry conceived of and implement institutional reforms early in his career as a contributor to the first edition of the Joint Staff Officer's Guide (published by what is now the Joint Forces Staff College). His influence as a general officer affected multiple generations of officers and included changing the Army's central warfighting doctrine from Active Defense to AirLand Battle.

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Central to AirLand battle was the concept of an extended battlefield in both time and space. This doctrine served as a warning to Soviet leaders that if they chose to fight NATO, the U.S. would carry the war to them, and not limit the fighting to the battlefields of Germany. This doctrine was never tested against the Soviets but would carry the day in Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Guardia details a fascinating aspect of Starry's career that is his relationships with other general officers. For example, throughout his career, Starry would work for General Creighton Abrams, who would become the Army's Chief of Staff. This relationship began early in Starry's career as a field grade officer and progressed through his time as a two-star general. Another Chief of Staff, General William Westmoreland would notice Starry in Vietnam. Indeed, Westmoreland used the lessons learned from Starry's creative use of armor formations during the invasion of Cambodia to request additional armor capabilities to fight the war. Starry's observations of the styles of both officers influenced his personal leadership philosophy.

Starry continually impressed upon his subordinates that commanders belong at the front. Indeed, Starry lived by this philosophy as a commander in the Vietnam War. To Starry, presence at the front meant living, seeing, and feeling the battle from the soldier's perspective. Guardia not only discusses this philosophy but provides multiple examples of its implementation at each stage of Starry's career. Starry was adamant that one cannot lead from the office, or in today's parlance from behind a desk or through email.

The culmination of Starry's career was the development of AirLand battle. The author tells how Starry took command from General William DePuy to become the second commander of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). While at TRADOC, Starry advanced the Army's central warfighting doctrine from the concept of Active Defense to AirLand Battle. This doctrinal change was a new and profound way to think about fighting a war with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

Every leader in the joint force should understand that a military officer's greatest accomplishments often happen away from operational forces on the battlefield, occurring instead on the home front in institutional assignments. Indeed, strategic leadership in the military requires patience and the ability to capture what one learns early in a career and then apply it when put into a position to influence real change. Guardia's book belongs on the bookshelf of leaders throughout the joint force.

Book Information:

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by Mike Guardia

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