

# The After-Action Review

**A**fter the medics finished their training event at the Combat Medic Advanced Skills Training program at Fort Sill, Okla., last February, observer/controller Staff Sgt. Jeff Leger was there to conduct an after-action review, helping the Soldiers discover for themselves what happened during their training, why it happened and how to improve in the future.

A candid, professional discussion of performance, the AAR is a critical assessment tool during training, guiding Soldiers to improve by figuring things out on their own. Far more effective than a critique — one-way communication that offers only one point of view — the AAR is designed to be a forum for feedback, where all participants are actively engaged in offering suggestions to correct deficiencies and reinforce strengths.

“The AAR allows us to discuss what students did well and what areas they could improve on,” Leger said after the exercise. “And, the information shared here goes both ways, because instructors learn from the different ways students approach the scenario.”

The new Warrior Leader Course program of instruction offers some salient advice for NCOs preparing to conduct an AAR:

**NOT A LECTURE, NOT A CRITIQUE:** Whereas a critique features only one perspective, usually that of the unit leader or senior observer/controller, an AAR is designed to help Soldiers

discover on their own where they can improve and how to do so. Similarly, success or failure is not determined during an AAR; instead, comments, discussions and varied viewpoints combine to help Soldiers learn from their mistakes.

**FORMAL & INFORMAL:** *Formal* AARs are typically conducted at the company level and above. Thus, they are much more resource intensive, requiring more detailed planning and preparation. On the other hand, junior NCOs will mostly participate in *informal* AARs for individual Soldiers and during crew-, squad- or platoon-level exercises. Indeed, informal

AARs are often on-the-spot reviews of Soldier and collective training performances, allowing lessons learned to be immediately applied when an exercise is repeated.

**OBJECTIVE: PROMOTE LEARNING:** The goal for any AAR is to help Soldiers learn how they can improve their performance. This cannot be achieved if everyone present does not participate and offer insightful observations or pertinent questions to help build understanding. The AAR cannot become a “love fest” either, where deficiencies are neither acknowl-

edged nor discussed. Instead, an honest discussion should be encouraged to provide the opportunity for learning — from both the mistakes made and the jobs done well.

The overall purpose of the discussion is for participants to discover their strengths and weaknesses, propose solutions and adopt a course of action to correct any problems.

*James Brabenec of the Fort Sill Cannoneer contributed to this story.*



Photo by Spc. Monica K. Smith

A team of Soldiers from E Company, 4th Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment, Combat Aviation Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, conducts an after-action review after completing a military operations on urban terrain live-fire exercise at the shoothouse at Fort Stewart, Ga., last August.



## A successful AAR: The 4-stage process

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### PLAN

The AAR plan — the foundation of a successful review — outlines who will **observe** the training, who will **conduct** the AAR, **what trainers should evaluate, when and where** the AAR will occur, and what **training aids** will be used. The plan covers things like **when stopping points are scheduled** during training events and **who should be present**. At the squad and platoon levels, all members should attend and participate in the AAR.

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### PREPARE

Since the AAR reviews how a team responded to training objectives, the observer/controllers should **review those objectives** before training and again immediately before the AAR. OCs **identify key events** for observation during the training event, **determine the best place to observe** without becoming a distraction, and **take good notes** about the team's performance during the event. After the training event, OCs **collect others' observations, organize** the AAR presentation and **rehearse**.

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### CONDUCT

The OC introduces the AAR by **explaining its purpose** and reviewing the **objectives and intent** of the training. Since Soldier participation is directly related to the atmosphere created during this introduction, the OC should make a special effort to draw in Soldiers who may seem reluctant to participate. Then, **what was supposed to happen** is discussed — the mission and intent. The OC guides the discussion of the events that transpired, encouraging participation by asking open-ended questions. As more Soldiers add their perspectives, **what really happened** and **how to improve** becomes clear. The AAR **concludes with a summary** of what was discussed, linking the review's conclusions to future training.

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### FOLLOW UP

Since the lessons learned during the AAR are **fresh in the minds** of the participating Soldiers, retraining should not be delayed, if at all possible. Leaders can use the information gleaned during the AAR process to **plan future training** that is focused on sustaining the proficiency demonstrated and correcting any deficiencies.

## DOS & DON'TS

After-action reviews are the dynamic link between task performance and execution to standard. Here are some dos and don'ts to keep in mind when conducting an AAR:

### What not to do:

- ✗ **Lecture or critique:** Encourage participation from all those involved. Establish an environment where a frank, professional discussion can occur and where disagreement is permissible.
- ✗ **Ask yes or no questions:** It is better to ask open-ended questions, which allow Soldiers to learn from each other instead of being fed the answers.
- ✗ **Dominate the conversation:** Guide but don't monopolize the discussion. Enter to facilitate only when necessary.

### What to do:

- ✓ **Organize:** Structure the AAR by presenting a chronological order of events, the warfighting functions, or the key events, themes or issues identified by the chain of command before the training.
- ✓ **Focus on what went wrong and what went right:** The AAR discussion should cover both the weaknesses needing improvement and the strengths to sustain.
- ✓ **Use visual aids:** They need not be elaborate. In an outdoor environment, for example, pinecones or other found material can represent the players in the training scenario.
- ✓ **End on a positive note:** The AAR is not the appropriate time to determine "winners" or "losers." Instead, conclude with a forward-focused statement that ties the conclusions learned in the discussion to future training.

*"We would be much better served if we could do a better job of accentuating the positive — pat that young NCO on the back when he [or she] does right. Better yet, have the guts to underwrite NCO mistakes and back up our junior NCOs. Finally, look for solutions and suggest them instead of problems to our commanders."*

— SGT. MAJ. OF THE ARMY WILLIAM A. CONNELLY