

# CAPS Case - Lecture 1

## Learning in a Counterinsurgency Team

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Last updated: 10/24/2019

### Goal

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This is the case we will discuss in the first lecture. The goal of this case and the associated exercise is twofold: (1) to understand the manifold aspects and strategies that drive how humans learn and make decisions, (2) to define, at a high level, patterns of learning that we can use to develop our understanding of machine learning. In the lecture, we will use the case to obtain a foundational understanding of how human learning and machine learning compare and where we might identify overlap between them.

If you have questions, please contact us at [capsseminar@gmail.com](mailto:capsseminar@gmail.com)

### Tasks

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You have two tasks:

1. Read the attached interview excerpt with Army captains Jason Amerine and Mark Nutsch.
2. Briefly assess how both Amerine and Nutsch learned before and during their deployment to Afghanistan and how learning influenced their decision-making.

The following questions can guide your assessment:

- What different types of learning can you identify in the report of Amerine and Nutsch?
- Do the decisions of Amerine and Nutsch follow a set of defined rules? If yes, where do these rules come from and how well do they map onto the new environment?
- Are Amerine and Nutsch trained for all the situations that they encounter during their deployment? If no, what are the exceptions and how were they handled (e.g. by developing new rules of behavior in unexpected situations)?
- Are there differences between how Amerine and Nutsch learn during training and during deployment (e.g. are they learning from a supervising teacher in both environments)?
- What do Amerine and Nutsch do to improve their decision-making during the deployment? What might be risks embedded in these improvements?
- Are there discernible differences between Amerine and Nutsch in terms of how they access and adapt their training during the deployment in Afghanistan?

# Case

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The following transcript is based on an interview with U.S. Army captains Jason Amerine and Mark Nutsch conducted in an episode of the Modern War Institute podcast [1]. The excerpt has been edited for clarity.

**Jason Amerine:** "The part that amazed me was that the cliché, train as you fight and everything, you know, is true. You get out of these courses and sometimes you have instructors that take what they teach very seriously and other times you don't. When we were in Robin Sage [an unconventional warfare Army training exercise], a lot of the instructors would be telling us that you will never do it this way, we don't know why we're teaching it. But what I found was that every major lesson I have learned throughout my career, whether it was in the Q Course [Army Special Forces Qualification Course] or Ranger School, I mean, everything that I was taught in the school house, I applied over there. I didn't find myself in a situation, where I was saying, 'Yeah, well, in the school house they taught it this way, but it was totally unrealistic, I wish they hadn't taught me that.' It was the opposite. All the major muscle movements during the campaign we really had been taught, we've been taught them well, even by people who were less motivated at times to teach it to us. It really kind of floored me. To me, the system worked; the training pipeline and all of that worked. You had certain unique areas, when we talk about the Horse Soldiers [the first group of U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan, traversing the mountainous terrain of the country on horse-back], Mark was *the* horse soldier, he was *the* unique horse soldier. He was the perfect man for the perfect mission in the North with Dostum's cavalry [Abdul Rashid Dostum, Afghan general of the Northern Alliance, with whom the U.S. was fighting the Taliban]. I mean that was something you couldn't have foreseen and literally was an act of God that we had the right officer there who could teach his people how to ride and could do everything he did. But that was too me almost the exception, everything else what we were taught, we applied, and it really blew my mind how well we were prepared for it."

**Mark Nutsch:** We had a very senior team at that time, by then I am talking our average age was 32. [...] Just a very mature, experienced team. But even in that new situation, the guys kept going, 'Hey, we have been here before, remember Special Forces training, remember Robin's Sage at this phase of insurgency, you know as that would progress, remember that.' [...] But the sergeants and I, coming back as we're talking about this, we did the things you do in training. Each day we would do lessons learned, an internal AAR [After Action Report], whether it was five minutes or fifteen minutes, sit down and go 'Damn, what nearly killed us today? How do we make sure that doesn't happen again? You know, how do we survive the next hour? And how do we win?' Because we believed that we could win, having that confidence in our training and resourcing and the people that were at our back. [...] You relied on that training that you had, the leadership lessons, people, mentors, that talked to you, every aspect of my career up to that point, to include character building events I had as a teenager through high school and college, all of that came to that focal point in my life on that battlefield, day after day. As it did with those sergeants. But that was a phrase that kept coming up, 'We did this in Robin Sage guys, we have been here before, it was slightly different, but how do we apply it to this model and think through the problem and get after it and solve it in a positive way with the means we had available.' ...

**Mark Nutsch (continued):** "I would have to say, even in our mission, we were the students. You know, even with the maturity and training and experience we've had and the deployments throughout the Middle East, we got in there and the militia elements we linked up with, these guys had been fighting guerrilla warfare for upwards of one to two decades. And they are the survivors. They have been whittled down through hard attrition. And every day, for us, was a history lesson. [...] I felt like we were the students and we had been reminded to not listen to what they had to say, because it's their backyard. They couldn't read a map but they could describe to

you passionately 'It's *this* village, don't you understand? It's *this* village right over here. It's *this* guy, he's the one we're after.' So even then in that role, I felt we were students."

## Sources

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[1] <https://mwi.usma.edu/podcast-spearfirst-special-forces-soldiers-afghanistan/>. The transcribed section takes place around the 30-minute mark.