



THE INFANTRY BATTALION AAR: PREPARATION AND PRESENTATION

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second article in a two-part series on planning, preparing, and conducting infantry battalion task force after-action reviews (AARs). The first part, in INFANTRY's January-February 1994 issue, dealt with the training of the observer-controller team in external evaluations (EXEVALs). This article provides a more detailed look at procedures and techniques that are useful in developing and presenting good AARs.

Before discussing the structuring and preparation of the battalion task force AAR, there are a few principles that must be kept in mind:

- AAR discussions should be concerned with performance measured against doctrinally accepted tactics, techniques, and procedures. Home-station observer-controllers (OCs) simply don't have the experience or credibility enjoyed by the OCs at the combat training centers (CTCs). Although it

is human for participants at any AAR to challenge the observations of the OCs, it is more difficult for them to argue with or ignore doctrine.

- CTC formats should not be slavishly copied. A particular technique may look impressive, but if it is based on an expensive instrumentation system that is not available at home station, it has to be modified to fit the environment and resources available.

- The AAR preparation plan must be kept simple and easy to execute. The fancy plays must be saved for a CTC assignment.

- Imagination and variety should be used to make a big production of the battalion task force AAR. We often have thousands of soldiers maneuvering at no small cost during battalion task force EXEVALs, and the task force AAR represents the culminating point. We owe it to our soldiers, our unit, and our profession to go beyond a dull, plodding checklist approach in delivering the AAR.

The quality of the AAR, of course, will only be as good as the input provided by the team OCs. Input is gathered through OC team meetings and the submission of OC cards.

Meetings

During each mission, the chief OC should meet periodically with his unit commanders, battle and special staffs, and specialty platoon OCs, hopefully at intervals that correspond to the completion of the planning phase (some time after the task force order is issued); the completion of the preparation phase (some time after the completion of task force rehearsals, and ideally company level rehearsals); and after a change of mission. It may be useful to have a brief OC meeting after each task force AAR to give the team any important feedback.

These meetings are best held at the AAR site, but it is sometimes more logical to convene them beside the evaluated unit's tactical operations center when all OCs are already gathered to observe an order or rehearsal. Every minute the OCs spend in meetings is a minute away from their tasks of observing and coaching, preparing their own AARs, and resting for the next phase. Meetings must therefore be well-organized with a clear agenda. They should be fast-paced and should include only what is essential.

Meetings should begin with the OC battalion executive officer (XO) and the concerned staff issuing any pertinent administrative, logistical, and OC command and control updates. This part of the meeting focuses exclusively on the functioning and support of the OC team and its mission as controllers. The meeting then turns to a detailed discussion of the observations of the OCs and their analyses of the evaluated task force.

The recommended order for this discussion is:

- Intelligence—S-2, scout OC, military intelligence support team (MIST) OC.
- Maneuver—S-3, rifle company commanders, antitank platoon OC.
- Fire support—battalion fire support officer (FSO), company FSOs, mortar platoon OC, and U.S. Air Force tactical air control platoon OC.
- Air defense—air defense OC.
- Engineer—engineer OC.
- Nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC)—NBC officer.
- Combat service support—S-4, S-1, headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) commander, support platoon OC, and medical platoon OC.
- Communications—signal officer and, if applicable, the military intelligence battalion team chief in charge of electronic warfare and operations security assessment.
- Noncommissioned officer (NCO) and soldier assessment—command sergeant major (CSM).

The goal of the participants is to identify significant task force strengths and weaknesses in the three phases of its mission (planning, preparation, and execution), and for the OC team as a whole to find and agree upon the sources of significant problems and to establish what really happened.

We are interested in issues that have a major effect on the

task force's performance (both good and bad), and that cut horizontally across the battlefield operating systems (BOSs) or vertically between the unit echelons. For example, the fact that the commander of Company B doesn't allocate his time well is not germane to the task force AAR unless that problem is common among commanders and can be attributed, perhaps, to the inability of the battalion staff to establish reasonable timelines early in the planning process. The fact that poor communications with the field trains precluded the timely resupply of ammunition to the mortar platoon is the kind of legend that great AARs are built upon: The mortar platoon sent one of its own vehicles in desperation to the rear, only to have it destroyed by a minefield that the tactical operations center had not made known to the mortars, which in turn led to the FSO not being advised until H-hour minus 15 of the mortars' inability to execute the preparatory fire.

The difficulty is in identifying an anecdote that represents the outer layer of a complex and important story. One technique is for each of the OCs listed above—using an operations map as a reference—to provide, in sequence, a brief (less than one minute) summary of the status and plans of the unit (or staff section) they are evaluating. (This is one reason the AAR site is the most conducive to OC meetings since standardized graphics are available.)

Each briefer should then note at least one but no more than three areas of concern that bear scrutiny by another member of the OC team. The briefer should specifically include other team members to reinforce his points. For example, the scout OC might ask the FSO OC to find out why the scouts were inserted without a fire support plan; the signal officer might explore the reasons they had no secure communications; and the Company A commander might find out why the fire team that was to accompany the scouts never appeared, which meant there was no known plan for Company A and the scouts to link up.

Additionally, each briefer should list one observed strength or area of improvement to help keep the OCs thinking positively.

If the participants in these meetings are going to get to the heart of the matter, each must be encouraged to contribute freely, whether lieutenant colonel or second lieutenant. These meetings are always time-consuming, perhaps up to two hours, but they are vital. Lacking the instrumentation, communications, and OC experience available at the CTCs, we need the somewhat tedious but focused and penetrating team discussions to offset our disadvantages.

If the chief OC actively guides the meeting—identifying the themes he wants the team to investigate in detail, and dismissing those he feels are not relevant to the task force AAR—the results can be impressive. The exchange of information after a change of mission must be abbreviated; the OCs must deliver platoon and company AARs and cannot be held up in a collective meeting at the task force AAR site. The best alternative is to have the OCs arrive independently, provide the assistant S-3 with their final data to be compiled into AAR charts (friendly losses, for example), and then meet one-on-one with the chief OC for a quick discussion of the

salient points of the execution phase, and to submit any remaining OC cards.

The use of OC cards is the key to easing the flow of information to the chief OC and expediting the preparation of the task force AAR. These are simply 3x5 or 5x8 index cards, prepared by the OCs and submitted to the chief OC, that suggest leading questions for designated AAR participants (see sample contents in Table 1). The cards are organized by mission phase (planning, preparation, and execution) and by BOS. Each offers an accurate description of what the answer should be, and lists pertinent lessons learned along with the appropriate doctrinal references.

The chief OC must specify the times (corresponding to the OC team meetings) when the cards for the planning and preparation phases should be turned in, and he receives the cards for the execution phase immediately after a change of mission. There is often considerable overlap in the three phases of an operation, and the chief OC must allow his team members some flexibility in their efforts to categorize particular issues.

The AAR is well on its way to a successful outcome if the chief OC does the following: Insists on completely standardized cards (preprinted cards eliminate the possibility of the scout OC providing his input on an MRE wrapper); makes

sure he understands the questions and what the answers should be (which is why he must receive the cards in person); requires his team members to do their homework in identifying lessons and possible fixes; and crosswalks an issue with other OCs when he suspects part of the story is still missing. Now the chief OC has only to select which cards he wants to use, arrange them in order, line up supporting graphic aids, and execute.

Several additional points should be considered:

- The team members who submit cards directly to the chief OC should include the battle and special staff, unit commanders together with their FSOs (with the battalion FSO OC also present), and the specialty platoon leader OCs.

- As the mission unfolds, the chief OC should develop several salient lessons-learned themes and then make sure he chooses cards that reinforce these themes. Without this focus, the AAR will have little effect on subsequent task force performance.

- Some system must be devised for providing information to the CSM on NCO and soldier issues. This can usually be done less formally, however, except for the collection charts concerning preparation for combat and soldier skills gathered by the assistant S-3.

- Team members should be commended for frequently submitting cards that are selected for use in the AAR.

- If there is enough room, key members of the OC team should attend the AAR (sitting in the rear) so that they can put their observations into proper perspective.

- OCs must inform their counterparts, before the task force AAR begins, of the topics the chief OC may address that touch on their areas of responsibility. (These can be ascertained, of course, from the contents of the cards the OCs hand in to the chief OC.) Forewarned, almost any professional soldier will quickly pass through the period of self-pity or anger and start to look inward for solutions. The OCs improve cohesiveness by setting everyone up for success at the AAR, not by blindsiding them in front of subordinates, peers, and superiors.

AAR Site Layout

Considerable care must go into the layout of the task force AAR site, a mission that can be given to the HHC first sergeant. A permanent or semi-permanent facility somewhere near the "maneuver box" is preferable.

A large parking area should be identified and some soldiers detailed to direct arriving vehicles. The site must include latrines to accommodate those attending. Beverages should be made available to the task force participants upon their arrival. The site itself must have communications, and ideally an AAR room (which doubles as the OC team meeting site); an office for the chief OC (used for OC card submission and his preparation of the AAR, and also by the division's senior leaders, who frequently convene a meeting after the AAR); an OC working area (which has doctrinal references and material to support the team's work); and an administrative office or message center.

The seating arrangement depends on the site itself and the

SAMPLE OBSERVER-CONTROLLER CARD

MISSION: Night Attack

PHASE: Execution

BATTLEFIELD OPERATING SYSTEM: Fire Support

SUBMITTED BY: Fire Support OC

ASK: Company B FSO

THE QUESTION: What happened when the Commander, Company B, directed him, in the middle of the assault on Objective Blue, to provide illumination over the enemy regimental command post?

THE ANSWER: Although the night attack had been planned as nonilluminated, the commander of Company B decided at 0323 hours, 25 minutes after the attack had been initiated that he had lost effective command and control and could only regain the momentum with the assistance of illumination. The FSO immediately called for illumination but learned he could not expect 105mm artillery support for another 10 minutes. The infantry battalion's mortars were supporting the task force main effort (Companies B and C). The Company B mortars had carried only five rounds of illumination forward and were out of range for illumination anyway. At 0352 hours, the battalion mortar platoon, which had neither preplanned illumination fires nor initially prepared illumination rounds, did finally respond to the B Company request. By 0404 hours, effective illumination fires had been adjusted over the regimental command post, but excessive casualties prevented Company B from pressing home the assault.

LESSONS LEARNED (cite doctrine): Always plan for illumination for a night attack (ARTEP 7-20-MTP, Task: Operate fire support section and field manuals (FMs) 6-20 and 7-20).

POSSIBLE FIXES: (1) FSOs should use planning checklists (fatigue factor); (2) Mortars must be more proactive—The mortar platoon leader had asked for guidance on illumination after the operations order, but didn't follow up when FSO said he'd get back with him later; (3) Maneuver commanders can do a better job of integrating FSOs into rehearsals—The Company B commander asked the task force commander after the rehearsal whether he could use illumination if his attack stalled and was granted permission, but no FSO was aware of this conversation; (4) CSS players must be more proactive—Support platoon leader was overheard by his OC the day before the attack telling the S-4 that he was surprised none of the rifle companies had decided to request 60mm mortar illumination.

Table 1



By encouraging subordinates to frankly discuss a unit's performance, a commander can improve participation in the AAR and increase the training benefit of the AAR process.

type of graphic aids to be used. The chief OC should provide clear guidance and approve the plan. The opposing force (OPFOR) commander must be included, as well as individuals who played key roles on a particular mission, such as the air mission commander for an air assault operation. The chief OC's task is easier if representatives from the same BOS or team (commander and FSO, for example) are seated in the same general area. The division command group and brigade level commanders should be seated off to the side, out of the view of the task force participants.

The AAR preparation team must ensure that each participant has an unobstructed view of the graphics used by the chief OC during the AAR. As the presentation becomes more involved, considerable juggling is usually required to make this work.

Upon receipt of the seating plan, the HHC first sergeant should have a chart made and posted at the entry to the AAR site, and then arrange and label the chairs accordingly. A detail should help seat the attendees and ensure that they do not bring their equipment or weapons into the site. To avoid disruptions during preparations, nobody except OCs should be admitted to the site until five minutes before the AAR is scheduled to begin.

The AAR Format

The CTCs and ARTEP 7-20-MTP, *Mission Training Plan for the Infantry Battalion*, are the best sources for AAR formats, although these must be adjusted to suit home-station conditions. A suggested outline is at Table 2. The chief OC should focus on the three or four areas where he and his team believe the most attention is needed (reconnaissance, rehearsals, fire support integration, and casualty evacuation). The use of a laser pointer will help clarify discussions involving charts, maps, and diagrams.

One technique for improving participation is to encourage the task force commander (off to the side) to frankly discuss

one or more specific shortcomings of the unit when asked for his input on what needs improvement. Subordinates who see their boss criticize himself in front of his own bosses quickly pick up on the idea that it is all right to talk openly about problems. At the same time, the chief OC must avoid destroying the effectiveness and the credibility of the task force commander during the AAR process; in general, the leading questions should be directed elsewhere. Finally, for those participants who are obstructive and persistently defensive, the chief OC can either skip over them and talk to the task force commander later or, if the problem continues, set them up for an unmistakable message that will quiet them.

The Presentation

The following techniques should be considered in the search for ways to improve AAR delivery:

Graphic Support. Many kinds of graphic support should be considered, the more diverse the better: large sketches of the maneuver area and objectives (with accompanying overlays), overhead and slide projectors, video tape players, flip charts, and even computers that can project monitor pictures and scanned or digitized maps. But plans should always include simpler backups in case these high-technology gadgets fail. Additionally, the actual graphics of the evaluated task force can be used. The unit no longer needs them upon change of mission, and the battle staff can't quibble when confronted with the real thing.

Doctrine Slides. The OCs in charge of each BOS should prepare generic doctrine slides that address the topics likely to be discussed during the AAR (a computer with a wall projection device is quite useful). The chief OC can use these slides to focus on particular points.

For example, after an operation during which three Stinger teams (none of which had relocated after last light) were neutralized by OPFOR guerrilla forces, the chief OC decides he wants the section leader to talk about lessons learned during

SUGGESTED AFTER-ACTION REVIEW FORMAT

- I. Statement of AAR Purpose and Goals (chief OC).
- II. Battle Summary (presented by chief OC or his representative, this presentation should be supplemented by references to a large operations map).
 - A. Brigade/Battalion Task Force Missions and Commanders' Intent.
 - B. OPFOR Mission and Commander's Intent.
 - C. Blue Force Concept of the Operation.
 - D. Significant Events (chronological list of major events with outcomes).
 - E. Battle Losses (blue force and red force personnel and equipment).
- III. Sustain and Need Improvement Input from Designated Task Force Leaders and Staff officers to Chief OC, Followed by Chief OC Identifying Major Themes to be Stressed During AAR (the chief OC should point out the correlation between these themes and the "need improvement" areas raised by the AAR participants).
- IV. Planning Phase (chief OC).
- V. Preparation Phase (chief OC).
- VI. Execution Phase (chief OC).
- VII. OPSEC Evaluation-Optional (MI battalion representative).
- VIII. NCO and Soldier Issues and Identification of "TF Heroes" (CSM).
- IX. Review Task Standards for Mission Just Completed (allowing task force members to judge overall performance) and Identify Task Standards for Next Mission (chief OC).
- X. Chief OC Asks for Input From Senior Commanders Present.
- XI. Chief OC Turns AAR Room Over to Task Force Commander and Gives Him 15 to 30 minutes uninterrupted alone with his leaders and staff (however, he should not allow him to use the comfort of the AAR site to conduct tactical planning).

•The chief OC, using his OC cards, should generally proceed in the BOS order—for example, planning phase discussion should move from S-2 and scout platoon leader to S-3 (and the commander for his intent), to FSO, mortar platoon leader, and ALO, and so on. The OPFOR commander and other special attendees—for example, air mission commander for air assault operation—should be called upon when appropriate.

Table 2

the AAR. At the AAR, the chief OC might begin by showing a slide that relates relevant doctrine (Table 3), and then ask the Stinger section leader to assess his performance accordingly. Again, it is better for the audience to compare their actions with the doctrine than to argue with the chief OC.

Once the AAR is over, commanders must ensure that information is disseminated to all members of the unit.

SAMPLE DOCTRINE SLIDE

Night Employment Considerations

Since Stinger unit participation in the air battle may be reduced at night, platoon leaders should take advantage of any lull and concealment afforded by darkness to accomplish the following:

- Move weapons to new, alternative, or supplemental positions.
- Resupply weapons and crews.
- Perform required maintenance.
- Position weapons to provide better security against ground attack.
- Allow maximum crew rest by lowering alert state for crews or squads, as the situation permits.

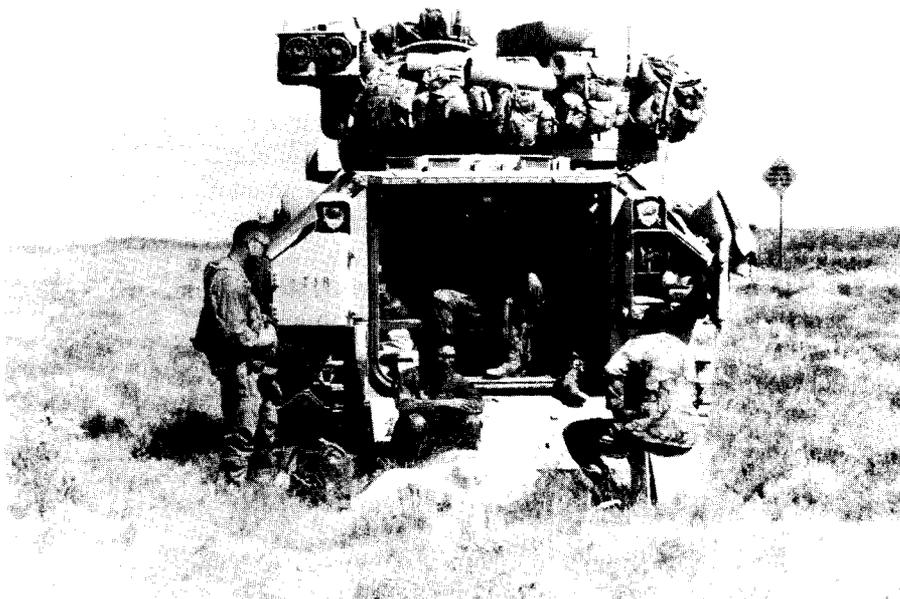
(From FM 44-16, *Platoon Combat Operations—Chaparral, Vulcan, and Stinger.*)

Table 3

Good sources of doctrine slides are field manuals, the publications of the Center for Army Lessons Learned, and quotations from military history that remind the viewers their problems are not unique (for example, Irwin Rommel's, "Communications had failed. . .the usual business at night").

Overlays. Overlays and templates, used imaginatively, can greatly improve an AAR. Multiple BOS overlays superimposed on one another are particularly useful. Some of these are named areas of interest (NAIs) and targeted areas of interest (TAIs), as opposed to the target list; engagement area direct fire; fire support; and obstacle overlays. Templates showing weapon fans (to display air defense coverage, for example) are also helpful. A computer with a map-scanning capability and a wall projector, operated by an innovative computer operator entering overlays and fans, can do wonders here.

Slides and Video Tapes. Pictures help establish what really happened. Arrangements with the training support center to have slides developed quickly can pay big dividends. Aerial photographs of the objectives and assembly



areas (to critique passive air defense), along with shots on the ground of sandtables and fighting positions, can lead to excellent AAR dialogue. Video tapes of operations orders and rehearsals also help record the facts, and these tapes can be used selectively during AARs. The process itself helps prepare task force leaders for the intrusiveness of the OCs at the CTCs. The CSM can also draw heavily upon slides and video tapes in his portion of the AAR on NCO and soldier issues.

Tracking Specific Actions Within the BOSs. OCs at the training centers have numerous resources at their disposal to establish the reality of the training. In the absence of these resources at home station, one technique is to tag a particular action in advance and have all concerned OCs follow its development closely until it is completed, noting all intermediate events and times. Slides showing the results can then be prepared for use during the task force AAR; the results will lead either to praise or to an analysis of what went wrong and how to fix it. Some examples are tracking a particular fire mission from call-for-fire until end-of-mission; a casualty evacuation from time of injury until arrival at the appropriate evacuation site; a resupply request from its initiation until the actual distribution of supplies to the user; and a request for maintenance support from the time a vehicle breaks down until it is repaired.

The CSM's Role. The CSM should be given some guidance and then turned loose on soldier issues. He should weigh soldier loads and check packing list compliance (the results should be captured on a slide for the AAR); and he can work with selected OCs to prepare slides for "A Day in the Life of a Private," recording the significant actions that selected soldiers performed during the planning and preparation phases. The numerous entries of sleeping, eating, or waiting for orders are eye-openers for the exhausted leaders of the task force who believe their soldiers, like them, must be on their last leg. The CSM also needs to gather information for the collection charts to be used in his portion of the AAR.

Finally, on the basis of input from OC team members, he should identify five to ten task force "heroes" (soldiers and young leaders who excelled during the last operation). At the end of his portion of the AAR, the CSM should announce the names and actions of these soldiers and show a brief video of the task force's last battle, accompanied by some upbeat music. Such a conclusion visibly restores morale to a group of professional soldiers who have just been subjected to some hard knocks.

The Role of Imagination. The OC team members should be encouraged to be creative. They might develop a slide showing the grid locations of the same three targets from ten different sources (the forward support element, the mortar platoon FDC, the company mortar section, a company FSO, a platoon forward observer, and others; track the sleep of key

leaders each day throughout the EXEVAL and brief at each AAR; record radio traffic and incorporate it when it can be helpful at each AAR; use global positioning system devices to check locations and to look for discrepancies within the task force and between BOSs; and examine mission statements and intents both horizontally and vertically for consistencies and variations.

Putting It All Together. A good, smart, strong team is needed to put together a high-quality AAR in the time allocated. The more work that can be done before mission execution, the better. In fact, most of the AAR can be prepared before the task force crosses the line of departure—graphics posted, planning and preparation cards completed, and so on. The execution phase, from an OC perspective, is often anticlimactic because the results have been anticipated. By the time execution begins, all that really remains for AAR preparation are the OCs' final comments and their input for the collective charts. AAR preparation and AAR site support teams—revolving around the assistant S-3, the NBC officer, and the HHC first sergeant, and committed to excellence—will put out a great product if the process is carefully considered in advance and rehearsed before delivery.

One-on-One AARs. Several days after returning to garrison, each OC should meet with his counterpart to talk behind closed doors and give a truly frank appraisal of the team's strengths and weaknesses. (Leaders are sometimes surprised to learn that their highly favored soldiers didn't measure up, while the not-so-favored excelled. This is the type of information that we as military professionals need to both convey and accept.

Preparing for and delivering an infantry battalion task force AAR is a difficult mission. The chief OC and his staff must ask the right questions and begin planning early. Although our CTCs provide excellent models for study, the task force leaders must look at their home-station resources and make any necessary adjustments.

They also need to bear in mind that the relationship between an evaluated unit and the training center OCs is quite different from that between a unit and the OCs from a sister unit. If an OC team remains professional and positive, half of the battle is already won. Following the principles of grounding the AAR in doctrine, basing it on the input of an aggressive but directed group of OCs, and keeping it simple but imaginative can lead to outstanding results.

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