

# Advanced Situational Awareness

by retired MAJ Vern L. Tubbs

Threats to individual security and organizational effectiveness are problems that persist in the complex operating environments we face. The question that must be answered is, "How do we effectively prepare our force to face these hybrid and insider threats in today's fiscally constrained environment?"

Training Soldiers to be aware by observing, interpreting and analyzing the human and environmental terrain in which they conduct operations is a critical aspect of operational security and effectiveness. Increased awareness is the key to a Soldier's capacity to observe effectively, analyze thoroughly, predict accurately and act decisively to avoid, mitigate or defeat potential threats.

The U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) is addressing this need with a unique course called Advanced Situational Awareness (ASA) that teaches Soldiers the art and science of observing humans and their surrounding environment. The ASA course grew from the recognition that Soldiers needed more training to enhance their awareness, sharpen their mindset and increase their ability to secure themselves and their units in the complex environments of Iraq, Afghanistan and even on the home front.



Figure 1. Roleplayers interact with a Soldier as part of the Advanced Situational Awareness Course at Fort Benning, GA.

## Threats

Hybrid or asymmetric threats are a diverse, dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces and criminal elements unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects. Hybrid threats will continue to exist no matter if our Soldiers are participating in a counterinsurgency operation, a decisive-action operation or simply living their daily lives in the United States while facing threats from terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Insider threats are defined in Army Regulation (AR) 381-12, **Threat Awareness and Reporting Program**, as "person(s) with placement and access (insider) who intentionally causes loss or degradation (threat) of resources or capabilities, or compromises (threat) the ability of an organization to accomplish its mission through espionage, international terrorism or the unauthorized release or disclosure (threat) of information about the plans and intentions of U.S. military forces."

Insider threats to our individual and unit security have come from within our ranks, as in the case of U.S. Army SGT Hasan K. Akbar, convicted of killing two officers and wounding 14 fellow Soldiers in a grenade-fragging incident on March 23, 2003, at Camp Pennsylvania, Kuwait. Another example is the case of U.S. Army MAJ Nidal Malik Hasan, who opened fire Nov. 5, 2009, killing 13 fellow Soldiers and civilians and wounding 32 others at Fort Hood, TX.

Insider threats have also appeared from within the ranks of our partner forces during the last several years in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The most recent tragedy is the killing of U.S. Army MG Harold Greene and the wounding of

more than a dozen others, including a U.S. Army brigadier general and a German general officer. This tragedy happened during a key-leader engagement Aug. 5, 2014, at the Marshal Fahim National Defense University, which is an Afghan training center in Kabul.

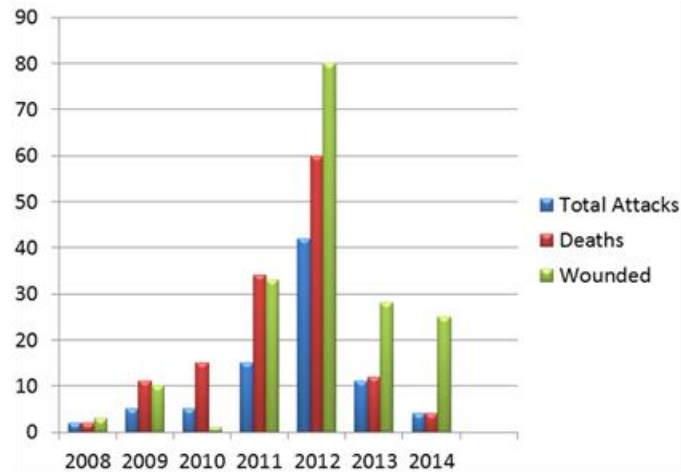


Figure 2. Green-on-blue insider attacks in Afghanistan.

### Modern situational awareness

The roots of modern situational awareness training in the military began with U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) GEN James Mattis, who determined Marines needed a set of skills once embodied by the “hunters-turned-Marines” of former generations. Successful hunters are keenly aware of the details in their surroundings and are alert to unusual environmental changes. Under Mattis’ guidance, the Marine Corps implemented the combat-hunter program in August 2007.

Although there are similarities to the USMC combat-hunter program, the Army developed the 50-hour ASA basic course and implemented it in late 2011. The Army has institutionalized ASA in its officer and noncommissioned-officer (NCO) development courses for our infantry, Cavalry and Armor Soldiers, and throughout the training continuum at MCoE. The ASA training supports warrior tasks and battle drills, the Maneuver Leader Development Strategy (MLDS) and ongoing efforts to codify and integrate the human dimension in all we do. The U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) established the requirement for ASA as part of its solution to the insider threat in Afghanistan through Fiscal Year (FY) 14 and included ASA in its region-alignment-of-forces (RAF) training guidance for FY15.



Figure 3. Students record observations.

### Adaptive leaders, sharpened mindset

The ASA course has continued to evolve and improve to meet the needs of the Soldier. This latest evolution began in

May 2014 when the Army shifted it to more closely align with the Army Learning Model (ALM) described in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. By decreasing the volume of lectures and slides, implementing more practical exercises, enabling individual learning opportunities through after-class assignments and broadening the “scenario aperture” beyond an Afghan-centric model to scenarios and looks from different areas around the globe, ASA continues to improve its learner-centric education and training model.

The ASA course develops adaptive, thinking Soldiers and leaders capable of meeting the challenges of operational adaptability in an era of persistent conflict. The course combines the ALM principles of self-development, institutional instruction and operational experience to deliver an exciting, interactive, “hands-on” course that educates and trains students in a classroom through practical exercises such as keep-in-memory games, observation exercises and ground-sign awareness (GSA). It also uses a complex, interactive, “free-play” outcomes-based field-training exercise supported by trained threat emulators.



**Figure 4. Roleplayers interact with ASA Course students at the ASA MOUT site.**

The ASA course teaches Soldiers about the human sensory system (five senses and the brain), the six domains of human behavior (heuristics, biometrics, kinesics, proxemics, geographics and atmospheric), principles of GSA (human pace, sign recognition), enhanced observation (why we see things, why we don't see things, signatures and cues), how to establish a baseline (an initial set of critical observations to confirm the norm of an area), critical thinking (problem-solving, anomaly-detection), decision-making (legal/moral/ethical, observe-orient-decide-act loop, ASA algorithm), how to think like the enemy and how to employ this knowledge and experience to be “left-of-bang.”

Students are evaluated on their teamwork, their participation and effort through all the practical exercises, their ability to articulate observations and reasoning behind their decisions, and their situational-awareness knowledge through a final written exam.



**Figure 5. An ASA instructor teaches the three key elements of a footstep as part of ‘using critical thinking to interpret GSA’ training.**

## Measuring benefit to Soldiers

It is difficult to quantify the benefit ASA training has had on the force, but many mid- and post-deployment after-action reviews indicate this training is saving lives. One battalion interviewed in Fall 2014, while deployed to Afghanistan, received ASA training in pre-deployment, and its Soldiers insist they used their newly acquired skills on a tactical level in many situations. Soldiers at all levels (private first class through first lieutenant) had very positive remarks about the ASA course's overall practical application and said ASA better prepared their less-experienced Soldiers to understand observation techniques when on patrol, in guardian-angel roles and when conducting entry-control-procedures operations.

More senior leaders (staff sergeant through sergeant first class) said the training provided a systematic approach to problem-solving. One platoon sergeant said, "All Soldiers in the Army should attend this course as early as possible." Another NCO said, "One unintentional side effect of the ASA training was the way it professionalized our younger Soldiers in a way we didn't expect."

## Summary

The skills taught by the Army's ASA course require no technology and are low-cost, perception-enhancing abilities that provide Soldiers the ability to predict a threat and act decisively. In the current uncertain and unstable security environment, and in a time of fiscal constraint, the affordability of ASA and the unparalleled dividends it pays in survivability and lethality make it a program that should be proactively enhanced and promulgated throughout the force.

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## References

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## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ALM** – Army Learning Model

**AR** – Army regulation

**ASA** – advanced situational awareness

**FORSCOM** – (U.S. Army) Forces Command

**FY** – fiscal year

**GSA** – ground-sign awareness

**MCoE** – Maneuver Center of Excellence

**MLDS** – Maneuver Leader Development Strategy

**NCO** – noncommissioned officer

**RAF** – regional alignment of forces

**RSLC** – Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader's Course

**SERE** – survival, resistance, evasion and escape

**TRADOC** – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command

**USMC** – U.S. Marine Corps