Lessons Learned on Lessons Learned – A Retrospective on the CJCS Joint Lessons Learned Program (JLLP)

ABSTRACT

More than 25 years after establishment, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Joint Lessons Learned Program (JLLP) has matured considerably, building on the foundation of three essential lessons learned functions: observation reporting, broad sharing of lessons learned and best practices, and resolving issues as they arise. The program, as it exists today, incorporates additional lessons learned from issues that were resolved. These include: establishing the value of holistic data collection and analysis, using both active and passive collection techniques; balancing the need to share with the need to protect and mitigating dissemination risks; fielding of a single Department of Defense (DoD) system of record for lessons learned, the Joint Lessons Learned Information System (JLLIS), enabling the capture of all relevant observations across all DoD information security domains; reinforcing the principal of solving problems at the lowest possible level; and taking positive steps toward establishment of top-level, consistent strategic management of the JLLP. These are lessons that JLLP leadership believe need to be shared across the lessons learned community of practice, to encourage the widest possible positive impact on organizational learning and development.

The CJCS JLLP got its start just over 25 years ago, as the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) response to external criticism of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) exercise program and of continuing challenges that plagued major joint operations. This paper captures some of the main lessons learned along the way as the program matured into what it is today. One of the primary tenets of lessons learned is that they must be shared as widely as possible to gain the greatest possible benefit from the cost involved in collecting them. Therefore, these lessons are offered to the broader lessons learned community of practice for consideration in planning, establishing, or maintaining other organizational lessons learned programs.

Two reports were published by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in 1979 and 1985, both dealing with issues arising in the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) exercise program. Because DoD lacked a process and a supporting information system to share problems encountered and solved in joint exercises, mistakes were repeated and in some cases impacted real-world operations.

An effective lessons learned program requires, at a minimum, means to:

• Ensure that organizations recognize and report observations
• Record, publish, and share lessons learned and best practices
• Address issues as they arise, in a venue that leads to remedial action

1 U.S. General Accounting Office, Improving the Effectiveness of Joint Military Exercises—An Important Tool for Military Readiness, LCD-80-2, 11 Dec 1979
2 U.S. General Accounting Office, Management of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Exercise Program Has Been Strengthened, But More Needs to be Done, GAO/NSIAD-85-46, 5 March 1985
In response to GAO’s findings, when the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) established the Joint Operational Warplans and Interoperability Directorate (J-7) in early 1987, one of its first tasks was to establish a “Joint Center for Lessons Learned” (JCLL). The JCLL was responsible for unifying three formerly independent processes under a single program. The three processes were: Joint After Action Reporting System (JAARS), Joint Universal Lessons Learned System (JULLS), and the CJCS Remedial Action Program, (RAP). Taken together, these three processes formed the basis of an effective response to GAO’s criticism. Although each has been refined and grown over time, these three processes remain at the bedrock of the JLLP today.

In 1991, Operation DESERT STORM provided one of the first large-scale operational tests of the “jointness” legislated in 1986 by the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act. Operation DESERT STORM was widely viewed as a resounding validation of Joint Force operations. However, problems encountered in subsequent joint operations such as the Hurricane Andrew disaster response in Florida, and Operation RESTORE HOPE in Somalia led to renewed interest from GAO, this time focusing specifically on how the JLLP was being executed. This time, the message was more oriented toward identifying practices that were undermining the program’s effectiveness. In a way, these lessons revealed the results of inadequate institutionalization of the first lesson. Not all observations were being reported; lessons learned and best practices were not readily available to those who needed them; and too often, once issues were considered “resolved,” they were closed without confirming that the solution had actually solved the original problem.

Over the next decade, Joint Staff J-7 worked with the combatant commands, Services, and Defense agencies to improve the program. The Joint Warfighting Center (JWFC) and U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) figured heavily in this effort. Resources were dedicated to increase the ability to analyze After Action Reports (AARs) and other lessons learned submissions to identify trends.

The watershed date of 11 September 2001 was not the first time the U.S. was hit by terrorist action. It was, however, the first major terrorist attack to take place on U.S. soil, and placed the War on Terror at the top of the DoD agenda. Accordingly, the Secretary of Defense demanded to know what lessons had been learned in combating terrorism. The initial response was developed from data gathered using what has come to be called passive collection—meaning that a data call was issued requesting that existing reports and databases be reviewed for information to analyze. The nature of this kind of collection, while useful in establishing a baseline, was less so in supporting the development of a U.S. Government response to the terror attacks.

Recognizing the problem, a different approach was tried: active collection. A collection team was assembled by USJFCOM and, after developing Terms of Reference with Commander, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), deployed to the theater of operations to interview key military leaders and gather near-real-time observations from the field. This information was fed
to a group of rear support analysts who could fuse it with data available from passive collection, producing the first Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) Lessons Learned (LL) report for DoD leadership to act on. The combination of active and passive data collection and dedicated analysis assets proved to be a very effective combination, enabling measurable improvements to ongoing Joint operations.

For major operations, “passive collection” alone is insufficient; but when coupled with “active collection” and top-notch analysis, it can become part of a very effective combination that truly enhances military capabilities.

One of the challenges encountered when actively collecting observations was balancing the need to share with legitimate commander concerns regarding premature release of sensitive information. The Terms of Reference (TOR) document under which the USJFCOM collection team deployed to USCENTCOM’s theater reserved release authority to the respective commanders. The TOR further specified that the collection teams would not be used to evaluate or critique ongoing operations, or to serve interest group analysis of fielded technologies or concepts. In April 2007, the USJFCOM/USCENTCOM TOR served as a template for Enclosure C to CJCSI 3150.25C, institutionalizing the precedent of withholding information by default until released by the supported command. The practice provided a significant benefit to the collection team: virtually unfettered access. However, it also carried a liability in terms of sharing information with other supporting commands and organizations.

This challenge will never completely go away, but J-7 has actively pursued ways of mitigating the risk of improper disclosure. One of the capabilities built in to the Joint Lessons Learned Information System (JLLIS) for this purpose was to provide an observer the means to restrict access to observations while still entering incomplete or preliminary observations. Even if the data is never finalized, it remains in the system, visible only to the originator and his or her organization. This capability, known as permissions-based access, serves to accelerate the process of sharing once the originating organization deems it ready.

Lessons Learned data collection always involves balancing the need to share information quickly with interested parties against the need to restrict access to sensitive information. Where possible, the capabilities of automated tools should be leveraged to reduce the tension between these choices.

For years, DoD sought to replace the obsolete JULLS system, but was unable to gain enough traction to do more than compile a wish list of desired characteristics. Eventually, the Joint Staff simply encouraged all components to develop their own systems, resulting in the development of more than 30 independent, non-interoperable lessons learned systems. According to a comprehensive 2004 OSD/Joint Staff study report, the number and diversity of information management tools was a major factor contributing to the disaggregated structure of the joint lessons learned program. According to users, the tools were difficult to use and access, their functions were poorly understood, and there was a general perception that it just wasn’t worth the time to enter observations. The lack of standardization also hindered the ability to perform basic analysis reviews of that data that did make its way into the various systems.

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Combatant Command feedback to the Joint Staff in 2004-2005 indicated that interest in a common system was growing considerably. In 2005 a formal Capability Development Document (CDD) was developed that provided the technical system detail necessary to begin development of what would become known as the Joint Lessons Learned Information system (JLLIS). The Joint Staff J-7 made a long-term, formal commitment to fulfilling the project management role. Although initially funded on a temporary basis, a pathway was successfully laid to a more permanent funding stream through the J-7 POM submission. JLLIS was formally designated as the DoD system of record for lessons learned in 2008. The JLLIS user base now extends not only across DoD, but to key allies, and it is under serious consideration for use by other agencies in the U.S. Government.

Some of the same dynamics that led to development and establishment of JLLIS were also at play in supporting a fundamental shift of the JLLP as a whole from being focused almost exclusively on the Joint Staff and the JCLL to a distributed program that capitalized on available diverse means of resolving issues. The case for this shift was made compellingly in the OSD/Joint Staff J-7 study cited above. Recognizing that the JLLP served many interests, the report presented a need to seek both horizontal and vertical integration; horizontal for widespread dissemination of lessons, vertical for providing the opportunity to resolve issues at the lowest level while providing a pathway to engage higher headquarters when necessary. The recommended focus areas were based on vertical integration of organizations with strategic, operational, and tactical level interests. OSD, the Joint Staff, and Defense agencies are most interested in strategic issues, and operational issues that may apply across multiple Combatant Commands. The Combatant Commands, because they employ forces of all components, are most interested in joint issues at the operational level of war. The Services, with the role of training and equipping forces, are most interested at the tactical and occasionally operational level of war.

One area of challenge has been changing guidance and non-standard practices. Two recent measures hold great promise to resolve this challenge. In the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. Congress identified joint lessons learned as one of the CJCS’ legal functions, as a part of his mandate of joint force development. Also in 2014, OSD drafted a new DoD Directive, the DoD Lessons Learned Program (DoDD 3010.ab) designed to provide the

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An effective lessons learned program requires consistent, strategic management that issues consistent guidance, publishes and enforces standards of process and system interoperability, and provides top level support for appropriate resourcing.

The JLLP has come a long way in the last 25 years, overcoming institutional challenges while growing into a full-fledged CJCS responsibility, now found in Title 10 of the U.S. Code. The program continues to be founded on the principles of reporting observations, sharing lessons learned and best practices, and resolving issues. This foundation has been enhanced by organizational learning, and will continue to grow and adapt.

This paper has been approved for public release, and unlimited distribution. The views contained are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of Defense.

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