

THE ROLE OF THE AFTER-ACTION REVIEW

by **Andrew Eden**
NATO International Civilian
Lessons Learned Analyst
Lessons Learned Branch
NATO Joint Warfare Centre

SITTING ON MY HOTEL balcony overlooking Lake Geneva is the perfect setting to consider the role of the after-action review (AAR) in the exercises conducted at the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC): reflecting on reflection, if you like. The AAR is the main opportunity for senior exercise stakeholders to reflect on their exercise performance, most often after the culmination of a Phase IIIB, the execution phase.

I find myself in Geneva because I was tasked to brief a constellation of international and non-governmental organizations on the

ways in which they can contribute to exercise AARs and the NATO lessons learned process. They are keen to be heard, and eager to provide feedback on how NATO is operationalizing the comprehensive approach in our exercises.

The AAR, in practice, is a carefully planned and choreographed event conducted under the auspices of the officer conducting the exercise. The value of the AAR, for the observer, is the opportunity to witness key leaders articulate their thoughts on their headquarters' performance, the commanders binding those reflections into a forward-looking message to their staffs, and finally the senior mentors' carefully considered objective view for consumption at all levels.

For a JWC exercise, the list of attendees comprises senior leaders in all training audience headquarters (typically deputy chiefs of staff and above), along with the JWC Commander as the officer directing the exercise. The final comments are usually articulated by

the senior mentor. On occasion, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), one of NATO's two strategic commanders and the head of Allied Command Operations (ACO), may also contribute.

The presentations are usually structured along the lines of three positive points and three learning points for improvement: three ups, three downs. The intent of these apologies is to share immediate reflections on collective branch or division performance, to set some expectations for the development of the first impression reports and the subsequent final exercise report, and perhaps also to record some initial discussion points for the post-exercise discussion, some 60 days later.

The AAR therefore comes hot on the heels of the end of exercise (ENDEX); it is quite reactive; it is relatively raw in its analysis; and it comes at a point of very public culmination of a two-year endeavour and 10 days of intense headquarters activity. It is also often juxtaposed



with certification for the training audience.

The event is certainly a masterclass in strategic communication. Replete with rich learning opportunities, the AAR is a precursor to deeper dives into the highlighted themes. Indeed, the JWC's analysis team hopes that the themes raised in the AAR complement the director's observation guidance articulated at the earliest stages of exercise development, and also SACEUR's focus areas and local commanders' guidance on observation priorities.

As a professional practice, the idea of taking time to reflect on personal and collective performance is gathering wider interest and adoption. Academically it plays a key part

in postgraduate assessments. It is an established practice in the nursing and teaching professions, with the intent of encouraging practitioners to understand their central role in affecting outcomes in their organization. It sustains the principle that the vector of the message has as much influence as the message itself.

The practice also encourages practitioners to conduct a personal learning loop to identify their role in the task accomplishment and to improve their performance in the process. To many, some reflection comes naturally, but a formal process, or external encouragement such as mentoring or coaching, can tease out further insights.

Below, from top

The AAR for Exercises TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018 and STEADFAST JACKAL 2021. Photos by JWC PAO



"The AAR comes at a point of very public culmination of a two-year endeavour and 10 days of intense activity."



The author, Andrew Eden, during a briefing. Photo by JWC PAO

Returning to the AAR, as this edition of *The Three Swords* goes to press, we will see a revised edition of Bi-SC Directive 075-003 Collective Training and Exercises promulgated by the new custodian, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

Amongst other nomenclature changes, "Phase IIIB" will be known as the "EMPLOYEX" or the Employment Exercise, and the former "Stage 4 (Analysis and Reporting)" will become known as the "exercise feedback process." The AAR remains unchanged.

The new process is more forward-looking, incorporating and embedding experience at the forefront of the exercise planning process. This means that the AAR will, we hope, contribute to exercise design and execution in a more agile way, while remaining a vehicle for training audience reflection.

As the 2024 exercise programme takes shape as an ambitious sequence of endeavours demanding multiple commitments from the NATO Command and Force Structure headquarters, the AAR will continue to provide inspiration for successive training audiences to refine their exercise performance, collectively making NATO better. ✦