

TRENDWATCH



Military Maneuvers


By Jennifer J. Salopek

American flags wave from homes, cars, and highway overpasses. Operation Anaconda rocked, even if Osama Bin Laden isn't yet caught (or his body yet recovered). Such movies as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *We Were Soldiers* let us relive history with the men and women who made it. And since U.S. forces were deployed to Afghanistan in November 2001, along with troops from allied countries, the military has been much in the forefront of our collective consciousness.

The armed forces of the United States have long been known as an exemplary model of leadership, teamwork, and

communication. Many corporate training practices are taken from or inspired by military models. The U.S. Army is even at the forefront of e-learning, demonstrating how information can be shared from one deployment to another across the boundaries of time and space.

Although tempered somewhat by the slowdown in the economy and reduced capital spending, there has been increased corporate interest in military-inspired training programs since last fall. In March, *Inc.* magazine credited "renewed patriotism and interest in all things military" with helping one of those offerings, Afterburner

Seminars, achieve its current numbers: 212 percent ahead of budget for FY2002 at the  "What Things Cost" end of April. (T+D, June)

Numerous options abound for corporate trainers wanting to bring the lessons of the military home to businesspeople on the ground. Here's an overview of just a few.

For a mostly intellectual and historical exercise, there's the **Leadership Experience**, offered by The Conference Board in collaboration with the department of behavioral sciences and leadership at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. Sited in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, the program offers participants the opportunity to visit the scenes of important battles and learn about the strategy used by the generals commanding the action there. Designed for senior executives, Leadership Experience draws upon the tradition of "staff rides" conducted by the Army.

Longstanding staples of military practice, staff rides are an early example of experiential learning. Late in the 19th century, armies began visiting old battlefields to analyze decisions and their consequences. Leaders, staff members, and facilitators would visit together, creating a team-building experience focused on problems encountered in actual battle.

"The strategy of the battle is the most important story," explains Brian Hackett, senior research associate at The Conference Board and creator of the program. "We use it as an example to get to what companies are dealing with now. We focus less on the terrain and more on the people, but you can't understand decisions until you see the ground."

Lt. Col. Greg Dardis, director of leadership and management studies at West Point and leader of the program, notes that there has always been a great deal of interest in the site visits but acknowledges that it has increased in the past few months. Dardis's goal is to

extend learning "from battlefields to boardrooms," and to "develop leaders of competence and character."

Gettysburg was chosen because it's familiar to many Americans, Dardis says, and because the whole battlefield can be seen within a day. As participants walk the scene of the action, they're able to "put themselves into the shoes of the decision makers," he says—leaders such as Generals Mead and Lee, who were known as tactical, strategic leaders. Dardis learns a great deal beforehand about his participants' challenges and companies, and tailors the learning objectives as much as he can. (A longer program is also offered in Normandy, France.)

One key lesson of the battlefield visits is the meaning of *intent*. As Hackett notes, "Once the action starts, strategy often goes out the window." That's why it's important for team members to understand their commander's (or boss's) intent, rather than his or her plan. "A good leader must communicate intent—the big picture—instead of steps or tasks," says Dardis. That highlights the common corporate problem of telling people what to do and how to do it—*what* to do but not *why*. "It's demoralizing," Dardis explains, but giving that mission information "is empowering and unleashes the hidden potential within people and within the organization."

For learning with a shot of adrenaline, corporate trainees can get a dose of Army Ranger-style TLC (teamwork, leadership, communication) through **Leading Concepts**, a hands-on learning institute in Louisville, Kentucky. During a four-day, 86-hour training exercise, participants repeat this learning cycle:

1. Receive TLC instruction.
2. Apply the instruction by planning and executing a Ranger Team mission.
3. Review and evaluate lessons learned.
4. Apply experiences and skills to their own business situations.

Leading Concepts was founded by Dean Hohl, a former Ranger himself. In December 1989, Hohl was part of Operation Just Cause, the U.S. invasion of Panama. "There's an emphasis on working together to solve problems under stress and pressure in the Army—experiences that aren't taught in business school," he says.

After completing his active duty, Hohl labored briefly in the corporate world. His thoughts kept returning to his Ranger days as he wondered, "How can I devise a program that re-creates those principles and experiences?" He held his first class in 1993, and Leading Concepts generated more than US\$1 million in revenue in 2000. "Corporate America is starving for these kinds of experiences," he says.

Although participants wear fatigues and conduct exercises in the Kentucky woods, Hohl emphasizes that the TLC program isn't basic training or a survival school. And he cautions that the learning won't work if participants aren't committed to change and aren't prepared to check their egos at the door. That last point is particularly important, Hohl says, because most of us have an inaccurate perception of the military, perpetuated by Hollywood.

"It isn't a dictatorship. Elite teams operate with a high degree of precision, using constant communication. The role of a leader is to state the operation's purpose, direction, and resources, then get out of the way." Companies such as Domino's Pizza, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and Captain D's have sent teams to Leading Concepts.

For companies looking for a more high-tech learning experience, there's the **Corporate Aviation Challenge**, offered by the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama. This program combines simulated fighter-pilot training with classroom sessions to demonstrate the parallels between air combat and the pressure-filled world of business.

Dying Relaxed

Many of the precepts taught by Afterburner Seminars are designed to overcome a phenomenon called “task saturation.” Although it might be known by other names in the corporate world, such as overwork or burnout, the consequences can be the same: a crash. In his book, *Business is Combat: A Fighter Pilot’s Guide to Winning in Modern Business Warfare* (ReganBooks, 2001), Afterburner founder and CEO Jim Murphy explains:

“Like the blur of air-to-air combat, today’s business environment is a spinning, topsy-turvy world of people demanding that you do more with less—less time and fewer assets....

[The first fighter pilots] became task-overloaded, and when that occurred, the ability to perform both cognitive and mechanical tasks declined drastically.... The results were usually the same: The pilot tended to lose control of his aircraft without even knowing it was happening. All of us in the fighter-pilot community know of aviators who flew perfectly good jets into the ground and probably didn’t know they were doing it until the end.

In the fighter-pilot community, we call that *dying relaxed*. You can call it the exact same thing, because it has the same effect on you as it does on me—the briefing is out the window, execution is nil, task saturation brings your job to a halt, and your mission fails....

There can be deadly consequences to task saturation because the mind can respond in these damaging ways:

- It can *shut down*—that is, turn itself off as a way of fleeing what it perceives to be an impossible situation.
- It can *compartmentalize*—shut down certain parts of the brain as a way to focus all resources on a narrow course of action or thought. The danger lies in the fact that the mind doesn’t carry out its overview function while it is compartmentalized.
- It can *channelize*—focus on one thing only to the exclusion of all other data, sensory stimuli, or thought.

The onset of task saturation is subtle, and its effects are insidious. For that reason, it’s important to self-diagnose and identify when you’re reaching the task saturation point.”

“Participants get a magnified version of what they need in the corporate world,” says John Raiford, director of aerospace operations at the center and a retired Navy commander. He notes that most clients seek to improve communications and teamwork. People’s most-common mistakes, he says, are that they don’t prepare properly for the task at hand. “If we all attack problems in our own way, there’s not enough coordination to maximize each person’s skills. We must develop a plan to attack problems.”

In addition, often people don’t communicate well within their groups. “Communication helps us use assets effectively—augmenting and using each other’s skills—and learn from our mistakes.”

The center’s sophisticated static simulator uses high-tech graphics as well as visual and sound effects to replicate flight and evoke feelings of motion. Raiford says that the biggest challenge is making clients comfortable with operating in a three-dimensional environment. But

once they do, “There’s a huge Wow! factor,” he says. As participants “fly” in two-person crews, they learn the importance of understanding their duties, working together as a coordinated flight crew, and using communication effectively in three environments—*intra-cockpit*, *ship-to-ship*, and *air-to-ground*.

Aviation Challenge participants can also select optional ropes-course and escape-and-evasion activities.

For those who prefer their training with a little less vertigo, **Afterburner Seminars’s** teams of fighter-pilot speakers and facilitators travel to client sites to deliver keynote addresses and workshops with a Business Is Combat theme. Their main goal, explains founder and CEO Jim Murphy, is to teach “flawless execution in the face of changing, challenging environments.” The instruction is based on military pilots’ meticulous preparation and evaluation activities designed to prevent accidents or death. Those activities break down into five steps: 1) Plan, 2) Brief, 3) Execute, 4) Debrief, 5) Win.

“Murph” and his colleagues prefer the element of surprise, jogging into ballrooms in their flight suits to the accompaniment of loud, upbeat music. Typically, they ask their client contacts not to announce beforehand that Afterburner will be appearing. Why? “Sometimes there’s the possibility of a bias against the military [on the part of the participants] due to their personal experiences. We’re not the empty, rah-rah presentation some might expect. We’re devoted to giving people great, simple tools they can use tomorrow.”

Afterburner’s programs are finding receptive audiences worldwide. Seventy percent of the firm’s business is with *Fortune* 500 companies, and it was named one of America’s fastest-growing companies by *Inc.* in December. Although a small flattening in business occurred early in 2001, Murphy believes that, with economic recovery, companies have realized

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“they can hunker down only for so long. You have to spend money to make money and spend it on your most precious asset: human capital.”

Kasey Diulus, manager of performance management and development for Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Illinois, Texas, and New Mexico, and a Leading Concepts client, sums up her company's experience with military-inspired training:

“We had an intact work group that was being restructured. I was looking for something that would bring together employees from different disciplines who had previously had an adversarial relationship.” Clearly, the participants didn't know what to expect from their trip to Kentucky. “The guys thought they were going on a traditional retreat,” she says. “They took their golf clubs!” Although the group attended five or six years ago, the experience had a lasting impact: Diulus says that participants still talk about it and the lessons they learned.

Jennifer J. Salopek is a contributing editor of T+D; jjsalopek@earthlink.net.