

## Police and the Military: Lessons Learned and After Action Reports

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U.S. Military Definition:

**Lessons learned:** "Capitalizing on past errors in judgment, material failures, wrong timing, or other mistakes ultimately to improve a situation or system" (Defense Systems Management College).

For the most part, a common language of terms and acronyms does not exist between civilian law enforcement and the military, which is also true among different branches of the military. In the ever-increasing drive for the U.S. military to avoid being service-centric and to work jointly with other agencies, Joint Military Doctrine has been written in the attempt to standardize terms and acronyms to create a common language. This solution, though, is not a cure-all. In fact, quite far from it; for as the military is progressing towards jointness, it is also viewing a future in which it needs to become more interagency (civil law enforcement) and international (coalition forces). Clarifying or even annotating the sheer multitude of acronyms, jargon, slang, and idioms appears an impossible task. Nonetheless, we need to begin learning how to talk with one another. This article explains just one significant communications difference between law enforcement and the military (specifically joint military operations). Both law enforcement and military use the terms "after action reports" and "lessons learned." They are used to identify different products, though. Discussing these differences is only one step in

understanding the hurdle of linguistic variations, but it is one step in helping us discover what we can learn from each other.

### After Action Reports: Historical Records that Form the Basis for Lessons Learned

According to Joint military doctrine, after action reports (AAR) represent selected after action comments and recommendations that are designated to assist and benefit future planners and executors of similar evolutions (*Joint Publication 1-02*). They are actual, physical reports of events that form a historical archive. They record events and may or may not assess a particular situation. The reports are stored in databases referred to as lessons learned. However, lessons learned are more than just databases—they are those lessons that can be learned from the archived after action reports. One after action report could, for example, lead to three or four or any number of lessons learned. Units might conduct assessments of training and operational performances and provide opinions and recommendations in the form of lessons learned for future training exercises and operations that are of a similar nature and in a specific region or terrain. Lessons learned also provide situational awareness for both current and future operations in the same area of operation. AARs and lessons learned are used in Research and Development (R&D) of equipment and for the development of Tactics, Techniques, and Plans (TTPs) to carry out mission sets.

AARs usually contain, but are not limited to, the following descriptive information: parent organization, geographical location, security classification, operation, sponsor,

conducting unit, actual event date, releasable information, operation type, start date, and end date. AARs normally have implications in the following specific areas: Forces, Intelligence and Information Systems, Maritime and Rotary Wing, Fixed Wing, or Special Programs, with additional implications directed to Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership/Education, Personnel, or Facilities.

Within the military, AARs are generated at all levels of command and from all ranks of military personnel. Traditionally, the senior military commander or his designated representative will compile the AARs based on his personal observations and firsthand knowledge, but he also relies on his subordinates and members of his team, squad, platoon, company, etc. depending on the circumstances. This method of recording is key because then the information is firsthand and not secondhand. The firsthand knowledge and reporting provides important credibility to both the report and the information it contains. Within Special Operations Forces (SOF), for example, all members of an operational element collect information with the knowledge that it will be used as part of an AAR upon completion of that mission, training, or event. This collection method is vital; the thought process here is that the more eyes on a situation, the more intelligence is gathered, collected, and retained to ultimately produce better results in the future, i.e. *lessons learned*.

How important are lessons learned to SOF? Important enough that Lesson Learned Centers have been funded, established, and manned at every level of major command within Special Operations. These centers allow for the cross components: U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), Naval

Special Operations Command (NAVSOC), Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), and Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) to share information. The data are routinely kept up-to-date and searchable by numerous methods; no small task on a day-to-day basis and no less maintained even during a state of continuing conflict. The fact that the databases are kept up-to-date, shared, and easily accessible by any security-cleared Special Operations service member increases its usage immensely. The lessons learned databases are essential and recognized as such by the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command down through the chain of command.

While this information establishes the “now,” the future must be attended to. What the future must bring us is a mindset of using lessons learned without even thinking about it: making it second nature, automatic, like checking out your weapon from the arms room before a mission. The service member must make it routine to go online, enter select key coordinates (a phrase, a word, an event, etc.), and pull down all the pertinent information that is available. The *user* then determines what he or she will require to successfully complete the mission. The lessons learned databases of the future must be more robust, instantaneously accessible, and immediately updateable. Direct contact with the data inputter is a requirement in order for users to ask specific questions, get clarifications, and be able to receive the answers directly from the data source. The integrity of the information is paramount; otherwise, it becomes useless.

### **Somewhere in Iraq**

An actual course of events:  
Somewhere in Iraq a U.S. Army sergeant is told by his platoon sergeant that his

squad is being tapped to conduct a patrol of a volatile area of a city within the next 24 hours. The squad is no stranger to these particular missions. However, what makes this one different is that the squad has never patrolled in this area before, and so they are unfamiliar with it. The platoon sergeant tells the squad leader that he'll have an up-to-date intelligence report on the area prior to their starting the mission. With this information, the squad leader assembles his squad to discuss the upcoming mission, stating they will have an operation brief 8 hours before departure time and a final situation update 1 hour before departure.

The squad members break up, returning to their tents to prepare their personnel and squad equipment for the mission. As part of their preparation, two of the members independently decide to go online, one to a local military blog populated by in-country service members. The other goes to an established NCO-collaborated Web site. They search for any firsthand information about the area they will be patrolling in the next 24 hours. Both men are successful. One finds an AAR filed by other squads in the battalion Lesson Learned Database. The other finds unofficial but informational data filed by individual troops who actually patrolled the area as recently as 2 days earlier. They download their respective information and take it with them to the initial brief, sharing it with the squad leader and the squad. They repeat this procedure again prior to the final operation update. Now the squad is better prepared to meet the threat, accomplish the mission, and return back to base safely.

Being better prepared to meet the threat, in this case, could save any number of lives. Saving lives, especially one's own, is a grand motivator for

taking initiative to be as aware of one's surroundings as possible. Young service men and women already take this initiative. When they do, the rewards can go beyond just personal satisfaction or security. But questions remain: how do we promote this culture, and how do we ensure that it's not done only on an ad-hoc basis? The answer to the first of the two questions is relatively easy. The young men and women in service today have grown up with today's technology. They assume the technology will be available and part of their lives. It is natural for them, as a generally individualistic and inventive group, to turn to the Internet or any other type of information they can get to enable their own self-awareness. They are used to interactive relationships with others, welcome opportunities to share what they've learned, and recognize that knowledge is power. They are very good at multi-tasking, giving them increased ability to handle different levels of a given situation at all times. These attitudes are evidenced simply by the number of available blogs and communications sites that have grown quickly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Computer technology in the hands of the individual is already part of the service culture. Still, we must move forward, taking advantage of this culture. Can we require every man in the unit to check the blogosphere and lessons learned before each mission? Is that necessary on a team? It seems to defy common sense NOT to want to gather all possible information; perhaps it's just a matter of institutionalizing the process, empowering everyone involved.