



Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Harold Tanner

Eight Questions for Dr. Tanner:

1. How did you get interested in Military History?

Well, growing up in Lawrenceville, New Jersey you feel like you're in the middle of a military history museum—Washington crossing the Delaware, Battle of Trenton, Battle of Princeton and so on. But in a more professional sense, as a graduate student I had written a seminar paper using the memoirs of Chinese People's Liberation Army personnel who had fought Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces in Manchuria—but it wasn't really a military history approach. Much later, while here at UNT, I realized that I had the makings of a good work of military history there. I give a lot of credit to my former colleague, Adrian Lewis, for giving me some good suggestions as to how to develop intellectually in the direction of military history.

2. What interests you most about being a professional military historian?

What I find most interesting is the process of working out a story for myself and then having the opportunity to try to share that story with a broader audience, both through teaching and through writing.

3. What place does Military History have in academia?

No matter what the sub-field of history, the historian has to think critically about the past and about the ways that we use the past in order to justify our visions of the present and future. Whether folks like it or not, war is a major part of the human past and present—it has and will continue to have an enormous impact not only on the careers of "great men" but on the lives of hundreds of millions of ordinary people. Military history has an important place in academia because war has an important place in life. To quote Sunzi (Sun Tzu): "Warfare is a great affair of the state, the field of life and death, the way of preservation and extinction. It cannot be left unexamined." If military history has no place in academia, then academia will have surrendered the field to popular writers who indulge in cheap celebration rather than thoughtful examination.

4. How do you integrate Military History in your curriculum?

I bring military history into my survey courses on Chinese and Japanese history because you can't properly understand the development of those nations' histories without it. How could you adequately understand contemporary Japan without reference to WWII, or China without reference to the experience of Japanese invasion? War and preparation for war are part of the overall historical narrative: they interact with politics, art, music, you name it!

5. What are your current and future projects?

I am currently looking at how the Chinese People's Liberation Army succeeded in suppressing insurgencies in the late 1940s and 1950s. We generally think of the Chinese Communists as the great insurgents—a weaker army defeating the

more modernized Chinese Nationalist forces. But while the Communists were fighting the Nationalist in the late 1940s, they were also suppressing a variety of irregular forces behind their own lines. And of course, in the 1950s, the PLA successfully put down a Tibetan rebellion which actually included guerrilla forces trained and equipped by the CIA. What interests me right now is the question of how the Chinese were able to suppress irregular forces (bandits and separatist uprisings) so effectively.

6. What was the hardest aspect of writing your most recent book?

Some might say that the hardest part was traveling multiple times to China and Taiwan to do research. I actually enjoy the traveling. On the other hand, spending eight or more hours every day for four weeks in my room in a university guest house in Shanghai reading and taking photographs of over 2,000 pages of material that couldn't be openly taken to a photocopy shop--that was rather challenging. My wife called to ask me "how is Shanghai?" I said, how would I know?

7. Any advice to students aspiring to be military historians?

First, find something that you like and focus on it; second, think about how to make it interesting to others. If you haven't communicated your insights to an audience beyond a dozen like-minded scholars, you haven't achieved much. Try to find the right balance between academic rigor and popular appeal—it isn't easy!

8. If you could have any career in the world, what would it be and why?

Pretty much what I'm doing now, but with two changes: 1) I'd be fluent in Russian as well as Chinese; 2) I'd combine my historical research with consulting on contemporary Chinese military issues.