

# **Advanced Situational Awareness Course: Increased Awareness Key to Avoiding, Defeating Potential Threats**

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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’s Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) is addressing this need with a unique course called Advanced Situational Awareness (ASA) that trains Soldiers in the art and science of observing humans and their surrounding environment. The ASA course grew from the recognition that Soldiers needed additional 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.

## **The 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 (COIN) 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 (ISIS).

Insider threats are defined in 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 23 March 2003 at Camp Pennsylvania, Kuwait. Another example is the case of MAJ Nidal Malik Hasan who opened fire on 5 November 2009 killing 13 fellow Soldiers and civilians and wounding 32 others at Fort Hood, Texas.

Insider threats have also appeared from within the ranks of our partnered forces over the last several years in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The most recent tragedy is the killing of 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, on 5 August 2014 during a key leader engagement at the Marshal Fahim National Defense University, an Afghan training center in Kabul.



An ASA course instructor teaches the three key elements of a footstep as part of “Using Critical Thinking to Interpret Ground Sign Awareness” training. (Photo courtesy of author)

### **Modern Situational Awareness**

The roots of modern situational awareness training in the military began with U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, who determined that 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 Gen. 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 NCO development courses for our Infantry, Cavalry, and Armor Soldiers, and throughout the training continuum at the MCoE. 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 the solution to the insider threat in Afghanistan in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 and has included ASA in its regionally aligned forces (RAF) training guidance for FY15.

### **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, with the Army shifting the course to more closely align with the Army Learning Model (ALM) described in 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 numerous practical exercises (keep-in-memory [KIM] games, observation exercises, ground sign awareness [GSA]) and with a complex, interactive, “free-play” outcomes-based field training exercise supported by trained threat emulators.

The ASA course educates and trains Soldiers on the human sensory system (five senses and the brain), the six domains of human behavior (heuristics, autonomies, kinesics, proxemics, geographics, atmospherics), principles of ground sign awareness (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, OODA [observe-orient-decide-act] loop, ASA algorithm), how to think like the enemy, and how to employ this knowledge and experience in order to be “left-of-bang.”

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

### **Measuring Benefit to Our Soldiers**

It is difficult to quantify the benefit that the ASA education and training has had on the force but numerous mid- and post-deployment after action reviews (AARs) indicate that this training is saving lives. One battalion interviewed in the fall of 2014 while deployed to Afghanistan received ASA training in pre-deployment and insist they have used their ASA skills on a tactical level in numerous situations. Soldiers at all levels (PFC through 1LT) had very positive remarks about the ASA course’s overall practical application and stated that ASA better prepared their less-experienced Soldiers for understanding observation techniques while out on patrol, in guardian angel roles, and in conducting entry control procedures (ECP) operations. The more senior leaders (E6 through E7) said the training provided them with a systematic approach to problem solving; one platoon sergeant stated that, “All Soldiers in the Army should attend this course as early as possible.” Another NCO stated, “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 an 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.

For more information about attending the ASA Basic Course, the ASA Mobile Training Team Course, or the ASA Advanced Master Trainer Course, visit the MCoE ASA webpage at:

[www.benning.army.mil/armor/316thCav/ASA/index.html#ad-image-t2](http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/316thCav/ASA/index.html#ad-image-t2).

### **References**

- AR 381-12, *Threat Awareness and Reporting Program*
- TRADOC Pam 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*
- MCoE Maneuver Leader Development Strategy
- FORSCOM RAF Training Guidance for FY15

- [http://www.army.mil/article/102060/Situational\\_awareness\\_training\\_aims\\_to\\_prevent\\_attacks/](http://www.army.mil/article/102060/Situational_awareness_training_aims_to_prevent_attacks/)
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- <http://www.tactical-life.com/magazines/tactical-weapons/usmcs-combat-hunter/>
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