

Developing AAR Skills for Observer Controllers and AAR Facilitators

by Major Mark J. Hovatter



“Sir, you are supposed to be at the brigade conference room in 30 minutes. You don’t want to be late again,” the ISG dutifully pointed out. CPT Jones looked at his watch and recoiled in dismay. “Where did the morning go?” he thought to himself as he walked toward the brigade headquarters. The brigade commander’s officer professional development (OPD) lunch sessions were the last thing on his mind this morning. Jones had been in command for almost a month now and was truly “drinking from the fire hose.” In less than a week, his tank platoons would be rolling out for platoon situational training exercise (STX) lanes, and he was just trying to get his feet beneath him, and training was one of a thousand priorities right now. But the National Training Center train-up was fast and furious, and there wasn’t a moment to breathe anywhere on the schedule.

Two months ago, COL Nelson had taken command of the brigade and things had been very different since. Well known for his bizarre behavior and never-ending energy, COL Nelson was truly colorful. One of his initiatives had been bimonthly company commander OPDs, and he so far had conducted every one. One of the OPDs was conducted at the range during gunnery to minimize the time leaders were away from their units. But all of his OPDs were focused on near-term events. Jones did not know what today’s OPD was about, nor did anyone else.

The brigade’s company commanders filed into the conference room and were met by Nelson at exactly 11:45. He was always painfully punctual. Each officer in the brigade religiously synchronized his watch with pluggie time every morning to ensure that they would not be considered “tardy” to a meeting, as late officers were usually “reinforced” with the importance of timeliness. “Today, gentlemen,” Nelson began, “we will start to work on fixing a systemic problem, not just in the brigade combat team, but in the Army as a whole. Our

after action reviews (AARs) are not meeting the standard. Our leaders lack critical skills in collection, analysis, and, most importantly, in communications that make AARs the high payoff event they need to be. Today, we are going to work on AAR facilitator skills.” There was a bit of nervous tension among the captains. Most were convinced that Nelson’s statements applied to someone else, not them.

Nelson continued, “Today we will be conducting AAR training in a low-cost environment. You will be divided into player units, collectors, and two facilitators. There are two different written scenarios. The scenarios are for platoon STX lanes very similar to the ones we will be conducting next month. Written on the boards are the two task organizations for the teams. Once the facilitators have read the information sheets, the clock starts. You will have 30 minutes to prepare your AAR. The first AAR will be from Blue Team, and then White Team will go immediately after. Questions gentlemen? OK, Blue Facilitator and White Facilitator, here are your information sheets.”

The two captains read their information sheets, which gave each one the training objective, the scenario for the STX lane, a timeline for the execution of the lane, and a series of observations that the senior observer controller (OC) had made. The captains nodded that they understood the task and began to assemble their respective Blue and White OC teams. Each OC team included two observers and an opposing forces (OPFOR) commander. The observers had their own information sheets, which had their specific observations for the lane. The OPFOR commander had an information sheet, which had his plan and what happened during the lane. Meanwhile, the player unit counterparts were reading their own information sheets, which gave their side of what happened. There was a platoon leader sheet, a platoon sergeant sheet, and two wingmen sheets.

Each captain familiarized himself with the events of the lane. On the conference room tables were all of the field manuals (FMs) and mission training plans (MTPs) that could possibly apply, and most importantly, TC 25-20, A Leaders Guide to AARs. The hotseat AAR facilitators were struggling with all of the data that each of the collectors had and turning it into a coherent AAR. The observers’ sheets had many observations, but what did it all mean? Meanwhile, there were training aids to be constructed hastily and an agenda to be mapped out. The 30-minute buzzer came too quickly.

“OK, Blue Team, let’s go ahead and take a run at this AAR.”

This scenario is one brigade commander’s effort to fix a systemic problem in units today. How do we train AAR facilitators in an environment where every training dollar must prepare units for combat? Today’s training environment is one of incredible pace, with little room for error. Personnel turbulence, decreased time in key troop positions, and stability operation deployments are major contributors to reduced tactical skill in leader positions. These causes are having a direct effect on training quality. Many leaders are thrust into performing duties as an OC without having the prerequisite tactical skills to really provide meaningful feedback to training units. Additionally, these ad hoc OCs do not have the communications skills that come from repetitive performance of the AAR task, so AAR quality suffers. The corollary to these conditions is that junior leaders have poor models of how AARs are conducted and replicate those substandard models in their own training. As an Army, we must find a way to develop AAR facilitator skills in our leaders.

It All Begins With Battle Focus

To improve AAR facilitators, we first must address key problems in the process of training and building AARs. Chapter 1 of Army Readiness and Train-

ing Evaluation Plan (ARTEP) 71-1-MTP, *Mission Training Plan for the Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company and Company Team*, discusses the now popular 8-step training model.¹ A possible parallel process is the AAR Handrail shown in Figure 1, which focuses on the OC and building the AAR. This process is not designed to replace the 8-step training model; it is designed to complement it.

Battle focus is the concept used to derive and prioritize peacetime training requirements from wartime missions.² The key word in this sentence is “prioritize.” All Army unit training should be directly related to a unit’s mission essential task list (METL). There simply is not enough time to train everything, so METL focuses unit’s scarce training resources to optimize specific mission sets.³ From a unit’s METL, we can identify training deficiencies and develop training exercises to correct deficiencies. Deficiencies are prioritized, and then corrective tasks are nominated to become training objectives for an exercise.

This step, when truncated, is a root cause for poor quality AARs. Too often, units plan situational training exercises (STX) and lane training exercises (LTX) based on what the unit did during the last combat training center train-up, with no regard for whether the previous train-up netted success. The end result is LTXs with no clear training objectives, or objectives that do not

have the degree of specificity that they require. Commanders must issue a clear intent for the training objectives for each iteration of a given STX/LTX, and be very specific. Training objectives are written in the form of task, conditions, and standards, and are specified in the unit’s MTP manuals. However, the MTP standards are intentionally generic and only a start point. A commander must refine those products by proposed iteration and define success for OC teams. These very specifically designed criteria give an OC team a start point from which to design key learning objectives for leader tasks in the AAR.

Developing the LTX/STX Lane

How much is too much? Too often, leaders are over ambitious on the number of tasks that they want to train and try to make every STX lane the panacea for all of their training shortfalls. In one “magic” run, units go from U (un-trained) to T (trained) on their METL assessment and do not require any additional training. Unfortunately, the reality is that if we cannot provide adequate OC coverage for a task, then that task cannot be trained during this STX lane. The long pole in the tent for scope of STX lane tasks is the OC team’s ability to observe those tasks and provide feedback. Performing tasks with no OC coverage is the functional equivalent of firing at a known distance range target that you cannot tell if you hit or miss, and you never get to see the

target. Do not be afraid to reduce the scope of an STX lane if it cannot be covered with OCs.

So if we start out with a given task, and we have well-defined training objectives, we should be able to quickly scope the feasibility of the lane in OC resources. OCs must be in a position to see the success criteria and build the AAR given the training objectives. We can phase the execution to a certain extent, so that tasks occur sequentially rather than simultaneously, but at some point, the critical path will be the ability of OCs to see the events. More importantly, OCs must be in position to perform their battlefield effects tasks of providing “information feedback (intrinsic and extrinsic).”⁴ Intrinsic feedback refers to information that is inherent to task performance. For example, a unit must see where its artillery is landing to assess its effectiveness. Extrinsic feedback refers to information provided in the AAR, coaching and mentoring during the exercise and take-home packet information.⁵ When we shortchange OC coverage in a training event, we not only compromise the quality of the AAR, we risk the fidelity of the exercise in presenting a realistic picture of the battlefield, which drives the commander’s decision process. Blaming commanders for bad decisions made on incomplete intrinsic feedback potentially turns the exercise into a negative learning event. Therefore, if we find that we cannot give adequate coverage based on OC availability, then we have to reasonably reduce training objectives.

Choose the AAR Site

The first consideration in choosing the AAR site is how often to conduct AARs. Considering the average soldier’s attention span when determining how often to conduct AARs is a must. If an AAR exceeds 45 minutes, you begin to exceed a soldier’s “tracer burn-out.” Given this constraint, consider giving in-stride AARs at phased intervals to provide timely feedback. Unit leaders may not be able to recall the planning phase of the operation as well the next day, so cover issuing the operations order at an in-stride AAR early on. That way, units can leverage improved task performance early, versus continuing to make the same mistakes. There are two caveats to in-stride AARs. First, try to minimize conducting AARs during prime time, specifically daylight hours or during company logistics package. AAR windows that occupy lead-

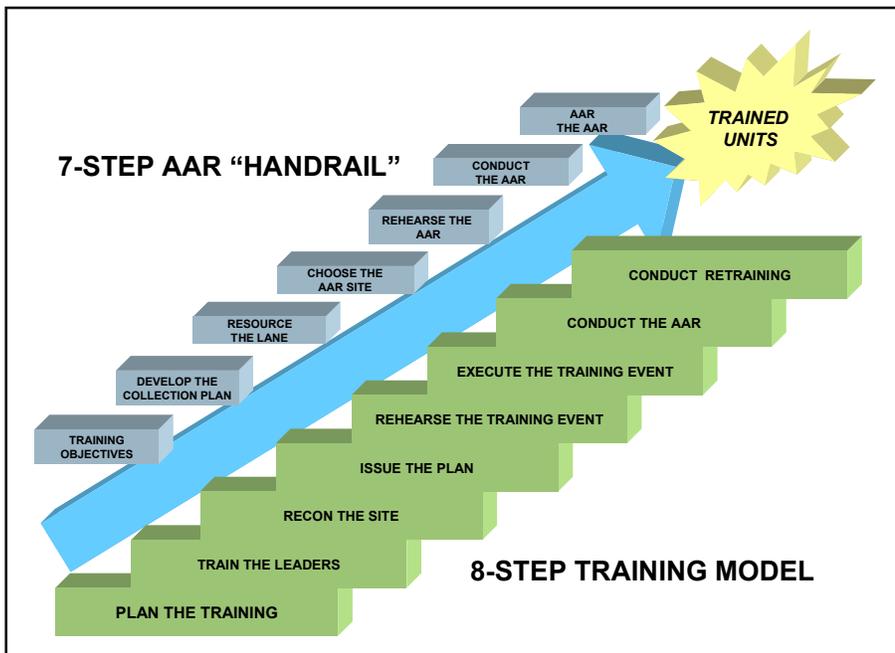


Figure 1

KEY INDICATORS	AAR THEMES					
	PLANNING/ PREPARATION/ TIME MANAGEMENT	TACTICAL MOVE AND MANEUVER	BATTLE COMMAND	BREACH MECHANICS	SUPPORT BY FIRE	MAINT AND LOGISTICS
EQUIPMENT FAILURE (LOW STARTING CBT POWER)	X					X
MISSION FAILURE (CBT POWER ATTRITED)		X			X	
MISSION FAILURE (BREACH)				X	X	
BOS SYNCH FAILURE INDIRECT FIRES		X	X			
BOS SYNCH FAILURE ENGINEERS			X	X		
SITUATIONAL AWARENESS	X		X			

Figure 2

ers' precious daylight hours will not be well received, nor will soldiers concentrate on the task at hand when food is waiting for them. Second, be aware of the desire to steer a player unit into a given course of action. Focus only on the training objectives, and never discourage initiative.

Once you determine the logical breaking points for in-stride AARs, the next step is to choose AAR sites that support them. Training Circular (TC) 25-20, *The Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews*, provides very specific guidance on considerations for the AAR site, which facilitators should review prior to site consideration.⁶ The start point from which to consider AAR sites and required logistics is how well it facilitates the training objectives. Facilitators must give close scrutiny to time and to key points, such as training aids, which will contribute to unit success.

One of the toughest tasks relating to the AAR site is selecting training aids, device simulators, and simulations (TADSS), then leveraging their capability to drive home learning points. TADSS range from portable dry erase boards, detailed terrain models, to the high resource spectrum of combat training center AAR vans and the close combat tactical trainer (CCTT). The CCTT is the most manifest example of underused TADSS AAR capability. Units frequently use CCTT to train their companies, but the quantity of data available in a virtual simulation once a training event is completed is usually overwhelming to the AAR facilitator. Capability is frequently unused based on facilitator knowledge of the system and the technician's willingness to explain. All of this occurs with very little time for experimentation, as one of the

strengths of CCTT is the ability to do multiple runs, and CCTT time is a precious resource. Key to success in the CCTT environment is the facilitator's familiarity with all of the system's capabilities. The best way to do this is to visit the CCTT facility when another unit is using it and view their AAR preparation. This will give the facilitator an idea of what will or will not work. CCTT could also be a great officer professional development vehicle to train AAR skills, simply by watching other units conduct AARs, and by using these observations as a discussion vehicle in developing AAR skills.

Rehearse the AAR!

We would never consider conducting a deliberate attack without some kind of rehearsal, yet we frequently conduct AARs without rehearsing. The type and time spent on rehearsing will certainly depend on the preparation time available. At a minimum, OCs should rehearse the collection plan and key battlefield effect events (intrinsic feedback). OCs can identify routes that support moving OC vehicles, and can determine the time required to move to observation locations and points where battlefield effects must be replicated. Rehearsal also gives OCs an opportunity to validate the trafficability of the lane. It also validates the technique that will be used to simulate battlefield effects for rules of engagement such as mine clearing line charge launch. In virtual environments, the rehearsal can focus on the intrinsic feedback that must be replicated by "white cell" or other support individuals, such as higher and adjacent units actions. Executing a rehearsal prior to beginning a training unit's execution will pay dividends in AAR quality.

Another method for rehearsing the AAR is to fight the battle in a constructive simulation, such as TacOps, and use that as a trial run for the AAR to be given to training units. The flexibility of *TacOps* to adapt to different locations through constructed maps gives the OC team the ability to have a live "driver" to potential AAR strategies. Warfighting skills are sharpened through practice, and AAR skills certainly follow this same model. Constructive simulations like *TacOps* give us a "cheap" platform to develop AAR skills prior to the exercise, and can serve as a vehicle for senior leader's OC certification, all with substantially less cost than live simulation.

Developing AAR Skills

Getting the most from an AAR requires technical and tactical competence, analytical ability, and communication skills. If the collection plan is effective, then the facilitator will be presented with significant observation data. To borrow from U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 101-5, *Staff Organizations and Operations*, much of this information is useful, but not pertinent, to the commander during decisionmaking. Commanders and staffs who understand this can avoid potential information overload by using effective systems to accurately and rapidly convey necessary information.⁷ At this point during AAR preparation, we are actually in an information management exercise, determining what information is pertinent to learning or to unit improvement. The mechanism by which we manage information for mission execution is by commander's critical information requirement (CCIR). I propose a similar technique for OCs to determine the

method by which they approach the preparation phase of an AAR.

TC 25-20, *The Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews*, gives us three techniques for conducting the AAR: chronological order of events, battlefield operating system (BOS), and key events/themes. Chronological order of events and BOS are popular AAR techniques for task force and above AARs, but take a closer look at analyzing key events/themes, which are more effective for company teams and below. By analyzing an STX task with the help of the MTP, we can identify potential themes for an AAR. If we identify these themes early, we can prepare a framework for an AAR conducted along those themes. Our next step is looking for indicators that will identify a specific theme as the highest payoff for unit improvement. Figure 2 represents an indicator to theme correlation matrix. This table is not meant to be all-inclusive, just an example of a technique using the breach an obstacle task previously developed.

After we have constructed a "straw man" of what themes we would approach given a specific indicator, the OC team can build a shell for an AAR that prepares them to discuss any identified themes. The next step is to classify observations into the category of indicators given above, and use these as a mechanism to lend meaning to the reams of potential data. The OC can also use critical observations as the deciding factor for what AAR theme they will choose, in much the same way that priority intelligence requirements and friendly force information requirements drive commander's decision points. This system provides a way to organize chaos and approach a meaningful theme. It also gives the OC a chance before the exercise to think about how to approach AAR execution under time constraints. Remember, we only have approximately 45 minutes to make our case, and 15 minutes of that time can easily be chewed up in the TC 25-20 AAR agenda items, such as AAR rules, training objectives, and friendly/enemy missions.⁸ We want to make as much money as possible during that 30-minute window. It is all about what is important, and enables training objectives.

Don't Do All of the Talking

An AAR is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to dis-

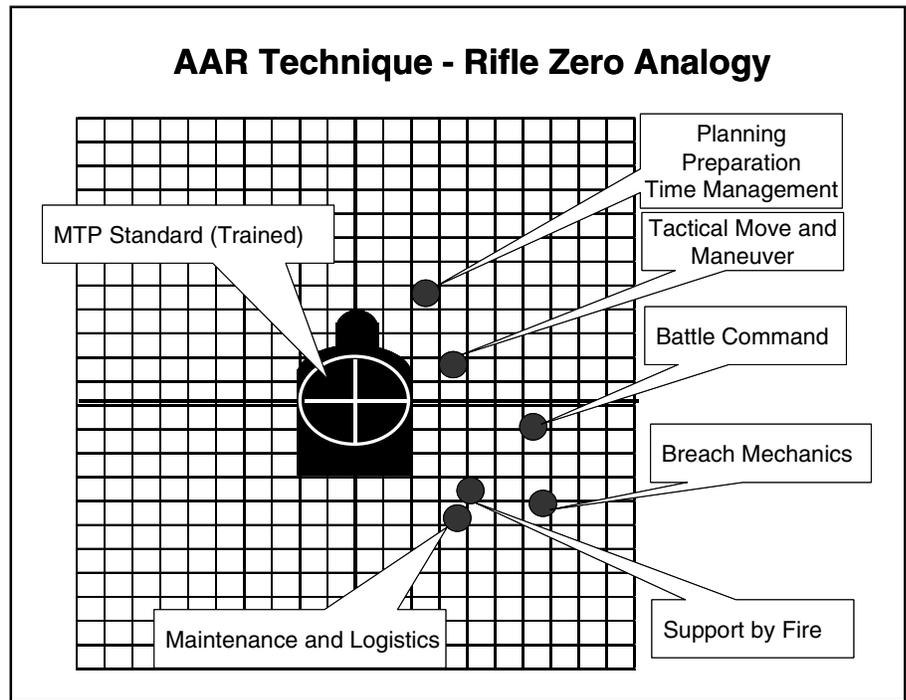


Figure 3

cover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. It is a tool that leaders and units can use to get maximum benefit from every mission or task.⁹

A critical point to an AAR is that it is not a lecture. The most critical part of the definition is "soldiers discover for themselves." The challenge for the facilitator is how to promote this self-discovery, but stay on track, and make the entire experience a positive one. OCs are not evaluators. It is not their charter to judge units as trained, practiced, or untrained. They enable the unit to learn for itself. The crux of this is in communications skills. Soldiers need to know how their performance relates to Army MTP standards. Once the "what happened" portion of the AAR is completed, the facilitator must focus on the "what do we sustain or improve." There are numerous vehicles for eliciting unit participation in the AAR process. Not all participation gets to the issues at hand. For example, a facilitator should be aware that using the subunit sustain and improve technique will often not focus on one solvable theme. The facilitator's goal is to get the conversation focused on the theme, and focus leaders on fixing the issue. One method for the facilitator to keep the unit on track is the rifle zeroing analogy, which is a model for AAR structure.

In the rifle zeroing analogy, the facilitator starts by drawing a representation of a zero target on a dry erase board or

butcher chart. Then, the facilitator will place dots on the target based on the success of the unit in relation to Army MTP standards, as shown in Figure 3. Unit leaders, as a function of the AAR, guide the facilitator in how much they feel they are off target. For example, in the breach scenario that has been developed up to this point, the facilitator would ask the leaders, "In breach fundamentals, where would we assess our performance in relation to the target?" The unit leader can either go up to the dry erase and mark it out, or have the AAR facilitator mark it. The facilitator goes through each of the identified themes and has the unit mark the target. When this initial process is over, if the unit has a realistic view of its performance, the facilitator chooses the aspect that the unit assessed as farthest off target. He then asks leading questions to direct the unit to what actions must occur to bring that strike closer to the zero target. For example, how can we get the company closer to center of mass on breach mechanics? The training unit should present the solutions that will correct that strike, and the facilitator guides the solution process by reinforcing doctrine. The goal of the facilitator is to get a commitment from the unit to take the actions to move that "strike" to the Army MTP standard. Sometimes a unit does not have a realistic view of its performance. In these cases, the facilitator must use observations of the OC team to assist in marking the "strike" of the bullet. The facilitator can use other analogies to the rifle

zero, such as grouping, steady hold, and breathing as methods to graphically portray unit performance on the lanes tasks. In a perfect run of the lane, the unit would have a tight group in the center. That represents a trained unit.

Often, many training issues do not make it into the actual AAR because of time constraints. OC teams produce take-home packets (THPs), which address these concerns. Unfortunately, the task of compiling the THP is often overwhelming, and timeliness of the THP is critical if the unit is going to correct identified deficiencies in another lane. OC teams should have a format for how they are going to address THPs from the start, so that they can be rapidly assembled and passed to the training unit at the completion of the AAR. Specific information worksheets that are completed by the OC team during lane execution can be stapled together and given to the unit right away and serve as an effective, timely THP. In this case, a timely 80 percent solution wins out over a 100 percent solution executed too late.

AAR the AAR

The AAR OC should take time to analyze if key points were made and if the AAR was effective. One technique to enable this event is to have at least one of the OCs observe the AAR with a specific focus on the AAR execution. The AAR observer can also make notes about what the player unit's comments are, and use this to adjust the collection plan or refocus other OCs.

The AAR observer can address questions such as: do we need to adjust our current collection plan for information for the AAR; is the AAR technique effective; are training aids being used effectively; and did the AAR OC do all of the talking? Closely tied to the collection plan is the effectiveness of the AAR technique. Is the current technique producing the self-discovery effect that is critical to AAR effectiveness? If not, then adjust the AAR technique prior to the next iteration of the STX lane.

What Senior Leaders Should Look For

Senior leaders, who get a chance to watch AARs conducted in their organizations, have an opportunity to see their units from many perspectives. Often, it is easy to only focus on the training unit alone, and not take advantage of a

couple of leadership indicators while observing an AAR. Senior leaders can evaluate the climate of the organization as a whole by observing if leaders are candid in accepting shortfalls in their organizations. If a unit is less willing to accept training shortfalls, and this becomes systemic, it is possible that an environment of zero-defects could be perceived within the organization.

It is important to observe how many people participate in the AAR. The more people who participate and stay actively engaged in the AAR is an indicator that units want to get better, and are usually well disciplined.

A critical factor is observing how the unit commander accepts constructive criticism. Unit leaders who accept constructive criticism and make changes are often mature leaders.

Senior leaders need to provide feedback to the OC team on the quality of the AAR. Take time to recognize OCs and AAR facilitators who do a great job, and work with teams that need more instruction. OCs that demonstrate good AAR skills are a resource to help train other potential OCs. The end result is highly trained units and better leaders.

AARs are integral to our training methodology. But the skills to give a good AAR do not come easy and must be developed over time. Our purpose is not to replace TC 25-20, but to supplement it with specific techniques, tactics, and procedures that will help senior leaders develop AAR facilitators and help OC teams conduct better AARs.

COL Nelson wrapped up the OPD session with some closing remarks: "Gentlemen, you now understand what is involved in performing AARs to standard in this brigade. Skills in performing AARs don't come overnight, or from reading just one manual. They come from regular use and experience. The platoon STX lanes that are coming up next week are a start point for you to develop AAR skills. From now on, use every opportunity you can to develop these skills. And I may just be coming down to see what progress you are making. Now let's get back to work."

CPT Jones left the OPD with a new perspective on what was involved in performing AARs to standard, and really "making money" when we expend resources on important training events. As he walked back to the motor pool,

he began organizing an AAR of the STX preparation week in his mind.

Notes

¹Army Readiness and Training Evaluation Plan (ARTEP) 71-1-MTP, *Mission Training Plan for the Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company and Company Team*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, February 1999, pp. 1-10, Figure 1-2.

²U.S. Army Field Manual 25-100, *Training the Force*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 15 November 1988, pp. 1-7.

³ARTEP 71-1-MTP, pp. 1-11.

⁴John E. Morrison and Larry L. Meliza, *Foundations of the After Action Review Process*, Special Report 42, United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, online at http://call.army.mil/products/spc_prod/aar/aar.htm, July 1999.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Training Circular (TC) 25-20, *The Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews*, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS, November 1993.

⁷U.S. Army Field Manual 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 31 May 1997, p. 1-1.

⁸TC 25-20.

⁹Ibid.

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