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Future Conflict: Adapting Better and Faster than an Adversary

Kamara, Hassan

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Capt. Irvin Drummond, U.S. Army, studies at a computer 18 May 2007. (Photo by Chris Sanders, U.S. Army)

Writing

A Way to Maximize Returns on the Army's Investments in Education



Maj. Hassan Kamara, U.S. Army

Have the courage to write, publish, and be heard. Launch your ideas and be an integral part of the conversation. Why? Because it makes our nation and our profession stronger. In the end, no one of us is as smart as all of us thinking together.

—Adm. Jim Stavridis, U.S. Navy, Retired

The dialogue on educating the force tends to focus mostly on making additional investments in education, which is increasingly difficult to do in the contemporary era of budget and workforce reductions. Therefore, this article refocuses the dialogue on a way the U.S. Army can maximize returns on the

investments it has made in education. Soldier education and training rank high among the Army's priorities despite budget and workforce reductions. The 2015 unveiling of the Army University evidences the service's commitment to invest in soldier education. According to its charter, the Army University "represents a greater investment in our soldiers and civilians through improved education that will increase competence, character and commitment."¹ Typically, people and institutions invest to yield maximum returns, which raises the question: How can the Army maximize returns on its investments in soldier education? In other words, how can the Army better tap into the soldier expertise it is cultivating through sustained investments in education?

An increased emphasis on writing can help the Army effectively utilize the soldier expertise it is cultivating through sustained investments in education. Implementing *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World* requires growing competent, innovative, and adaptive leaders consistent with some of the concept's operational tenets.² By emphasizing writing, the Army can enhance soldier competence, innovation, and critical thinking—this article highlights how, and it posits ways the Army can get soldiers to write more, and better.

Literature on Writing

There is considerable literature on writing, and a brief examination will help provide context and clarity on ensuing arguments about the utility of writing to the Army. Some works on writing discuss the importance and benefits of writing well, but much of the literature on writing seeks to improve writing skills in some respect.

Clear written communication is important and beneficial. The Army understands the importance of clear written communication and promotes it in manuals. For example, Army Regulation (AR) 25-50, *Preparing and Managing Correspondence*, promotes effective written communication within the ranks. It defines effective Army writing as being "understood by the reader in a single rapid reading and ... free of errors in substance, organization, style, and correctness."³ Other examples of the Army's appreciation of, and commitment to, effective writing are the now-revoked AR 600-70, *The Army Writing Program* (1985), and Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-67, *Effective Writing for Army Leaders* (1986). In

DA Pam 600-67, then Army Chief of Staff Gen. John A. Wickham Jr. referred to the fateful Charge of the Light Brigade—a failure based partly on unclear written orders—at the 1854 Battle of Balaclava. Wickham stated, "one way to assure ... clear and concise communication is by improving the quality of our writing."⁴ This perspective is shared by some in the Army. For example, in his well-written 2011 article in the *Military Review* journal titled "Flight Simulation for the Brain: Why Army Officers Must Write," Maj. Trent Lythgoe echoes the critical importance to the Army, as well as the benefits, of writing well. Lythgoe highlights a link between writing and critical thinking, arguing that "writing, although valuable as a communication medium, is most valuable as a powerful way of thinking."⁵

Among the numerous works that seek to improve writing skills, Henriette Anne Klausner's book *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain* stands out as a key enabler to writers and aspiring writers. Klausner helps writers manage their creative, free-writing tendency vis-à-vis their strong impulse to edit and correct.⁶ William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* counts among the salient works about writing improvement. Zinsser tackles common challenges in writing, such as simplicity, style, and techniques—for tenses, grammar, and mechanics.⁷ James Kilpatrick's *The Writer's Art* also describes writing techniques, insights, and examples for both professional and aspiring writers.⁸ Naveed Saleh's *The Complete Guide to Article Writing: How to Write Successful Articles for Online and Print Markets*, is notable for its emphasis on the importance of research in writing successful articles, and for its insights on excelling at the writing craft in general.⁹

Maj. Hassan Kamara, U.S. Army, is an armor officer and an assistant product manager assigned to Program Executive Office Missiles and Space, Redstone Arsenal, Alabama. He has served on the U.S. Forces Korea Joint Staff (J-3), and, prior to that, commanded a Stryker infantry company at Fort Bliss, Texas, and an armor company in Iraq. He holds a BA in political science from Arizona State University, and an MA in security studies from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Kamara is also an honor graduate of the U.S. Naval War College Command and Staff Course.



Writing as a Means to Improve Soldier Competence

The Army can cultivate and better utilize soldier competence by compelling soldiers to write articles about professional military topics and by including writing on operational matters as part of their daily duties. They should conduct research, think critically, and study. These processes are inherent in professional writing, and are catalysts for developing competent and adaptive soldiers. Naveed Saleh concurs that research is inherent in writing, and he reports, “good writers spend about 80 percent of their time actually writing. Good research helps you determine what’s important with respect to the issue being explored and much more.”¹⁰ Kate L. Turabian describes the knowledge-enhancing value of research, stating that writing a research report increases one’s knowledge on a subject and enhances one’s ability to write.¹¹ So, by compelling soldiers to research and write on aspects of the military profession and also as part of daily operations, the Army can help them build the high level of competence vital to overcoming complex challenges.

Adm. James Stavridis, commander of U.S. European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe, addresses students from the U.S. Naval War College and Senior Enlisted Academy during a visit to the Naval War College 23 October 2012 in Newport, Rhode Island. In a 2008 article in *Proceedings*, Stavridis advocates writing for publication. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Eric Dietrich, U.S. Navy)

Dwight Eisenhower’s experience under the command and mentorship of Maj. Gen. Fox Conner is a good example of how an emphasis on writing in daily operations can enhance competence. While they were stationed in Panama during the early 1920s, Conner had his young protégé and operations officer write plans and operation orders on a daily basis, which grew Eisenhower’s prowess as an operational planner. In a letter reply to Eisenhower’s request for insights to help him prepare for attending the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Conner wrote,

You may not know it, but because of your three years’ work in Panama, you are far better trained and ready for Leavenworth than anybody I know. You will recall that during your

entire service [with me] I required that you write a field order for the operation of the post every day for the years you were there. You became so well acquainted with the technics [sic] and routine of preparing plans and orders for operations that included their logistics, that they will be second nature to you.¹²

Reflecting on his experience with the operational planning exercises at Leavenworth, Eisenhower would later write, “Fox Conner had been correct, we had done this type of war-gaming in Panama.”¹³

Writing as a Means to Improve Innovation in the Ranks

In addition to building and utilizing soldier competence and expertise, the Army can promote innovation by emphasizing professional writing. Innovation thrives on discourse, which is greatly enhanced by writing and publishing. In other words, writing promotes the free and rapid exchange of ideas and facts, which helps spawn new and innovative ideas. According to Elizabeth Eisenstein, the “revival of learning” in the Renaissance period in fourteenth-century Italy was spurred by the advent of the printing press and the ability to mass-produce various works of writing.¹⁴

Historically, soldiers have written as a way to promote professional dialogue and drive innovation and change. The institutional impact of some who have written and published their ideas long ago can still be felt today. According to Edward Cox, in 1910 while serving on the General Staff, Conner “began writing articles for publication in professional military journals” and published an article titled “Field Artillery in Cooperation with the Other Arms,” which spawned major changes to field artillery regulations.¹⁵ Similarly, Eisenhower and George S. Patton Jr. challenged the conventional infantry doctrine of their day and inspired professional dialogue by publishing articles in the infantry and cavalry journals on combined arms maneuver and armored warfare.¹⁶

Writing helps disseminate information and ideas, which promotes institutional learning, adaptation, and innovation. For example, during the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, units were able to share operational lessons by providing written feedback from their combat tours to centralized forums such as the Center for Army Lessons Learned, and in many cases directly to the units replacing them. This exchange and ready access

to written lessons spurred innovation and adaptation, especially at the tactical level. In his incisive study of military innovation during the Iraq campaign, James Russell highlights that innovation flowed from the tactical level upward as some units adapted their doctrine, organization, and equipment to campaign-specific conditions.¹⁷ Since units typically rotated to home station after a year, sustained adaptation and innovation during the Iraq campaign was largely made possible by sharing written observations and lessons. The Army’s ongoing transformation also depends on sharing lessons, and on learning. Michael Formica concurs by writing that Army transformation would “require the Army to foster a dialogue throughout the organization about the lessons learned.”¹⁸

Writing as a Means to Improve Critical Thinking and Initiative

Winning in the complex contemporary and future operational environments requires better, and more aggressive, thinkers. Challenging and encouraging soldiers to write will help the Army promote critical thinking and initiative in the ranks. Retired Marine Col. Thomas X. Hammes concurs that the Army will need to grow and promote “free-thinking, aggressive, risk-taking” officers to lead the complex wars of the present and future, or the Fourth Generation.¹⁹ In his article on writing, Lythgoe argues, “if the Army wants better thinkers, we should start by educating better writers.”²⁰ Desirae Gieseman concurs by writing that the contemporary Army wants “strategic thinkers,” and “a better approach to Army writing will help the Army develop them.”²¹ Interestingly, critical thinking and initiative are indispensable qualities to mission command—a command philosophy that advocates the practice of empowering subordinates to execute missions within the intent of higher echelons, using disciplined initiative.

To better leverage soldiers’ ability to think critically, Army leaders should strongly consider reducing the Army’s overreliance on PowerPoint, by opting to have subordinates present information to them in written reports and briefs, as in pre-PowerPoint times. Hammes writes that prior to PowerPoint, Army staffs “prepared succinct two- or three-page summaries of key issues,” which involved greater intellectual rigor, and afforded more time for staffers and decision makers to analyze and weigh issues in depth.²² PowerPoint does not help



the Army fully realize its investments in soldier education and expertise because it hinders critical thinking. Hammes writes that PowerPoint is “a tool that is the antithesis of thinking ... it is actively hostile to thoughtful decision-making.”²³ Lythgoe writes, “it is relatively easy to produce a PowerPoint presentation without clearly understanding the subject matter. We can cut, paste, and rearrange bullet statements to produce the illusion of thinking and understanding.”²⁴ By emphasizing written reports where feasible, in lieu of or complementary to PowerPoint briefs, the Army can compel soldiers to think critically and with greater depth on issues.

How Can the Army Get Soldiers to Write More, and Better?

Writing is a great means for the Army to cultivate and exploit soldier competence, innovation, and

A soldier of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 34th “Red Bull” Infantry Division, deployed in support of Operation New Dawn, writes a letter home 9 October 2012 at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

critical thinking—but how can the Army get soldiers to write more, and better? Army leaders at all levels can start by requiring their subordinates to craft well-written documents and correspondence as part of their daily unit operations. They can also develop formal requirements and performance-related incentives for soldiers to write professionally. Lythgoe concurs and writes that the Army should “bring good writing back as a visible part of day-to-day Army operations,” with leaders demanding subordinates write well in e-mails and other written forms of communication.²⁵ An increased requirement for well-written documents

and correspondence in daily administration will help soldiers and leaders think more critically about issues, and become more competent.

Getting soldiers to write more and better in daily operations will again require a shift from the Army's current overreliance on PowerPoint as a tool to present information to decision makers. This is because PowerPoint inherently requires users to compress information irrespective of the complexities involved, which fosters a preoccupation with summarizing data at the expense of careful analysis, logic, and coherence. According to Edward Tufte, a study that compared PowerPoint with other methods for presenting information yielded evidence that "PowerPoint, compared to other common presentation tools, reduces the analytical quality of serious presentations of evidence. This is especially the case for the PowerPoint ready-made templates, which corrupt statistical reasoning, and often weaken verbal and spatial thinking."²⁶ Interestingly, in his 2015 visit to U.S. Forces in Kuwait, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter was reported to have barred the use of PowerPoint in an effort to "challenge his commanders' thinking."²⁷

The Army can get more soldiers to write professionally by creating and formalizing requirements and performance-related incentives for them to write for publication, or in some cases doctrine, and tactics, techniques, and procedures development. Conceptually, emulative of the Army Acquisition Corps' annual requirement for its members to accrue forty continuous learning points per year, the Army could mandate that commissioned and senior noncommissioned officers publish at least one research article every year in a professional publication. This increased emphasis on professional writing would also help the Army maximize returns on its investments in great resources like *The Army Press* and *Military Review*, and it would promote professional dialogue.

Additionally, the Army could institute written examinations as part of the entrance criteria for officer and noncommissioned officer developmental courses or schools. Douglas Macgregor concurs by writing that as a way to cultivate a habit of professional study early in officers' careers, the Army should institute a written examination for admission to the Command and General Staff College. Macgregor writes that "by publishing the list of required reading and study material, captains would know precisely what areas would be tested and what skills they would need to perform

well."²⁸ At this juncture, it is relevant to highlight that in 2015 the Army implemented and evaluated an initiative in which noncommissioned officers attending the Warrior Leader Course, Advanced Leader Course, Senior Leader Course, Master Leader Course, and Sergeants Major Course were required to write essays that were evaluated by what is known as the Criterion Writing Assessment Tool. This tool helps the Army identify and remedy the writing and communicative challenges of noncommissioned officers.²⁹

The Army can also get soldiers to write by encouraging leaders at all echelons to give higher performance evaluations to soldiers who—all other things being equal—demonstrate a higher level of professionalism relative to their peers by undertaking to study, research, and write on aspects of the profession of arms. Promotion boards could be made to award extra points for candidates who have demonstrated commitment to professional and intellectual growth by consistently fulfilling their mandatory annual requirement to publish on a topic of relevance to the profession.

Finally, the Army can inspire soldiers to write by emphasizing reading. One could convincingly argue that the Army has a strong reading tradition—citing the professional reading lists of numerous Army leaders as evidence. However, the existence of professional reading lists, while inspiring and motivational to some, fails to encourage the preponderance of soldiers to read and study the profession on their own time. Leader (command) emphasis is required to get the majority of soldiers to read professionally. Leaders, preferably commanders, should make reading and subsequent discourse a part of their units' periodic professional development seminars. Reading and discourse will inspire soldiers to write, which will vigorously spur professional growth in the Army. According to Lythgoe, "writing, when combined with reading, produces powerful thinking."³⁰ Some of the most illustrious officers in the Army's history grew professionally through voracious reading, critical thinking, discourse, and writing. While in Panama, Eisenhower not only wrote but also read extensively. Cox writes that Eisenhower and Conner "would read biographies of Civil War generals and spent [sic] hours discussing their decisions together," frequently conversing well into the night.³¹ Interestingly, according to Cox, it was also during this time that Conner passed on his experiences and lessons

from fighting alongside the Allied powers in World War I, and he urged Eisenhower to learn all he could about fighting wars with alliances.³²

Conclusion

With more soldiers reading, thinking, and writing on its challenges and future, the Army could witness breakthroughs in military thinking and innovation just as the German army (Reichswehr) did a century ago. During the period between World Wars I and II, the German Army was able to reform itself and develop combined arms doctrine in large part because its chief of staff, Hans Von Seeckt, dedicated ten percent of the Officer Corps to studying and writing about World War I. According to Williamson Murray, Hans Von Seeckt tasked over four hundred officers with combat experience (roughly 10 percent of Germany's downsized Officer Corps of four thousand, who were organized into different committees) to study and write about World War I doctrine and tactics, as well as future war; "the result was the

extraordinary Army Regulation 487 'Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms.'"³³ This regulation (published from 1921-1923) changed the focus of German doctrine from defensive to offensive maneuver, and it emphasized decentralization and initiative—key tenets of mission command.³⁴ In his insightful article titled "Read, Think, Write, and Publish," Adm. Jim Stavridis argues that the U.S. military will benefit similarly if more service members study, write, and publish on the myriad of contemporary challenges facing their institutions and the joint force.³⁵

The U.S. Army will continue to prioritize and invest in soldier education and training. As the institution seeks and implements innovative ways to educate soldiers, it should also continue to look for ways it can maximize returns on the investments it has made. Emphasizing that soldiers write more and better in their daily operations, as well as professionally, is a way for the Army to maximize returns—in the form of increased soldier competence, innovation, and critical thinking—on its investments in education. ■

Notes

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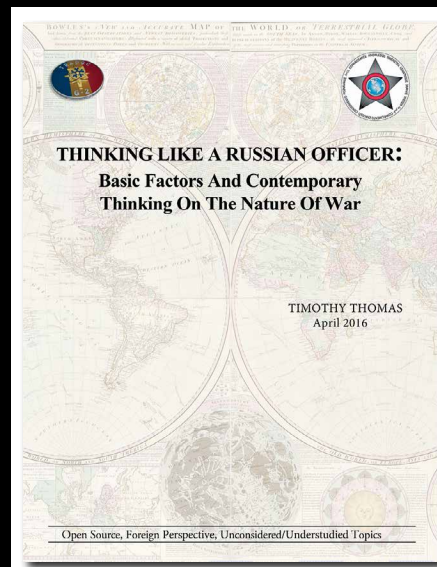
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MilitaryReview

WE RECOMMEND



Western officials and analysts can improve their understanding of Russian arms control priorities, peacekeeping agendas, military-to-military goals, and perhaps even intent by understanding how Russian military professionals think and express their ideas in writing. With this in mind, Timothy Thomas offers *Thinking like a Russian Officer: Basic Factors and Contemporary Thinking on the Nature of War*.

The first part of Thomas's monograph demonstrates that Russian military writing typically begins by assessing trends in the character of war and then predicting how future conflicts are likely to unfold. The prediction is followed by assessing how the forces and the means to conduct war correlate for each side in a conflict. Russian military writers then examine the forms and methods of potential confrontation. They review historical lessons learned, foreign and domestic, and decision making about the initial period of war, which Russian analysts consider critical to success.

The second part of the monograph investigates four sources of Russian military thinking: official voices in the defense ministry, two groups of theorists who have regularly dominated thinking regarding the nature of war in Russian military publications, and individual and group thought. Interesting topics include emerging trends in armed struggles, bioweapons, indirect and asymmetric actions, futurology, new-generation weapons, military art, strategic deterrence (both nuclear and nonnuclear), and understanding the concept of geopolitical conditioning. A special interest is Russia's new focus on new-type warfare, which appears to be different from new-generation warfare and is championed by Russia's General Staff.

To view this monograph, visit: http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Thinking%20Like%20A%20Russian%20Officer_monograph_Thomas%20%28final%29.pdf.