



# Is Experience the Missing Link in Junior Officer Development?

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**I**N 1808, AFTER humiliating defeats inflicted by Napoleon and France, the Prussian government placed much of the blame for its misfortunes on poor military leadership and subsequently redrafted national criteria for officer development. Gone was the discriminator that officers be selected exclusively from the nation's aristocracy. "The only title to an officer's commission," read the directive, "shall be in time of peace, education and professional knowledge; in time of war, distinguished valor and perception . . . All previously existing class preference in the military establishment is abolished."<sup>1</sup>

The Prussian government also added a requirement that all officer candidates serve six months in the enlisted ranks—to ensure a head start toward technical proficiency—and attend nine months of professional schooling before commissioning. These reforms, commonly recognized as the beginning of the modern military officer profession, were intended to secure future victory by growing the type of leader who would thrive and succeed in the increasingly complex operating environment of Napoleonic combined arms warfare. The reforms, arriving at the beginning of a period of dominance experienced by the Prussian military, and later the German military, revolutionized the way armies thought, performed, and developed leaders well into the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

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ART: Napoleon is shown on the battlefield at Eylau (in Prussia) during one of the Napoleonic Wars (the War of the Third Coalition, 1807) in this oil painting by Antoine-Jean Gros.

In a similar but less monumental manner, following nearly a decade of continuous combat operations, the United States Army published the Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) in November 2009. ALDS was the Army's initial vision of how it would focus institutional means toward building its next generation of direct and organizational leaders. It was authored by major departmental stakeholders who believed that the Army was "out of balance" in developing its leaders and recognized the need for a new leadership vision. In discussing the "competitive learning environment" of the future in which our forces would face patient and adaptive enemies using time and complexity to their advantage, the authors called for the Army to shape victory now by developing its leaders to "learn faster, understand better, and adapt more rapidly."<sup>3</sup>

To get there, the ALDS stated that the Army must focus on developing confident, versatile, adaptive, and innovative leaders in order to dominate in a changed and changing environment. A way, said the strategy, was for the Army as an institution to balance its commitment to the three pillars of leader development: training, education, and experience.<sup>4</sup>

While the effects of institutional change are rarely visible in the short term, four years later the Army still sees itself as out of balance across these three pillars, "given the emphasis [it has] had to place on warfighting," according to the latest version of the ALDS, published in June, 2013.<sup>5</sup>

Exactly where balance is still needed and where change must still occur is and likely will remain a matter of debate. This essay seeks to enter that debate by proposing that of the three pillars of Army leader development, one—experience—is most out of balance with the others when applied to our most junior officers in their pre-implementation development phase.

## Initial Development

Implementation, for the purpose of this essay, is the placement of junior officers into their first troop leadership positions following initial developmental training. Balance pertains to equal attention paid across all three pillars of the leader development model to ensure a more versatile, adaptable officer. A contemporary illustration follows: A few years ago

at Fort Leavenworth, near the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom and just before the Afghanistan "troop surge," an Army brigade combat team commander spoke to a group of field grade officers about the challenge of balancing force manning with leader development requirements. He said that among his 40 current company commanders, 11 of them had yet to attend the Captain's Career Course. In other words, he said, they were on their first assignment as officers in the Army. Ten years ago, this brigade commander said, a similar ratio would have been unthinkable. Then, he said, all captains taking company command in an active duty brigade were career course graduates and on at least their second assignment in the Army.

This brigade commander went on to explain that the unanticipated effect of this increased population of younger company commanders was additional stress on the organization due to their inexperience. Although all had copious combat experience from recent deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan, none of them were as skilled, for example, at mentoring their new lieutenants or midgrade and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), as had been their predecessor peers of ten years earlier. This, said the brigade commander, forced his field grade officers to assume a greater role than before in this area, creating new stressors such as increased workloads for the field grade officers and perceptions of micromanagement.

While this illustration refers to company commanders rather than the entry-level junior officers who are the subject of this essay, it speaks about the factor of experience in leader development. Officers require practice over time to become skilled at most leader tasks, and each new level of responsibility requires different skills. Without the benefit of time and practice, junior officers can become a burden on their superiors while developing their leader skills.

Of the three pillars of Army leader development, experience, defined by the current ALDS as "the continuous progression of personal and professional events," may be the most elusive to quantify.<sup>6</sup> Different than education or training, which can both be measured in terms of completion of a course or field of study, experience is usually assessed in terms of participation in specific events, or time served in the next lowest position prior to upward movement. However, individuals learn at different

rates, and some environments offer greater learning opportunities. In any case, relevant job experience is normally considered essential for placement into positions of management or leadership within most civilian organizations. The Army is no different in this case, with the well-known exception of junior officer selection: based on education attained and training received, the Army places individuals from civilian life into military leadership positions at the middle point in the organizational rank hierarchy and pay scale. These individuals become the Army's

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junior officers and platoon-level leaders. Prior military experience is not required. While some of these junior officers may have prior enlisted and possibly combat experience before commissioning, this is the exception, not the rule—and not a prerequisite.

In this officer-commissioning model, two of the three pillars of Army leader development (education and training) are governed by service requirements prior to implementation, but the third (experience) is incompletely addressed. The Army has experimented with pre-implementation experiential leader training through the Basic Officer Leader Course, Phase II (BOLC II), a six-week, branch-immaterial leadership course for newly commissioned officers that ran from 2006 until it was discontinued in December, 2009.<sup>7</sup> Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, then-deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command for Initial Military Training, explained the elimination of BOLC II by saying that units

needed junior officers sooner, and cutting out BOLC II seemed the most expedient solution.<sup>8</sup>

While BOLC II may or may not have provided junior officers the opportunity to gain organizational experience prior to implementation as direct-level leaders, its cancellation—or merger into the current BOLC B, which is similar in length and scope to the pre-BOLC officer basic courses—created a void of any *proposed* experiential preparation for the Army's junior officers. This suggests a simple leader development imbalance at the career start point of our most junior officers.

## **Where Experience is Needed Most**

Doctrinally, the Army's approach to developing experience in junior officers is through on-the-job training. The current edition of Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, published in 2010, states "troop units" are "where officers begin to develop their leadership skills... Troop leadership is the best means to become educated in Army operations and builds a solid foundation for future service."<sup>9</sup>

While learning on the job is essential and beneficial, our post-implementation junior officers may not learn key lessons early enough to make the sound and timely decisions required in today's complex and competitive operating environment. These trained and educated, but inexperienced, junior officers are perhaps not the optimal problem-solvers required to achieve success in an ALDS-described future battlefield of "complexity and ambiguity."<sup>10</sup> Given the increasingly decentralized nature of conflict today, where platoon leaders are often the senior decision makers on many operational missions, this would seem where experience is most needed.

Simply put, gaining experience over time prior to implementation is rigidly programmed into the professional development of almost all Army leaders—from noncommissioned officers to company and higher-level commanders—but not for platoon leaders.

While it is not difficult to identify the shortfall in experience development among our junior officers (especially among those with no previous

military experience), it is necessary at this point to establish what causal link, if any, exists between previous military experience and higher levels of performance in post-implementation junior officers. This subject does not lack for answers found in folklore, such as prior-enlisted lieutenants being coveted by battalion commanders for their already-developed technical and leadership skills; junior enlisted men stating their preference for officers with enlisted experience because of this shared background; and the belief of some that prior-service officers simply make better platoon leaders. But the question begs exploration and proof: In what ways can previous military experience make a junior officer better, and is this potential advantage significant enough to inspire a change in how we develop officers?

A casual survey of existing literature on the subject reveals at least five different categories of why the addition of organizational or combat experience in a junior officer might improve the

performance of the leader, unit, and organization—other desired attributes such as intelligence, physical fitness, character, and motivation remaining equal. The categories are —

- Initial military screening has occurred.
- Increased technical competence and reduced train-up time within the unit.
- Increased confidence, judgment, and ability to lead by example.
- Increased ability to relate to subordinates.
- Less micromanagement by superiors resulting in reduced organizational stress.

Examples from pertinent literature discussing each category follow.

**Commitment.** In the first category, a junior officer with previous military experience is more committed to the organization, as well as the reverse, since the occupational screening process has already occurred. In other words, the Army has chosen—and been chosen by—the soldier who decides to pursue and who receives a commission.



U.S. Army Spc. Ernestine Koroma, center, assigned to the 30th Medical Command, and sponsors check her zero target of the M4 carbine assault rifle during the 2013 Best Warrior Competition at Grafenwoehr Training Area in Bavaria, Germany, 20 August 2013. (U.S. Army, Markus Rauchenberger)

The likelihood of that officer remaining past an initial term of service is higher than that of an officer with no previous experience. This is validated by recent scholarship on officer retention rates over the past decade across all commissioning sources. Research shows that Officer Candidate School officers with prior enlisted service remain in the Army at the highest rate. In contrast, U.S. Military Academy and Reserve Officer's Training Course four-year scholarship officers, both with relatively low cadet populations of prior enlisted soldiers, maintain the lowest retention rates.<sup>11</sup>

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The occupational screening process occurs over time and covers formative career milestones. For example, a junior officer with previous military experience has already attended and graduated from basic and advanced individual training, been awarded a military occupational specialty, served in a unit with both peer soldiers and supervisory noncommissioned and commissioned officers, and applied for acceptance into a pre-commissioning source. This period of service is more than a number of years or months: it is evidence or the assumption of positive adaptation to the specific military culture, acquisition of a range of basic individual technical skills, and possible mastery of a few. It shows a sense of commitment to the Army, since the soldier chooses to remain in service and become an officer, which is a strong suggestion that the soldier finds the military profession agreeable.

Martin van Creveld, the noted Israeli military historian, found our system of screening potential junior officers problematic when he wrote, "The outstanding feature of the road toward earning a commission in the United States is that most future officers are designated as such even before they are taken in to the forces."<sup>12</sup> The occupational screening for officers created in this manner occurs by necessity during and after implementation, placing additional stress on the organization as well as on the individual. In short, neither the Army nor the individual has chosen the other prior to placement in a direct leadership position.

**Competence.** Second, a junior officer with prior military experience has more technical competence and requires less train-up on individual and collective skills. In speaking about enlisted soldiers, military sociologist Samuel Coates wrote, "Military skills, whether in leadership or in technical specialties, are as a rule too complex to be mastered in one period of enlistment."<sup>13</sup> The required skills of officers, which can be assumed as more complex than those of enlisted soldiers—collective-level planning, leading, and decision making, for example—likely take at least a similar length of time to master. In the interim, unit NCOs often bear the burden of completing the training of junior officers.

U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile*, sheds light on the responsibility NCOs have in completing the development of entry-level officers. "When junior officers first serve in the Army, their NCO helps to train and mold them. When lieutenants make mistakes, seasoned NCOs can step in and guide the young officer back on track."<sup>14</sup> This suggests, given the assumed difference in complexity between officer and enlisted tasks, that NCOs are either already competent enough at junior officer tasks to teach them, or that our entry-level junior officers are learning skills of the sort taught easily by NCOs—basic soldier or beginning leadership skills.

The requirement for NCOs to train junior officers on the job is not new. One historian, borrowing a snapshot from 1830s Army culture, described the friction that resulted from this inevitable train-up period: "Junior officers appointed from civil life, as most officers were, resented having to rely upon [the first sergeant's] coaching due to their inexperience. Professional soldiers, on the other hand, appreciated and came to rely upon him."<sup>15</sup>

*The Plattsburgh Manual*, a handbook that described how the U.S. Army created its mass-expansion officer corps for service in the First World War, summarized this point with candid rationale: “A good private makes a good corporal, a good corporal makes a good sergeant, a good sergeant makes a good lieutenant—a good colonel makes a good brigadier general—all exactly as in civil life.”<sup>16</sup> The inference to be taken from this statement is that sufficient time and exposure to develop skills at the next lowest position

creates conditions for success as one progresses up the ladder of rank and responsibility.

**Skills.** Third, junior officers with prior experience have enhanced skills in nontechnical areas only time and performance of duties can develop, such as confidence, the ability to lead by example, adaptability, and judgment. According to FM 6-22, the ability to lead with confidence involves “having prior opportunities to experience reactions to severe situations.”<sup>17</sup> Once leaders have collected experiences gleaned from these “severe situations,” they become aware of what “right looks like,” and logically, are better prepared to lead confidently and by example. Adaptability, according to our leadership doctrine, is also a product of time and practice: “As the breadth of experience accumulates, so does the capacity to adapt.”<sup>18</sup>

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), an organization that has amassed military leadership experience over the past several decades due to near-constant regional conflict, bases its leadership doctrine around personal example. While accepting that this style of leadership creates greater risk, Israel’s



Sgt. 1st Class Shvoda Gregory, motor sergeant for the 557th Engineer Company, 864th Engineer Battalion, talks to a small group of specialists and new sergeants during a five-day junior leadership development course his battalion administers quarterly to better prepare its new and future leaders, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., 24 January 2012. (U.S. Army)

forces believe leadership by example presents the opportunity for greater reward, “both in mission success and unit cohesion.” Good judgment, confidence, and adaptability are the IDF goals for junior officers prior to their implementation as platoon leaders. The Israeli model of combat leadership, according to an IDF psychologist, “requires an experienced leader to assess and mitigate risks and to make correct decisions.”<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that the IDF selects its officers exclusively from the ranks of its conscripted enlisted force. All future officers serve for two years in the ranks prior to attending a commissioning course to develop—and to be screened for—the type of technical skills, confidence, and judgment required to become a by-example style of leader.<sup>20</sup>

Glancing at the negative, a lack of confidence and judgment in a junior officer can inspire catastrophic results in a worst-case scenario. The leader of a platoon controls mass destructive combat power and must know when to apply this force, where to apply it, and in what circumstances it is justified and lawful. The official Army investigation into the

incident at My Lai, Vietnam in March, 1968, known as the Peers Report, cites the inexperience of the platoon leaders who participated as a major factor in the mass murder of roughly 400 noncombatants. The 1970 report states these junior officers chose to follow rather than question orders from their company commander concerning the use of lethal force on unarmed villagers who were mostly women, children, and old men. The Peers Report noted the “extraordinary degree of influence” wielded by the company commander, a career officer known as a strict disciplinarian, over these still-developing platoon leaders. The report concluded that inexperience contributed to the poor judgment exercised by platoon-level leaders—both officers and NCOs—at My Lai.<sup>21</sup>

Our leadership doctrine summarizes this point: “Good judgment on a consistent basis is important for successful Army leaders and much of it comes from experience. Leaders acquire experience



Cpl. Ian Faught pulls himself up onto a wall with the help of his buddies during the Leader Reaction Course, the culminating activity of the battalion's Team Leader Development Course, Fort Hood, Texas, 29 October 2013. (U.S. Army, Staff Sgt. Leah R. Kilpatrick)

through trial and error and by watching the experiences of others.”<sup>22</sup>

**Relationships.** Fourth, junior officers with prior military experience are better prepared for relating to, understanding, and caring for their enlisted subordinates. While this seems a bold statement, research lends it credence. Samuel Stouffer, the noted American social psychologist, led a team of researchers during and after the Second World War in seeking feedback from U.S. Army soldiers about their experiences in the war and in the service. His findings include the perhaps unsurprising perception among enlisted men that “officers who were formerly enlisted men were *more likely* to share the view of the enlisted men than were officers who had never been enlisted men.”<sup>23</sup> While that might seem elementary, a complementary finding may not: “Officers felt ‘executive abilities’ (carrying out orders promptly and thinking for oneself) were much more important than ‘personal relations’ abilities (helping soldiers, explaining things clearly, gaining liking of men). Privates felt exactly the opposite.”<sup>24</sup> What this illustrates, according to Stouffer’s research, is while enlisted men generally maintained different values about day-to-day Army business than their officers, those officers without enlisted experience were more than likely unable to grasp this difference—in other words, were less able to relate to their men.

Enlisted experience in the U.S. Army officer corps has always had some precedent, along with the bond this shared background has created—in myth or reality—between officer and soldier. In the Army National Guard between the world wars of the 20th century, some units “preferred officers who had come up through . . . [their] own ranks . . . [and who] usually served quite an apprenticeship as enlisted men before being made officers.” The benefit of this, felt Guard officers of the early 20th century, was the “sense of round-the-clock responsibility [these officers had] for their men.”<sup>25</sup>

The practice of taking care of soldiers is believed to enhance unit morale and increase combat effectiveness. This involves ensuring basic human needs are met and soldiers are led with competence and concern. A behavioral sciences research team at U.S. Military Academy observed, “leaders who took care of their soldiers, who met their tactical needs through their own competence

and skills...and who allayed their soldiers' anxieties that they would respect their lives by avoiding wasteful casualties—these leaders led units that were the most combat effective.”<sup>26</sup>

**Trust of superiors.** Fifth, experienced junior officers are less likely to be subjected to micromanagement by their superiors, which reduces stress on the organization, increases the young officers' job satisfaction, and possibly their organizational commitment and retention in the Army. This is a broad statement, but again, current learning lends evidence. The landmark Army Training and Leader Development Panel report sought to identify issues within the Army's culture and climate that were contributing to dissatisfaction in the officer corps and decreased retention rates over the decade following the Persian Gulf War. According to this 2002 report, junior officers were “not receiving adequate leader development experiences . . . [which] leads to a perception that micromanagement is pervasive. They do not believe they are being afforded sufficient opportunity to learn from the results of their own decisions and actions.”<sup>27</sup> The Army chose to make the causal link between these complaints and poor officer retention and instituted several changes over the next several years in an attempt to reverse the trend.

Of course, micromanagement and its negative impact is nothing new. The Vietnam-era U.S. Army provides an interesting precedent of the organizational perils of inexperienced leadership “corrected” by micromanagement. In this example, NCOs created from the post-basic training, “shake and bake” Noncommissioned Officer Course were considered too inexperienced to be left alone to execute their duties and care for soldiers. The alleged micromanagers? Junior officers. As related by historian Ernest Fisher, “Because of a chronic shortage of experienced NCOs, many officers, especially at the company level, resumed the practice of bypassing their noncoms when dealing with the troops...this eroded the sergeant's proper role as a small-unit leader and pushed him to the sidelines where he became a spectator instead of the focus of the action.” The chief irony of this practice, Fisher adds, was that it occurred exactly at a time when, “because of the nature of tactics employed in Vietnam, the small-unit leader was more needed than ever before.”<sup>28</sup>

## Creating Capable Junior Officers

This brief survey of leader development literature in these five categories suggests that previous military experience, along with sufficient education and training, creates a junior officer more capable of immediately performing with competence and confidence upon implementation. This may have as much to do with the way humans learn as it does with the various complex tasks a junior officer must master. According to a leadership textbook used at Fort Leavenworth, humans learn from experience through a process called “action-observation-reflection.” Typically, humans engage in actions, observe the results or outcomes, and eventually reflect upon what went right or wrong, including whether or not to repeat the same action and how to improve the results. While actions and observations may occur at high frequency, for example, during a junior officer's initial assignment, especially in combat, the reflection period required to process this collected data may not take place until later, often much later, and sometimes only after an environmental change—such as redeployment or transfer to a subsequent job or assignment.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, when applying this learning model to a junior officer without prior military experience, it would seem that experiential reflection occurs after it might be most useful. For example, a former platoon leader now working as a company executive officer may begin to understand and benefit from his experiences and feel more confident in his ability to lead a platoon, but now the officer is fully engaged in a new job with different duties and requirements. It would seem the best way to train a platoon leader to perform at the highest level would be to allow the young officer to be a platoon leader for a sufficient time period, move the individual to another job to take advantage of time and the environmental change to stimulate reflection, and then reinsert that officer into a platoon leader position to fully capitalize on his improved abilities.

The Army, or any organization for that matter, does not have this time or resource luxury with respect to leader development and must utilize and train junior officers as they become available. It must also rotate them through other important jobs, such as specialty platoon, executive officer, and battalion staff jobs to meet organizational needs as well as to provide broadening experiences for these developing officers.



What should be apparent, given this survey of the experience pillar of our leader development model, is that more experience in a junior officer prior to implementation is better than less, and that the Army must find a way, in keeping with the intent of the ALDS, to provide more balance in the development of our junior officers.

Practical solutions are not the topic of this essay, but to be useful they all should share one thing: the benefit of experience must be factored into a junior officer's development prior to implementation as a direct leader of troops. Some known practices and ideas include mandatory enlisted service prior to entry into a commissioning program (two years seems to be a common standard, as used by the Israelis, among others). Another is an "apprenticeship" following graduation from a leadership school and prior to commissioning and implementation (the German Bundeswehr develops its officers similarly). Still another is creating a vertical rank structure in which all soldiers enter at the lowest pay grade and progress upward (however quickly or slowly) based on individual talent, desire, motivation, and supervisory recommendation. Experience at the

next lowest position before upward progression would be guaranteed. Of course, certain pay grades would have to be consolidated or bypassed to ensure company-level leaders are youthful enough to lead by example under physically harsh conditions.

This discussion aside, some, perhaps many, contemporaries would insist that the current Army officer development model works fine. They would point to the enviable supply of motivated, college-educated, and technically trained young men and women who volunteer every year to become the Army's entry-level officers and begin their on-the-job training as direct leaders. A noncontemporary, such as a Prussian army officer of the early 19th century, would likely be impressed by the education and training our new lieutenants receive but might scratch his head at the last part: beginning the on-the-job training of our officers while they simultaneously function as leaders? To this Prussian officer, our model might seem sequentially challenged, for if the literature on military leader development has one common thread, that thread is this: experience is the best teacher of military leadership. **MR**

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NOTES

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