AAR CONSIDERATIONS DURING MULTINATIONAL OPERATIONS

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"[A]after the battle they bring this mobile theater and they do what they call an 'after action review' to teach you what you've done wrong. Sort of leadership by humiliation. They put a big screen up and they take you through everything and then, 'you didn't do this and you did do this,' etc. I walked out feeling as low as a snake's belly in a wagon rut. And I saw my battalion commander, 'cause I had let him down. And I went up to apologize to him and he said, 'Stanley, I thought you did great.' And in one sentence he lifted me, put me back on my feet and taught me that leaders can let you fail and yet, not let you be a failure."

– GEN Stanley McChrystal[1]

The United States and its partners are increasingly focusing their efforts on an uncertain future against uncertain enemies. Consequently, Combat Training Centers are exercising multinational interoperability. The after action review (AAR) is a ubiquitous tool within these training environments, yet many multinational forces are entirely unfamiliar with its use as an assessment tool. Further, AARs are not always adjusted appropriately to accommodate international audiences. This article is designed to introduce facilitators to AAR challenges in a multinational environment and to introduce our partners to the process.[2] In the spirit of interoperability — where trust is paramount — we do not want our coalition partners to walk away from our AARs feeling "as low as a snake's belly in a wagon rut," as GEN McChrystal once did. In order to avoid that, we need to understand our training audience.

Even within the U.S. military — a generally homogeneous organization — many unique subcultures exist: Marines, airborne infantry, mechanized infantry, armored, support, etc. We are made up of men and women from the north, the south, other countries, and virtually every ethnic origin. By all accounts, we are an organization with many cultures, but our U.S. military culture binds us. Our coalition partners have their own unique military cultures as well, with their own subcultures. To be sure, creating one multinational military culture is difficult but not impossible. Good AAR practice helps us to build the camaraderie and trust critical to interoperability.

AAR Purpose

AARs' enduring principles and methods have remained relatively unchanged over the years, having only really changed terminology to match the vernacular of the most current doctrine. For example, what was once a "battlefield operating system" is now a "warfighting function."[3] At their core, AARs are tools to analyze a unit's performance in order to improve future performance.[4] They are professional discussions — guided by a facilitator — about a unit's strengths and weaknesses during a particular training event.[5] Conducted effectively, they develop a strategy and assign responsibility to solve those individual or collective tasks that require improvement.

AARs are very much a part of the Army's operations process in that they provide critical feedback to the commander so that he can assess his unit. They are necessarily part of the commander's assessment process. They help to build the common framework for exercising mission command.

In the same vein, the best way to conduct an AAR (multinational or otherwise) is through the same mission command activities performed during operations — plan, prepare, execute, and continuously assess.

Figure 1 — The Four-Step Process for Conducting AARs[6]
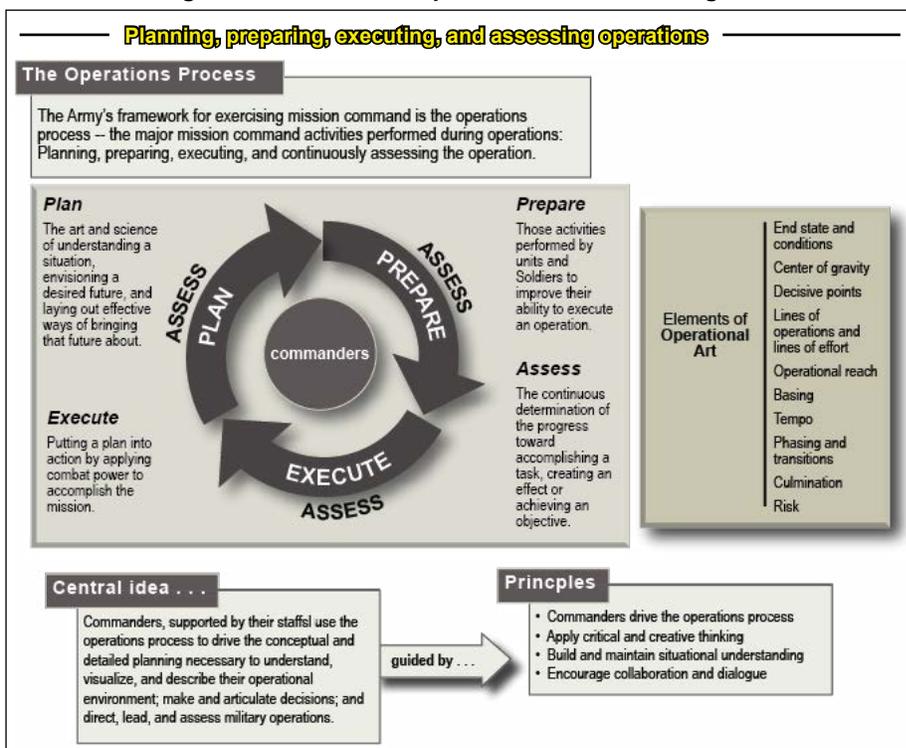
Plan

AAR planning is absolutely critical to the effectiveness of AARs. All those providing input to the AAR must know and understand the commander's intent for the training event (i.e., the training objectives), the concept of the operations, and the tasks to be trained.[7] Successful AARs, therefore, have effective AAR plans for each training event that include such factors as selecting appropriate observer-coach-trainers (OCTs), scheduling, determining attendance, choosing training aids, and reviewing performance standards.

In a multinational environment, reviewing performance standards becomes exponentially more important in order to gain and maintain credibility. During multinational operations, we need to look to sources from outside of our own doctrine so that we can make meaningful and accurate observations and potentially compare and contrast methods and standards. In other words, we need to be learned facilitators rather than instructors. Where we would normally look to training and evaluation outlines to develop training objectives, a multinational AAR requires more research from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sources and other country-specific sources so that feedback is meaningful. Despite our deference toward the familiar, not everybody does things the way the U.S. Army does, nor do they necessarily want to.

For example, during a recent training rotation at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) at Hohenfels, Germany, an Italian-led multinational brigade task force commanded and controlled several multinational (including U.S.) task-organized battalions. Among the Italian brigade's training objectives was to "plan operations." At first glance, one could have easily opened Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-03, *The Army Universal Task List*, and identified multiple subsidiary training objectives with well-developed tasks, conditions, and standards. However, the Italians do not use Army Design Methodology or the military decision-making process (MDMP). Instead, they use something more akin to the NATO comprehensive operational planning directive. Further, one of the task force's subordinate battalions used the British Army's Combat Estimate (i.e., "the 7 questions") while the other used the MDMP. In order to be effective in helping to assess this brigade's training, one must at least become conversant in the subtle differences in those processes and how they are interoperable with one another. In this example, an OCT's working knowledge provided a foundation for the AAR as it pertained to "planning operations."

Prepare

AAR preparation is continuous and bridges the gap between

Photo by SPC Ryan Tatum

Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment conduct an after actions review with Polish soldiers after engaging in attack maneuvers as part of Anakonda 16 in Poland on 8 June 2016.

planning and execution. During the preparation phase, AAR facilitators — whether internal or external OCTs, or both — should review all orders, training objectives, concepts, and tasks in order to make sure everything observed is relevant. In reality, preparing for the AAR mostly consists of observing the training events and organizing the observations appropriately for the AAR. Regardless of the unit being trained or the complexity of the training, training must be recorded with enough detail to make the AAR meaningful. Details should include events, actions, and observations with accurate date-time groups. At the earliest opportunity after the observed event, they should be integrated with other observations (OCT, opposing force, and others as applicable) and refined into an appropriate medium in order to provide a complete picture of the event.

Depending on the size and structure of the OCT network, preparation also requires that key events be identified so that resources can be applied to it. For example, if one of the unit's training objectives is to conduct a passage of lines, then resources have to be in place to observe and record the event as accurately and completely as possible. Perhaps that means observing the event from perspectives of both the moving and stationary unit or at the planned and actual contact points.

Preparation can be slightly more multifaceted during multinational operations. Observing a passage of lines between two partnered forces, for example, presents an additional level of complexity — new tactical relationships, different languages, unique procedures, different and unfamiliar vehicles. All of these factors have to be identified prior to the key event so the most appropriate resources can be dedicated to observe and document it.

Finally, the AAR needs to be organized and rehearsed. *The Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews* identifies three ways to

organize the AARs — chronologically, by warfighting function, and by key event/theme/issue.[8] It can be done on a vehicle truck-top, on a terrain model, via PowerPoint presentation, etc. The AAR is flexible and can therefore be organized and conducted in any useful way imaginable.

Since the purpose of the AAR is for participants to self-discover strengths and weaknesses, solutions, and courses of actions to resolve weaknesses, the method should be the most appropriate method for the participants. Again, this takes research and understanding of the audience. While a PowerPoint presentation discussing issues through warfighting functions might work great for a U.S. battalion, it is likely inadequate for a formation that is unaccustomed to PowerPoint as a learning/teaching tool and who likewise does not fight by warfighting function.

Execute

Rules should be set and expectations managed right up front, regardless of the training audience. Although most American Soldiers have been through countless AARs from the time they enlisted or were commissioned, the rules for each AAR might be different depending on facilitator and/or audience and therefore should be clearly understood and expressed. As a baseline, every AAR should include the basic rule that everyone should participate and the understanding that the AAR is not a critique, evaluation, or grade.

Soldier participation is paramount to self-discovery. Among other things, Soldier participation during the AAR is directly related to the atmosphere created by the facilitator. Therefore, the facilitator must foster an environment where Soldiers feel comfortable and free to disagree with one another and give honest opinions. They need to know that it is an open forum, generally free from outside influences designed for candid input.

This is difficult for U.S. forces and perhaps more so with multinational participants. How do we ensure group participation with such a diverse audience? Hopefully, by the time an AAR rolls around, there is relative familiarity and comfort-level among the participants. Regardless, group dynamics will fail if we communicate poorly.

Facilitators should avoid idioms, axioms, colloquialisms, and especially acronyms. Despite how much they mean (or do not mean) to us, they often confuse, have no meaning, or mean completely different things to our coalition partners, regardless of whether or not they speak fluent English. Where an American facilitator might tell his audience to "have thick skins" in order to facilitate dialogue, a multinational partner might interpret that to mean, "This is going be harsh; I should deflect this or otherwise not absorb what is about to be said."

Simple, seemingly unambiguous words might also have vastly different meanings influenced by culture. For example, U.S. service members tend to use the term "leaders" almost interchangeably with the term "Soldiers," with only "commanders" enjoying a unique role within military leadership parlance. However, during at least one rotation at the JMRC, "leader" had unique meaning among the primary participants — it meant "decision maker." As a result, when the facilitator

insisted that leaders provide the input to the AAR, the input came from only a select few. The point is to identify and understand these idiosyncrasies throughout the AAR planning process and consciously execute the AAR around them.

Finally, facilitators have to execute the AAR according to the developed plan. Although it does not have to be scripted, having a general agenda to facilitate flow of information is a good thing. Typically, after a short introduction, the facilitator summarizes the events (what actually happened), identifies what went right or wrong, and guides the participants to determine how it could be done differently. At its conclusion, the facilitator should summarize and link the conclusions to future training.[9]

Assess

Retraining should be conducted immediately for the AAR to have its greatest effect. However, assessment is a continuous process, and the commander can use the lessons learned from the AAR long after the training event. Further, he can build on those lessons to create new challenges for his unit at each successive training event or operation.

To help the unit link the conclusions to future training or operations, facilitators often frame the challenge as questions:

* What do we want to fix? (What actually happened that could be done better?)
* How can we fix it?
* Who is going to fix it?

In keeping with the theme that AARs are an element of the operations process (assessment), facilitators might also consider asking the question:

* How will we know if we fixed it? (How will we know if it is better?)

Put in the U.S. operations process context, the former identifies a measure of performance, and the latter identifies a measure of effectiveness.[10] This is distinguishable from hindsight at the next AAR. This should be identified right up front — asking the hard questions that will tie the AAR to the next training event or operation and whether we achieved the intended results. It has to be clear and measurable. Once identified, one should be able to state unequivocally that the task has been accomplished (or not).

For example, during a recent mid-rotational AAR at the JMRC, a battalion command sergeant major referenced a casualty collection operation that he wanted to fix. He explained that he was going to "keep the plan simple" in order to fix it. He had therefore identified something he wanted to fix and stated how he was going to fix it. But how does he know that he has kept the plan simple? Simple according to him? Simple according to the medics? What's the metric? Linking his proposed solution to a measure of effectiveness would have provided that metric, allowing him and his commander to more clearly assess the planning, preparation, and execution of the next training iteration.

Conclusion

AARs are important assessment tools — to us and to our

November 1988	Field Manual (FM) 25-100, *Training the Force*	Considered revolutionary in the way the army trains. Battle-focused and based on unit mission essential task list and nested with other doctrinal publications, such as FM 100-5, *Operations*, and FM 22-100, *Leadership*. Designed for brigade and higher organization and leadership.[11]
September 1990	FM 25-101, *Battle Focused Training*	Complemented FM 25-100. Designed to apply the doctrine of FM 25-100 and assist leaders in training program development. Designed for battalion and company organization and leadership.[12]
September 1993	Training Circular (TC) 25-20, *A Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews*	Supplemented and expanded the guidance in FM 25-100.[13]
Circa 2000 – GEN Eric Shinseki ordered extensive reviews of Army doctrine		
October 2002	FM 7-0, *Training the Force*	Updated and superseded FM 25-100. Integrated lessons learned from recent military operations.
September 2003	FM 7-1, *Battle Focused Training*	Updated and superseded FM 25-101. Integrated lessons learned from recent military operations.
December 2008	FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*	Further developed the concepts of the 2002 version. Incorporated new training for modular organizations.
GEN Raymond Odierno's Vision for the Future: "Doctrine 2015" concept published		
August 2012	Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders*	Superseded FM 7-0. Re-established fundamental training and leader development concepts and processes.
August 2012	Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders*	Augments principles discussed in ADP 7-0. Refers to *Leader's Guide* (see below) for further discussion of AAR.
August 2012	*The Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews (AAR)* (Training Management Directorate)	Updates terminology from TC 25-20; supports ADP 7-0 and ADRP 7-0.
December 2013	*The Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews (AAR)* (Training Management Directorate)	Update of August 2012 version.
May 2014	FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*	As part of Doctrine 2015, FMs reduced to total of 50. Most knowledge was transitioned to ATPs, but not AAR concepts — AAR is covered in Chapter 16.

Figure 2 — Modern Regulatory History of the Army AAR

multinational partners. Because commanders are conducting simultaneous offensive, defensive, and stability tasks — and increasingly as part of a multinational effort — AARs are as important now as they have ever been. But we have to do them right. AARs help to provide a common lens through which we can assess and improve our multinational interoperability. The conduct of AARs must acknowledge and be responsive to differences in culture and language in order to accomplish this. As a facilitator, the key is to know your audience members and conduct an AAR most useful to them — not necessarily what you might find most useful. Above all, be humble, be kind, and be adaptive.

Notes

[1] TED Talks Radio Hour episode, "Disruptive Leadership,"17 January 2016. Transcript available at http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=261084625.

[2] This article is meant to supplement *A Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews*, not replace it. It should also be noted, the leader's guide is based on Army doctrine — not joint, NATO, or partner. Regardless, applying critical analysis to its core will still yield results across formations.

[3] See Figure 2 for a brief history of regulatory AAR guidance.

[4] Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders* (August 2012), paragraph 3-73, 3-12. "An after action review is a guided analysis of an organization's performance."

[5] *The Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews*, Combined Arms Center – Training (CAC-T), Training Management Directorate (TMD), Fort Leavenworth, KS (December 2013).

[6] Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (May 2012), Figure 1, page iv.

[7] The Leader's Guide to AARs, 7-9.

[8] Ibid, 13.

[9] Ibid, 16.

[10] ADRP5-0, 5-2 to 5-3.

[11] Anne W. Chapman, "The Army's Training Revolution, 1973 – 1990," TRADOC Historical Study Series, Office of the Command Historian, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command and Center of Military History (1994), 29-39.

[12] Ibid, 44-45.

[13] TC 25-20, preface.

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