

## **“Hey, How Did We Do Today?”**

The Chief of Staff of the Army, General Erik Shinseki, recently visited the National Training Center (NTC) and commented on the Army’s After Action Review (AAR) process. General Shinseki remarked that one of the highlights of a unit’s NTC training experience is the quality AARs Observer Controllers conduct during a rotation. These AARs range from the formal fully instrumented AARs conducted several hours after a battle to the more informal “Hummer Top AAR” conducted just minutes after the battle. While he was very impressed with the quality of Observer Controller AARs, he was less certain that commanders and leaders in the field could lead AARs to the same standard for their own units. General Shinseki asked the NTC to allow unit commanders to lead AARs during their rotation as a vehicle to export high quality AARs to Army units. With that guidance, the NTC embarked on a leader-led AAR program now in place from platoon to brigade commander level. This article illustrates the experience of CPT Melvin Hubbard, a Paladin battery commander, who led such an AAR during his recent rotation to the NTC.

It had been another tough battle for CPT Hubbard. He knew that providing artillery fires in support of a brigade deliberate attack against the highly trained Krasnovians would be a tough mission for his Paladin battery. He had been in Mojavia for over two weeks and had been fighting the Krasnovians for six days. Following his third encounter with the Krasnovians, he set up his campstool by his HMMWV and went over the 4-hour battle in his mind. He jotted down several remarks in his green notebook and then began to prepare for his AAR. After participating in two AARs, it was CPT Hubbard’s turn to lead his own battery-level post battle AAR. Before rehearsing his AAR, CPT Hubbard pondered what he had learned about facilitating a battery level AAR.

Prior to deploying to the NTC, CPT Hubbard reviewed Training Circular 25-20, A Leader’s Guide To After - Action Reviews dated September 1993. This was an excellent starting point to prepare for a professional AAR. From this handy circular, CPT Hubbard noted the AAR process follows four simple steps: planning, preparation, conduct, and follow-up. He also learned a great deal about AAR delivery techniques during the AARs following his first two missions.

The day following the first battle, a defense in sector, CPT Hubbard joined the other key leaders from his battalion for his first formal NTC AAR. During this AAR, the Senior Fire Support Trainer, Wolf 07, facilitated a two hour fully instrumented Field Artillery Battalion AAR. As he sat there in the expandable van located just a few kilometers from his battery’s final position, CPT Hubbard marveled at all the high-tech equipment that Wolf 07 had at his disposal for gathering tactical information and

providing feedback to the leaders in his battalion. He knew that he would not be as fortunate to have access to this equipment or feedback mechanism for his own AAR. CPT Hubbard noticed that Wolf 07 focused the AAR on only three topics: delivery of fires, crew drill, and the military decision making process. Prior to delving into these areas, Wolf 07 briefly discussed what happened and why it happened. But, the bulk of Wolf 07's AAR centered on having the unit identify who was responsible for fixing the shortcoming and how the unit would fix the issue for the next battle. Hubbard would remember this directed focus approach.

Following the second battle, a movement to contact, Wolf 13, a Firing Battery Combat Trainer, exposed CPT Hubbard to another AAR style, the informal counterpart AAR. Wolf 13 had been in Hubbard's shoes before and knew what was going through Hubbard's mind. Wolf 13 recalled his own NTC experiences as a battery commander and became a true believer in the coaching and teaching approach to training. Within minutes after the battle, Wolf 13 and CPT Hubbard gathered next to Wolf 13's High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV). This "Hummer Top" AAR was much different from Wolf 07's instrumented AAR. There were no screens, boards, computer-generated graphics, or air conditioning. It was a one-on-one dialogue between two professional artillery officers. Wolf 13 began the discussion with a simple, "How do you think we did today?" In an honest self-assessment, Hubbard identified several areas that had not gone well during the fight. Wolf 13 let Hubbard dissect each of these topics, and the two determined fixes for the upcoming battle. Towards the end of the exchange, Wolf 13 remarked, "OK BC, we have identified a bunch of areas that we need to concentrate on for the next battle. Let's narrow it down to three and call them 'The Big 3'." Without hesitation, Hubbard replied, "We've got to get our arms around reconnaissance operations, pre-combat checks, and emergency fire missions before the deliberate attack." The entire dialogue lasted 40 minutes, and Hubbard left with his marching orders for the next battle. He also stored this self-discovery technique in his AAR kit bag.

CPT Hubbard was now ready to lead his first battery-level AAR. Shortly after the third battle Hubbard glanced over his notes from the last AAR and he felt comfortable that his unit had tackled "The Big 3" successfully during this battle. It did not take Hubbard long to come to the conclusion that ammunition resupply, battery timeline, and M825 smoke rehearsals had plagued his unit throughout the deliberate attack. He concluded that this would be the focus of his AAR. Based on this assessment, he decided to include all of the key leaders in the battery. Although he had the option of having the entire battery present, he wanted to concentrate on fixing leadership systems rather than individual soldier skills. In addition to platoon leaders, fire direction officers, platoon sergeants, and section chiefs, he directed

ammunition team chiefs and palletized loading system (PLS) drivers to come to the AAR. He then moved on to AAR site selection. He chose a site underneath the FDC camouflage net that provided some shade from the blistering desert sun. He also ensured that the site was free of such distracters as the blare of radio traffic and the noisy fire direction center's generator.

As the battery's leaders assembled, all toting their campstools, a canteen of water, and notebooks, Hubbard looked over his training aids. He managed to scrounge up a butcher-block easel with paper, a dry erase board with markers, and used the fire direction centers' map board with the maneuver graphics posted. With the few minutes he had remaining, he conducted a brief rehearsal with his scribe to ensure a smooth delivery.

CPT Hubbard had set the stage for his AAR. He gathered all of the tools, selected the perfect site, and assembled the key players. He now turned his attention to the AAR delivery. Before covering the house rules, he grabbed the audience's attention with a brief historical vignette about fire support in Vietnam. He then briefly discussed what happened in the battle action summary portion of the AAR. He included the battery mission, the enemy's final positioning, and battlefield statistics courtesy of Wolf 13. CPT Hubbard then began the principal focus of his AAR, ammunition management.

CPT Hubbard started the discussion with an open-ended question, "How did we manage ammunition today?" At first there was silence. CPT Hubbard was tempted to fill the silence, but paused--waiting for his battery leaders to respond. Finally, after several seconds, SSG Williams, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Howitzer Section Chief, spoke up and responded with, "Sir, my job is to fire the rounds, it's the platoon leader's job to track the bullets! It's been that way since I've been a section chief." 1LT Baker, one of the platoon leaders, quickly chimed in, "Sir, the executive officer (XO) and the fire direction officer (FDO) decide when and what goes on the gun and ammunition vehicle. So how am I supposed to manage the ammunition?" Sensing that he had struck a nerve, Hubbard interjected with a leading question, "Who is responsible for ammunition management in our battery?" A hand appeared way in the back of the assembled leaders. It was SPC Sampson, the 4<sup>th</sup> Section Ammunition Team Chief. Sampson remarked, "Sir, I have a suggestion. I haven't been assigned to the battery that long; however, isn't ammunition management everyone's responsibility?" Before Hubbard could ask another question, SFC Jackson, the headquarters platoon sergeant replied, "Sampson's right, I know that I didn't get into the details on how we track ammunition distribution from the PLS to the howitzer. We have to develop a better system." The discussion went back and forth amongst the leaders for about fifteen minutes with Hubbard facilitating and staying focused on fixing ammunition management. For the next fight, 1LT Hill, the XO,

said he would fix turret loads and PLS ammo accountability. 1LT George, the FDO, would keep the AFATDS database up to date. The chiefs of section would manually update ammo counts on the howitzers and field artillery ammunition supply vehicles (FAASV) DA Forms 4513 as well as the automated fire control systems (AFCSs) every hour. CPT Hubbard knew he was on his game, his unit was responding and his subordinate leaders, the same ones who would implement the fix were doing most of the talking. The battery was now ready to tackle its second topic, the battery timeline.

CPT Hubbard graphically depicted the battery timeline on the butcher-block easel prior to the AAR. He asked his 3<sup>rd</sup> Howitzer Section Chief, SSG Willis, to talk the battery through the planned timeline. The commander then asked, “1LT Hill, did you experience any time constraint issues during the planning portion of today’s mission?” 1LT Hill responded, “Sir, we didn’t receive the battery operations order (OPORD) until 2400 hours and immediately began ammunition upload. This took us most of the night to accomplish. According to the timeline, I was supposed to have your directed pre-combat checks and inspections accomplished by 0800 hours which we did not begin until 0900 hours.” SSG Adams, the battery ammunition NCOIC, joined in: “Sir, there was nothing we could do. Battalion did not send us the correct ammunition on the PLSs and so we were dead in the water until they fixed the problem.” CPT Hubbard sensed he was at risk of losing the training point. If the battery commander allowed SSG Adams to successfully deflect the issue to battalion, then the battery would miss its own issues with ammunition management. Hubbard had to gently nudge the discussion back into his court. He refocused the AAR by asking, “Gentlemen, the PLSs were late; however, did we download our current ammunition on the FAASVs to the guns in order to facilitate the ammunition upload? 1LT Hill responded, “Sir, we allowed ourselves to go into a wait-and-see mode and did not stay proactive. We’ll get after that one.” CPT Hubbard now looked for a fix by asking the following leading question, “Who directed ammunition upload after 2400 hours?” SSG Adams quickly jumped in and said, “Sir, we had to unload the PLS immediately in order for them to return to the Combat Artillery Trains (CAT) so they could upload our FASCAM for our upcoming mission.” CPT Hubbard realized once again that his key leaders had identified a problem and were working through fixes. The discussion continued for approximately twenty minutes with communication flow and flexibility being the solutions for the next fight. SSG Adams and the two platoon leaders signed up to fix the problem and agreed to issuing reporting formats to the battery leadership to streamline communication flow within the battery. CPT Hubbard felt that the battery was hitting on all its cylinders and was ready to address their third topic, M825 smoke rehearsals.

The commander facilitated the M825 smoke rehearsal discussion by asking 1LT George, the battery FDO, "FDO, did we accomplish our M825 Essential Field Artillery task (EFAT) during this last battle?" 1LT George replied, "No Sir, we had a ten minute separation between the build phase and the sustainment phase. The AFCS on two of our guns went down, and those sections called themselves out of the mission." CPT Hubbard asked, "Okay, so why did it take us ten minutes to hand off the mission to our operational howitzers to fire? Did we rehearse contingencies?" SPC Liddell, the 6<sup>th</sup> Section Ammunition Team Chief, stood up and said, "Sir, I don't know if we rehearsed contingencies; however, I do know that we did not get hot chow last night. We were told that we were going to get hot chow and we didn't! Talk about lowering a soldier's morale. Maybe we should rehearse LOGPAC procedures?" Knowing that discussing LOGPAC procedures would lead the discussion off azimuth, Hubbard replied, "SPC Liddell, that's a great issue. But let's finish our issue on smoke and then we'll discuss LOGPAC issues." SPC Liddell answered, "Roger, Sir." SSG Miller, the 1<sup>st</sup> Howitzer Section Chief, said, "Sir, if I may, the FDC conducted a rehearsal with 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> sections last night because they were going to be our primary sustainment shooters during the battle; however, we did not rehearse any contingencies." SSG Foster, the battery fire direction NCO, interjected, "Sir, the other problem we had was that all of the smoke rounds were only uploaded on the three sections that conducted the rehearsal. We did not upload smoke rounds across the rest of the battery causing us to cross level rounds from section to section during the middle of the mission." CPT Hubbard, feeling his leadership had found the source of the problem, now looked at fixing responsibility. 1LT Hill spoke up and said, "I will ensure M825 rounds are included in the turret load for all sections." 1LT George said, "I will ensure that we rehearse contingencies with the entire gunline." After a fifteen-minute discussion, CPT Hubbard knew that he had hit another home run.

At the conclusion of the AAR, CPT Hubbard reviewed and summarized the key points from the scribe's board. Hubbard knew that he needed to bring this discussion full circle and he wanted to emphasize the fixes for the next fight. He remarked, "OK, let's review the bidding here. XO, you've got the mission of fixing this ammunition issue for the next fight. We've got a good jump on it already. Get with SFC Jackson and fine-tune it. Be sure to update the ammunition portion of our TACSOP as well. 1LTs Hill and Baker, keep the communication flow open with SSG Adams throughout the planning and preparation phases of the battle so that I can make adjustments to the timeline as necessary. 1LT George, let me know the rehearsal schedule for special munitions so that I can include them into the battery OPORD and rock drill. 1LTs Hill and Baker, I will give you guidance on turret loads for the battery. You must ensure and report to me when they are complete." Before releasing his leaders, Hubbard asked several of them to highlight one safety issue that they would address with their soldiers. As his leaders

left the area, Hubbard walked over to his HMMWV, leaned his campstool against his door, and dozed off knowing that his unit would be ready for their next fight.

Just what did CPT Hubbard learn during his leader-led AAR at the NTC? He learned to focus on “the Big 3” and that too many topics makes the AAR unwieldy and too hard to work the details for implementing fixes. He also learned not to waste a lot of time on what happened--just enough to set the stage--that the real key is to get after the issues, and make sure one leader is responsible for executing the fix. He learned that self-discovery is how soldiers learn the most and that leading questions that involve the whole team are more productive than a lecture from the boss. He learned how to set up the AAR site, how to keep it free of distracters, as well as what equipment and assistance he needed to facilitate the AAR. He learned about selecting the audience for his AAR and how to deal with silence, externalizing issues, and keeping soldiers on track. Finally, he learned about bringing both issues and the entire AAR full circle--closing out issues with realistic fixes as well as leaders to implement the fix.

Of all the great tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), challenging experiences, and hard knocks from the Krasnovians, perhaps CPT Hubbard's most enduring lesson from the NTC was learning to facilitate an AAR. Armed with the confidence and experience of leading an AAR, he would be able to implement the same techniques at his home station training to increase the level of proficiency of his leaders and his battery. Even better, he will be able to apply those same techniques as a future staff officer and commander at all levels. Looking back, it would seem that GEN Shinseki's desire to expand the vitality of the AAR process will have a marked impact on the training readiness of our Army. Just as it has with CPT Hubbard and you--on your next trip to the High Mojave.

## **CPT LaPorte's Biography**

Captain Ryan J. LaPorte is a Firing Battery Combat Trainer on the Werewolf Team at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. His previous assignments include Commander of Bravo Battery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 82<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery at Fort Hood, Texas; Task Force Fire Support Officer for both 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, also at Fort Hood. He also served as a Company Fire Support Officer, Battery Fire Direction Officer, Firing Platoon Leader, and Assistant Operations Officer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 41<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery at Fort Stewart, Georgia. He is a graduate of the Combined Arms Services Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and the Field Artillery Officer Advanced Course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

## **CPT Mark O. Bilafer's Biography**

CPT Mark O. Bilafer is a Firing Battery Combat Trainer on the Werewolf Team at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. His previous assignments include Paladin Battery Commander, Task Force Fire Support Officer and Assistant Operations Officer in 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery in Giessen Germany. While serving in 2-3 FA Captain Bilafer deployed to Bosnia in support of IFOR. He has also served as a Battery Executive Officer, Battery Fire Direction Officer, and Company Fire Support Officer in 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery at Fort Wainwright, AK. He is a graduate of the Combined Arms Services Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and the Field Artillery Officer Advanced Course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

### Notes to the Editor:

1. We've attached two Powerpoint Slides that we give to unit leaders to help in their AAR preparation.
2. The following is an AAR outline format that can also be added to the article.
  - A. Introduction
    1. Start with a joke or historical vignette.
    2. Appoint a scribe.
  - B. House Rules
    1. Leave problems at the door.
    2. No thin skins.
    3. Speak loudly and clearly.
    4. Relate your mission experience to future deployments and operations.
    5. Fix responsibility.
  - C. Battle Action Summary
    1. Battery mission.
    2. OPFOR mission.
    3. Mission times.
  - D. Identify 2 – 3 Key Topics or Issues for Discussion.

1. Briefly discuss what happened.
  2. Briefly discuss why it happened.
  3. Focus discussion on how can we improve the next time.
  4. Identify who is responsible for fixing the issue.
- E. Identify commander's focus "or fix" for the next fight.
- F. Conclusion.
1. Summarize key topics discussed.
  2. Emphasize the "fix" for the next fight.
  3. Discuss safety issues.