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Coping with Knowledge: Organizational Learning in the British Army?

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ABSTRACT This article – based on data that employs interviews conducted with British Army personnel – adopts a social theory of learning in order to examine how both formal and informal learning systems have affected organizational learning within the Army in relation to the counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan. It argues that while the Army has adopted new, or reformed existing, formal learning systems, these have not generated a reconceptualization of how to conduct counter-insurgency warfare. It, furthermore, argues that while informal learning systems have enabled units to improve their pre-deployment preparations, these have created adaptation traps that have acted as barriers to higher-level learning.

KEY WORDS: Organizational Learning, Organizational Adaptation, British Army, Counter-insurgency, Afghanistan

So, every little thing that you try to do, it's all like wading through treacle.¹

This article examines the organizational learning challenges and opportunities that the British Army has experienced over the last few years in which it has tried to learn how to operate more effectively within the complex counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.² By adopting a social theory of learning, this article argues that organizational learning is not only determined by an organization's formal learning systems, but also influenced by the pervasiveness of

¹Author interview with Lt. Gen. Paul R. Newton, Commanding Officer (CO), Force Development and Training (Land), London, 8 March 2011.

²British Army, henceforth, Army.

informal learning systems in which individuals are able to interpret and make sense of their experiences and share new operational knowledge through social interaction.³ The article shows how British Army personnel have often relied on sharing knowledge informally through social networks in order to make up for the deficiencies experienced with the organization's formal learning systems. Nevertheless, while such informal learning systems have a crucial role in obviating some of the organization's knowledge production deficiencies, these do not necessarily lead to learning throughout the organization. Rather they effect adaptation, which is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for organizational learning to ensue.

As this article will argue when examining organizational learning it is crucial to distinguish higher-level learning – the outcome of which results in the institutionalization of new structures, processes, routines and, most importantly, new conceptual and normative constructs within the organization as a whole – from lower-level learning – the outcome of which leads to the mere correction of errors leading to a change in prescribed practices.⁴ The former equates to organizational learning, whereas the latter to adaptation. By making such a distinction, this article argues that many of the changes relating to the lessons learned processes that have occurred in the Army have not truly led to a major reconceptualization of how it conducts counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare.

Although this study has acknowledged the creation of new, and reform of existing, formal learning processes and systems, the amount of knowledge and the nature of the information that the Army has had to deal with have been quite overwhelming and difficult to cope with. This has led the Army to lag behind in terms of processing and disseminating operationally current and specific knowledge for units about to deploy to Afghanistan. Consequently, social networks have allowed personnel to partly offset the knowledge deficiencies that they have experienced during their pre-deployment preparations and deployments. This article highlights how such informal learning systems mainly focus on short-term, circumscribed and ad hoc problem-solving. Given the random nature that knowledge sharing through informal

³See Bente Elkjaer, 'Social Learning Theory: Learning as Participation in Social Process', in Mark Easterby-Smith and Majory Lyles (eds), *The Blackwell Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005), 38–53; Paddy O'Toole and Steven Talbot, 'Fighting for Knowledge: Developing Learning Systems in the Australian Army', *Armed Forces and Society* 37/1 (Jan. 2011), 42–67.

⁴The distinction between higher-level and lower-level learning is elaborated below.

social networks entails, the Army tends to be prone to ‘organizational forgetting’.⁵

Without the incorporation and institutionalization of new knowledge within the organization, such knowledge is lost once personnel (or units) have moved on or ceased to exist within the organization. This explains why this article posits the institutionalization of new knowledge as a key indicator of the extent to which the Army has realized organizational learning.⁶ This has been the case in the Army, where a lot of the interviewees confessed having to ‘relearn lessons learned’ and ‘reinvent the wheel’ during their deployment.⁷ More crucially, informal learning systems’ emphasis on short-term knowledge and the development of competencies caused by adaptation has often reduced inducements among personnel for assisting the organization’s formal learning system’s efforts at developing new institution-wide knowledge and practices. This article concludes by arguing that due to the fact that adaptation is only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for achieving higher-level learning, the Army will need to bolster further its formal learning systems in order to achieve the latter. The Army will also need to find ways of incorporating new knowledge produced through informal learning systems, which may be beneficial to the whole organization, into its knowledge repositories. Such steps should be more conducive to effect learning that will endure immediate operational challenges and keep up with the Army’s future force structure and capability requirements.

Given the focus on interpretation and on organizational learning experiences, the research approach adopted for this article produced qualitative data.⁸ The data employed in this study consisted mostly of

⁵See Pablo M. De Holan and Nelson Phillips, ‘Remembrance of Things Past? The Dynamics of Organizational Forgetting’, *Management Science* 50/11 (Nov. 2004), 1603–13.

⁶Serena has shown, in his recent study of the US Army’s adaptation during Operation ‘Iraqi Freedom’, that the collection, transfer and integration of knowledge, which together enable the institutionalization of knowledge throughout the whole organization, are essential in facilitating organizational learning. See Chad C. Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation: The US Army in the Iraq War* (Washington DC: Georgetown UP 2011), 15–17.

⁷In a House of Commons Defence Committee hearing Theo Farrell has also attested that this process of learning from, but then again continually repeating, mistakes has led the British to ‘go through ... cycles of constantly rebooting [their] memory and relearning’. Cited from: *The Comprehensive Approach: the point of war is not just to win but to make a better peace – Seventh Report of Session 2009–10*, 9 June 2009 (London: Stationery Office 18 March 2010), 33.

⁸See Robert E. Stake, ‘Qualitative Case Studies’ in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage 2005), 443–66.

the accounts and stories of Army personnel's experiences in trying to make sense and give meaning to their adaptation and learning experiences before and during their deployment to Afghanistan. It also consisted of accounts of personnel involved in the Army's institutional lessons learned, training and force development organizations. The focus on such accounts according to Gabriel enables researchers 'to study organizational politics, culture and change in uniquely illuminating ways, revealing how the wider organizational issues are viewed, commented upon and worked on by their members'.⁹

This article employed data originating from both semi-structured individual interviews and small focus groups conducted with members of the Army's lessons learned and training organizations, and with over 60 combat infantry personnel mainly ranging from the rank of lance corporal to lieutenant colonel who served in either Operations 'Herrick' XI (October 2009–April 2010), XII (April 2010–October 2010) or XIII (October 2010–April 2011). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. *Atlas.ti* data analysis software was employed to help with the management and evaluation of interview data. Quotes used in this article were selected as heuristically representative of the accounts and viewpoints expressed by study participants.¹⁰ Moreover, battlegroup level post-operational reports (PORs) and other classified material were examined for verifying information, but their contents were restricted from being revealed in this article by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD).

Organizational Learning and the Role of Knowledge

Some of the military innovation literature has shown that militaries innovate/learn as a result of external pressures, such as when operational challenges threaten military defeat or when civilian leaders coerce their militaries to innovate.¹¹ Other literatures have highlighted the role that intra-service and inter-service bureaucratic politics play in affecting military innovation.¹² A third school, which focuses on organizational culture, has contended that external threats or bureaucratic pressures may prove insufficient to effect innovation often due to the military's

⁹Cited in O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 48.

¹⁰See O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 49.

¹¹See Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1984), 233–4.

¹²See Deborah Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons From Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1994); Kimberly M. Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation, 1955–1991* (Princeton UP 1993).

organizational culture.¹³ A military's organizational culture influences how the organization reacts to constraints and incentives provided by civilian decision-makers and by its senior military leadership as well as how the organization adapts to, and ultimately learns from, external threats.¹⁴ With specific reference to organizational learning, culture plays a central part in influencing 'when and how learning takes place and what is learned'.¹⁵ The learning process 'in turn influences organizational culture', thus, making 'the relationship between culture and learning ... one of reciprocal interdependence'.¹⁶ This article, consequently, adopts an institutional level of analysis, because as Downie has shown, factors intrinsic to the organization, such as the 'timing and stage of development of the military's institutional learning cycle', are crucial in determining whether or not organizational learning ensues.¹⁷ It, thus, focuses on the formal and informal learning systems that influence the extent to which organizational learning occurs.

While examining the whole literature on organizational learning goes beyond the focus of this article, one can discern within the literature two main traditions.¹⁸ First, a behavioural perspective that views learning as a systematic transformation in structures, rules, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and routines. Second, a cognitive perspective that views learning as a systematic transformation in the shared mental models and understanding of organizational members.¹⁹ Both traditions focus on the changes to the organization's knowledge base brought on by experience.²⁰

Variance in learning and performance within organizations can be ascribed to asymmetries in knowledge and competencies relating to experience. Such variance is the function of the degree to which the

¹³In this article, a military's organizational culture is defined as the mental models, 'embedded beliefs and attitudes ... that shape [an] organization's preference on when and how the military instrument should be used'. Cited from: Robert M. Cassidy, *Peacekeeping in the Abyss: British and American Peacekeeping Doctrine and Practice after the Cold War* (Westport, CT: Praeger 2004), 75.

¹⁴Elizabeth Kier, 'Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars', *International Security* 19/4 (Spring 1995), 65–93. See also Theo Farrell, 'Culture and Military Power', *Review of International Studies* 24/3 (July 1998), 407–16.

¹⁵Victoria Nolan, *Military Leadership and Counterinsurgency: The British Army and Small War Strategy since World War II* (London: I.B. Tauris 2012), 12.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Richard D. Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The US Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (London: Praeger 1998), 7.

¹⁸De Holan and Phillips, 'Remembrance?', 1604.

¹⁹See Richard L. Daft and Karl E. Weick, 'Toward a Model of Organizations as Interpretation Systems', *Academy of Management Review* 9/2 (April 1984), 284–95.

²⁰De Holan and Phillips, 'Remembrance?', 1604.

organization and its constituent units are able to tap into the 'repositories of knowledge' they have access to.²¹ From a knowledge-based viewpoint, organizations are 'repositories of knowledge' embedded in structures, rules, SOPs, mental models and dominant thinking.²² Managing knowledge is crucial to the process of exploiting current knowledge. It is also fundamental for exploring new knowledge and institutionalizing it in order to achieve organizational learning.²³ Change to such knowledge repositories or 'institutional memory is a prerequisite for institutional learning and occurs when an organization ... institutionalizes lessons learned by its members'.²⁴

Organizational learning is institutionalized through the delivery of formal learning programmes – mainly training and education. It then may be enhanced by the pervasiveness of informal learning opportunities.²⁵ Personnel may gain knowledge by means of informal learning mechanisms in which social networks enable them to overcome the shortcomings of the organization's formal learning systems.²⁶ Knowledge, understanding and ideas of learning take place within individuals. However, as Downie argues, although 'individual learning is necessary for institutional learning, it is not sufficient to cause institutional learning'.²⁷ In order for such institutionalization to occur lessons have to be 'widely accepted, shared, and practised as standard procedure by members throughout the organization'.²⁸

The social theory of learning holds that learning within the organization is a social process and that informal social networks also play a role in developing and disseminating new knowledge, especially when the more formal structures and mechanisms that enable organizational learning are found to be deficient.²⁹ In order to enable the organization

²¹See Mary M. Crossan *et al.*, 'Organizational Learning: Dimensions for a Theory', *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* 3/4 (Oct. 1995), 337–60.

²²Barbara Levitt and James G. March, 'Organizational Learning', *Annual Review of Sociology* 13/3 (Aug. 1988), 319–40.

²³James G. March, 'Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning', *Organization Science* 2/1 (Feb. 1991), 71–87.

²⁴Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 23.

²⁵See O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 42–67.

²⁶*Ibid.* Bickel, for example, has shown in his study how information shared through informal processes among personnel enabled units within the US Marine Corps (USMC) to adapt to small wars challenges before the USMC developed new training courses and disseminated institutionally sanctioned lessons. See Keith B. Bickel, *Mars Learning: The Marine Corps Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1915–1940* (Boulder, CO: Westview 2001).

²⁷Downie, *Learning from Conflict*, 24.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹See Elkjaer, 'Social Learning', 38–53; O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 42–67.

to exploit the experiences of earlier individuals and its constituent units and transfer them to current members, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), SOPs, regulations, practices and doctrine are created allowing for collective action to occur within the organization. Such 'organizational routines' help prevent personnel from having to relearn organizational practices.³⁰ They also enable the organization to execute effectively its core competencies.³¹ However, there may be instances in which routines persevere despite poor performance. Organizational routines may decrease incentives for units or individuals to seek out alternative notions and procedures to conventionally-held ones.³² Since what has been learnt is stored in individuals or in organizational knowledge repositories, 'its transience or permanence' relies on what personnel leave behind them when they leave, or transfer within, their organization. Nonetheless, the recording and transforming of new experiences, that is, of 'lessons identified' into organizational routines entails costs and, thus, may not occur even with the increasing automation of lessons learned processes, because the costs may be considered too great.³³ At any stage of the learning process, new knowledge can be lost or discarded.

As suggested by Thomas *et al.*, there are three basic stages that make up the knowledge creation and learning process.³⁴ First, the data collection phase can be conducted through formal data collection systems, such as after action reviews, PORs and interviews, information technology (IT) knowledge management systems that assist in the capture, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge. Yet organizations have 'informal learning systems that should be recognized', because these may also influence their learning processes.³⁵ The second stage involves interpretation, the process by which meaning is given to information and 'the process of translating events and developing shared understandings' of experience.³⁶ Theories of social learning underline how learning transpires through observation and participation in embedded contexts.³⁷ Given that meaning comes from social

³⁰James P. Walsh and Gerardo R. Ungson, 'Organizational Memory', *Academy of Management Review* 16/1 (Jan. 1993), 73.

³¹De Holan and Phillips, 'Remembrance?', 1604.

³²Daniel A. Levinthal and James G. March, 'The Myopia of Learning', *Strategic Management Journal* 14 (Winter 1993), 106.

³³See Levitt and March, 'Organizational Learning', 327.

³⁴See James B. Thomas *et al.*, 'Understanding "Strategic Learning"': Linking Organizational Learning, Knowledge Management, and Sensemaking', *Organization Science* 12/3 (May-June 2001), 331-45.

³⁵O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 47.

³⁶Daft and Weick, 'Toward a Model', 286.

³⁷O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting', 45.

interaction, ‘interpretations are shared through communication’.³⁸ How information gathered from events and experiences is framed influences the interpretation of such information.³⁹ Interpretation within or across organizational units, furthermore, is subject to the individual’s or unit’s capacity or willingness to process information.⁴⁰ The third stage is when learning occurs. ‘Learning ... implies a new response or action based on interpretation’.⁴¹

Higher-Level and Lower-Level Learning: Differentiating Learning from Adaptation

However, one must distinguish between ‘lower-level’ and ‘higher-level’ learning in order gauge whether new knowledge – in the form of new conceptual constructs, structures, processes and routines – has been institutionalized throughout the organization and, thus, whether it will endure beyond immediate operational challenges.⁴²

‘Higher-level learning’ entails modifying the organization’s knowledge management (i.e. collection, analysis and dissemination) and, more importantly, sense-making constructs in significant ways.⁴³ It occurs when responses to detected errors lead to ‘processes of learning where the participant questions fundamental aspects of the organization’,⁴⁴ such as the entrenched beliefs and attitudes that personnel have regarding what the Army’s core functions and identity should be. It is a

³⁸James G. March, *A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen* (London: Free Press 1994), 210.

³⁹See George P. Huber, ‘Organizational Learning: The Contributing Processes and the Literatures’, *Organization Science* 2/1 (Feb. 1991), 102–3.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 103.

⁴¹Daft and Weick, ‘Toward a Model’, 286. Ucko develops a comparable framework in order to examine three co-related stages of learning, which enable him to gauge the extent to which the US Army has been able to learn how to conduct COIN warfare. These, he argues, capture ‘the various manifestations of institutional learning’ and are: (1) achieving an ‘understanding of what counterinsurgency entails and requires’; (2) ‘prioritizing counterinsurgency as a mission’; and (3) ‘developing a capability to conduct such missions through various institutional adjustments and reforms’. Cited from: David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the US Military for Modern Wars* (Washington DC: Georgetown UP 2009), 18.

⁴²See Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1978); Ernst Haas, *When Knowledge Is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1990), 17–49.

⁴³See Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1995).

⁴⁴Chris Argyris, ‘Single-Loop and Double-Loop Models in Research on Decision Making’, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21/3 (Sept. 1976), 367.

process in which new frameworks of understanding and new behavioural norms are institutionalized throughout the organization. This, consequently, leads the organization to reorientate the way it operates beyond the immediacy of current operational requirements. Higher-level learning is activated through deeply interactive routines of knowledge dissemination and transformation, which are conducted through the organization's formal learning systems.⁴⁵

Conversely, 'lower-level learning', which equates to adaptation, entails the alteration of behaviour in order to deal with operational challenges without needing to reassess the whole programme and the logic on which it relies upon for its continued existence.⁴⁶ Adaptation limits itself to rectifying errors within the current system of norms, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions. During operations soldiers 'accumulate tacit knowledge through hands-on experience' and the process of adaptation remains 'personal unless they are articulated and amplified through social interaction'.⁴⁷ Yet while O'Toole and Talbot argue that social networks enable individuals and groups to share and acquire knowledge and learn,⁴⁸ such knowledge acquisition concentrates rather on short-term and immediate problem-solving. It is also limited by the ad hoc nature of such social interactions. Informal learning mechanisms have a limited reach within the organization and do not produce institution-wide learning, but rather localized adaptation.

Adaptation is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for organizational learning to ensue. Although adaptation may boost current performance, it frequently diminishes incentives for seeking new institution-wide approaches or paradigms. That is, '[adaptation] has its own traps'.⁴⁹ It can be of limited duration and impact. Individual or clusters of units within an organization may adapt and even learn, but when personnel leave their unit of reference, that unit may forget insights gathered through adaptation. Thus, the individual and group

⁴⁵See Gunnar Hedlund and Ikijuro Nonaka, 'Models of Knowledge Management in the West and Japan', in Peter Lorange (ed.), *Implementing Strategic Processes, Change, Learning and Cooperation* (London: Basil Blackwell 1998), 117–44.

⁴⁶C. Marlene Fiol and Marjorie A. Lyles, 'Organizational Learning', *Academy of Management Review* 10/4 (Oct. 1985), 807. On the distinction between military adaptation and military innovation, see Theo Farrell, 'Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006–2009', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33/4 (Aug. 2010), 569.

⁴⁷Ikijuro Nonaka, 'A Dynamic Theory of Knowledge Creation', *Organization Science* 5/1 (Feb. 1994), 14–37.

⁴⁸See O'Toole and Talbot, 'Fighting'.

⁴⁹Levinthal and March, 'The Myopia', 97.

knowledge repositories leave the organization leading to various degrees of ‘organizational forgetting’.⁵⁰

Organizational forgetting can be problematic in that a unit will maintain, or revert back to former routines and underlying assumptions. Under time and resource constraints both individuals and institutions ‘will not only induce falling back on routine responses, but will also lead to a preference for those routine responses that are rehearsed more often’.⁵¹ This can explain why the execution of distributed offensive operations, which played on the strength of the Army’s manoeuvrist approach to warfare has been a familiar, yet unfitting, way for military commanders to cope with the Helmand insurgency.⁵² It was after all what commanders were trained and educated to do since joining the military. Until changes to the lessons learned, training and education processes were implemented on a significant scale, commanders were bound to revert to what they were conditioned to do: conduct enemy-centric mobile offensive operations with often deleterious effects on the Helmand campaign.⁵³

Although the Army’s inability to operate on the basis of close civil-military cooperation and of establishing political primacy in its COIN campaign could partly be ascribed to, as explained by Egnell, the resource and manpower constraints that the various British Task Forces were under until 2007,⁵⁴ since then there has been quite a significant surge of personnel and resources (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) as well as a surge in civilian staff and civil-military coordination and implementation efforts.⁵⁵

Furthermore, some of the progress achieved in Helmand since 2009, as Farrell, and Farrell and Gordon have argued, can also be ascribed to several exogenous dynamics linked to the operational environment that have permitted the Army to conduct COIN operations under less structural constraints, such as: the increase in capacity and numbers

⁵⁰See De Holan and Phillips, ‘Remembrance?’, 1603–13.

⁵¹Markus C. Becker, ‘Organizational Routines: A Review of the Literature’, *Industrial and Corporate Change* 13/4 (Aug. 2004), 650.

⁵²Anthony King, ‘Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Afghanistan’, *International Affairs* 86/2 (March 2010), 311–32.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴See Robert Egnell, ‘Lessons from Helmand, Afghanistan: What Now for British Counterinsurgency’, *International Affairs* 87/2 (Mar. 2011), 305–6.

⁵⁵See Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon, ‘COIN Machine’, *RUSI Journal* 154/3 (June 2009), 18–25; *The Comprehensive Approach*; Daniel Korski, ‘British Civil-Military Integration’, *RUSI Journal* 154/6 (Dec. 2009), 14–24. See also updates regarding the UK-led Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team’s activities: Afghanistan, <www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/about-us/where-we-work/afghanistan.html>.

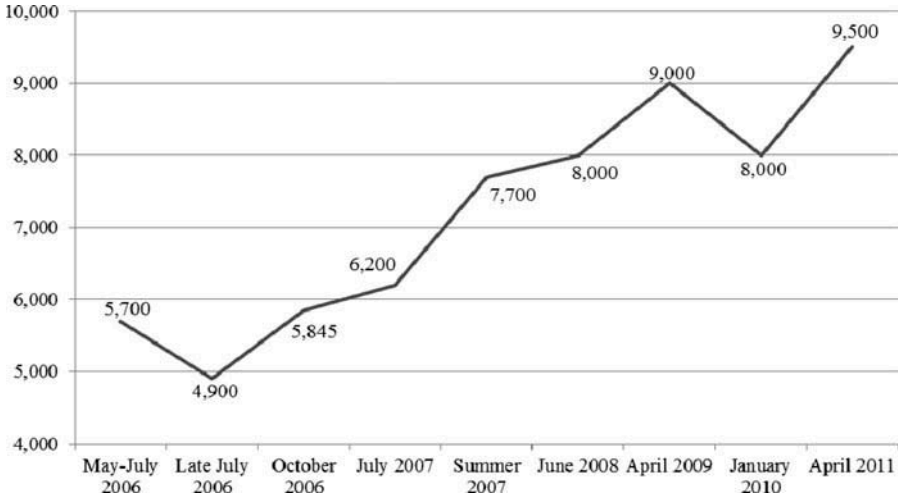


Figure 1. Troop Levels in Afghanistan May 2006–April 2011.

Source: *The Cost of International Military Operations, SN/SG/3139* (London: House of Commons 5 July 2012).

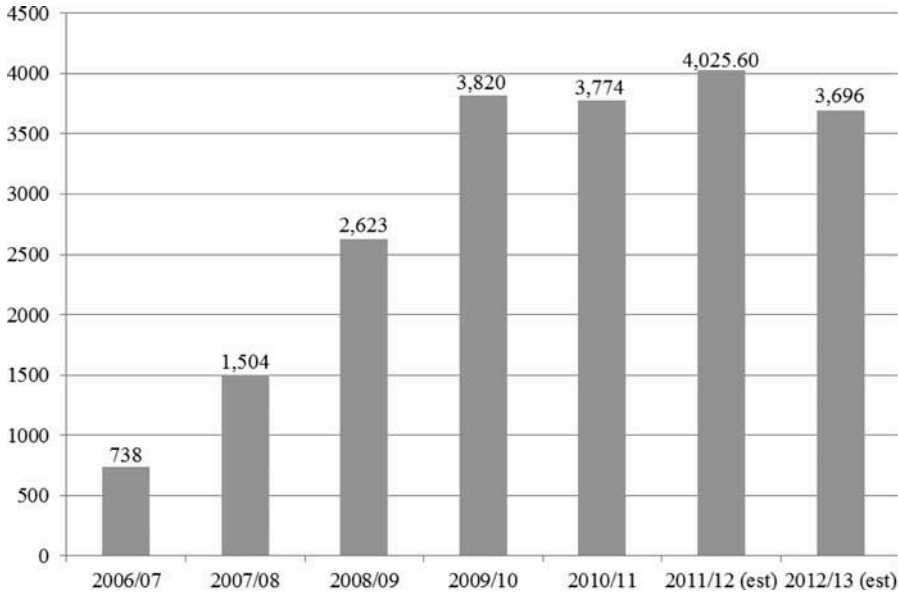


Figure 2. Net Cost of Military Operations in Afghanistan, £ million.

Source: *MoD Annual Report and Accounts 2010–11, HC1635* (London: Stationery Office 25 Jan. 2012); *MoD Main Estimates 2012–13, HC133* (London: Stationery Office 22 June 2012).

of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),⁵⁶ the US troop surge in Helmand (and in Afghanistan in general);⁵⁷ and the change in Taliban tactics, which have tended to avoid direct set-piece battles in favour of opportunistic ambushes and the increasing employment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) over the last four years.⁵⁸ Notwithstanding such a surge in materiel and personnel and improving civil-military integration efforts, as King has observed, the Army's difficulties in implementing a principally population-centric COIN strategy based on the precept of political primacy and on the protection of the population, is a consequence of the Army's organizational culture, which leads its commanders to be 'driven by the need to act' and 'to be seen to seize the initiative (in a conventional military way)', through the implementation of 'indecisive offensive operations', that is 'kinetic operations', which have been deleterious to the achievement of the UK's campaign objectives in Helmand.⁵⁹

As highlighted by Foley *et al.*, the Army's shortcomings in conducting effective COIN operations have also been the symptom of the 'deep-rooted internal weaknesses in doctrine and education' given that the Army lacked an organizational structure that combined 'force development, training and education' and a 'formalized process of learning lessons'.⁶⁰ With specific reference to Britain's historical experiences with COIN this has often led to a repetitive and painful process of relearning 'lessons learned' in almost every COIN campaign. Mockaitis, for example, has argued that Britain has approached each internal-security/COIN campaign 'on a more or less *ad hoc* basis'.⁶¹

Mockaitis has attributed the Army's informal or 'common sense' COIN approach to its lack of official doctrine or, once produced, to its inability to circulate it as well as to provide its personnel focused educational and training opportunities. To rectify such shortcomings, informal methods of transmitting experience relating to COIN warfare were often used. This, however, did not discount the fact that such

⁵⁶By the end of 2006, 86,000 ANSF had been stood up. By March 2009 troop levels had risen to 162,690 and by April 2011 to 286,003. See Ian S. Livingston and Michael O'Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index* (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, May 2012), 6.

⁵⁷In Helmand US reinforcements were initially provided by an USMC battalion in spring 2008 and subsequently by an 11,000-strong division-sized USMC task force as part of US President Barack Obama's initial 21,000-troop surge.

⁵⁸See Farrell, 'Improving in War', 567–94; Farrell and Gordon, 'COIN Machine', 18–25.

⁵⁹King, 'Understanding the Helmand Campaign', 322 and 313.

⁶⁰Robert T. Foley *et al.*, 'Transformation in Contact: Learning the Lessons of Modern War', *International Affairs* 82/2 (March 2011), 260.

⁶¹Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–60* (New York: St Martin's Press 1990), 187.

methods often ‘left much to chance’ and led to a situation in which the opening phase of each COIN campaign was distinguished by a ‘costly period of uncertainty’ in which lessons had to be relearned.⁶²

Likewise, in a recent historical study of the evolution of the Army’s approach to small wars between 1948 and 1960 Nolan, while demonstrating its development of a distinctive and successful ‘small wars culture’ and approach, highlights several instances in which the Army forgot what it had learned during several consecutive, if not overlapping, COIN campaigns. This led the Army to adopt at the beginning of each conflict, ‘ineffective approaches’.⁶³ Nolan argues that the Army was able to eventually re-learn, institutionalize and internalize such a ‘small wars culture’ as a result of the fact that charismatic organizational leaders took on campaign leadership positions through which they were instrumental ‘in embedding and transmitting ... its small wars culture’ during such campaigns.⁶⁴

The Army’s late realization of its deficiencies in conducting effective COIN together with the poor operational performance experienced during the initial years of the Afghan campaign similarly led to the introduction of Operation ‘Entirety’ in late 2009 in order to ‘put the Army onto a full war footing’ and,⁶⁵ thus, prioritize and effect changes to the Field Army’s force structure, equipment, doctrine and concepts, training, staffing, and lessons learned procedures for the Helmand campaign.⁶⁶ It was hoped that such changes would enable the Army to meet operational requirements in a more rapid and effective manner. Then designate Chief of the General Staff, General Sir David Richards, justified the need for such changes by portraying them as a ‘fundamental re-think of the way we prepare and equip our armed forces for the twenty-first century’.⁶⁷

⁶²Ibid., 188. In spite of an almost uninterrupted succession of COIN campaigns during the period which Mockaitis analyses Britain’s COIN experiences, the Army still found it difficult to institutionalize such knowledge. French has similarly argued that the British have had a chequered past in institutionalizing their COIN campaign lessons during the two decades following World War II and has mainly ascribed this to the high personnel turnover rates – and, consequently, organizational forgetting – that the Army was subject due to its conscript-based structure. See David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945–1967* (Oxford: OUP 2011).

⁶³See Nolan, *Military Leadership and Counterinsurgency*, 210.

⁶⁴Ibid., 223.

⁶⁵‘Afghanistan’, *British Army Review* 148 (Winter 2009/2010), 3.

⁶⁶See ‘Mission Brief: Op Entirety’, *Soldier Magazine* 67/5 (May 2011), 15.

⁶⁷Gen. Sir David Richards, ‘Twenty-first Century Armed Forces: Agile, Useable, Relevant’, 25 June 2009, <www.rusi.org/events/ref:E496B737B57852/info:public/#.UOmL2OQ3iSo>.

Yet while new COIN doctrine has been produced by the Army, Catignani has shown how such doctrine does not substantially differ from previous iterations of British COIN doctrine and principles. As shall be seen below, doctrine also has not been properly taught and implemented in both education and training programmes. In terms of staffing, some changes have been introduced in order to create new (but often ad hoc) population-centric roles with the expectation of better resourcing cultural awareness, human intelligence and information exploitation tasks. Catignani, however, has raised concerns regarding the quality and quantity of such resourcing as well as the outdated personnel evaluation system, which reduce personnel's incentives to develop capabilities in such areas, despite the crucial role that they play in COIN warfare.⁶⁸

In terms of emergency equipment provision, the Army has met its immediate operational requirements in Afghanistan more effectively. However, the fact that such provision has come in the guise of 'Urgent Operational Requirements' – that is, it has been funded from the UK Treasury's Government Reserve rather than from the MoD's budget – means that such ad hoc and provisional resourcing has not run under the MoD's core procurement programme. Such an arrangement has enabled the MoD to continue to maintain and invest, despite a decade of COIN warfare, in costly technologically-advanced core conventional procurement programmes of dubious benefit to current and future conflict scenarios.⁶⁹ The current financial crisis and the budget cuts proposed by the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) have also led to the situation in which almost none of the £8 billion set aside for uncommitted programme funding (mainly used to fund UORs created to tackle the COIN/hybrid warfare mission) by the MoD over the next 10 years will be available as of next year.⁷⁰

More importantly, as the rest of this article will argue, changes to the education, training and lessons learned processes within the Army have not led to a 'fundamental re-think' on how to conduct COIN.

⁶⁸See Sergio Catignani, "Getting COIN" at the Tactical Level in Afghanistan: Reassessing COIN Adaptation in the British Army', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/4 (Aug. 2012), 513–39.

⁶⁹See Timothy Edmunds and Anthony Forster, *Out of Step: The Case for Change in the British Armed Forces* (London: Demos 2007), 30–46.

⁷⁰See Andrew Chuter, '60% of UK "White Board" Programs Could be Cut', *Defense News*, 19 Nov. 2012, <<http://mobile.defensenews.com/article/311170001>>.

Education, Training and Doctrine

As current Army doctrine suggests, ‘training without education is unlikely to be sophisticated enough to deal with the complexity of conflict and operations’.⁷¹ Yet, the education that mid-ranking officers, many of whom have held key positions at brigade, battlegroup and company levels of command in Afghanistan, have received on various education courses have arguably been unfit for purpose for the Army’s COIN campaigns. Since 1998, mid-career officers – command and staff officers at company, battalion and brigade levels of command – from the three armed services have undergone joint education at the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) through three key progressive courses: (1) the Intermediate Command and Staff Course-Land (ICSC-L); (2) the Advanced Command and Staff Course (ACSC); and (3) the Higher Command and Staff Course (HCSC).

The 30-week ICSC-L, which prepares senior majors for command and staff jobs at battalion and above levels until recently dedicated only two days to COIN. Stabilisation-related, and to a smaller extent COIN-related, study has increased over the last three years; officers now study for six weeks British peace-support operations and the comprehensive approach to COIN.⁷² Within this six-week block, four weeks focus on planning exercises and two weeks focus on theory and doctrine.⁷³ Yet only two hours of directed reading on current COIN doctrine and theory, encapsulated in *Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 – Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution (JDP 3-40)* and *Army Field Manual Countering Insurgency Volume 1 – Part 10 (AFM Countering Insurgency)*, were allocated in the 2010–11 course study plan.⁷⁴

Likewise, until very recently on the ACSC, less than 10 per cent of the year focused on sub-conventional warfare. It offered three modular options on stabilisation (13 days’ instruction in total), one of which partly focused on COIN.⁷⁵ The new ‘Stabilisation and Security’ module does last three weeks, but it also includes the full spectrum of operations associated with sub-conventional warfare: peace-support operations, terrorism and counter-terrorism, stabilisation operations, security sector reform and COIN. Focus on the UK COIN approach and

⁷¹Army Doctrine Publication, *Operations* (Shrivenham, UK: MoD 2010), 2–9.

⁷²See *About the Course*, Intermediate Command and Staff Course, <<http://da.mod.uk/icscl/about/>>.

⁷³Author email correspondence with Lt. Col. James Heardman, Course Instructor, *ICSC-Land*, 25 Aug. 2011.

⁷⁴*Course 7A – Term 2 Planning Programme, ICSC-Land*.

⁷⁵See Col. David Benest, ‘British Leaders and Irregular Warfare’, *British Army Review* 139 (Spring 2006), 10; Col. Alex Alderson, ‘COIN: Learn and Adapt? Can We Do Better?’, *British Army Review* 142 (Summer 2007), footnote 8, 16.

doctrine is compressed into only two 45-minute lectures and one 45-minute panel discussion.⁷⁶ While these sessions on UK COIN doctrine are aimed at examining *JDP 3-40*, the actual manual itself is not read for such sessions. Rather, a 'Study Purple' hand-out (i.e. lesson summary) is employed.⁷⁷ Although such Study Purples are useful revision tools and provide discussion points for staff college students, Development Concepts Doctrine Centre (DCDC) doctrine writers have voiced their frustration regarding the fact that doctrine is not really read during staff courses even though the JCSC as part of the wider UK Defence Academy is 'the vehicle for the dissemination of that doctrine'.⁷⁸ As a senior officer at DCDC has contended, 'using Purples is not really helping us encourage officers to read doctrine'.⁷⁹

Moreover, although the above three sessions are focused on COIN doctrine, *AFM Countering Insurgency* is overlooked given that it is a single-service manual. According to the Afghan COIN Centre director, in September 2010 the distribution of free copies of *AFM Countering Insurgency* were offered to each ACSC student, but the offer was declined as ACSC directing staff believed that single service doctrine was not germane to the course.⁸⁰ While such an omission may be in principle understandable, because the course focuses on joint operations, in practice this means that over 30 per cent of each cohort comprising Army officers is not given the opportunity to undergo directed study on its key doctrine manual.⁸¹

More importantly, although the addition and study of *JDP 3-40* is a welcome attempt at creating joint and operational-level doctrine that aims to give 'guidance into the way the military should think about their contribution to stabilisation',⁸² Griffin has highlighted the publication's inherent conceptual ambiguity particularly in the way it tries to distinguish itself, in a rather confusing manner, from British COIN principles and doctrine.⁸³ Notwithstanding the fact that contemporary operational

⁷⁶*Instructional Specification – Stabilisation Operations*, ACSC 14, March 2011.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Hew Strachan, 'One War, Joint Warfare', *RUSI Journal* 154/4 (Aug. 2009), 23

⁷⁹Author interview with senior officer of the land doctrine team, DCDC, Shrivenham, 10 Dec. 2010. Similar viewpoint shared in author interview with Col. (RM) Nick Lindley, Assistant Head Joint Functional Doctrine, DCDC, Shrivenham, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁸⁰Author interview with Col. Alex Alderson, Director, Afghan COIN Centre, Warminster, 16 Feb. 2011.

⁸¹Strachan, 'One War', 23.

⁸²*JDP 3-40 Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution* (Shrivenham, UK: MoD 2009), v.

⁸³See Stuart Griffin, 'Iraq, Afghanistan and the Future of British Military Doctrine: From Counterinsurgency to Stabilization', *International Affairs* 87/2 (March 2011), 317–33.

challenges confronting the British armed forces have been insurgencies for the last decade, insufficient attention has been given to COIN on a 46-week long course aimed at majors and lieutenant colonels, the top 20 per cent of whom will eventually go on to command battalions.⁸⁴ Finally, the HCSC, which is aimed at a select group of one star-officers, focuses on the principles and conduct of joint warfare at the operational command level. It also aids officers to plan and execute operations with a better understanding of the wider strategic context in which these take place. Still, only a very small share of the three-month HCSC is dedicated to 'irregular warfare'.⁸⁵

Coping with Knowledge

In spite of the changes and attempts at creating new, or at improving existing, lessons learned processes introduced under the leadership of Force Development & Training-Land (FDT-L) Command since 2009, the historical analysis of which goes beyond the scope of this article,⁸⁶ such processes have had some unintended results. Seeking out organizational knowledge has proven difficult given the explosion of information availability that has occurred in the military as a result of the rise in number of data collection and storage systems hastened by reforms. Seeking out such knowledge has become difficult given the upsurge in the number and the type of units with their own specific data capture, analysis and dissemination processes, which personnel have contended with. As one battlegroup commander stated, 'I think there is a blizzard of new acronyms, processes and technologies, which is coming out through the FDT-L and is hard to keep up with.... [and] work these out'.⁸⁷

Such difficulties are also due to the fact that the sharing and coordination of lessons identified have led to some duplication of effort. Both the Land Warfare Development Group (LWDG), the main organization responsible for Army's current lessons learned process, and the

⁸⁴See *Course Structure*, Advanced Command and Staff Course, <www.da.mod.uk/colleges/jscsc/acsc>.

⁸⁵Author interviews with Brig. James Cowan, former Task Force Helmand Commander ('Herrick' 11), London, 5 Nov. 2010 and Maj. Gen. (RM) Gordon Messenger, former Task Force Helmand Commander ('Herrick' 9), London, 2 Nov. 2010. See also Higher Command and Staff Course, <www.da.mod.uk/colleges/jscsc/courses/hcsc>.

⁸⁶For a detailed analysis see Tom Dyson, 'Organizing for Counter-insurgency: Explaining Doctrinal Adaptation in Britain and Germany', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33/1 (April 2012), 27–58; Foley *et al.*, 'Transformation in Contact', 253–70.

⁸⁷Author interview with Lt. Col. Roly Walker, CO, 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, 26 Jan. 2011, London.

Operational Training Advisory Group (OPTAG), the main organization for delivering individual and collective sub-unit training, have tended to stovepipe lessons identified by their respective lessons learned embeds from both theatre and training. The LWDG doctrine and lessons director raised this issue by stating that, 'they [i.e., OPTAG] also have their own embeds in theatre And everyone has to break down stovepipes. It's a continual battle to share with each other'.⁸⁸ Analysing lessons identified and sharing these were challenges that were also conveyed by DCDC doctrine writing personnel when commenting on the difficulties that DCDC has faced in trying to convert lessons identified by Permanent Joint Headquarters into operational doctrine. According to the DCDC head of lessons, such difficulties have been partly due to:

DCDC not being able to get the lessons sorted and understand what's going on, but a lot of it is that lessons suffer from exactly the same problems as doctrine, it's a fractured community and it's really hard to pull together in a cohesive way and make changes happen.⁸⁹

Those tasked with analysing new knowledge stated in their interview that the access to information was not the real problem, but dealing instead with the mass of 'raw' information they confronted. As several officers admitted, extracting relevant information and analysing it in order to convert it into corporate knowledge has been the major challenge for those involved in the lessons learned process. The LWDG director admitted that 'we have got a wealth of information; hundreds and hundreds of lessons identified that have never been processed'.⁹⁰ Similarly, the director of the Afghan COIN Centre also admitted that the lessons process relating to the COIN campaign lacked any 'regular campaign analysis'.⁹¹ Knowledge management has been also another

⁸⁸ Author interview with Brig. Piers Hankinson, Director Doctrine and Lessons, LWDG, Warminster, 15 Feb. 2011. Similar concerns were raised by several officers during a group briefing with the author at OPTAG, Thetford, 4 May 2011.

⁸⁹ Author interview with Lt. Col. (Ret.) Paddy Clarke, SO1 Lessons, DCDC, Shrivenham, 10 Dec. 2010. Similar points raised in author interview with Ms Amanda Coleman, Assistant Head Development, Analysis & Research, DCDC, Shrivenham, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁹⁰ Author interview with Maj. Gen. Andrew Kennett, Director LWDG, London, 11 Feb. 2011. This lessons conversion problem has also been raised in Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, *From General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and Influence*, The Shrivenham Papers No. 9 (Shrivenham: Defence Academy Dec. 2009), 27–8.

⁹¹ Author interview with Col. Alex Alderson.

challenge that lessons learned units faced, leading the Second-in-Command (2IC) of the Land Warfare Centre's Lessons Exploitation Centre (LXC)⁹² to intimate that the lessons learned process itself has overtaken the LXC's ability to convert and institutionalize many of the lessons identified into actual lessons learned:

What we lack desperately in our organization is an Information Manager ... I spend an inordinate amount of time moving information from one system to another, filing it, drawing it out and everything like that.... *There is a danger that the process is overtaking the output.* [author's emphasis]⁹³

In other words, many of the lessons identified have not been incorporated into the Army's organizational routines and not yet led to major organizational learning and military innovation relating to COIN warfare. Moreover, there has not been yet a major reconceptualization of how to conduct a more focused population-centric COIN campaign throughout the Army.⁹⁴ This can also be explained partly by the fact that the focus of lessons identified has related preponderantly to techno-centric, health and safety and procedural issues.⁹⁵ A case in point is the LWDG's 'Defence Lessons Identified Management System', which was established to generate lessons identified so that stakeholders within the Army and wider defence community are able to process them.⁹⁶ As Farrell has also noted, even this system produces a rather 'mechanical process that encourages a tick-box approach and fails to distinguish and prioritize big operational lessons from small technical lessons'.⁹⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that significant amounts of lessons identified regarding the conduct of the Helmand COIN campaign have not been translated into doctrine, doctrine does still inform Army training. Despite the existence of the new *AFM Countering Insurgency*, the

⁹²The LXC is tasked with capturing, analysing and fusing best practice and lessons from operations in order to deliver the most current operational and tactical knowledge to field units.

⁹³Author interview with Maj. Dave Hunt, SO2, LXC, Warminster, 16 Feb. 2011.

⁹⁴For publications arguing that the Army has learnt to implement an effective COIN campaign in Helmand, see Farrell, 'Improving in War', 567–94; Farrell and Gordon, 'COIN Machine', 18–25. For more recent publications arguing the contrary, see Catignani, 'Getting COIN', 513–39; Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2011).

⁹⁵Author interview with Mr Rupert Lescott, Consultant, LXC, Warminster, 15 Feb. 2011.

⁹⁶Author interview Maj. (Ret.) John Rye, Consultant, LXC, Warminster, 15 Feb. 2011.

⁹⁷Farrell, 'Improving in War', 583.

Army's organizational culture and, thus, preference for conventional operations and training has ensured that conventional doctrine still informs the Army's force preparation and generation. While the Army since late 2009 has changed its training progression – which now consists of 12 months of core 'Hybrid Foundation Training' (HFT) and six months of 'Mission-Specific Training' (MST) – in order to incorporate more training relevant to the asymmetric threat environment, a lot of the training is still focused, in fact, on conventional TTPs. The HFT phase still emphasizes the maintenance of core conventional capabilities, 'the basics'. According to Levinthal and March, when an organization decides to focus on what it deems to be 'the basics', 'the incentive for and competence with new ... paradigms', diminishes.⁹⁸

During the initial two years of Operation 'Entirety', steps were taken towards incorporating more training serials involving COIN-related and hybrid warfare scenarios.⁹⁹ However, the introduction into HFT of some COIN-relevant training serials was more a result of trying to decompress the pressures that MST was falling under given that new TTP lessons from Afghanistan were being increasingly incorporated into pre-deployment training (PDT), thus, cluttering an already overburdened PDT process,¹⁰⁰ rather than the result of a paradigm shift in the way the Army was supposed to train and prepare for COIN. That is, more recent attempts at trying to incorporate COIN-relevant training into HFT have not been pursued as a result of organizational learning, but rather as an expedient method of incorporating some of the tactical training forfeited during MST due also to the increase in technical training requirements. A National Audit Office (NAO) audit concluded that, 'with the high demand for drivers on operations and the increase in equipment types [i.e. mainly ISR and force protection platforms], priority is given to personnel doing technical training'.¹⁰¹

While some training serials involving COIN/hybrid warfare training (e.g. counter-IED drills, working with indigenous security forces, urban patrols, etc.) were being introduced within HFT during the initial couple of years of Operation 'Entirety',¹⁰² the UK's decision to

⁹⁸Levinthal and March, 'The Myopia', 97.

⁹⁹See Sarah Goldthorpe, 'Future Fight: Canada Readies Troops for Post-Helmand Combat', *Soldier Magazine* 67/8 (Aug. 2011), 25–7.

¹⁰⁰The OPTAG officer responsible for training development had admitted that 'at OPTAG the scope of our training just gets bigger and bigger, but we don't have the capacity to do it all'. Author interview with Maj. Gary Wolfenden, SO2 OPTAG, OPTAG, Thetford, 4 May 2011.

¹⁰¹National Audit Office, *Support to High Intensity Operations* (London: Stationery Office 14 May 2009), 37.

¹⁰²See Richard Long, 'Storming the Prairie', *Soldier Magazine* 66/7 (July 2010), 23–5.

implement NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) transition strategy in order to terminate the ISAF mission in Afghanistan by 2014,¹⁰³ has provided an even greater inducement for the Army to default back to training more in line with its predilection for kinetic conventional manoeuvre warfare scenarios.

Thus, only one year after Operation 'Entirety' had come into full swing, already the commander of the Army's Collective Initial Training Group, when commenting on the effect that it had had on the Army's foundation training, had delineated changes to the Army's training progression as, 'very much about adaptation, "bending existing structures and modus operandi out of shape" while in contact'.¹⁰⁴ Having bent 'existing structures and modus operandi', the commander was already calling for the '**reset [of some] of the combined arms manoeuvre skills**' [emphasis in original].¹⁰⁵ By late 2011, that is, three years before the UK was set to cease its combat operations in Afghanistan, HFT was already resetting its sights to basic war-fighting training. Lieutenant Colonel David Robinson, CO of the 1st Royal Gurkha Rifles, enthusiastically commented on how the HFT that his unit had just undergone was focused on 'hard war-fighting'.¹⁰⁶ He also emphasized the fact that 'the major difference between this and mission-specific training is that there is a conventional force with an armoured threat and capable systems to match our own – so we're using lessons learnt from conflicts other than southern Afghanistan'.¹⁰⁷

Thus, in 'Wessex Thunder', a major HFT training exercise, training is conducted in order to ensure 'battlegroups ... are up to speed with core skills and drills'.¹⁰⁸ Another recent HFT training exercise, dubbed 'Bayonet Thrust', was also focused on enabling personnel to revert 'back to conventional soldiering after years of preparing for Operation "Herrick"'.¹⁰⁹ Personnel of the 3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment (3 PARA) seemed relieved to undergo training in

¹⁰³Adopted at the NATO Lisbon Summit in Nov. 2010, the transition strategy began being implemented in July 2011. See Louisa Brooke-Holland and Claire Taylor, *Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition*, SN/IA/5851 (London: House of Commons 9 July 2012).

¹⁰⁴Brig. Richard R. Smith, 'Delivery of Military Capability – Training, Basing and Living', *RUSI Land Warfare Conference*, 1 June 2011, <www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Brigadier_R_R_Smith_Speaking_Notes.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Joe Clapson, 'Plain Schemers: Exercise Showcases Scope of Service Training Unit', *Soldier Magazine* 68/1 (Jan. 2012), 32.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Joe Clapson, 'Afghanistan to Anywhere: Paras Prepare for Contingency Tasks', *Soldier Magazine* 68/2 (Feb. 2012), 34.

line with their warrior ethos and self-identity. According to one senior NCO, HFT 'is about going back to old-school soldiering, which is what the British Army does best. It's more Brecon-style tactics.... So, this is going back to our bread and butter'.¹¹⁰ Another NCO reiterated that, 'it's a good thing we are withdrawing from Helmand.... The blokes joined to do things like fighting in woods and forests, not walking around with Vallons [mine-detectors] worrying about IEDs'.¹¹¹

In terms of PDT, although many insights from the current Helmand campaign have been incorporated into MST, it has tended to focus on mission survival/force protection TTPs and familiarization with new command and control, weapons and transport platforms. As one of the senior OPTAG training officers admitted:

If you had to fall on one side of the non-kinetic vs. kinetic approach, OPTAG is always falling on the 'I don't want you to get blown up by an IED, I don't want you to get shot' side. So, I'm going to focus on those kinetic things that will kill or maim you, because I only got this much time. It's harder for me to take 100 and some soldiers out on the plains and teach them how to do partnering.¹¹²

In sum, MST and particularly HFT have provided little opportunity for personnel to develop a better conceptual understanding of population-centric COIN principles and their practical implementation, particularly below the battlegroup command level.¹¹³ Again, this can be explained partly by the fact that although many lessons have been identified for quite some time, these have not been institutionalized into the Army's core training progression. As the LXC director admitted:

We are trying to identify the things we are doing at the moment on operations, but what we have not done is put that into our core training. To put it into our core training you need to write doctrine, because you can't put something into training and not have doctrine behind it. We recognize that this must happen.¹¹⁴

Even in the case of getting officers up to speed with the Army's current COIN doctrine, the majority of officers below the rank of major and senior NCOs are exempt from reading more than a six-page booklet on

¹¹⁰'Final Word', *Soldier Magazine* 68/2 (Feb. 2012), 98.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²OPTAG Training Group Briefing with author, OPTAG, Thetford, 4 May 2011.

¹¹³See Catignani, 'Getting COIN', 513–39.

¹¹⁴Author interview with Col. Neil Wilson, Director, LXC, Warminster, 16 Feb. 2011.

the essentials of COIN, which at best can provide only a notional grasp of COIN principles.¹¹⁵ The Afghan COIN Centre, established in late 2008, distributes COIN-focused literature within the military. It also provides several short courses on ‘COIN basics and principles’ such as the ‘COIN Conceptual Cadre’ and the ‘COIN Tactical Cadre’, but according to its director, these are brief and, at best, ‘remedial initiatives’ in relation to the level of training and education that would be necessary to change the culture and mindset of personnel for COIN operations.¹¹⁶

Social Networks as Knowledge Facilitators

The supposed insight and innate expertise towards COIN that the Army felt it has did not prevent it,¹¹⁷ unfortunately, from suffering embarrassing setbacks during the latter years of the Iraq campaign and during several of its ‘Herrick’ deployments.¹¹⁸ As a result of operational setbacks the lessons learned process, as mentioned above, has undergone changes in order to better prepare units for deployment to Afghanistan. Notwithstanding such reforms, personnel’s access to such new knowledge repositories has been challenging, leading many to resort to informal social networks to gain current knowledge of the Helmand campaign. Several commanders stated in interviews how they would contact counterparts from other regiments who had already served in Helmand in order to get tactical tips on how to operate once deployed. For example, one officer stated: ‘Anybody you know who’s been across

¹¹⁵Author telephone interview with Lt. Col. Dickie Head, SO1 Education, Afghan COIN Centre, 1 Aug. 2011. See also ‘An Encouraging Development – Force Development and Training’, *British Army Review* 150 (Winter 2010/2011), 6.

¹¹⁶Author interview with Col. Alex Alderson. Changing the culture and mindset of personnel becomes all the more difficult given the anti-intellectual culture and ‘course mentality’ many military personnel have in relation to learning beyond what is covered in education and training serials. See Claudia Harvey and Mark Wilkinson, ‘The Value of Doctrine: Assessing British Officers’ Perspectives’, *RUSI Journal* 154/6 (Dec. 2009), 26–31.

¹¹⁷See David Betz and Anthony Cormack, ‘Iraq, Afghanistan and British Strategy’, *Orbis* 53/2 (Spring 2009), 319–36; Andrew Mumford, *The COIN Myth: The British Experience of Irregular Warfare* (London: Routledge 2011); David Ucko, ‘Lessons from Basra: The Future of British Counter-Insurgency’, *Survival* 52/4 (Aug.–Sept. 2010), 131–58.

¹¹⁸See Warren Chin, ‘British COIN in Afghanistan’, *Defense & Security Analysis* 23/2 (2007), 201–25; Egnell, ‘Lessons from Helmand’, 297–315.

then you will naturally speak to them and ask, “What have you been doing? How have you been doing it, etc.?”¹¹⁹

Relationships developed in previous shared contexts of experience, whether on missions, training, courses or staff postings, have facilitated the creation of informal social networks enabling knowledge sharing among personnel.¹²⁰ As a learning mechanism, social networks have allowed interviewees to somewhat make up for knowledge deficiencies encountered in the Army’s formal learning systems enabling them to seek out short-term alternatives to problems requiring immediate operational solutions.¹²¹ As one battlegroup commander stated, ‘it is very, very hard for the training or the doctrine world to keep up.... I think that the technological and operational changes make contemporary doctrine very hard to develop and to keep up with. It’s almost out-of-date before it’s published’.¹²²

During interviews with combat personnel, two main issues arose relating to how they sought knowledge. The first concern related to the reality that units below the battlegroup command level lacked the real capability to Hoover up, collate and analyse data during their deployment. Such inability was partly due to the fact that sub-units were operating in a rural environment that limited the amount of communication and IT infrastructure that could run during their deployment. It was also due to the fact that many of the company-level staff officers – and personnel in general – had not received the appropriate training, education and resourcing to exploit effectively information during their operations.¹²³ Thus, one officer who was tasked with his company’s information exploitation explained how his company had to improvise the way in which it collated and analysed information regarding its area of operations (AO):

We developed a ‘Doomsday Book’ which assisted us, but it wasn’t ideal. We just had an *Access* spread sheet with everyone’s name,

¹¹⁹Author interview with Lt. John Murphy, Platoon Commander, D Company, 1st Battalion The Royal Welsh (1 RWELSH), Chester, 1 Feb. 2011. Similar remarks expressed in author interviews with Lt. Rory Evans, 8 Platoon Commander, A Company, 1st Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles (1 RGR), Shorncliffe, 9 Feb. 2011; Sgt Neil Harvey, Section Commander/Platoon Sergeant, 3 Platoon, Right Flank Company, 1st Battalion The Scots Guards (1 SG), Catterick, 11 March 2011.

¹²⁰See Rob Cross *et al.*, ‘Knowing What We Know: Supporting Knowledge Creation and Sharing in Social Networks’, *Organizational Dynamics* 30/2 (Nov. 2001), 100–20.

¹²¹See O’Toole and Talbot, ‘Fighting’, 54.

¹²²Author interview with Lt. Col. Roly Walker. This reality was admitted as an ongoing challenge by those interviewed at the LWDG, OPTAG and DCDC.

¹²³See Catignani, ‘Getting COIN’, 529–30; Bernard Gray, *Review of Acquisition for the Secretary of State for Defence* (London: MOD 2009), 31.

age, compound, contact details, employment, friends, family, etc. We ran that in parallel with *TIGR*,¹²⁴ which was useful for the kinetics. It didn't have enough of White J2 [intelligence on the population] capability, but we used the *TIGR* for Red [intelligence on the enemy] and the 'Doomsday Book' for the White, which of course is difficult to maintain at handover.¹²⁵

The second issue expressed by interviewees concerned the accessibility to the organization's knowledge repositories. This has been largely due to the over-classification of information, which units have very limited access to, but also due to the fact that there has been an IT gap between theatre and home-based units. As one battalion 2IC commented:

We would be sent Sit-Reps [Situation Reports], which would then be locked up and you could not even print them all out, but for me the inability to speak on a secure phone to my opposite number over in theatre meant that I was relying on either veiled speech on his secure network, which leads to confusion, or was asking for questions on an insecure network and then he would get information couriered back to me.¹²⁶

Such shortfalls have had clear repercussions on the preparedness of deploying units. As a former battlegroup intelligence officer commented, '.... poor information management means that [deploying units] lack context beyond the start of their tour'.¹²⁷ The information contained within the organization's knowledge repositories has also not consistently reached its anticipated users due to difficulties with knowledge diffusion. For example, the Army has developed over the last few years the 'Army Knowledge Exchange' (AKX) electronic repository with the hopes that it will obviate its knowledge diffusion problems by becoming a 'one-stop-shop, a portal for army knowledge that is

¹²⁴Tactical Ground Reporting is a multimedia reporting system for platoon and company-based patrols, allowing personnel to collate and distribute information to enhance tactical awareness and to enable cooperation and information analysis among junior officers. See Tactical Ground Reporting, <www.gdc4s.com/content/detail.cfm?acronym=TIGR>.

¹²⁵Author interviews with Capt. John Savage (2 Scots), J5 (Plans), C Company, 3 PARA, Colchester, 27 April 2011. Similar difficulties expressed in author interviews with Maj. Benjamin Birkbeck, SO1 Information Exploitation, 1 RGR, Shorncliffe, 10 Feb. 2011; Capt. Ed Michell.

¹²⁶Author interview with Maj. Paul Blakesley.

¹²⁷Capt. John Bethell, 'Accidental Counterinsurgents: Nad E Ali, Hybrid War and the Future of the British Army', *British Army Review* 149 (Summer 2010), 12.

pertinent to the current campaign'.¹²⁸ According to its director, the AKX's 'Afghan Hub presents essential knowledge to provide situational understanding for those preparing for deployment'.¹²⁹

Yet, according to many of the participants in this study, one of the Army's main problems is that significant amounts of documentation have tended to be over-classified and that the main IT platform that officers and soldiers employ to gain access to the Army's web portal, 'Defence Intranet', only permits access to unclassified and restricted information. Most of the critical information regarding the COIN campaign, however, has tended to have higher security classifications.¹³⁰ Consequently, many have been unable to tap into the knowledge that the Army has been trying to diffuse through AKX. Several company level officers interviewed were not even aware of AKX or had not accessed it in order to prepare for their deployment. Other officers sceptically regarded the AKX of very limited utility given the difficulty of extracting information pertinent to their knowledge requirements.¹³¹ Informal social networks were employed also because a lot of the intelligence reports were not pitched at lower command levels where AO-specific knowledge was crucial for preparing for and conducting effective COIN operations. A battlegroup 2IC explained:

For a company commander he's not interested in what's happening in Nadi Ali North if he is down in Saidabad. The problem that you end up with is there is a huge amount of stuff that comes out of Task Force Helmand in the Sit-Reps and the Assess-Reps, but so much of it loses its potency, because it is being generalised to go and feed a two- and a three-star audience.¹³²

¹²⁸ Author interview with Brig. Piers Hankinson, Director, Doctrine and Lessons, LWDG, Warminster, 15 Feb. 2011.

¹²⁹ Author email correspondence with Lt. Col. Judith Dando, SO1 Information Management Systems, LWDG, 22 Feb. 2011.

¹³⁰ Another battalion 2IC commented, 'It's absolutely shocking. There's one terminal here to try and prepare an entire battalion. And of course everything you produce in Afghanistan is mission secret. The problem with it is that a vast majority of it is overly classified and almost impossible to obtain'. Cited from author interview with Maj. Peter Flynn, 2IC, 3 PARA, Colchester, 27 April 2011.

¹³¹ Author interviews with Maj. Neil Richardson, 2IC, 1 RGR, Shorncliffe, 9 Feb. 2011; Capt. Hamish Barne, 2IC, Left Flank Company, 1 SG, Catterick, 11 March 2011.

¹³² Author interview with Maj. Paul Blakesley, 2IC, 1st Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment (1 LANCS), Catterick, 15 March 2011. Similar observations raised in author interviews with Maj. Edward Hill, Officer Commanding (OC), B Company, 1 RWELSH, Chester, 1 Feb. 2011 and Maj. Rupert Kitching, OC, Left Flank Company, 1 SG, Catterick, 11 March 2011.

Given such barriers to knowledge acquisition, officers at company level and below often resorted to email and telephone correspondence with their in-theatre counterparts in order to get AO-specific and, more importantly, current knowledge of what TTPs and SOPs worked during deployment:

There was a lot of stuff that was coming from theatre through mates, ‘how have you done this, how have you done that? Oh this is how we did it’, speaking to the guys in theatre because we had one Brent phone in battalion HQ,¹³³ so you would find out what the score was.¹³⁴

Other interviewees also indicated how they employed their social networks in order to provide or gain more specific information regarding the Helmand campaign. One platoon commander noted:

An effective way was speaking to other colleagues who we went through Sandhurst with, an unofficial way of sort of getting the TTPs that they use in the theatre, speaking to the mates who’ve just come back from Afghanistan or have come back on R&R [rest and recuperation] and I tried to be a sponge off them and get as much information out of them unofficially, just to try and get my head around things.¹³⁵

Other commanders perceived anyhow the Army’s organizational routine of pre-deployment reconnaissance visits (‘recces’) as a useful source of obtaining area-specific, time-sensitive knowledge. However, the composition and timing of such recces were often limited and unsystematic due to clashes with training requirements or to local operational challenges. Notwithstanding such challenges, several commanders saw them as an opportunity for informing more deeply AO-specific planning efforts and for tailoring more precisely the generic training that was being provided by the OPTAG during MST. As one battlegroup 2IC

¹³³The Brent phone is a secure Integrated Services Digital Network telephone, which protects voice and data up to and including ‘top secret’.

¹³⁴Author interview with Maj. John Fry, OC, Anzio Company, 1 LANCS, Catterick, 14 March 2011. Similar comments in author interview with Capt. Chris Jaunay, Current Ops Officer, 1 SG, Catterick, 11 March 2011.

¹³⁵Author interview with Capt. Stephen Healey. Similar methods were used by other junior officers as noted in author interviews with Lt. James Higginson, Commander, 9 Platoon, C Company, 3 PARA, Colchester, 26 April 2011 and Lt. Oliver Field, Commander, 9 Platoon, Corunna Company, 1 LANCS, Catterick, 14 March 2011.

stated, the possibility of having more recces at an earlier stage of the MST phase would be helpful:

Because otherwise you are on a conveyor belt, you are trusting in OPTAG. They are very good at what they do, but they are training 9,500 people to do 9,500 roles, and so there is an element of genericness [sic] in the process.¹³⁶

Even during their brief in-theatre ‘Relief in Place’ (RIP) – whereby the incoming unit shadows the outgoing unit prior to taking up command in-theatre – such initiatives suffered similar limitations to that of recces. Moreover, interviews revealed that often the depth and breadth of knowledge shared during these two processes depended very much on the personalities involved and on attitudes that participants had towards sharing information. A staff officer stated that, ‘it was just getting that information and making sense of it. And we did it a bit in a kind of ad hoc way through force of personality, what was in our own heads, but an awful lot of that was obviously lost on RIP’.¹³⁷

A lot of lessons identified were being lost due to the short time in which recces and RIPs in theatre, and handovers in country, were being conducted. Over-burdened personnel were often not finding sufficient time for deliberation and discussion with their replacements during such transition periods. Consequently, campaign continuity between units has understandably not been that straightforward. Betz and Cormack have described the Army’s campaign continuity and learning process as at most ‘a series of partial reboots’ of previous operational experiences.¹³⁸ This has also been the case even when concerted efforts have been made by UK-based personnel to contact their in-theatre counterparts during their MST progression. As one platoon commander opined:

Without getting in touch with the guys that we were taking over from we could have spent the initial months reinventing the wheel again, which I think, at the end of the day, seemed to be the

¹³⁶Author interview with Maj. Paul Blakesley. Similar observations expressed in author interviews with Maj. Martin French, 2IC, 1 SG, Catterick, 11 March 2011; Maj. Peter Flynn.

¹³⁷Author interview with Capt. Ed Michell. Similar comments were expressed in author interviews with Maj. Giles Murray-Jones, OC, B Company, 3 PARA, Colchester, 27 April 2011; Maj. Andy Garner, OC, Corunna Company, 1 LANCS, Catterick, 14 March 2011.

¹³⁸David Betz and Anthony Cormack, ‘Hot War, Cold Comfort: A Less Optimistic Take on the British Military in Afghanistan’, *RUSI Journal* 154/4 (Aug. 2009), 27.

general opinion of what we do in Afghanistan in that every six months we reinvent the wheel.¹³⁹

Conclusion

When it has come to seeking or sharing knowledge, either through the formal learning systems or informally through social networks a lot of personnel have still struggled to gain sufficient knowledge. As one officer noted, ‘the issue that the Army is continually having is every six months we’re trying to hand over information or to understand who to speak to when someone needs information. It is hard to pass on’.¹⁴⁰

The difficulty in gaining such knowledge through the Army’s knowledge repositories, the formal training and education programmes’ ineffectiveness at modifying so far the organization’s basic sense-making constructs, attitudes and beliefs relating to COIN warfare, have often led deploying units to repeat the same mistakes that previous deployed units have made. Due to the fact that the organization’s formal learning systems have not kept up with the increased tempo and number of operational challenges that the evolving insurgency has posed during the Helmand campaign, informal learning mechanisms were employed by personnel in order to improve their pre-deployment preparation efforts and to deal with the immediate operational challenges faced once in-theatre through adaptation. Even when units relied during their pre-deployment preparations on informal social networks to gain both general COIN and campaign-specific knowledge, this study has noted that such informal methods have also suffered several limitations.

This study has observed that informal knowledge sharing has relied on knowledge ensconced often in situated and context-specific experiences and predominantly focused on TTPs. While informal knowledge sharing has been crucial at enabling tactical units to adapt to local circumstances and ‘change their tactics, techniques or existing technologies to improve operational performance’,¹⁴¹ many such changes were often not replicated by subsequent incoming units, thus, often disrupting campaign continuity. The inability to replicate lessons identified by

¹³⁹Author interviews with Lt. Oliver Field. Similar remarks conveyed in author interviews with Lt. Col. Gerald Strickland, CO, 1 RGR, Shorncliffe, 10 Feb. 2011; Colour Sergeant Chris Dundon, Platoon Sergeant, Mobility Reconnaissance Force, 1 RWELSH, Chester, 1 Feb. 2011.

¹⁴⁰Author interviews with Capt. John Savage. Similar remarks expressed in author interview with Capt. Rob Reese, Influence Officer, 1 RWELSH, Chester, 31 Jan. 2011; Colour Sergeant Paul Keeble, Influence Officer, 1 LANCS, Catterick, 14 March 2011.

¹⁴¹Farrell, ‘Improving in War’, 568.

previous units was partly due to the fact that the new knowledge relating to the adoption of practices produced through localized adaptation, which was informally shared, remained mainly privy to such networks. The Army's inability to tap into such informal social networks – due to their ad hoc occurrence – has exacerbated the loss of such potentially valuable knowledge. Without the institutionalization of such knowledge by the Army's lessons learned mechanisms many of the lessons identified and improvements obtained through localized adaptation have been repetitively lost and relearnt. Many of those interviewed, particularly long-serving NCOs that had served in multiple deployments in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, admitted that this had been the case.¹⁴²

While informal learning systems have satisfied some of the knowledge requirements that personnel had during their pre-deployment preparation, individuals and sub-units, which have relied heavily on them, have found themselves 'in self-reinforcing spirals of knowledge-generating activity' leading sub-units to achieve high levels of localized adaptation without effectively contributing to learning throughout the organization.¹⁴³ Such cycles often reduced the incentive to seek out institutionalized knowledge through the Army's formal learning systems even in instances in which these could have provided more pertinent knowledge. Several officers admitted that they found seeking knowledge from acquaintances more expedient than having to rely on the Army's formal learning systems and knowledge repositories.¹⁴⁴ Informal social networks, consequently, have helped individuals and units from the Army to adapt to the operational challenges confronted in Afghanistan. Yet, these have exacerbated the tendency of the Army to lose or forget knowledge and lessons identified particularly through personnel and unit turnover.

Clearly, more research is required in order to explore further how informal networks influence an organization's knowledge exploitation and exploration capabilities and processes. While this article has identified a significant disconnect between knowledge developed and shared among informal social networks and the Army's formal learning

¹⁴²As noted in author interviews with WO2 Gary Simpson, B Company Sergeant Major and WO2 Christopher Smith, C Company Sergeant Major, 3 PARA, Colchester, 26 April 2011; Colour Sergeant Raji Dura, Battalion Assistant Intelligence Officer and Colour Sergeant Prem Kajiro, Fire Support Commander, A Company, 1 RGR, Shorncliffe, 9 Feb. 2011.

¹⁴³Levinthal and March, 'The Myopia of Learning', 104.

¹⁴⁴Lt. Gen. Paul R. Newton's *Directive 001 – The Basics of 21st Century Land Warfare: Re-defining and Teaching*, FDT/3/4, 1 Oct. 2010 (Restricted) also has highlighted personnel's over-reliance on anecdotal experience in doctrine training and education and the need for rectifying such a predisposition.

systems, further research could explore whether certain network configurations may be more effective at exploring and exploiting new knowledge than others. Further research could also explore what institutional configurations could help improve the Army's ability to extrapolate more efficiently the operational experiences that have been shared by personnel through informal networks and transform them into more enduring organizational knowledge and, thus, achieve higher-level learning.

In conclusion, both systems are necessary to realize lower-level learning, that is, adaptation, within an organization. Yet, adaptation is only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for realizing higher-level learning. Further institutionalizing the knowledge and lessons identified from the current COIN campaign in order to continue the Army's learning process and also to avoid further organizational forgetting will be all the more necessary given that the Army will be cutting 20 per cent of its personnel to around 80,000 by 2020 as a result of the UK SDSR.¹⁴⁵ In order to enable more systematic and enduring learning within the organization as a whole, more effort and resources will have to be put into the Army's formal learning systems.¹⁴⁶ This will, consequently, help the Army avoid the loss of knowledge of the lessons learned over the last decade.

However, given the fact that many of the changes examined in this article have not led to a major reconceptualization or cultural shift on how to conduct COIN during the height of the Helmand campaign and the fact the Army is already reverting back, that is, re-booting its force structure and training progression for conventional manoeuvre warfare does not bode well for the future. As Serena had already warned after observing similar resetting patterns occurring in the US Army after its redeployment from Iraq, 'rebalancing the force to be more combat-centric is tantamount to ignoring history and the successful, and necessary, adaptations that occurred'.¹⁴⁷ Policy-makers and military commanders within the UK defence establishment may want to heed such a warning in order to help prevent the Army from undergoing yet another

¹⁴⁵'Army to lose whole units under cuts, says Philip Hammond', *BBC News*, 7 June 2012, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18350358>.

¹⁴⁶The need to improve both was also heavily emphasized in an internal report prepared for the Director of the Land Warfare Development Group and FDT-Land Commander. See Brig. Andrew Sharpe, *Future Demand on People, DCDC/DART/56200 LAND* (Restricted). See also Maj. Gen. (Ret'd) Mungo Melvin, 'Educating and training the Army for an uncertain world', *The British Army 2012* (London: MoD 2012), 184–6.

¹⁴⁷Serena, 'A Revolution in Military Adaptation', 173.

costly cycle of having to reboot its memory and relearn lessons in future asymmetric contingencies.

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