

The Story Behind by Rob Swanson

Socrates is considered by some to be one of history's smartest men. Me, I'd have to say he was the most trusting of all men, because despite his wisdom and love of learning, he never wrote anything down. Apparently, he gave that job to a kid who liked to hang around. The kid was Plato, another Greek wise guy who could have claimed Socrates' ideas for his own, but didn't. There's probably a character lesson in there somewhere, but really I'm just interested in Socrates' most famous quote: "The unexamined life isn't worth living."

So true, but so surprisingly difficult. Even those of us who do try to examine our lives can get it so wrong if we don't test every thing we believe, because even when it should be obvious, we can still go with what we *think* "makes sense."

For example, if you drop a hundred-pound iron ball and a two-pound wooden ball from any height, which will hit the ground first? Of course we know they hit at the same time. Just try it and you'll see. But it took *four hundred years* for people to figure that out; all the science scrolls and books said the heavier object would land first. It only makes sense, right? When an Italian scientist proved it by dropping things from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, they accused the poor guy of fraud.

Here's an idea that seemed to make sense, but almost lost us the Great War... until Germany decided to steal the bad idea and give the victory back to us.

We've all seen them in movies, and boy do they look cool: tracer bullets. Some clever scientist made phosphorous bullets to help our fighter pilots' aim. Regular bullets are invisible, so they made every fifth round a tracer, and BANG, our boys knew where they were shooting.

Except they didn't. A phosphorus bullet has totally different ballistics. Hit the enemy with a tracer, and you were missing him with your other bullets. IMMEDIATELY, our air victories dropped by 80%. Then some knucklehead thought loading the end of the ammo belt with tracers would tell our guys when they were out of bullets. It also told the enemy, and our victories dropped another 10%.

You would think such a detrimental practice would be obvious, but our guys never caught on. Luckily the Germans thought tracers were pretty flashy, so they copied our bad idea and evened the odds, saving a ton of lives on BOTH sides. Pre-tracers, almost every engagement ended up with somebody shot down; post-tracers, most engagements ended with all planes in the air and empty ammo-belts.

The high command explained it away as allied and German pilots were getting so good that no-kill engagements were to be expected. Tracers were used in all wars since, with adjustments to correct the tracer ballistics occurring finally in the Gulf War.

What are your unexamined beliefs? What parenting, business, relationship, or living decisions you act upon are suspect? Had the generals just looked at the numbers, the truth should have been obvious. Are you looking?