

TC 25-20

**A LEADER'S GUIDE TO
AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS**

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**HEADQUARTERS
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY**

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

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PREFACE

Modern combat is complex and demanding. To fight and win, we must train our soldiers during peacetime to successfully execute their wartime missions. We must use every training opportunity to improve soldier, leader, and unit task performance. To improve their individual and collective-task performances to meet or exceed the Army standard, soldiers and leaders must know and understand what happened or did not happen during every training event.

After-action reviews (AARs) help provide soldiers and units feedback on mission and task performances in training and in combat. After-action reviews identify how to correct deficiencies, sustain strengths, and focus on performance of specific mission essential tasks list (METL) training objectives.

This training circular (TC) is a leader's guide on how to plan, prepare, and conduct an AAR. It supplements and expands the guidance in Field Manual (FM) 25-101. Competent leaders must understand and apply the techniques and procedures which produce good AARs.

Key is the spirit in which AARs are given. The environment and climate surrounding an AAR must be one in which the soldiers and leaders openly and honestly discuss what actually transpired in sufficient detail and clarity that not only will everyone understand what did and did not occur and why, but most importantly will have a strong desire to seek the opportunity to practice the task again.

The U.S. Army Combined Arms Command is the proponent for this publication. Send comments or suggestions to the Deputy Commanding General for Training, Combined Arms Command, ATTN ATZL-CTT, Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-7000.

Unless this publication states otherwise, masculine nouns and pronouns refer to both men and women.

Chapter 1

The After-Action Review

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

An after-action review (AAR) is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. It is a tool leaders and units can use to get maximum benefit from every mission or task. It provides-

- Candid insights into specific soldier, leader, and unit strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives.
- Feedback and insight critical to battle-focused training.
- Details often lacking in evaluation reports alone.

Evaluation is the basis for the commander's unit-training assessment. No commander, no matter how skilled, will see as much as the individual soldiers and leaders who actually conduct the training. Leaders can better correct deficiencies and sustain strengths by carefully evaluating and comparing soldier, leader, and unit performance against the standard. The AAR is the keystone of the evaluation process.

Feedback compares the actual output of a process with the intended outcome. By focusing on the task's standards and by describing specific observations, leaders and soldiers identify strengths and weaknesses and together decide how to improve their performances. This shared learning improves task proficiency and promotes unit bonding and esprit. Squad and platoon leaders will use the information to develop input for unit-training plans. The AAR is a valid and valuable technique regardless of branch, echelon, or training task.

Of course, AARs are not cure-alls for unit-training problems. Leaders must still make on-the-spot corrections and take responsibility for training their soldiers and units. However, AARs are a key part of the training process. The goal is to improve soldier, leader, and unit performance. The result is a more cohesive and proficient fighting force.

Because soldiers and leaders participating in an AAR actively discover what happened and why, they learn and remember more than they would from a critique alone. A critique only gives one viewpoint and frequently provides little opportunity for discussion of events by participants. Soldier observations and comments may not be encouraged. The climate of the critique, focusing only on what is wrong, prevents candid discussion of training events and stifles learning and team building.

TYPES OF AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

All AARs follow the same general format, involve the exchange of ideas and observations, and focus on improving training proficiency. How leaders conduct a particular AAR determines whether it is formal or informal. A formal AAR is resource-intensive and involves the planning, coordination, and preparation of supporting training aids, the AAR site, and support personnel. Informal AARs (usually for soldier, crew, squad, and platoon training) require less preparation and planning.

Formal

Leaders plan formal AARs at the same time they finalize the near-term training plan (six to eight weeks before execution). Formal AARs require more planning and preparation than informal AARs. They may require site reconnaissance and selection, coordination for training aids (terrain models, map blow-ups, and so on), and selection and training of observers and controllers (OCs).

NOTE: Figure 1-1 lists the key points in all AARs. Figure 1-2 shows the AAR format. Figure 1-3 lists characteristics of formal and informal AARs.

- After-action reviews--
- Are conducted during or immediately after each event.
 - Focus on intended training objectives.
 - Focus on soldier, leader, and unit performance.
 - Involve all participants in the discussion.
 - Use open-ended questions.
 - Are related to specific standards.
 - Determine strengths and weaknesses.
 - Link performance to subsequent training.

Figure 1-1. AAR Key Points

- Introduction and rules.
- Review of training objectives.
- Commander's mission and intent (what was supposed to happen).
- Opposing force (OPFOR) commander's mission and intent (when appropriate).
- Relevant doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).
- Summary of recent events (what happened).
- Discussion of key issues (why it happened and how to improve).
- Discussion of optional issues.
- Discussion of force protection issues (discussed throughout).
- Closing comments (summary).

Figure 1-2. AAR Format

Formal reviews--	Informal reviews--
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have external observers and controllers (OCs) • Take more time. • Use complex training aids. • Are scheduled beforehand. • Are conducted where best supported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted by internal chain of command. • Take less time. • Use simple training aids. • Are conducted when needed. • Are held at the training site.

Figure 1-3. Types of AARs

Formal AARs are usually held at company level and above. An exception might be an AAR of crew, section, or small-unit performance after gunnery tables or after a platoon situational training exercise (STX). Squad and platoon AARs are held before the execution of formal company and higher echelon AARs. This allows all levels of the unit to benefit from an AAR experience. It also provides OCs and leaders with observations and trends to address during the formal AAR.

During formal AARs, the AAR leader (unit leader or OC) focuses the discussion of events on training objectives. At the end, the leader reviews key points and issues identified (reinforcing learning that took place during the discussion) and once again focuses on training objectives.

Informal

Leaders usually conduct informal AARs for soldier and small-unit training at platoon level and below. At company and battalion levels, leaders may conduct informal AARs when resources for formal AARs, including time, are unavailable. Informal AARs use the standard AAR format.

Leaders may use informal AARs as on-the-spot coaching tools while reviewing soldier and unit performances during training. For example, after destroying an enemy observation post (OP) during a movement to contact, a squad leader could conduct an informal AAR to make corrections and reinforce strengths. Using nothing more than pinecones to represent squad members, he and his soldiers could discuss the contact from start to finish. The squad could quickly--

- Evaluate their performance against the Army standard (or unit standard if there is no published Army standard).
- Identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- Decide how to improve their performance when training continues.

Informal AARs provide immediate feedback to soldiers, leaders, and units during training. Ideas and solutions the leader gathers during informal AARs can be immediately put to use as the unit continues its training. Also, during lower echelon informal AARs, leaders often collect teaching points and trends they can use as discussion points during higher echelon formal AARs.

Informal AARs maximize training value because all unit members are actively involved. They learn what to do, how to do it better, and the importance of the roles they play in unit-task accomplishment. They then know how to execute the task to standard.

The most significant difference between formal AARs and informal AARs is that informal AARs require fewer training resources and few, if any, training aids. Although informal AARs may be part of the unit evaluation plan, they are more commonly conducted when the leader or OC feels the unit would benefit. Providing immediate feedback while the training is still fresh in soldiers' minds is a significant strength of informal AARs.

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW PLANNING AND EXECUTION SEQUENCE

To maximize the effectiveness of AARs, leaders should plan and rehearse before training begins. After-action review planning is a routine part of unit near-term planning (six to eight weeks out). During planning, leaders assign OC responsibilities and identify tentative times and locations for AARs. This ensures the allocation of time and resources to conduct AARs and reinforces the important role AARs play in realizing the full benefit of training.

The amount and level of detail leaders need during the planning and preparation process depends on the type of AAR they will conduct and on available resources. The AAR process has four steps:

- Step 1. Planning
- Step 2. Preparing
- Step 3. Conducting
- Step 4. Following up (using AAR results)

NOTE: Chapters 2 through 5 detail each of the four steps. Figure 1-4 is a list of actions leaders should follow to ensure effective AARs.

<p>Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select and train qualified OCs. • Review the training and evaluation plan, Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP) mission training plans (MTPs), and soldier training publications (STPs). • Identify when AARs will occur. • Determine who will attend AARs. • Select potential AAR sites. • Choose training aids. • Review the AAR plan.
<p>Preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review training objectives, orders, METL, and doctrine. • Identify key events OCs are to observe. • Observe the training and take notes. • Collect observations from other OCs. • Organize observations. (Identify key discussion or teaching points.) • Reconnoiter the selected AAR site. • Prepare the AAR site. • Conduct rehearsal.
<p>Conduct</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek maximum participation. • Maintain focus on training objectives. • Constantly review teaching points. • Record key points.
<p>Follow up</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify tasks requiring retraining. • Fix the problem -- retrain immediately, revise standing operating procedures (SOPs), integrate into tutors training plans. • Use to assist in making commander's assessment.

Figure 1-4. The AAR Process

Chapter 2

Planning the After-Action Review

THE AFTER-ACTION REVIEW PLAN

Leaders are responsible for planning, executing, evaluating, and assessing training. Each training event is evaluated during training execution. Evaluations can be informal or formal and internal or external. Key points for each type of evaluation follow.

Informal evaluations are most commonly used at battalion level and below. They are--

- Conducted by all leaders in the chain of command.
- Continuous.
- Used to provide immediate feedback on training proficiency.

Formal evaluations are usually scheduled on the long-range and short-range calendars. These include ARTEP evaluations, expert infantry badge (EIB), expert field medic badge (EFMB), and technical validation inspections (TVIs). They are--

- Sometimes unannounced, such as an emergency deployment readiness exercise (EDRE).
- Normally highlighted during quarterly training briefs (QTBs) and yearly training briefs (YTBs).
- Resourced with dedicated evaluators or OCs.

The unit undergoing the evaluation plans, resources, and conducts internal evaluations. They also plan and resource external evaluations. However, the headquarters two levels above the unit being evaluated conducts theirs. For example, division evaluates battalion; brigade evaluates companies; battalion evaluates platoons; and company evaluates sections, squads, teams, or crews. Observers and controllers assist commanders in the evaluation process by collecting data and providing feedback.

A key element in an evaluation plan is the AAR plan. The AAR plan provides the foundation for successful AARs. Leaders develop an AAR plan for each training event. It contains--

- Who will observe the training and who will conduct the AAR.
- What trainers should evaluate (training and evaluation outlines (TEOs)).
- Who is to attend.
- When and where the AAR will occur.
- What training aids trainers will use.

Trainers use the AAR plan to identify critical places and events they must observe to provide the unit with a valid evaluation. Examples include unit maintenance collection points, passage points, and unit aid stations. By identifying these events and assigning responsibilities, unit leaders can be sure someone will be there to observe and take notes. This allows the training unit team to make the best use of its limited resources and conduct a first-class training event.

After-action review plans also designate who will observe and control a particular event. The term observer and controller refers to the individual tasked to observe training and provide control for the training exercise as well as to lead the AAR.

NOTE: Figure 2-1 shows an extract from an exercise plan.

Observer	1Lt Jones
Element	1st plt
Priority tasks	Occupy, prepare, and defend a battle position
Who attends	All
When held	1 hour after contact broken
Location	Behind 2d squad GH44319218
Special requirements	LTC Smith will provide closing comments

Figure 2-1. An Exercise AAR Plan

SELECTING AND TRAINING OBSERVERS AND CONTROLLERS

When planning an AAR, trainers should select OCs who--

- Can perform the tasks to be trained to Army standards.
- Are knowledgeable on the duties they are to observe.
- Are knowledgeable on current TTPs.

When using external OCs, trainers must ensure that OCs are at least equal in rank to the leader of the unit they will evaluate. If trainers must choose between experience and understanding of current TTPs or rank, they should go with experience. A staff sergeant with experience as a tank platoon sergeant can observe the platoon better than can a sergeant first class who has no platoon sergeant experience.

Observers should not have duties which would detract from their OC duties. If this is not possible, leaders in the chain of command should evaluate subordinate units and conduct the AARs. For example, squad leaders would evaluate the performance of soldiers in their squads and limit AAR discussion to individual actions. Platoon leaders or platoon sergeants would do the same for squads, company commanders or first sergeants for

platoons, and so on. If possible, they should avoid evaluating their own duties and tasks. (It is hard to be objective about your own performance and to determine how it will affect your unit.)

Trainers must train their small-unit leaders and OCs. Each OC leads AARs for the element he observes and provides input to the AAR leader for the next higher echelon. Leaders and OCs must be trained in the use of the methods, techniques, and procedures in this training circular. If possible, trainers should assign someone with AAR experience to accompany and assist an inexperienced AAR leader until he is proficient. The trainer must *conduct AARs to help AAR leaders improve their performances*. Inexperienced AAR leaders should observe properly conducted AARs before attempting to lead one. The trainer must include classes on small-group discussion techniques in OC instruction.

REVIEWING THE TRAINING AND EVALUATION PLAN

Observers and controllers selected to observe training and lead AARs cannot observe and assess every action of every individual. Training and evaluation outlines provide tasks, conditions, and standards for the unit's training as well as the bottom line against which leaders can measure unit and soldier performance.

Once a trainer extracts TEOs from the ARTEP mission training plan (AMTP) or, if none exist, develops his own, he gives a copy of the TEOs to the senior OC. The senior OC distributes them to his subordinates who review and use them to focus their own observations. The senior OC must be specific on what his subordinates are to evaluate and what standards of performance he desires. When possible, he should list the steps which units must accomplish to properly complete the action. By listing each step, an OC can more readily detect an error, especially in a drill when the actions of one soldier may affect others.

The steps in AMTPs and soldier's manuals provide the standard method for completing each task and help structure consistent observations. Using the evaluation plan, the OC can concentrate efforts on critical places and times where and when he can best evaluate unit performance. This ensures that feedback is directly focused on tasks being trained and provides the unit and its leaders with the information they need to improve or sustain proficiency.

SCHEDULING STOPPING POINTS

Leaders must schedule time to conduct AARs as an integrated part of overall training. When possible, they should plan for an AAR at the end of each critical phase or major training event. For example, a leader could plan a stopping point after issuing an operation order (OPORD), when the unit arrives at a new position, after it consolidates on an objective, and so on.

For planning purposes, leaders should allow approximately 30-45 minutes for platoon-level AARs, 1 hour for company-level AARs, and about 2 hours for battalion-level and

above. Soldiers will receive better feedback on their performance and remember the lessons longer if the AAR is not rushed.

Reviewers must fully address all key learning points. They must not waste time on dead-end issues.

DETERMINING ATTENDANCE

The AAR plan specifies who must attend each AAR. Normally, only key players attend. At times, however, the more participants present, the better the feedback. Leaders must select as many participants as appropriate for the task and the AAR site.

At each echelon, an AAR has a primary set of participants. At squad and platoon levels, everyone should attend and participate. At company or higher levels, it may not be practical to have everyone attend because of continuing operations or training. In this case, friendly and OPFOR commanders, unit leaders, and other key players (fire support team (FIST) chief, radio telephone operator (RTO), and so on) may be the only participants.

SELECTING POTENTIAL AAR SITES

An AAR will usually occur at or near the training exercise site. Leaders should identify and inspect AAR sites and prepare a site diagram showing the placement of training aids and other equipment. Designated AAR sites also allow pre-positioning of training aids and rapid assembly of key personnel, minimizing wasted time.

Ideally, the AAR site should allow soldiers to see the terrain where the exercise took place. If this is not possible, the trainer should find a location which allows them to see the terrain where the most critical or significant actions occurred. If needed, the trainer should have a terrain model or enlarged map or sketch and a copy of the unit's graphics so everyone can relate key events to the actual terrain.

The trainer should make soldiers attending the AAR as comfortable as possible (by removing helmets and so on), providing shelter from the elements (sun, cold, rain, snow), having refreshments (coffee, water), and creating an environment where participants can focus on the AAR without distractions. Participants should not face into the sun, and key leaders should have seats up front. Vehicle parking and equipment security areas should be far enough away from the AAR site to prevent distractions.

CHOOSING TRAINING AIDS

Training aids add to an AAR's effectiveness. The trainer should choose them carefully and request them well in advance. Training aids should directly support discussion of the training and promote learning. Local training support center (TSC) catalogs list training aids available to each unit. Dry-erase boards, terrain models, and enlarged maps are all worthwhile under the right conditions. (See also Figure 2-2.)

Formal AARs	Informal AARs
• Terrain model	• Unit markers
• Enlarged map	• Pointer
• Models	• Unit maneuver graphics
• Dry-erase marker board	• Communications recordings
• Photographs	• Rocks and twigs
• Video camera and monitor	• Colored chalk

Figure 2-2. Training Aids

Terrain visibility, group size, suitability to task, and availability of electrical power are all things to consider when selecting training aids. The key is planning and coordination. The bottom line is to only use a training aid if it makes the AAR better.

To select the right training aids, trainers should ask--

- What points will I need to make during the AAR, and what training aids will help me make these points?
- Will the aid illustrate one or more of the main points?
- Can I use the actual terrain or equipment?
- Does the aid have any restrictions or special requirements, such as additional generators?
- Will participants be able to see and hear it?
- Is it really necessary for the discussion or just nice to have?

REVIEWING THE AAR PLAN

The AAR plan is only a guide. Leaders should review it regularly to make sure it is still on track and meets the training needs of their units.

CAUTION: Remember that every change takes preparation and planning time away from subordinate OCs or leaders. This may impact the quality of feedback. The purpose of the AAR plan is to allow OCs and AAR leaders as much time as possible to prepare for the AAR. Frequent or unnecessary changes prevent that.

Chapter 3

Preparing the After-Action Review

REVIEW DOCTRINE, TRAINING OBJECTIVES, ORDERS, AND METL

Preparation is the key to the effective execution of any plan. Preparing for an AAR begins before the training and continues until the actual event. Observers and controllers should use the time before the training event to brush up on their knowledge. They must be tactically and technically proficient. Therefore, they should review current doctrine, technical information, and applicable unit SOPs to ensure they have the tools they need to properly observe unit and individual performances.

To gain understanding of both the focus of unit training and the exercise plan, OCs must also review the unit's training objectives, orders, and METL. The unit's training objectives focus on the specific actions and events which OCs must observe to provide valid observations and to effectively lead the unit in its discussion during the AAR. Orders, including OPORDs and fragmentary orders (FRAGOs), which the leader issues before and during training, establish initial conditions for tasks the units must perform. The METL contains the complete task, conditions, and standards for each task.

IDENTIFY KEY EVENTS OBSERVERS AND CONTROLLERS ARE TO OBSERVE

Observers and controllers must focus their observations on the actions required to perform tasks to standard and to accomplish training objectives. To do this effectively, they must identify which events are critical to accomplishing each task and objective. By identifying key events, OCs can make sure they position themselves in the right place at the right time to observe the unit's actions. Examples of critical events include--

- Issuance of OPORDs and FRAGOs
- Troop-leading procedures (TLPs)
- Contact with opposing forces
- Resupply and reconstitution operations
- Intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB)
- Passage of lines

OBSERVE THE TRAINING AND TAKE NOTES

All unit activities have three phases: planning, preparation, and execution. These phases can help the OC structure his observation plan and notetaking. He should keep an accurate written record of what he sees and hears and record events, actions, and observations by time sequence to prevent loss of valuable information and feedback. He can use any recording system (notebook, prepared forms, 3-by-5 cards) that fits his needs

as long as it is reliable, sufficiently detailed (identifying times, places, and names), and consistent. The OC could also use a small portable tape recorder, but he should not get carried away with gadgets when a pencil and paper would do.

The OC should include the date-time group (DTG) of each observation so he can easily integrate his observations into those of other OCs. This will provide a comprehensive and detailed overview of what happened. When the OC has more time, he can review his notes and fill in any details he did not write down earlier.

NOTE: Figure 3-1 shows a sample observation format using a prepared form. Figure 3-2 shows similar comments using 3-by-5 cards. See also Appendix A for AAR techniques.

<p>Training/exercise title:</p> <p>Event:</p> <p>Date/time:</p> <p>Location of observation:</p> <p>Observation (player/trainer action):</p> <p>Discussion (tied to task and standard if possible):</p> <p>Conclusions:</p> <p>Recommendations (indicate how the unit could have executed the task(s) better or describe training the unit will need to improve future performances):</p> <p>NOTE: Units may modify this format to meet their specific needs.</p>
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Figure 3-1. Example AAR Observation Worksheet (Note)

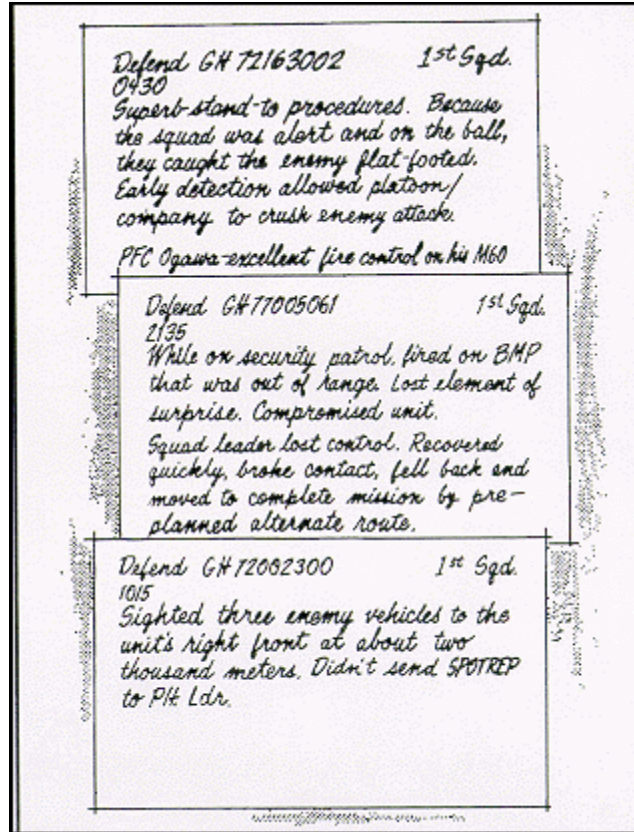


Figure 3-2. Example AAR Observation 3-by-5 Comment Card

One of the most difficult OC tasks is to determine when and where to position himself to observe training. The OC does not always need to stay close to the unit leader. Sometimes he can see more from locations where he can observe the performance of critical tasks or the overall flow of unit actions. However, he should not position himself where he would be a training distracter. He must look and act as a member of the unit (using individual and vehicle camouflage, movement techniques, cover and concealment, and so on). He must not compromise the unit's location or intent by being obvious. At all times, he should be professional, courteous, and low-key.

Another way to observe training is to monitor unit communications nets. Modern technology can quickly record radio transmissions using voice-activated tape recorders or video cameras. By listening to radio traffic, OCs can trace the dissemination of orders and messages as well as monitor information flow from subordinate units. When appropriate, OCs can monitor computer traffic on the Maneuver Control System (MCS) to determine unit actions or status and to identify the impact of inaccurate information on unit operations.

COLLECT OBSERVATIONS FROM OTHER OBSERVERS AND CONTROLLERS

The AAR plan designates a time, place, or method to consolidate feedback from other OCs. The leader will need a complete picture of what happened during the training to

conduct an effective AAR Therefore, each OC must give him input. This input may come from subordinate units, combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) units, or adjacent units.

The leader may also receive input from OPFOR leaders, players, and OCs. The enemy's perspective is often useful in identifying why a unit was or was not successful. During formal AARs, the OPFOR leader briefs his plan and intent to set the stage for a discussion of what happened and why.

ORGANIZE OBSERVATIONS

After the leader has gathered all the information, he puts his notes in chronological sequence so he can understand the flow of events. Next, he selects and sequences key events in terms of their relevance to training objectives, identifying key discussion and/or teaching points.

SELECT AND RECONNOITER THE AAR SITE

The leader selects potential AAR sites as part of the overall planning process. He should select areas near where the training occurred or where most of the critical events took place. However, he must be sure to reconnoiter alternate sites in case he finds he cannot use his first choice.

PREPARE THE AAR SITE

The leader sets up the AAR site so participants can see the actual terrain or training aids. Horseshoe arrangements encourage discussion and allow everyone to see. Figure 3-3 shows a typical AAR site.

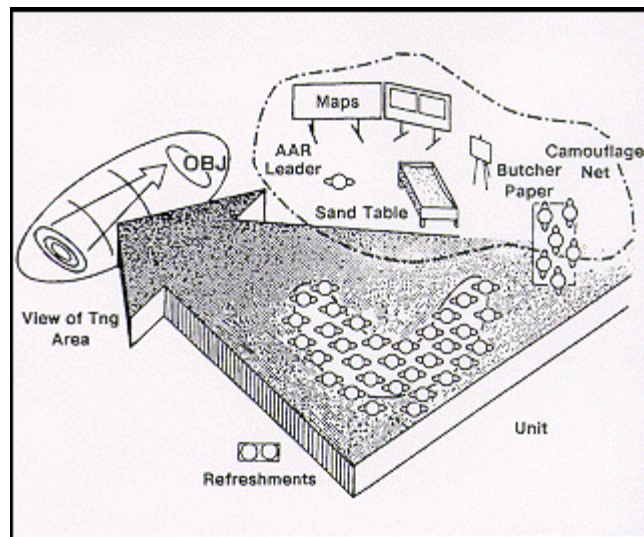


Figure 3-3. Typical AAR Site

If possible, the leader should pre-position training aids and equipment. If he cannot, he should place them nearby under the control of a responsible individual.

REHEARSE

After thorough preparation, the leader reviews the AAR format (Figure 1-2), rehearses at the AAR site, and gets ready to conduct the AAR. He should then announce to unit leaders the AAR start time and location. He must allow enough time for OCs to prepare and rehearse while unit leaders account for personnel and equipment, perform actions which their unit SOP requires, and move to the AAR site.

Chapter 4

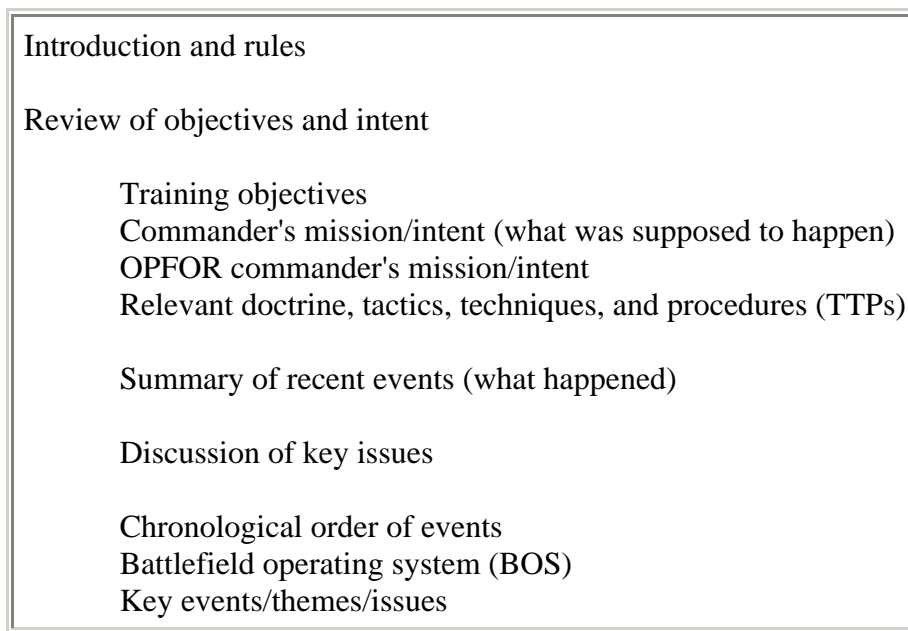
Conducting the After-Action Review

INTRODUCTION AND RULES

The training exercise is over, AAR preparation is complete, and key players are at the designated AAR site. It is now time to conduct the AAR. The leader should begin with some type of "attention getter" -- a joke, an appropriate anecdote, or a historical example that relates to the training, exercise, event, or conduct of the AAR. Then, if necessary, he reviews the purpose and sequence of the AAR to ensure everyone understands what an AAR is and how it works. His introduction should include the following thoughts:

- An AAR is a dynamic, candid, professional discussion of training which focuses on unit performance against the Army standard for the tasks being trained. Everyone can, and should, participate if they have an insight, observation, or question which will help the unit identify and correct deficiencies or maintain strengths.
- An AAR is not a critique. No one, regardless of rank, position, or strength of personality, has all of the information or answers. After-action reviews maximize training benefits by allowing soldiers, regardless of rank, to learn from each other.
- An AAR does not grade success or failure. There are always weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain.

NOTE: Figure 4-1 contains a recommended sequence for conducting an AAR.



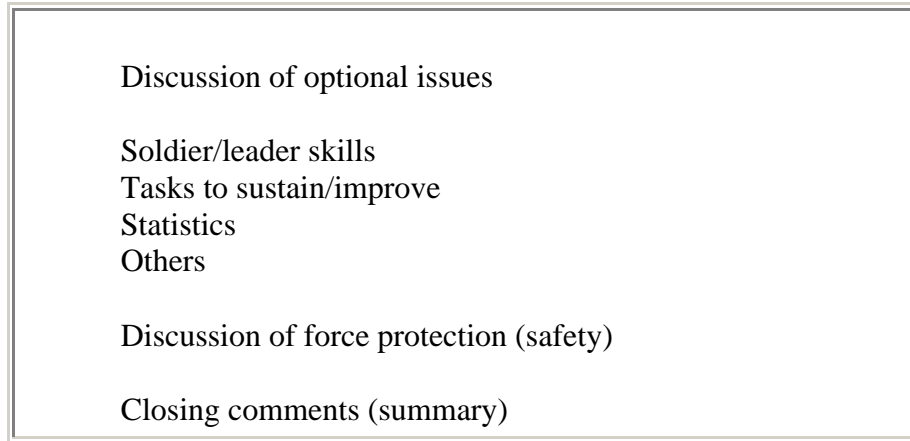


Figure 4-1. Sequence for Conducting AARs

Soldier participation is directly related to the atmosphere created during the introduction. The AAR leader should make a concerted effort to draw in and include soldiers who seem reluctant to participate. The following techniques can help the leader create an atmosphere conducive to maximum participation. He should--

- Enter the discussion only when necessary.
- Reinforce the fact that it is permissible to disagree.
- Focus on learning and encourage people to give honest opinions.
- Use open-ended and leading questions to guide the discussion of soldier, leader, and unit performance.

REVIEW OF OBJECTIVES AND INTENT

Training Objectives

The AAR leader should review unit training objectives for the training mission(s) the AAR will cover. He should also restate the tasks being reviewed as well as the conditions and standards for the tasks.

Commander's Mission and Intent (What Was Supposed to Happen)

Using maps, operational graphics, terrain boards, and so on, the commander should restate the mission and his intent. Then, if necessary, the discussion leader should guide the discussion to ensure everyone understands the plan and the commander's intent. Another technique is to have subordinate leaders restate the mission and discuss their commander's intent.

OPFOR Commander's Mission and Intent

In a formal AAR, the OPFOR commander explains his plan to defeat friendly forces. He uses the same training aids as the friendly force commander so participants can understand the relationship of both plans.

SUMMARY OF RECENT EVENTS (WHAT HAPPENED)

The AAR leader now guides the review using a logical sequence of events to describe and discuss what happened. He should not ask yes or no questions, but encourage participation and guide discussion by using open-ended and leading questions. An open-ended question has no specific answer and allows the person answering to reply based on what was significant to him. Open-ended questions are also much less likely to put him on the defensive. This is more effective in finding out what happened. For example, it is better to ask,

"SGT Johnson, what happened when your Bradley crested the hill?"

rather than--

"SGT Johnson, why didn't you engage the enemy tanks to your front?"

As the discussion expands and more soldiers add their perspectives, what really happened will become clear. Remember, this is not a critique or lecture; the OC does not tell the soldiers or leaders what was good or bad. However, the AAR leader must ensure specific issues are revealed, both positive and negative in nature. Skillful guidance of the discussion will ensure the AAR does not gloss over mistakes or unit weaknesses.

DISCUSSION OF KEY ISSUES

The AAR is a problem-solving process. The purpose of discussion is for participants to discover strengths and weaknesses, propose solutions, and adopt a course of action to correct problems. Leaders can organize the discussion using one of the three techniques in the following paragraphs.

Discussion Techniques

Chronological Order of Events

This technique is logical, structured, and easy to understand. It follows the flow of training from start to finish and allows soldiers to see the effects of their actions on other units and events. By covering actions in the order they took place, soldiers and leaders are better able to recall what happened.

Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS)

To focus and structure the AAR, the leader can also use the seven BOS (Figure 4-2). By focusing on each BOS and discussing it across all phases of the training exercise, participants can identify systemic strengths and weaknesses. This technique is particularly useful in training staff sections whose duties and responsibilities directly relate to one or more BOS. However, leaders using this

technique must be careful not to lose sight of the big picture. They must not get into long discussions about BOS which do not relate to mission accomplishment.

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intelligence (INTEL) 2. Maneuver (MVR) 3. Fire Support (FS) 4. Mobility, countermobility, survivability (M, C, S) 5. Air Defense (AD) 6. Combat Service Support (CSS) 7. Command and Control (C²) |
|---|

Figure 4-2. The Seven BOS

Key Events/Themes/Issues

A key events discussion focuses on critical training events which directly support training objectives the chain of command identified before the exercise began. Keeping a tight focus on these events prevents the discussion from becoming sidetracked by issues which do not relate to training objectives. This technique is particularly effective when time is limited.

Fratricide

All incidents or near incidents of fratricide, whether inflicted by direct fire, indirect fire, or close air support (CAS), will be discussed in detail. The leader must focus on identifying the cause of the fratricide and develop SOPs and TTPs to prevent it in the future. Regardless of the environment (training or combat), the leader must swiftly deal with all fratricide incidents. As soon as possible after the event, an AAR should be held to discuss the circumstances surrounding the event, using the following discussion points:

- How and why did the incident occur?
- How were friendly personnel and equipment identified?
- What fire control measures were in place where the fratricide occurred and how effective were they?
- How did the commander's risk assessment and overall intent for the mission address the issue of fratricide?

Flexibility

One of the strengths of the AAR format is its flexibility. The leader could use the chronological format to structure the discussion, then, if a particular BOS seems to have systemic issues that the group needs to address, follow that BOS across the entire exercise. Once that topic is exhausted, the AAR could proceed using the chronological format. Each technique will generate discussion, identify unit

strengths, weaknesses, and training the unit needs to improve proficiency. However, the leader must remember to--

- Be specific, avoiding generalizations.
- Be thorough.
- Not dwell on issues unrelated to mission accomplishment.
- Focus on actions.
- Relate performance to the accomplishment of training objectives.
- Identify corrective action for areas of weakness.
- Continually summarize.

DISCUSSION OF OPTIONAL ISSUES

In addition to discussing key issues, the leader might also address several optional topics, included in the following paragraphs.

Soldier/Leader Skills

Through discussion, the unit can identify critical soldier and leader skills which affected unit or individual performance. The leader should note these skills for retraining or for future unit training. (Often it is best to discuss leader skills in a separate meeting or AAR specifically for that purpose. This allows for a candid discussion of leadership issues without wasting unit AAR time best spent on reviewing the entire training exercise.) The AAR leader for follow-on meetings should be a member of the unit so participants can candidly address key training issues without fear of airing dirty laundry in front of outsiders.

Tasks to Sustain/Improve

This technique focuses on identifying tasks on which the unit is proficient and tasks on which they need further training. The intent is to focus training on mission-essential tasks and supporting soldier, leader, and collective tasks which need improvement rather than training to known strengths. Although it is important to sustain proficiency on tasks whose standards the unit has met, it is more important to train to standard on new or deficient mission-essential tasks. Train to weakness, not to strength.

Statistics

Statistics is a double-edged sword. Effective feedback requires participants to measure, collect, and quantify performance during the training exercise. Statistics supply objective facts which reinforce observations of both strengths and weaknesses. The danger lies in statistics for statistics' sake. Chart after chart of ratios, bar graphs, and tables quickly obscures any meaning and lends itself to a "grading" of unit performance. This stifles discussion and degrades the AAR's value. Statistics and statistics-based charts should *identify critical trends or issues*

and reinforce teaching points. (An example for an armored unit would be to link the number of rounds fired to the number of enemy vehicles destroyed. This would provide a good indication of unit gunnery skills.) Judicious use of statistic feedback supports observations and provides a focus to AAR discussions.

Other

Other topics which participants may need to discuss include troop-leading procedures, troop deployment and use of terrain, synchronization, enemy disposition and tactics, information dissemination and use, obstacle emplacement and breaching, vision of the battlefield, knowing the enemy, and so forth.

DISCUSSION OF FORCE PROTECTION (SAFETY) ISSUES

Safety is every soldier's business and applies to everything a unit does in the field and in garrison. Safety should be specifically addressed in every AAR and discussed in detail when it impacts unit effectiveness or soldier health. The important thing is to treat safety precautions as integral parts of every operation.

CLOSING COMMENTS (SUMMARY)

During the summary, the AAR leader reviews and summarizes key points identified during the discussion. He should end the AAR on a positive note, linking conclusions to future training. He should then leave the immediate area to allow unit leaders and soldiers time to discuss the training in private.

Chapter 5

Following Up

(Using the Results of the After-Action Review)

BENEFITS

The real benefits of AARs come from taking the results and applying them to future training. Leaders can use the information to assess performance and to immediately retrain units in tasks where there is weakness. Leaders can also use AARs to help assess unit METL proficiency. Immediately or shortly after the training event, leaders should conduct a trained-practiced-untrained (T-P-U) assessment and develop a future-training concept.

Leaders should not delay or reschedule retraining except when absolutely necessary. If the leader delays retraining, he must be sure the soldiers understand that they did not perform the task to standard and that retraining will occur later.

After-action reviews are the dynamic link between task performance and execution to standard. They provide commanders a critical assessment tool to use to plan soldier, leader, and unit training. Through the professional and candid discussion of events, soldiers can compare their performance against the standard and identify specific ways to improve proficiency

IMMEDIATE RETRAINING (SAME TRAINING EXERCISE)

Retraining may be immediately necessary to address particularly weak areas. By applying its learning, a unit can improve its performance to meet the Army standard. However, the focus of this effort is not to get an A or B; it is to improve soldier and unit performance. By the end of an AAR, soldiers must clearly understand what was good, bad, or average about their performance.

Field Manuals 25-100 and 25-101 require leaders to schedule time for retraining as a normal part of the planning process. The unit must retrain on the tasks which they did not perform to standard before the unit can go to the next training event. The unit must always retrain and perform critical gate tasks derived from the Combined Arms Training Strategy (CATS) to standard before progressing to the next level of tasks. This reinforces the learning process by immediately correcting substandard performance. The unit must conduct any necessary retraining of supporting soldier or leader tasks before retraining on deficient collective tasks. This ensures that the unit can focus on performing the collective task. When there is not enough time to retrain the task or tasks, the leader must integrate it into the unit's training plan and reschedule it.

NOTE: Critical gate tasks are tasks grouped in a training event that a soldier or unit *must* perform and receive an evaluation for before progressing to more complex or difficult tasks or events. Commanders *must* prescribe the performance of the task to standard as a prerequisite for progressing to subsequent tasks or events.

Time or complexity of the mission may prevent retraining on some tasks during the same exercise. When this happens, leaders must reschedule the mission or training in accordance with FM 25-100 and FM 25-101. As part of this process, leaders must ensure that deficient supporting tasks found during the AAR are also scheduled and retrained.

REVISED STANDING OPERATING PROCEDURES

After-action reviews may reveal problems with unit SOPs. If so, unit leaders must revise the SOP and make sure units implement the changes during any future training.

THE AFTER-ACTION REVIEW IN COMBAT

Training does not stop when a unit goes into combat. Training is *always* an integral part of precombat and combat operations although limited time and proximity to the enemy may restrict the type and extent of training. Only training improves combat performance without imposing the stiff penalties combat inflicts on the untrained.

The AAR is one of the most effective techniques to use in a combat environment. An effective AAR takes little time, and leaders can conduct them almost anywhere consistent with unit security requirements. Conducting AARs helps overcome the steep learning curve that exists in a unit exposed to combat and helps the unit ensure that it does not repeat mistakes. It also helps them sustain strengths. By integrating training into combat operations and using tools such as AARs, leaders can dramatically increase their unit's chances for success on the battlefield.

Appendix A

After-Action Review Techniques

Observers and controllers from combat training centers (CTCs) administer AARs every day. The experience of professional AAR leaders yields techniques that apply to all units, not just those that rotate through CTCs. The techniques in the following paragraphs can help leaders conduct effective AARs.

SITE SELECTION

After-action review leaders should select sites where a free exchange of ideas and discussion of recent events can take place. An appropriate site would overlook areas of significant action, such as a hill overlooking an obstacle breach. The importance of selecting a site where participants can observe the actual locations where key events took place cannot be overstated.

Environmental factors can impact significantly on AAR efficiency. When possible, avoid seating soldiers in direct sunlight, excessive darkness, or exposing them to rain or snow. When weather is particularly bad, an alternate AAR site, such as a building, bunker, range tower, or possibly even a tent, would be appropriate.

SITE IMPROVEMENT

Site improvement enhances an AAR's chance of being successful. If there is no way to avoid direct sunlight, the leader should erect some type of covering, such as a camouflage net or a tarp. Cover from direct sunlight allows soldiers to concentrate on the task at hand. Likewise, protecting soldiers from heavy rains or snow has a positive effect. The leader can counteract high winds by placing a vehicle on the up-wind side or by moving soldiers to an area with sufficient cover.

Some sites lend themselves to rapid improvement. Others require a large investment in time and energy to make them suitable. The AAR leader must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of the site. The prudent decision may be to move to an area which may not overlook the terrain but which does facilitate a good AAR.

TRAINING AIDS

The best training aids are those that enhance learning without distracting from the AAR's overall goal. Leaders must carefully select only those training aids which directly apply to key events. For example, it would be appropriate to have a detailed scale terrain model when conducting an AAR of a squad ambush. However, a detailed scale terrain model is probably not appropriate when conducting an AAR for marksmanship training. The key is, if it does not assist, then it detracts. Figure A-1 is a list of common AAR training aids.

Training Aid	Application
Tape recorder	Used to record radio traffic, OPORDs, and so on.
Video tape recorder; TV monitor	Used to record key events for playback.
Dry-erase board	Used as a portable chalk board.
Butcher paper	Used for outlines, teaching points, agenda, or other details.
Map overlay	Used to guide discussion of events; should be bigger than 1:50,000 if possible.
Terrain model	Used to guide discussion of events in greater detail than with a map.
Model vehicles; toy soldiers	Used to simulate soldiers and equipment on terrain models.

Figure A-1. Common Training Aids and Their Applications

Training aids need not be complicated or fancy to be effective. For example, instead of butcher paper or a dry-erase board, a poncho or the side of a tracked vehicle would do. If a terrain model is needed, use the same one that the unit used for the operation, if possible.

ORGANIZATION OF THE AAR SITE

Organization of the site is essential to establishing the right atmosphere for a good AAR. Areas that the AAR leader must address include the location of the AAR discussion leader, seating for soldiers, and positioning of training aids.

The AAR discussion leader should be centrally located and stand directly facing the majority of the soldiers taking part. If the AAR is for a large group, the discussion leader should be elevated.

Seating should be in a horseshoe shape when possible. This allows the maximum number of soldiers to have "front row seats" with no one standing behind the discussion leader. The leader of the unit undergoing the AAR should be seated in the front and center of the horseshoe. Higher echelon leaders and commanders should be seated to the flanks and rear of the horseshoe. For example, for a platoon AAR, the platoon leader and platoon sergeant should be seated in the front and center of the horseshoe, with their soldiers spread out to the left and right. The company commander and battalion commander would be located behind the back row of soldiers. This allows soldiers taking part in the AAR to feel that their comments are valued as much as those of senior leaders. It is important that the atmosphere of the AAR be one of open discussion, not one stifled by rank consciousness.

Training aids must be centrally located so the maximum number of soldiers can benefit from their use. Terrain boards should be propped at an angle to allow greater visibility. Television monitors, if used, should be placed out of direct light. Butcher-paper charts and dry-erase boards work best when everyone can see them. However, they must not dominate the AAR. When using butcher-paper charts, the leader should be sure printing is in the block style and large enough for everyone to read.

These techniques, when properly applied, assist in the efficient execution of AARs. See Appendix G of FM 25-101 for more details.

Glossary

AD	air defense
AMTP	ARTEP mission training plan
ARR	after-action review
ARTEP	Army Training and Evaluation Program
AT	antitank
BMP	Soviet armored personnel carrier
BOS	battlefield operating system
C²	command and control
CAS	close air support
CATS	Combined Arms Training Strategies
CS	combat support
CSS	combat service support
CTC	combat training centers
DTG	date-time group
EDRE	emergency deployment readiness exercise
EFMB	expert field medic badge
EIB	expert infantry badge
FIST	fire support team
FM	field manual

FRAGO	fragmentary order
FS	fire support
intel	intelligence
IPB	intelligence preparation of the battlefield
KS	Kansas
ldr	leader
LT	lieutenant
MCS	Maneuver Control System
M, C, S	mobility, countermobility, survivability
METL	mission-essential task list
MTP	mission training plan
mvr	maneuver
obj	objective
OC	observer and controller
OP	observation post
OPFOR	opposing force
OPORD	operation order
PFC	private first class
plt	platoon
QTB	quarterly training brief
RTO	radio telephone operator

SGT	sergeant
SOP	standing operating procedures
SPOTREP	spot report
sqd	squad
STP	soldier training
STX	situational training exercise
TC	training circular
TEO	training and evaluation outlines
TLP	troop-leading procedure
tng	training
T-P-U	trained-practiced-untrained
TSC	training support center
TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
TV	television
TVI	technical validation inspection
U.S.	United States

References

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FM 25-101, *Battle Focused Training*, September 1990

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