



By Scott Kelly

I commissioned in 2012, joining an Army in which my leaders had been engaged in counterinsurgency (COIN) fights in Iraq and Afghanistan for nearly a decade. As I left training and entered the operational force, I was hit with the distinct difference between the way I had been trained to fight by the institution and the way the Army had actually been fighting for the past decade. I was trained in Unified Land Operations against near-peer threats. My leaders had spent years working in Joint Operations Centers in support of counterinsurgency operations and conducting security force assistance.

The disconnect between today's training and doctrine and many of our senior leaders' experiences is pronounced. The fights of the past two decades defined the careers of the leaders who run today's Army and shaped their perception of the utility and relevance of the formal training they received. The generation that came after them, which begins with many of today's senior captains and junior majors, do not share their experiences and likely never will. This experience differential has created a gap between leader expectations and subordinate realities that hinders our ability to communicate and adapt as a force.

Training for one war and fighting another

During our contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns, there was a disconnect between the wars we trained for and the wars we fought. A consistent refrain from instructors to

students in Army schoolhouses is, “this is what the army says you need to know, don’t worry, once you get to your unit, you’ll learn how it really is, all of this is out of date.” This attitude came from the fact that the type of war the Army was trained to fight prior to 9/11 was not the war it found itself in after the initial push to Baghdad. As [General Mark A Milley](#) said in 2016, we went into Iraq and Afghanistan with a conventional force ill-suited to fight and win the counterinsurgency fight and “had to re-engineer ourselves ... and now we have an army that institutionally has a lot of knowledge, skills, and experience at fighting terrorists and insurgents” but little else.

Now the Army is preparing to fight a large-scale war against a near peer threat in an era of persistent great power competition across multiple domains. This transition has happened in step with the U.S. counterinsurgency fight, and has immediate impacts at the tactical and operational level that affect everything from unit structure, to the risk commanders must assume to accomplish their mission. It has exacerbated the divide between the generations of soldiers who were shaped by their experiences fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and those who were not.

The most obvious symptom of this divide is a lack of shared understanding. My unit ran an exercise in how to run a Joint Operations Center. Based on the commander’s intent, the battle captains (myself included) and non-commissioned officers (NCO) set up what we felt were effective systems to track the operations we anticipated needing to execute. We based it off of exercises we ran at different schoolhouses and unit training events we participated in. When the commander walked in, he was dissatisfied with what we had, and said he was looking for, “a normal combat JOC like you’d see anywhere in Afghanistan,” where he had deployed multiple times as a lieutenant and captain. I looked at the other battle captains in the room. None of us had been to Afghanistan and none of the NCOs had ever run a Joint Operations Center while deployed, much less set one up.

Generations of soldiers since 2003 based their leadership approach and operational concepts on the experiences they gained in these wars. These experiences drove organizational changes in how we designed and employed units, such as cutting Brigade Combat Teams into Security Force Advisory and Assistance Teams. They also created a clear divide between how we were taught to organize and conduct operations and how we executed them down range. Most shared understanding of how a unit operates and fights was learned from peers and immediate supervisors on the job, meaning anyone who doesn’t have that shared experience also lacks shared understanding.

Learning a new “Leadership Language”

The break in the chain of shared experience has created a new challenge. There has always been a disconnect between what is taught formally in an Army schoolhouse and a unit’s requirements, but what has made this situation unique is the scale and duration of the disconnect. For 19 years, we trained one army and fought with another.

To overcome this gap, Leaders need to train, coach, and mentor their subordinates in a more deliberate fashion than they themselves were coming up the ranks in order to make their organizations successful. After formal training, most of us arrive at our units and learn from our peers who have “been there” and “done that.” Commanders rely heavily on those with experience in their organization to get new people up to speed but most of our peers also lack these shared experiences with our commanders.

With the drawdown of units deploying to combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the body of shared experiences is shrinking. Experience is critical, and there will always be some type of gap between training and operating down range. But when a generation shaped by their experiences attempts to teach, coach, and mentor a generation that will never share those experiences without first starting with the training they have in common, intra organizational communication comes to a standstill along with the adaptation necessary to succeed in our new environment.

This disconnect is exacerbated by the officer career timeline. From the time a captain finishes company command, moves on to a broadening assignment, then intermediate level education at the Command and General Staff College, it may be four or more years before they cycle back to a unit as a major. This means many have not been in a position to observe the transitions that occurred during that time. The gap in understanding may not be noticed until the first critical communications failure between leaders and their subordinates. The only thing worse than dog years are soldier years, and four is a lifetime.

Overcoming the Gap

Overcoming this gap in shared understanding requires the deliberate creation of shared experiences that inform and shape an organization’s culture. Leaders cannot outsource this, and it will demand a significant portion of their time.

Experience is a great teacher, and the Army values it above all other forms of learning. But overconfidence in our experience can blind us to necessary change. Our persistent focus on how we’ve conducted operations has left us with little experience examining why we’ve

been doing operations that way. In a changing world facing a new set of global challenges, the Army's experience of the past 19 years needs to be re-grounded and integrated in the body of knowledge that informs the doctrine that drives our training. It cannot be assumed that the lessons learned in those 19 years automatically carry over into our new operating environment.

Our current school house training and doctrine, which through foresight or bureaucratic intransigence has always entailed how to conduct combined arms maneuver against a near peer threat, is a good starting point to begin this examination. Donald Rumsfeld infamously said in 2004, "[you go to war with the Army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have.](#)" This is one thing that will remain true in the future. We should be very intentional about the Army we are building for that future, and how we allow the past 19 years to shape it. This effort provides an opportunity to reach across the gap and bridge the experiences of the generation shaped by Iraq and Afghanistan and those of who follow in their footsteps.

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