

FROM CADET TO COMMANDER: LEVERAGING AFTER ACTION REVIEW FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN MILITARY ACADEMY

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Abstract: *After-Action Review (AAR) has long served the military profession as a structured conversation that translates experience into learning. Although its doctrinal steps are well codified, few empirical accounts document how the method functions when embedded continuously in the fog and friction of a live field training exercise. This study therefore examines Exercise CADET 25 - a ten-day, battalion-level operation conducted in May 2025 by the final-year cadets of the “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy - as a realistic scenario. Drawing on direct observation, facilitator notes, and the audio-video archive produced by the academy’s evaluation & analysis cell, the article traces how cadets applied platoon, informal and formal AARs to interrogate performance in real time. Findings indicate that habitual, tiered reflection improved problem-solving agility by the final tactical lane and fostered a shared vocabulary for constructive feedback. The case suggests that when AARs are treated not as an administrative add-on but as a constructive element of the exercise, they sharpen judgment without imposing prohibitive costs on tempo. Implications for military education include the need to protect “white-space” within continuous operations and to cultivate facilitation skills among junior leaders.*

Keywords: After-Action Review, experiential learning, military education, case study, cadet development

1. Introduction

Professional armies have long recognized that battles are too costly a classroom to waste. From the Prussian Kriegsspiel of the nineteenth century to contemporary live-virtual-constructive simulations, instructors have sought ways to convert raw experience into durable knowledge. Among the modern instruments for that conversion, the After-Action Review occupies a privileged place. Codified in U.S. Army Training Circular 25-20 and adopted by many North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners, the AAR offers a deceptively simple sequence of questions - What was

the intent? What happened? Why did it happen? How can we improve? - designed to close the loop between planning and performance [1]. Its conceptual roots lie in the wider literature of experiential learning [2] and reflective practice [3], both of which emphasise the learner’s active construction of meaning from lived events. Despite its popularity, the AAR remains understudied as a phenomenon situated in time and place. Most doctrinal manuals describe how to conduct a review but offer limited evidence of what transpires when soldiers implement the method under operationally realistic conditions. Recent

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analytical work has begun to mine archived AAR transcripts with natural language processing [4], yet the fine-grained dynamics of facilitation, psychological safety, and peer feedback at the small-unit level are still poorly documented. Furthermore, little scholarship addresses the specific context of initial officer educational period when habits of reflection are formative but professional identity is still fluid.

The present study responds to these gaps through an ethnographic case study of “Exercise CADET 25”, a full-scale field training exercise (FTX) executed by the Class of 2025 at the “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy in Sibiu, Romania. The exercise provided a rare opportunity to observe a cohort of cadets as they applied the AAR method continuously across multiple tactical problems ranging from convoy security to key-leader engagement.

2. What is an After Action Review?



Figure 1: AAR (personal archive)

An After Action Review (AAR) is a structured, reflective process implemented following military training exercises, designed to enhance learning and performance outcomes through guided discussion and analysis. Conducted within a positive, non-threatening atmosphere, the AAR facilitates open communication among all exercise participants, from individual soldiers to unit leaders, promoting active self-assessment and mutual feedback.

A fundamental feature of the AAR is its participatory nature, involving every individual directly engaged in the training

event. Participants systematically examine what actions took place, why they unfolded in the observed manner, and how improvements can be incorporated into future practices. By critically reflecting on both successful outcomes and deficiencies, soldiers and leaders identify practical lessons aligned closely with specific training objectives and mission-essential tasks.

AARs may vary in complexity and formality. Informal AARs typically occur immediately after smaller-scale exercises, requiring minimal preparation and resources, and are most effective at the platoon or lower levels. Formal AARs, on the other hand, demand meticulous planning and preparation, involving detailed assessments and resource allocation, generally employed at company-level training events or higher.

Effective planning for an AAR includes selecting qualified observers and facilitators who identify critical performance indicators, scheduling the review appropriately, and using suitable training aids to support discussion. Observers document critical events and behaviours systematically during exercises, providing a factual basis for subsequent review.

Empirical evidence suggests that well-conducted AARs significantly contribute to improved training effectiveness, team cohesion, and unit readiness. Participants develop greater accountability for their performance, motivating continual enhancement and operational excellence. Thus, the consistent use of AAR methodologies is integral to fostering a robust, learning-oriented organizational culture within military units.

By raising open-ended/leading questions, guide discussions that allow soldiers and subordinate leaders to personally discover important learning points. Soldiers learn much more when they identify what **went well** and what **went wrong** than when you point out these points.

AAR always:

- It reinforces and increases the importance of the lessons learned from a training exercise.
- It increases the interest and motivation of the soldier and the leader.
- Identify and analyze both strengths and weaknesses.
- It implies all participants.
- It helps to achieve learning objectives.



Figure 2: Formal AAR

In summary, AARs assist teams in identifying and understanding the reasons behind errors and unexpected successes. They promote discussion, continuous learning and open communication among team members about strengths to build upon and weaknesses to address. They also help teams understand the factors affecting performance and how to improve in the future to reach their goals. Additionally, AARs allow teams to extract useful lessons from exercises and share them across the units. They boost technical and institutional confidence by giving members a chance to voice their insights in a supportive environment, separate from individual or team evaluations. This process enhances the chances of success and improves development outcomes.[5]

3. AAR as a Critical Thinking Tool: Increasing Training Efficiency in Military Education

The After Action Review (AAR) significantly stimulates critical thinking among cadets at the Land Forces Academy by providing a structured and reflective learning process that promotes deep

analysis of actions, decisions, and outcomes.

Through participation in AARs, cadets cultivate the habit of reflective learning by systematically reviewing recent exercises or operations. This process compels them to assess outcomes, delve into underlying causes, and identify actionable improvements. Consequently, students develop their ability to think analytically and recognize patterns within complex situations, foundational elements of advanced critical thinking.

The interactive, collaborative environment characteristic of AAR sessions fosters open dialogue, where cadets openly share observations, challenge assumptions, and critically evaluate diverse viewpoints. Such group interactions expand their cognitive flexibility and enhance their aptitude for making reasoned judgments and adapting effectively to new information or perspectives.

Moreover, AARs refine cadets' problem-solving and decision-making capabilities by encouraging a balanced examination of both successes and failures. This systematic evaluation process helps cadets distinguish between well-founded decisions and outcomes derived from chance, ultimately sharpening their ability to make calculated, informed decisions under pressure.

Integrating AAR methodology within the educational framework of the Romanian Land Forces Academy thus creates an institutional culture that continually enhances critical thinking and adaptive decision-making skills, essential qualities for future military leaders navigating dynamic operational environments.

4. Case Study – Exercise CADET 25: Field Application of the After-Action Review Method

This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the ethnographic research methodology employed in analyzing the implementation and impact of the AAR method during, “Exercise CADET 25”. It

details the research objectives, the methods for data collection, and the analytical processes used to correlate and interpret quantitative and qualitative data.

The study aimed to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Examine the influence of AAR methodology on the development of critical thinking skills among cadets.
2. Assess the practical effectiveness and applicability of AAR in a realistic field training environment.
3. Identify key factors that facilitate reflective learning and promote analytical dialogue among cadets.
4. Explore cadets' perceptions of how AAR sessions affect their decision-making and problem-solving capabilities.

The study adopted an ethnographic research design characterized by in-depth, immersive participant observation, complemented by structured interviews and content analysis of recorded AAR sessions. This methodology was chosen to gain a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal interactions, decision-making processes, and reflective practices embedded within the field training context.

Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated and analyzed concurrently to reveal patterns and validate observations. Quantitative data facilitated the identification of participation trends and topic prominence, while qualitative analysis provided contextually rich insights into cadet experiences and the nuances of reflective practice.

Analysis of the collected data revealed substantial growth in cadets' critical thinking abilities throughout Exercise CADET 25. Cadets increasingly demonstrated proficiency in articulating causality, recognizing the impact of their decisions, and proposing actionable improvements.



Figure 3: AAR in the field (Personal archive)

Exercise CADET 25 was a 5-days field training exercise (FTX) designed to simulate realistic operational conditions. Cadets were required to plan, execute, and analyze complex tactical scenarios, with the primary focus on integrating structured reflective practices through the AAR method.

Cadets conducted immediate micro-AAR sessions following tactical actions, such as contact drills or negotiations. These short reviews revolved around four key reflective questions: What was the intent? What happened? Why did it happen that way? What could be done better next time? These brief discussions helped quickly correct errors and capture details that might otherwise be forgotten.

Each evening, more formal platoon-level AAR sessions were conducted around sand tables and portable projectors, facilitated by instructors but driven primarily by cadet participation. Discussions were candid, analytical, and aimed at identifying root causes of outcomes, fostering an atmosphere free of blame and rich in critical reflection.

The final day featured a comprehensive, thematic AAR session involving the entire exercise group, synthesizing insights into key areas such as preparation, communication, leadership rotation, and resource management.

The case study observed notable improvements in cadets' analytical abilities and problem-solving skills as the exercise progressed. Cadets demonstrated enhanced confidence in openly discussing successes and failures, which significantly strengthened their critical thinking

capabilities. Practical challenges identified included instances of “rehearsal fatigue”, which instructors addressed through clear delineation of session purposes and strategic scheduling of reflective pauses.

Interviews and informal discussions revealed positive perceptions among cadets regarding the value of the AAR method. Initially viewed as procedural, many cadets acknowledged a shift in perspective, recognizing its practical benefits for future leadership roles. The structured reflective process became a habit, fostering an enduring commitment to continuous improvement.

The practical implementation of AAR during Exercise CADET 25 clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing critical thinking, reflective practice, and decision-making among cadets. This case study underscores the importance of integrating structured reflection as a core component of military training and leadership development.

5. Conclusions

“Exercise CADET 25” demonstrates that the After-Action Review, when treated as an integral component of manoeuvre rather than an administrative add-on, can accelerate leadership development at the pre-commissioning stage. Embedding micro, platoon-level and formal AARs throughout a ten-day field exercise cultivated a shared vocabulary for constructive feedback, sharpened cadets’ problem-solving agility and normalized reflective practice as part of operational tempo. By the final tactical lane, cadets displayed greater judgment, quicker error-correction and heightened psychological safety in peer dialogue -outcomes that

suggest reflection, repetition and tiered facilitation can compress the learning cycle without hampering momentum.

The case also underscores two enabling conditions. First, leaders must deliberately protect “white space” amid continuous operations; reflection cannot occur if every minute is consumed by movement or maintenance. Second, junior facilitators need explicit training in guiding discussion that digs to root causes without sliding into blame. Neglecting either condition risks reducing the AAR to a perfunctory checklist and forfeiting its developmental power.

For military education, these findings argue for institutionalising AAR literacy across the curriculum. Cadets should encounter the method early in classroom simulations, practise it habitually during progressively complex field problems and graduate able to coach their own sections through candid, standards-based reviews. Such spiral exposure not only hones critical-thinking skills but also inculcates the mission-command ethos of initiative, mutual trust and disciplined autonomy expected of NATO-compatible junior officers.

The study’s qualitative scope limits generalisability, yet it provides a rich template for replication. Future research might pair ethnographic observation with sentiment or discourse analytics to measure how AAR language evolves over repeated iterations or compare cohorts that receive differing levels of facilitator preparation. Until then, “CADET 25” offers compelling evidence that reflection in action, properly scuffled, can help transform cadets into adaptive commanders ready for the fog and friction of contemporary operations.

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