

Miszelle

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Dennis E. Showalter (1942-2019)

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Late on 30 December 2019 the world lost a generous, gentle man and a superb military historian. Dennis Edwin Showalter died at his home in Colorado Springs after complications arising from esophageal cancer. He was 77 years old. Whereas Ernst von Salomon's eldest brother Bruno had fantasized about a "most wonderful" career end, perishing as a young lieutenant "in some roadside ditch outside of Paris," Dennis Showalter left us in what for a historian can only be termed a more benevolent form—hard at work on his twenty-ninth book, to be entitled simply "Modern Warfare."

Dennis Showalter was born on 12 February 1942 in Delano, Minnesota. His parents were arch-typical American stock: the father was a traveling door-to-door salesman and the mother a strong homemaker. Both had been deeply marked by the Great Depression. One luxury that they allowed their son was a troop of lead toy soldiers. At age twelve Dennis became the Minnesota state spelling champion. As such, he was awarded a trip to the spelling nationals in the nation's capital. Washington, D.C., fired up his love of history. The Civil War battlefields that surround it likely helped shape that love toward military history.

Dennis later recounted that he had hated the sales trips with his father and that he was "not good with his hands." That left what he called "this education thing." He made it "work": A Bachelor of Arts degree from St. John's University in 1963 and then a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Minnesota in 1969 under the direction of Bismarck biographer Otto Pflanze. At Minnesota he also encountered Harold Deutsch, a noted Germanist and a prominent member of the Office of Strategic Services' Board of Economic Warfare during World War II, with whom he would later write two World War II counterfactuals, *If the Allies had Fallen* and *What if? Strategic Alternatives of WW II*. That same year, 1969, Dennis headed out West, to "flyover country" in the current terminology of the self-anointed elite of the two American oceanic shores, to interview for a job at a small, private liberal arts college founded by the Reverend Thomas Nelson Haskell in 1874. To his amazement, The Colorado College chose Dennis over the well-heeled applicants from far more prestigious institutions. It would be his professional home for the next forty-seven years.

Why? Why did he not resettle at a famous-name university after his third or tenth or fifteenth book? The simple truth is that Dennis loved Colorado Springs and The Colorado College. Not to mention his wife of 54 years, Clara Anne McKenna, and his two children, Clara Kathleen and John. He used The Colorado College as a home base from which to

explore the world of the United States Military Academy, the Marine Corps University, and the United States Air Force Academy. The latter became a second home. Dennis not only taught at the Academy but joined several of its scholars to mount high-level military history conferences, and to edit or co-edit numerous anthologies. My attempt to lure Dennis to the United States Naval War College at Newport as my successor in 1986 thus was doomed to failure. He loved his small college of 2,000 bright, young students. He devoured books—it is rumored that he read a book a day—in order to always present cutting-edge lectures. After all, he once told me that was his duty, given the College's exorbitant tuition fees (\$60,000 per annum today). He never lobbied friends for an august chair at a premiere university. He was that rarest of academic creatures: deeply content.

But how does one write twenty-seven books at a College with a teaching load of eight classes per academic year? Dennis once revealed that secret to Frederick Schneid of High Point University. When asked point-blank how he balanced teaching, service, research, and writing at a small liberal arts college, Dennis replied in his usual down-to-earth fashion. "Rick, a page a day is a book a year." Dennis practiced what he preached.

In 1975 Dennis published his revised dissertation, *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology and the Unification of Germany*. The author showed how Prussia's generals, normally conservative in accepting innovations, nevertheless were alert to new technologies such as railroads, steel, rifling, and their effect on existing tactics and operations. In short, the Prussian military elite "met the challenges of the industrial revolution." The work was well reviewed in the *American Historical Review* as being "highly readable, well-documented, and well-argued." But it was flawed. It was "old-school" military history, the kind that Winston Churchill in *My Early Life* called "majestic splendour," a "sporting element in a splendid game." It failed to consider "the relationship of arms and society and the social composition and outlook of the officers' corps." Too little "social, economic or psychological analysis." Dennis Showalter had landed head-first in the maelstrom of the "new military history." I am afraid that I was one of the leaders of the new cult.

Mars and Clio are difficult partners at the best of times. Historians of all stripes united to drive out their military history colleagues. They regarded the field to be ethically and politically questionable, and its practitioners, in the words of John Lynn of the University of Illinois, the eminent military historian of Louis XIV, "politically right-wing, morally corrupt, or just plain dumb." As one of Lynn's colleagues liked to say, "Military history is to history as military music is to music." Retirements in the field were never replaced. New hirings were in the trendy genres of labor, race, class, and gender. They proudly sported their new garb: L.L. Bean boots and jeans. A smug self-righteousness and intolerance came to dominate the academy (until this day).

Dennis remained unconvinced and unrepentant. The old drums-and-bugles approach with its emphasis on battles, campaigns and great captains remained valid. It could incorporate economics, intelligence, logistics, and technology (as in "railroads and rifles") in its analyses. He at once set out to make his point in a delightful piece in *Military Affairs* entitled "A Modest Plea for Drums and Trumpets" (penned in 1975,

revisited in 1998). Armies, he reminded his readers, may well be part of a broader social, economic and political framework, but what makes them unique is that “they exist to fight.” Taking combat (Carl von Clausewitz’s centrality of *Schlacht*) out of military history would be akin to asking historians of science “to disregard Newton’s laws.” Drums-and-bugles history was difficult but necessary. It involved “painstaking, frustrating labor.” But the labor was necessary in order to attain “even a marginally accurate reconstruction of a single phase of an uncomplicated action.” Dennis ended his reply to the “new-military-history” practitioners with a “modest plea for drums and trumpets” and with a reminder to the military historian “of the dangers of straying too far from his roots.”

Dennis stayed close to his roots. The next two decades brought books on the great captains (*Patton and Rommel* 2005, *Hindenburg* 2005, *Frederick the Great* 2012); on major battles (*Tannenberg: Clash of Empires* 2005, *Armor and Blood: Kursk 1943* 2013); and on titanic clashes (*The Wars of Frederick the Great* 1996, *The Wars of German Unification* 2004, and *Hitler’s Panzers* 2009). And there ushered forth from Colorado Springs a host of delightful articles, with cheeky titles such as “No Officer Rather than a Bad Officer,” “More Than Nuts and Bolts,” “Archie Bunker, Lenny Bruce, and Ben Cartwright,” “The Odd Couple,” “A Tidal Wave of Degeneracy,” and that ultimate classic, “Even Generals Wet Their Pants.” Somehow, Dennis found the time to leave his drums and trumpets and to pen a piece on his favorite baseball team, *Batting 10th for the Yankees*.

Perhaps to defang the anti-military-history crowd, Dennis delved back into German history and in 1982 published *Little Man What Now? Der Stuermer in the Weimar Republic*. He had taken the title from Hans Fallada’s highly successful novel, *Kleiner Mann – was nun?*, a gripping tale of harsh life in Berlin in the years after the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. Dennis’ main character, Gauleiter Julius Streicher, was found guilty of “crimes against humanity” and sentenced to death by the International Military Tribunal at Nürnberg in October 1946. Yet, could an author be found guilty of a crime he had encouraged in press but not actually committed?

Dennis made the argument central to the book. But he did not defend traditional concepts of academic freedom or the First Amendment of the United States Constitution guaranteeing “freedom of press”; instead, he concluded that the sentence was correct insofar as Streicher’s lurid, anti-Semitic, pornographic paper *Der Stürmer* had “infected the German mind with the virus of anti-Semitism, and incited the German people to active persecution.” Right topic, wrong conclusion for his liberal-moralist colleagues. Again, Dennis stood tall. He would revisit the *Stürmer* case in 1983 via articles in the *German Studies Review* and in *Modern Judaism*, and in 1989 in the *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*. And he would regularly lecture on “The Jews in the Modern World” at The Colorado College.

As if his dance card was not already full, Dennis also entered the world of professional societies and their journals as well as that of academic and commercial publishing houses. For years he had been a member of the American Military Institute and a

regular contributor to its journal, *Military Affairs*. The latter came in a pedestrian-looking paper format and its contents no longer reflected the “new military history.” Thus, in 1989 a troika consisting of Allan Millett, Richard Kohn and Holger Herwig moved the journal from Kansas State University to the Marshall Foundation at the Virginia Military Institute, renamed the publication *The Journal of Military History*, transformed it into a more conventional format, and appointed Bruce Vandervort as its new editor. The following year the American Military Institute became the Society for Military History.

Dennis took these radical changes in stride. He wrote for the new journal and from 1997 to 2000 served as president of the new Society. He became series editor for several presses, including Cambridge University Press, University of Kansas Press, Brassey’s, Praeger Press, and Oxford University Press. In some ways he secured his already elevated status in the field in 1993 by joining Professor Hew Strachan as founding editor of a new journal, *War in History*.

The year 2011 brought a crowning achievement: A Festschrift entitled *Arms and the Man: Military History Essays in Honor of Dennis Showalter*. Michael Neiberg, then professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, had come up with the idea and convinced Brill at Leiden to publish it. When he asked Dennis what he might like in a Festschrift, Dennis at once rattled off the names of military historians he respected. The Festschrift was unique insofar as to the best of my knowledge, Dennis never was the primary supervisor (*Doktorvater*) of a single graduate student. Indeed, graduate studies did not exist at The Colorado College. But what a well-deserved reward for a lifetime of mentoring hordes of academic graduate students and military officers.

The title of the Festschrift was a stroke of genius: *Arms and the Man*. THE MAN read masters’ theses and doctoral dissertations and, where merited, steered them to the presses for which he served as series editor. He was never too busy to offer constructive criticism (*Kritik*) for students and colleagues alike. He rarely forgot to pick up a bar bill for a graduate student. Or a stray cat. His special blend of charm and humor was contagious. His rumbly baritone voice could not be ignored at any conference. Nor could his wonderful habit of breaking into song in the middle of a formal presentation. If he fell asleep in a deep snore during a talk, he was the first on his feet with a penetrating question. When asked late in life by a doctoral candidate whether he was slowing down, Dennis replied, “I am as good as I ever was, just not as often as I used to be.” If he could be faulted, it was for his habit of devouring cold pizza for breakfast.

Kindness marked the man. He never belittled or degraded his critics. He steered military history calmly through the tidal waves of the peace movement, the radicalization after the Vietnam War, the Balkanization of his discipline, History, and the increasing intolerance of academia. He gently sought to raise the profile of military history by example. He even extended a welcome hand to “new-military-history” scholars. When I finally (to him) found my way to operational history with a presentation on the “Battle of the Marne 1914” at an annual meeting of the Society for Military History, Dennis as session chair was delighted that I had at last discovered the “sharp end of the stick.” He rushed over to congratulate me—I thought for brilliantly having put a human face to the

operational art of that great campaign. Wrong. With his usual sharp eye for detail, Dennis had picked up an aside: my reference to the thousands of German soldiers who had come down with violent bouts of diarrhea after consuming the unripe fruit of Artois and Picardy in early September! Small, human things mattered to Dennis Showalter.

In his last full year in harness, Dennis won the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing. Past recipients had included Gerhard Weinberg, Peter Paret, James McPherson, and Hew Strachan, among other notables. I am sure that Dennis would have shortened that Victorian title! And I am equally sure that for his offspring he welcomed its \$100,000 prize money. I could not have thought of a more worthy recipient.