

# The Cost of Thinking Outside the Box

*What follows is one more voice to be added to a growing chorus of professional soldiers concerned about the post-9/11 Army. MSG Charles Elliott, U.S. Army retired, makes a convincing argument that we have lost some of our traditional soldier skills that are a vital component of who we are and what we do as an Army, aka the basics.*

*When this nation sent its Army to war in the aftermath of 9/11, it also provided the resources to ensure that we had the tools (technology) needed to get the job done—the tools we have always wanted but lacked the funds to acquire. MSG Elliott suggests that the post-9/11 Army is becoming too dependent on this new technology and, as a result, is losing sight of the fundamentals.*

—CSM Jimmie W. Spencer, USA Ret.,  
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**By MSG Charles Elliott**  
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Years ago our forces needed to be more flexible and adaptable. After decades of training during a cold war that never went hot, most leaders had no inclination to train or fight differently. They were satisfied with keeping things the same, shying away from technology and unconventional ways of doing things. Most of these leaders refused to entertain creative ideas, and many rejected ideas and recommendations from subordinates.

This was the case during the first couple of years after 9/11. In Iraq and Afghanistan, our military was inundated with new equipment and technologies, vehicles, weapons, signals intelligence (SIGINT) technologies and so on. All this technology forced our leaders to finally start thinking differently (outside the box) to create ways to use this new equipment and technology to

assist them in accomplishing their mission, and they did. Our military has become more adaptive and technologically proficient, but at what cost?

Technology has helped us tremendously, and our leaders have become out-of-the-box—more adaptive—thinkers. There is a cost, however, to thinking outside of the box without fully understanding that the “things in the box” should not become irrelevant just because we have additional tools available to assist us. We have been thinking outside the box so long that we have forgotten what is in the box: the basics. We have become reliant on technology to the point that our basic soldiering skills have now degraded. We love to chase the next shiny gadget. Predeployment training proficiency with technology has made us train so much on this technology and equipment that we neglect training on the basics to achieve true mastery of our warfighting skills.

I am not saying that we don't want

our leaders to continue to be adaptive and that we shouldn't embrace and apply technology. The enemy is always changing and adapting to our tactics, techniques and procedures. Of course we need to continue to move ahead with technology; if we didn't, we would still be using muskets. Our soldiers and leaders need to continue to be adaptive and creative, and look for unconventional ways of doing things to defeat the enemy; however, we just cannot do this if the cost is forgetting the basics and fundamentals of patrolling. Remember that mastering the basics must be the foundation to applying technology into our operations more effectively. We need to regain a balance.

I was once told that “we can't live in the past and expect to remain ahead of the curve.” The fundamentals of patrolling (planning, reconnaissance, security, control and common sense) and basic soldier skills (shoot, move, communicate, self-medicate, battle drills, physical training and so on) haven't changed in years for a reason. They are the basics, the foundation of everything we do. They assist us in understanding technology and how to better use it.

Let's look at special operation units and the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment. What makes these units the best units in the world? They train on the basics every day so that they become instinct. True, they have all the best weapons, equipment and support in the world, but they still train the ba-

sics. They understand that training the basics is the foundation of everything they do.

Here are just a few of the observations I have garnered over the years that have led me to this conclusion. Dismounted patrols go out with one person carrying a map, but every leader has a global positioning system (GPS). I am not saying that GPS shouldn't be used or that one should be replaced by the other. GPS is a great tool; I have one and use it. Soldiers, however, need the basic skills of map reading, using a compass, and understanding terrain and its implications to master land navigation. These basic skills make soldiers better at using and understanding GPS.

This is also true for mounted operations. When mounted patrols navigate using their Blue Force Tracker (BFT) without following along on an actual printed map, what happens when technology fails or they have to get out of their vehicle?

Patrols take the same route into and out of objectives. They are too confident in their mine resistant ambush

protected vehicles and counter-radio-controlled improvised explosive device electronic warfare systems. We cannot forget the basic fundamentals of patrolling. What happened to planning for primary and alternate routes into and out of objectives? I have observed units drive into an area and take the same route out with catastrophic results. I observed a battalion tactical operations center in command and control of a very important mission, and they only communicated with the unit by texting on BFT throughout the entire mission. It slowed down the mission so much that it took more than 45 minutes of back-and-forth texting to get the unit to mark a building. This is just one example of many during this one mission. What happened to talking to each other? Technologies should be force multipliers, not hamper operations or slow you down.

Another area that emphasizes technology at the expense of basics is intelligence collection platforms. We rely heavily on SIGINT and full-motion video platforms for collection of intelligence and atmospherics on a village. This technology and its analysts are as-

sets and force multipliers. We should not forget, however, that in any fight the best intelligence can also come from other means, specifically our soldiers' interactions with the local populace. A SIGINT platform or unmanned aerial vehicle can't build relationships with the villages in your area of operation.

We have become so accustomed to working out of a forward operating base (FOB) instead of tactical patrol bases that we have forgotten basic field craft skills: 24/7 security, living off what we carry, camouflage and so on. What happened to those hard soldiers who would operate out of a patrol base and live noise and light discipline, mindful of security 24 hours a day? I believe that we have lived on the FOB so long that we've become complacent about mastering these foundational, basic soldier skills, which is reflected in our operations outside the wire and leads to greater risk to mission accomplishment, no matter how much technology is at our disposal.

As someone who spent 20 years on active duty, I care deeply about our soldiers and our military. The U.S. military is the best it has ever been, but it still has room to improve. We have matured as a military since 9/11 to the point that we do not need catchphrases, especially ones that have lost their real meaning. Our soldiers and leaders are adaptive and technologically proficient and have the best equipment and technology. We must not lose sight, however, of the fact that technology is a tool to assist us in accomplishing our mission, and that *mastering the basics* is the foundation to effectively applying technology to our operations. We must continue to foster adaptive thinking in our leaders and subordinates and adopt technology; this is not thinking outside the box—it's doing what makes sense, while remembering our foundations. □

*MSG Charles Elliott, USA Ret., entered the Army in December 1984 and served in the 7th Infantry Division; the 3rd Ranger Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment; the Ranger Training Brigade as an instructor; and 1st Special Forces Operations Detachment-Delta.*



"This is one of those 'build-the-technology-and-they-will-come' situations."