

# PROFESSIONAL FORUM



## NCO-FOCUSED AARs: HOW TO MAKE THE UNIT BETTER

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR WALTER E. RAKOW

*“The American Soldier is a proud one and he demands professional competence in his leaders. In battle, he wants to know that the job is going to be done right, with no unnecessary casualties. The noncommissioned officer wearing the chevron is supposed to be the best Soldier in the platoon and he is supposed to know how to perform all the duties expected of him. The American Soldier expects his sergeant to be able to teach him how to do his job. And he expects even more from his officers.”*

— General of the Army Omar N. Bradley

The Noncommissioned Officer Corps of the United States Army is the best in the world. It has become so because of the professional development requirements that the Army has established for the NCO Corps. A vital element our Army’s organizational and individual professional development system with respect to training is the after action review (AAR) process. Including the AAR process in any training program or event is an excellent way to improve the competence and professionalism of an organization and its Soldiers, especially the organization’s NCO Corps. Yet, our Army does not habitually conduct “NCO-focused” AARs during many, if any training events that NCOs conduct or in which they participate.

With this in mind, the First U.S. Army recently integrated NCO-focused after action reviews throughout its post-mobilization training programs at its seven power projection or power support platforms. These focused AARs have been invaluable to the hundreds of Reserve component units and thousands of NCOs that have executed First Army’s demanding, rigorous, and theater-focused pre-deployment training regimen. The NCO-focused AAR process helps mobilizing units form into cohesive organizations. This is especially true of those units into which the Army has cross-leveled a good percentage of deployable manpower just prior to, or soon after, their arrival at the power projection or support platform. However useful the NCO-focused AAR is for Reserve component units executing pre-deployment training, it is a valuable tool that NCOs can

use in any unit and for any mission.

Field Manual 7-22.7, *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, paragraph 4-47 states that “after action reviews are one of the best learning tools we have ... AARs must be a two-way communication between the NCO and their Soldiers. They are not lectures.” After action reviews that focus on the conduct and performance of NCOs during training will ensure that the NCOs are a competent and productive element of a unit’s combat readiness. From September to December 2004, the NCO-focused AAR was part of the training regimen that all Reserve component units executed as they conducted pre-deployment activities at First U.S. Army’s power projection platform at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. The 2nd Brigade, 85th Division (Training Support), the organization responsible for the conduct of pre-deployment training at Fort McCoy, used NCO-focused AARs to hone NCO execution of their unit’s pre-deployment operations with an emphasis on that unit’s post-mobilization training. We did this with the understanding that AARs are not just for units and Soldiers, but as FM 7-22.7 states, leaders use them to enhance the performance and conduct of the unit’s primary trainer — the NCO. Unit-level AARs are still important, but adding NCO-focused AARs as a systemic and habitual element of all training events will produce better trainers,



and thus better trained units.

2nd Brigade facilitated three NCO-focused AARs for each unit conducting pre-deployment operations while at Fort McCoy. The first AAR was an exploratory session of the unit and its own self-assessment of the NCO Corps in that unit. Subsequent AARs built upon the first AAR. The 2nd Brigade's six command sergeants major served as AAR facilitators, and they focused discussion on learning as opposed to "finger-pointing." This was important given the constant team-building that units were experiencing throughout their time at their home station soon after mobilizing and at Fort McCoy for post-mobilization, pre-deployment training. The first AAR is less an AAR than it is a discussion on the basic expectations and responsibilities of NCOs with respect to training. This AAR served as a session in which the unit's NCOs review and discuss their duties and responsibilities within the unit. The NCOs and the facilitator also discuss and confirm their understanding of the necessary professional relationship that must exist between the unit's NCOs and officers. We did this because of the perception we sometimes encounter in the Army that there is "officer business" and "NCO business" and that the responsibilities encompassed in each do not overlap. We teach and reinforce throughout the pre-deployment training the concept of "leader business" with an NCO and officer "focus." By covering this topic the NCOs are collectively able to affirm as a group the proper relationship between NCOs and officers and thus avoid any unnecessary future conflict between the two. It is the junior Soldier who suffers when NCOs and officers conduct their relationships improperly, and this session helps to dissuade this conflict.

**Crossing the Line of Departure - Establishing the Baseline Expectations of the Unit's NCOs**

The primary duty and responsibility of an NCO is the enforcement of standards and the assurance that all Soldiers in the unit adhere to them — all standards!

Noncommissioned officers must ensure all Soldiers, leaders, and units have



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*Being a Soldier means being part of a team — this attitude is essential for success in battle and is a tenet that the group of NCOs explores during the NCO-focused after action reviews.*

individual, leader, and unit discipline in areas ranging from appearance, behavior, conduct, and training proficiency. A lack of discipline at any of level, individual Soldier to unit, will in most cases eventually lead to unit failure. A failure to operate at all times within Army standards invites trouble. Lack of individual, leader, or unit competence and confidence can often be overcome by solid discipline. A lack of discipline will always overwhelm even the highest degree of individual, leader, or unit competence and confidence.

During the first NCO AAR, the facilitator leads the NCOs through a discussion of the need for all Soldiers, leaders, and units to be experts in the Five Warrior Skills:

- Physical Fitness,
- Weapons Skills,
- Medical Skills,
- Crew Proficiency, and
- Battle Drills.

Fitness is the ability to perform one's combat tasks in full combat gear for 72 continuous hours with minimal degradation in ability. The facilitator leads the discussion on weapons skills, reinforcing

the value of these skills in combat and the reason why all Soldiers should qualify as an "expert" on their weapon. The facilitator and NCOs also discuss the need to execute continuous weapons training that mitigates the degradation of marksmanship skills over time, a real threat that the unit will face while deployed. The NCOs explore the critical need for training on medical skills, and establish the training and certification of as many of the unit's Soldiers as possible as combat lifesavers as a key pre-deployment goal. The group talks about crew skills and how to ensure that the individual and crew-related training must result in an expert crew. Lastly, the facilitator and NCOs discuss the need for everyone to be well-trained on battle drills, most critically the react to contact battle drill. The group then talks about the process by which they prioritize the level of training on additional battle drills. This discussion during this AAR is tied into the Warrior Ethos, the Soldier's Creed, and the NCO Creed. We do this to ensure they understand that in order to be good leader of a team, one must also be a good follower.

Being a Soldier means being part of a team — this attitude is essential for success

in battle and is a tenet that the group of NCOs explores during the NCO-focused after action reviews. Discipline, competence, and confidence are essential elements of team operations. NCOs serve as the commander's means to ensure Soldiers are disciplined, competent, and confident. They do this through enforcement of standards in conduct, appearance, behavior, and training. Noncommissioned officers train their Soldiers to be experts in their individual Warrior Skills and small unit collective tasks. The NCO builds a Warrior Team by demanding discipline from Soldiers in all of their training.

The actions of noncommissioned officers are concentrated in the execution phase of any kind of operational plan. NCO participation in planning is relevant if and only if the unit has attained expertise in all individual and small unit skills necessary to ensure mission success at the collective level. If a unit has not met these requirements, then the NCOs' focus needs to be on the drills and rehearsals that occur concurrent with planning. Once the commander issues the plan, the NCOs then ensure that rehearsals take on a more focused relevance.

Essential elements of a unit's preparation for combat operations are pre-combat inspections (PCIs) and pre-combat checks (PCCs). NCOs must be ruthless in the execution of proper PCIs and PCCs so that Soldiers and units have the correct equipment at the right place and time to ensure combat success. Operational risk is unnecessarily increased and compounded if noncommissioned officers do not do this correctly.

During the first NCO-focused AAR, the group also discusses in some detail the need for NCOs to ensure the proper conduct and performance of good maintenance, especially preventive maintenance checks and services, and how maintenance is key to preparing for combat. The intent of this part of the AAR is to ensure that the unit's NCOs fully understand their duty and responsibility to have their Soldiers at the right place, at the correct time, in the proper uniform, and properly trained and ready to perform their tasks in any operation.

At the end of the first AAR, the facilitator leads the unit's NCOs through a

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series of slides that highlight lessons learned by previously deploying and redeployed unit leaders. The focus of these lessons learned is on the most critical aspects of training that the deploying leaders gleaned from their pre-deployment training. We also survey many redeploying unit leaders to solicit their views on the tasks that were most relevant during their mission and on which they will focus during their upcoming post-deployment annual training plan. The facilitator covers these lessons with the NCOs to let them know what their predecessors have said about their training. This information helps the NCOs better prepare for the pre-deployment training in which they are about to participate.

The endstate of the initial, baseline NCO AAR at First Army's mobilization stations is the assurance that a unit's NCOs are conditioned for success. By the end of the AAR, they will fully understand their responsibilities and duties with respect to performance and conduct as they vigorously execute their post-mobilization process and prepare to deploy to a combat theater of operations.

### **Azimuth check — the Interim NCO After Action Review**

The training support brigade conducts an interim NCO-focused AAR once a mobilized unit completes all pre-deployment individual training and its first collective training event. The purpose of this AAR is to facilitate the NCOs' evaluation of their performance and conduct against the baseline expectations they explored in the initial after action review. They also conduct a self-assessment of their current strengths and weaknesses. The training support brigade NCO AAR team facilitates the NCOs' discussion of

how they are going to maintain their strengths. The group fixes responsibility on those leaders in the NCO Corps who are chiefly responsible for maintaining their strengths. The facilitator also leads the group to realize their own weak areas, once again assigning responsibility to the unit's leaders who will lead their collective improvement and how they will improve themselves. The NCOs discuss how they are doing in the performance of their Warrior Tasks and how well they are living and enforcing the Soldier's Creed during their training. This dialogue serves well to reinforce the inculcation of the Warrior spirit in each noncommissioned officer.

The facilitator limits discussion during the interim AAR to one strength and one weak area upon which all of the NCOs must agree. This serves to focus the AAR discussion and prevents the NCOs from simply restating "training war stories." By this point the training support brigade has facilitated several other AARs focused on specific training events and there is no need to revisit these lessons in this forum. The intent of the interim AAR is to focus the NCOs on high value-high payoff lessons learned to maximize future success in training and preparation for combat operations.

The last item the group covers in this AAR is an improvement plan. The facilitator requires the group to identify their top three issues they can work to immediately fix, and how to prioritize the rest for improvement later. This requirement provides the NCOs with a game plan that they all must agree on and that they can begin to immediately implement in their subsequent training events. The group concludes its AAR with a discussion about training for combat. The group revisits the need to conduct all training to an exacting standard and under the most arduous conditions that they can possibly replicate. This is the goal of every NCO's duty to prepare Soldiers for battle.

### **Seizing the Interim Objective — The Final Post-Mobilization Station After Action Review**

The training support brigade facilitates a third and final AAR at the mobilization station upon completion of a unit's pre-

deployment training. This AAR encompasses the period from arrival at the mobilization station to completion of all training. Using the same model as the interim NCO AAR, the facilitator limits discussion primarily to one group strength and one area for improvement; all of the NCOs in the unit must agree to these assessments. As with the interim NCO-focused AAR, the intent of this session is to focus discussion on strengths to sustain and areas to improve. The precious time that the unit devotes to this AAR is not to rekindle training “war stories.” This session continues the learning process of the unit’s NCO Corps.

The discussion of the final NCO AAR builds on the previous two sessions. The NCOs assess their progress against the baseline expectations that they forged during the initial AAR in accordance with the tenets of the Warrior Ethos and the Soldier’s Creed.

They also determine if they are making progress in sustaining their strengths and improving their weaknesses that they collectively identified in the interim NCO-focused after action review. As with the interim NCO-focused AAR, the group determines three specific duties or responsibilities that it should immediately “fix,” how they will make the corrections, and who will lead this process. Identifying these specific areas for sustainment and improvement provides the NCOs the purpose and direction they require to sustain their collective strengths and improve their collective weaknesses.

The facilitator closes the final AAR with a discussion of how the NCOs can get the most value from their training and what training they should continue to execute to sustain their combat skills while deployed in their theater of operations. The group discusses the means and mechanisms that are available to them as they sustain their training while engaged in daily combat operations. This is a fundamental responsibility of the unit’s NCO Corps, yet it is a responsibility that NCOs in forward deployed units sometimes overlook as they become consumed by the tempo of combat operations.

However busy the unit becomes, it is the duty and responsibility of the NCO Corps to sustain the unit’s basic individual



Sergeant Jeremiah Johnson

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Soldier’s skills and its small unit collective tasks. This portion of the AAR process serves as a key reminder of NCOs’ responsibility to constantly hone their Soldiers’ perishable skills.

The final NCO-focused AAR is only an “interim objective” that the NCOs seize in their learning process. The reason for this is obvious — the NCOs will continue to learn and improve as a group while they execute the strategy that they developed during their three NCO-focused AARs at the mobilization station. This process serves as a means to pull them together, often a critical need for units that are the result of significant cross-leveling of Soldiers and leaders. It provides a forum for the NCOs to focus on their duties and responsibilities, and to discuss them as a group. Only the strongest of unit command sergeants major or first sergeants would think of the need to assemble their NCOs for this purpose.

The training support brigade at the mobilization station provides this forum and the time on the training schedule that allows the NCOs to re-explore their duties, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to develop a strategy to sustain or improve themselves as a collective corps of noncommissioned officers. The three

facilitated NCO-focused AARs also provide an example of how a unit can continue this process while it is deployed in its theater of operations. The NCO-focused AAR is a tool that all units can use in garrison, in training, and while deployed. The intent of the NCO AAR is to make the NCO Corps of a unit better so that the unit is better at what it does.

*An NCO must know what right looks like and must prepare. As NCOs we never stop learning and must seek guidance from manuals and our leaders to ensure we know the standard.*

— **Command Sergeant Major Mary Sutherland**

FM 7-22.7 - The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide

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