INFLECTION POINT: ARMY LEADER DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, professor of history at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and podcast editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us.

"Educating army professionals to win in a complex world" is the official motto of Army University, the name for the Army professional military education network of 70 schools worldwide in which more than 150,000 students are educated in more than 88 occupations. It's a massive task made all the more complicated as Army doctrine seeks to train the force for multi-domain operations, where the U.S. Army, as part of the joint force, can counter and defeat a near peer adversary capable of contesting the U.S. in all domains. Developing and maintaining appropriate practices and evaluations to live up to those responsibilities is an ongoing challenge for Army University. How well has Army University responded to those challenges thus far? What can or should it do in the future? Our guest today, Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Barta, a member of the U.S. Army War College Class of 2021, has come to discuss the role of Army University based on his own strategy research project. Lieutenant Colonel Barta is an Armor Officer who has served in a variety of cavalry, combined arms, air assault, infantry units, as well as training assignments, including as a Professor of Military Science and 56 rotations as an observer/coach/trainer during his 21 years of service. Welcome to A Better Peace, Lieutenant Colonel Barta.

Jeff Barta: Thanks, Ron. It's great to be here. It's an exciting new opportunity that I get here at the Army War College.

RG: Yeah, well, that's good. We're delighted to have a chance to talk about this. So, let's talk about how did you select Army University as your strategy research project?

JB: So it's been an exciting career thus far, and I've noticed that as I'm getting a little more senior, looking at giving back and developing leaders and leader development, as an effort within my organizations and personally, has been something that I'm much more interested in. They say

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that we're a little bit closer to the end than some others are. So it's fun to see those junior officers and NCOs really rise up to the challenge, learn more and really prepare for the future. Like the Army song says the "Army goes rolling along", but it's important to have those leaders roll in the right direction.

RG: Well, and so you were thinking about how training, you've obviously been involved in training and observing and coaching. So you've seen how the Army tries to coach people up. I gave some of the numbers in the intro, but I am curious, how would you describe Army University to someone who is not in the Army? What does it see itself to be doing?

JB: So drawing upon some of the similarities from higher education in the civilian world, the Army created the Army University as an umbrella organization to nest, essentially all of its educational systems, to best synchronize and educate leaders out there. When I was looking through some of the documents, I found that the Army University was the most significant change to the structure of leader development since the creation of the Training and Doctrine Command back in the late seventies. And that also was a time period when we created the branch schools. So the Army University has also marked a strategic adjustment to meet the leader skills required for the previous concept of unified land operations, looking forward to operating in a new concept, the multi-domain operations. I found that this significant institution has been one of the biggest changes that I think will set us on the right course to properly educate leaders for the future.

RG: What does a shift to multi-domain operations or MDO mean for training of Army officers?

JB: Yeah, so we're at another inflection point. Just a couple of years ago the Army changed its operating concept to look into the future. The timeframe proposed out there was around 2028, 2035, when there'll be so many new technologies and capabilities in the force. And switching this concept, I found we have to prepare the leaders to do that. The leaders who are currently serving are the ones who will be the senior leaders in the future, we're not a lateral entry organization, we grow leaders from within and have to find the right ways and the tools to prepare them for the future.

So multi-domain operations sees the Army employed as a part of the joint force competing with adversaries across five domains: land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. The main idea for the use of Army forces is to conduct multi-domain operations, to prevail on competition. And when necessary, win. So this AOC further defines some new phases across the conflict continuum, which are compete, penetrate, disintegrate, exploit, and recompete. Well, these are all fairly different from unified land operations, and it will take a mental shift and the agility of leaders to adapt to the new operating concept when it fully becomes doctrine in the near future.

RG: In what ways, and this is I know a larger problem with professional military education, but it's one thing to say, you're training Army officers for multi-domain operations, but through Army University it's only Army officers who are getting the training. How, or where, is there any kind of joint coordination of this kind of training?

JB: So one of the neat things when this structure was put in place in 2015 as an umbrella, it's been able to synchronize not only the officer education system, but the NCO education system and the civilian education system for Department of Army civilians. And it did follow the model of some of the other services, which have a similar concept. And certainly there are interlocutors there that work with their other service representatives in the other universities to make sure that we are nested within the joint force. Another interesting aspect of it is that our operating concept, and certainly some of the leader development philosophies and strategies that go along with that have actually been informing the joint force on how to move forward and synchronize all the other services with that.

RG: And so what, Army University isn't that old as you point out, right? It was created as umbrella only in, within the last less than decade and already it's responsible for managing this shift to MDO. What kinds of things should Army University, or is Army University planning to change or improve about its procedures or its training in order to meet those MDO challenges? What do we need to do differently?

JB: Well, as everyone's familiar with the unified land operations is our current doctrine. And as the leaders across the Army, look at implementing a new concept into doctrine, the Army University has also been looking at how we change our leadership development strategy to nest within that. So, when we looked at future budgets, resources, Army University will be helping to inform those things with the strategy. In fact, coming out later this year, the Army 2021 training and leader development strategy will be released. This one actually incorporates some of the new MDO ideas into the strategy of how we do training and leader development across the Army. Along with that Army University has been the chair of a new effort to define the Army learning concept focused on 2035. And this will align the Army new concepts within the new MDO AOC, our operating concept.

So I think, readers and listeners out there should be on the lookout because these will have a lot of new ideas, how to better incorporate technology into learning, how to best use a lot of the tools that are out there from the civilian higher education side. Army University has been able to draw some expertise in with those. And then more significantly there are a lot of changes out there on how the Army is going to integrate this through learning domains, even better.

The three learning domains that came out in the early strategy in 2013 are the institutional domain, the operational domain and the self-development domain. Oftentimes a leader spends,

some researchers have found that a leader spends about 90% of their time of their learning in the operational force or through their own self-study in the self-development domain. And really only about 10% in the schoolhouse. So Army University and the associated schools are able to affect the change in the growth within that 10% of a career. However, if you're looking at lifelong learning to prepare those leaders for the future, there are some new ideas on there on how we can best integrate doctrinal concepts and schoolhouse training into the operational force and into self-study.

RG: So you of course have experience both as a unit commander and as an instructor in military science and as an observer/coach. In what ways did the research that you conducted this year at the War College about Army University, did you discover anything in your research that was surprising to you, that you didn't already essentially have experienced in your previous roles as a commander and an instructor?

JB: Right. I have been lucky in my career to get several opportunities on the training side of things and get exposed to a lot of the educational techniques and how to be a better teacher and a leader at the same time, which I think are some important skills that are very closely tied together. What I did find though, is that maybe not everyone has had several experiences that cross between the operational force and the institutional force, and may not be employing the best leadership development techniques within their organization.

In fact, there were some surveys in the middle of the century, in 2013, there was a survey of Army leaders that found only about 47% of the folks out there thought that they had an effective leader development program within their unit. There was a survey in 2016 that found that only about 63% of those leaders surveyed thought that their immediate supervisor was doing a decent job at developing their personal skills within their operational assignment. So, I was kind of surprised to learn that there might be a gap out there on how well people are actually getting educated in their operational time.

RG: Based on those statistics you mentioned, which is fascinating, when people are talking about whether there's been development, are they talking about their own development, or are they questioning whether their leaders have been appropriately developed?

JB: No, they were questioning their own development.

RG: Their own development.

JB: By their supervisor.

RG: By their supervisor, whether their supervisor had a strategy for doing it. Does Army University have a plan or a strategy for encouraging, if not everybody's going to be as actively involved as an instructor as you have been. What ways exist for encouraging commanders, leaders to be open to the more systematic forms of instruction and leadership development?

JB: Right. So, one of the most recent changes is actually acknowledging the fact that we need to combine those domains and the learning that happens there. In fact, there used to be a separate Army training strategy and an Army training regulation and a separate leader development strategy and associated regulations with that. They are now combined, Army 350-1, the universal training regulation is now training and leader development. And the strategy will also be the same, under the same title.

So we're finding ways to better connect to that. I think there are some technological solutions out there they're going to be some information repositories that will better connect the operational units. They can reach back to the schoolhouse, to the institutional domain to make sure that they've got the most current techniques and strategies. There's going to be some overarching scenarios and ways to train across those different domains. In fact I saw some interesting article recently about the new Army goggles. You can actually put a synthetic training environment into those. So an operational force can tie into a database, or a training environment developed from the schoolhouse to give them some of the most accurate scenarios that are out there.

RG: I mean, I suppose it's the oldest question in the armed forces or in society, right? Are leaders born or are leaders made? If they are made, what do we have to do to make them? And so it's not, we shouldn't be surprised that Army University or the Army is feeling its way along here. How has the process of training and leadership development changed in your sort of lived experience from when you were a Second Lieutenant Barta to now Lieutenant Colonel Barta?

JB: Oh boy. Well, I think we've got a great focus now on learning outcomes and that is something that Army University brought forward from the civilian higher education side. It's always been in existence. I think since earliest Army schools were around. As a young Lieutenant, I remember, it was task condition standards, and that was the format where you were briefed on what you're about to learn and how it was to be applied. But now with the focus on learning outcomes, and we've borrowed some ideas from some researchers in higher education. Bloom's taxonomy of learning talks about the depth of cognitive knowledge, how deep the knowledge seeps in within our cognition. And we incorporate that as some of the different outcomes within schools. And it'd be really great to see that transcend over to the operational force. And if we look at the outcomes that we want to get from a training event or a training scenario, I think that'll really help us moving forward.

RG: And what obstacles do you think exist right now in getting the force to this level of comfort with training for MDO?

JB: Yes, that's interesting. Number one that I saw was one just the gap in space within the operational learning. There was going to be some disparity. If we continue down this path and some disparate outcomes between leaders across their careers, if one unit is not doing a very good job on leader development, but another is and reinforcing the schoolhouse, that could pose some risk for us in the future. But there are also a lot of new tools out there in the future that humans are going to have to be able to learn to be comfortable with. In fact, I found this research report from Australia, they looked at cadets and midshipmen out there and found that a lot of them wouldn't trust the robots. In fact, it was nearly 80% wouldn't trust robots to work alongside with them in future environments.

And these are younger people who have grown up more accustomed to technology, and they're still kind of wary of it on the battlefield. Found some other research out there saying that our senior leaders across the force right now aren't necessarily comfortable with artificial intelligence to augment their decision making. And this is another tool that will be very prevalent in the future to gain an advantage in the multi-domain over operations construct. And if senior leaders are comfortable with it, that might have a trickle-down effect as those junior leaders move up to be senior leaders. So I think we really need to find a way to gain the trust of these new tools, just like we've incorporated other technologies in the past.

RG: I mean, it's an interesting bracket there. If you've got young leaders who would be on the ground with the technology are not comfortable with it, then you've got the people at the top who are not comfortable with aspects of that technology. So that's a two-pronged problem. When does, I'm trying to think about how to phrase this when we talk about people at different levels of career, when does PME end? And so at what point at what point in an officer's training, does the Army sort of say, "well, you know everything we think you're going to need to know, and you don't need any more training". Does that ever happen?

JB: From the institutional side? I don't really believe that there is an end. There's a course right here in Carlisle that teaches three-star generals and admirals how to be combined joint land forces or air commanders in their final steps per se, in the Army, all the way down to the newest lieutenants. And then certainly the self-development domain continues. Most senior leaders out there are very well-read, always staying abreast of latest developments, incorporating those into their foundational PME knowledge that they got.

RG: And so I guess a lot of this training along the way is not only whatever you're learning right now, but also to instill in the officer a desire and an ability to continue to learn, to educate oneself. And I guess this is where it's easy to imagine when we talk about new technologies, it's

easy to imagine if there's a new technology, you got to figure out how to use it, right? You and I are recording this podcast through a technology that neither of us was probably familiar with 18 months ago.

JB: That's very true.

RG: Right. And so clearly technology part's easy or it's not easy, but it's easy to imagine that you got to learn new technology. How has the practice of leadership changed over time? In ways that might not be directly related to the hard issues of technology, but just in how we conceive of what it means to be a leader, what it means to develop the people under your command?

JB: Well, speaking with some of the individuals who were working on the new Army learning concept, they actually believe that that hasn't changed too much and that there are some certain human characteristics that will transcend the battlefield, whether now, or in the future. There are several leaders' skills that were postulated within the MDO concept. I'm going to just run down real quickly for our listeners. So it's, understand performance science, evaluate soldier readiness through sensors, apply human machine interfaces and artificial intelligence, make rapid more accurate decisions, possess significant breadth and depth of technical expertise, thrive in ambiguity and chaos, and to have increased resilience to operate complexity. And I'll hone in on those last two ambiguity and chaos, resilience and complexity are really some just fundamental human aspects of warriors almost time immaterial. So if the character of war evolves and new technologies are incorporated, humans will still, I believe in the future, be making those decisions augmented by some things that might make it more rapid. They might have to make their decisions quicker in order to gain an advantage out there or not be overcome by the enemy's advantage. And then certainly complexity, being able to, the human brain will still be super powerful and be able to wrap itself around a lot of the chaos on the future battlefield, potentially more than a computer can.

RG: Right. I mean, I suppose as we were talking before we started recording, right, as a cavalry officer. You embody this transformation, in the sense of that you don't ride horses anymore. So there are some things you don't need to know how to do, but it's still about getting people onto something that's going to move them from one place to another and get there in front of the force. Right. So the technology changes, but the challenges are the same.

JB: Yeah, certainly integrating the combined arms has been something that we've been practicing now, there'll be more tools in the quiver to be able to do that.

RG: And so have you, when you were developing this project this year at the War College, did you get any feedback or any indications from your fellow officers about their experiences with Army University and how they felt that it had been part of their career development?

JB: I believe for a lot of people, it's actually kind of still an unknown entity the branding and the marketing is continuing. There are some other fascinating pushes. The Army University wants to get a credentialing and accrediting program. So that education received from the Army, which has been happening for decades and decades now would be accredited by a civilian accrediting agency and could actually potentially translate into civilian equivalent degrees. Once a leader is out of the Army or potentially while they're in the Army, they can have a transcript from the Army University. So once I think they've finalized some of those things, I believe that it will become a lot more well known as a brand.

RG: Interesting. And to think about your experience at PME. So your year at the War College, as class of 2021, you've been a student in the residential program, but in a particularly difficult period. It hasn't been residential in the way that it usually is. We've been doing a lot of online learning. How would you characterize your experience as a student at the Army War College?

JB: Well, certainly nothing like I expected this year. I do have to commend the War College for finding a lot of face-to-face opportunities, even despite the really crazy health conditions out there that we wanted to protect the force from. So that's been exciting. Some days it's learning through a computer, some days it's in-person and we actually get to use dry erase boards.

RG: It wouldn't be the Army without the occasional dry erase board.

JB: Right.

So fascinating. I am a digital immigrant, right. Learning how to use these things. And, only recently shared, documents over a computer while people chat on Teams, even while living in the same neighborhood has been pretty unique. And that'd be one that I tell a story about that at the retirement home or something like that.

RG: Back in my day...

JB: Yeah. I've also had a great opportunity here as the children were also learning. So my first grader was at home for several months straight, learning on the iPad, using Zoom and other things. And she picked that stuff up so quickly, but it's been fun to be part of her education as well this year, too.

RG: Which I guess that's a small benefit, right. That would not have been possible otherwise. Do you know where you're off to after your successful completion of your year at the Army War College?

JB: Oh, I'm excited to join the U.S. European command out there in Stuttgart, Germany. I'll work their operation center for deployed in Germany for the next two years.

RG: Right. Have you been stationed over there before?

JB: I have, I do have one experience in Hohenfels in the training center over there and over in Baumholder. So it's great to get back to something that I do know, but also serve it at an entirely new echelon. I've never served at the strategic level before and really excited to meet a bunch of counterparts from across the services and watch our national strategy play firsthand.

RG: Right. And sort of get to see what it's like to plan multi-domain operations in that sphere. Will it be, how different do you imagine it will be? So when you were, I guess your previous service over there, you were Captain Barta.

JB: Young Captain.

RG: Young Captain. So it's a company commander.

JB: I was a trooper commander then for a cavalry troop and also an observer trainer in Hohenfels. The four-star command was something that was, might as well as been outer space back in those times. So that will be exciting to see how it all fits together and what are the pieces and how we actually work with our allies and partners over there.

RG: Well, that leads me into the question I wanted to end with, right. Thinking about what experiences. What would, if you could go back and talk to Captain Barta, troop commander Barta, about what his training for his future career would be that would get him back to the space station there in Stuttgart, what would you tell Captain Barta about what this process is like moving through the Army, to the position that you're going to be in?

JB: That's a fascinating question. Give me a minute to reflect here.

RG: I mean, do you think that you back would have expected the things that happened to you to get you where you are now?

JB: I would not have expected, but I will say looking back, the Army plan holistically for a career is right on track. I think it gave me the education at the right inflection points. I'm moving up to the next level, has tied me together with the new concepts as they evolve. We've been able to infuse them into the schoolhouse and get to train on those things. I would say to my former self, have a joint assignment a little bit earlier to learn about how the whole Pentagon services,

all of it works together. I was always excited to be in the mud with the troops or whatever, but there always a time to learn how a lot of other things work together at the senior levels.

RG: Interesting. Well, this is good. And I suppose you will meet a lot of true commanders when you're back over there and you can see whether you can, before you get to the old folks' home, right, you can give advice to younger officers on what they can do.

JB: Right. But you know, the Army still got me to the War College at the right place and the right time, before a strategic opportunity so, the system has worked and I'm happy to be a part of it. I look forward to being able to mentor those younger ones coming up.

RG: Outstanding. Well, that's an excellent point on which to end this conversation. Thank you so much, Lieutenant Colonel Jeff Barta for joining us today on A Better Peace.

JB: Thank you so much, Ron.

RG: You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening, and please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us your suggestions for future programs. We're always interested in hearing from you. Please subscribe to A Better Peace if you have not already. And if you have not already, why haven't you? But after you have subscribed to A Better Peace on your podcatcher of choice, please rate and review this podcast so that other people can find us as well. That helps to grow this community, which we always want to do. We're always interested in hearing from you and we look forward to welcoming you to future conversations, but until next time from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.