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**ON THE COVER:** Soldiers from B Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, meet with villagers in March 2009 during a key leader engagement near Forward Operating Base Lane, Zabol, Afghanistan. PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. ADAM MANCINI

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**PHOTOGRAPHY & GRAPHICS**  
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A member of the Asymmetric Warfare Group walks Soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, through drills during Focused Targeting Force training March 2010 at Forward Operating Base Sharana in Paktika province, Afghanistan. PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JIMMY NORRIS



# PROBLEM

# SOLVERS

## ASYMMETRIC WARFARE GROUP NCOS HELP ARMY UNITS THINK, ADAPT AND ANTICIPATE

BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS NCO Journal

*"No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking." —VOLTAIRE*

**U**nits downrange encounter a multitude of problems during their deployments: How can we counter the newest improvised explosive devices? Which tactics, techniques and procedures are best when responding to certain attacks? How can we lighten the Soldier's load? Often units figure out solutions on their own. But sometimes, there's a better way.

The Asymmetric Warfare Group is the Army's critical-thinking assault force on problems units run into while deployed. Its personnel — overwhelmingly comprising active-duty and retired senior NCOs with centuries of combined experience in combat — identify the best practices, best ideas and best solutions to close gaps in units' capabilities or exploit enemy vulnerabilities. They then circulate the findings to others encountering similar problems. Though all their knowledge is obtained firsthand while embedded with units before and during deployments, their goal is broader: creating a culture of mental agility and adaptability within the Army.

"We solve problems for the Army in order to get ahead of the enemy," said Sgt. Maj. Mike Masson, the sergeant major of "Baker" Squadron, one of the AWG's two operational squadrons. "The units do a good job staying abreast of what's going on. But if

# “One of our biggest strengths is the relevancy we bring, because we’re in and out of theater constantly.”

— MASTER SGT. DAVID GONZALEZ

they’ve got a question, it can be easy for them to ask us, ‘Can you reach forward and figure this out for us?’ Or, if we’ve got a solution, we can provide that for them.”

“We’re in the knowledge-transfer business,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Akridge, AWG’s command sergeant major. “We bring what one unit is doing superbly well and bring that over to another unit that is experiencing the same problem set.”

The AWG’s two-man operational advisor teams usually include one active-duty senior NCO — a master sergeant or sergeant major — and one contractor, most often a combat-seasoned retired master sergeant or sergeant major. These “warrior counselors” begin their work with a unit as it trains and prepares to deploy, sharing the latest TTPs that have proven successful where the unit is about to deploy.

“We try to get with that unit early in the [Army Force Generation] cycle to hit all those key training events,” Masson said. “That way, we can provide assistance all along the way, based on lessons learned coming from theater.”

“One of our biggest strengths is the relevancy we bring, because we’re in and out of theater constantly,” said Master Sgt. David Gonzalez, Baker Squadron’s operations NCO. That allows AWG teams to revise TTPs continuously based on the latest intelligence, he said. “We’re able to say, ‘Here’s exactly what’s going on there.’”

Once on the ground, AWG teams aren’t sitting behind desks, however. They move with units, patrol alongside them, get shot at and experience exactly what the unit’s Soldiers do day in and day out. From their observations — of both the units’ successes and areas of difficulty — AWG teams send reports back to the group’s Integrated Solutions Team in “Dog” Squadron at AWG’s headquarters at Fort Meade, Md. There,

the cell builds a macro, birds-eye view of how U.S. troops are interacting with the enemy.

“When they make their observations, make their reports and interact with the unit, that information comes back,” said Master Sgt. Mike Crosby, an operational advisor with “Able” Squadron, the other operational squadron. In turn, the solutions AWG devises get pushed back for dissemination to units in-theater.

“The units are talented and do a good job. But our advantage is that we see the whole picture,” Masson said. “We travel around and can see something going on in one part of the country that, through analysis, we can say is going to migrate to the area the unit is in — ‘This is what you can expect next.’”

As part of this collection and dissemination process, the AWG teams gather and share information with the full spectrum of deployed troops.

“There’s a saying here that we interact with privates through generals. That’s pretty true,” Crosby said. “It really is the whole gamut. That flexibility and that breadth of interaction is very unique.”

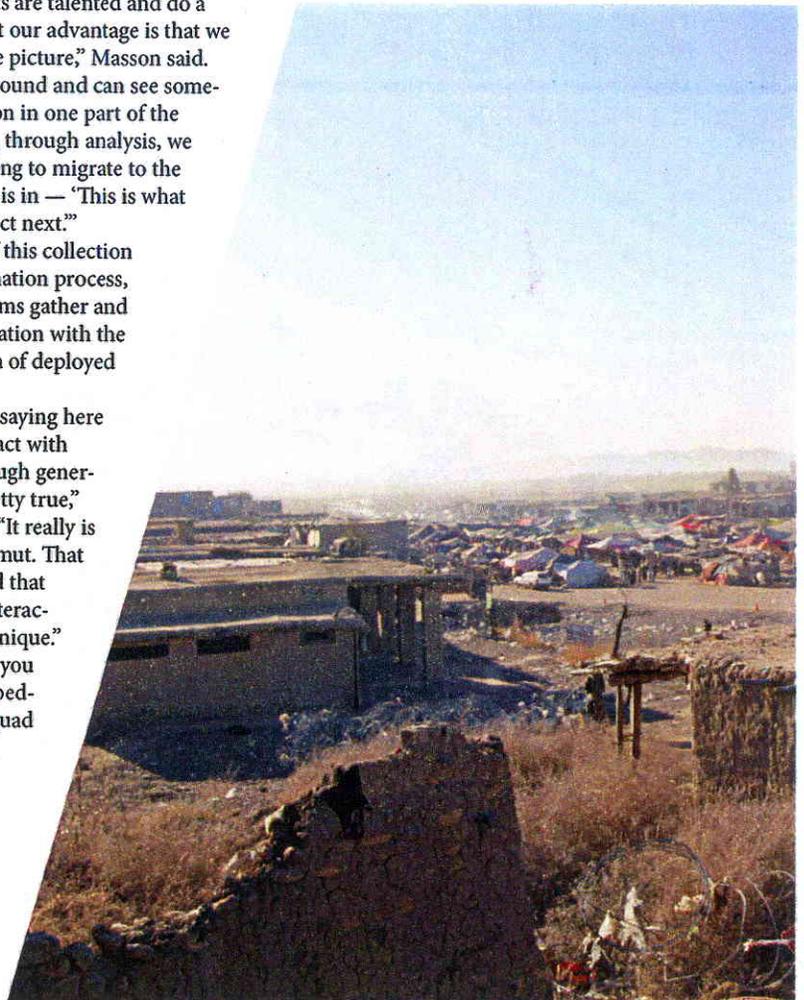
“One day, you might be embedded with a squad or a platoon, and you’re working for that platoon sergeant,” Akridge

said. “But two days later, you might be briefing a general officer or other senior leader to tell them what you’ve seen not just on this patrol, but on others in your sector.”

But the AWG is not there to critique or grade units, Akridge is quick to point out.

“We always work by, with and through the organization we’re embedded with,” he said. “We don’t write report cards.”

“Another misconception is that we’re observer/controllers, that we’re out there to look at them and evaluate what they’re doing,” Gonzalez said. “That’s not what we do. We do write some reports from the observations that we make, but they’re non-attributable. We’re not out there to point fingers.”



“What we do allows commanders to get that ground-troop perspective from an objective point of view,” said Master Sgt. Michael Lahoda, the group’s strategic plans NCO. “When we write our reports, we’re not looking to implicate anybody. It’s about best practices and lessons learned. If there’s a capability gap there, we can bring that up. But we don’t do it in a pretentious way or try to dictate things.”

Though their findings are shared continually with the Center for Army Lessons Learned and vice versa, what makes AWG teams unique is their persistent presence within units, Masson said.

“The difference between us and CALL is we have guys forward, living, breathing and seeing things firsthand,” he said.

“Yes, they do solution development and information dissemination,” Lahoda said. “But to have a guy come out there who has been there, done that and been in the shoes of that first sergeant, that platoon sergeant or that Soldier, it adds a certain amount of credibility.”

## SUCCESS STORIES

The Asymmetric Warfare Group has its origins in the Army’s IED Task Force. In 2004, desiring to apply the group’s rapid solution-development process to future and unknown threats, the Army G-3/5/7 spun the group off as a separate organization. Today, the AWG is a direct reporting unit to the commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

The solutions the AWG develops are categorized as material or non-material. The former typically involve adapting equipment to better meet units’ needs. The latter usually means adapting TTPs to counter newly identified enemy vulnerabilities. Either way, the group’s NCOs say their involvement has a direct impact.

“A unit I was with in 2006 was having a hard time with IEDs out in their area of operations,” Lahoda said. “We looked at what they were doing, applied some specific targeting methods to the way they were running their patrols and discovered they really weren’t far off. Helping them

understand better their situational awareness and giving them some techniques and tactics that they could use, as well as some associated equipment, made them more effective. The operations they went on, I heard from emails later, the casualty rate was down, they were cleaning things up, and the provincial government in the town was getting together again.”

Crosby recalled the potentially life-saving influence his team had in Iraq.

“During my last deployment, one brigade we were with was driving down this one stretch of road all the time,” Crosby said. “They were getting some IEDs and [explosively formed penetrators] there. During our embed, we went out there, patrolled with them and talked with them. Two weeks later, we got an email from the brigade commander who said they had found seven quadruple-rate EFPs — they had this thing lined up to take out the whole convoy. The unit used some techniques we had talked about to find the [devices], possibly saving many lives.

“That’s the rewarding part, when you know you actually did something,” Crosby continued. “At that Soldier level, you’re potentially saving lives. But you’re also getting inside their decision-making cycle as they take the fight to the enemy.”

Sometimes, the best solution AWG can offer is to help integrate and share information among the disparate parts in an area — letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing, Lahoda said.

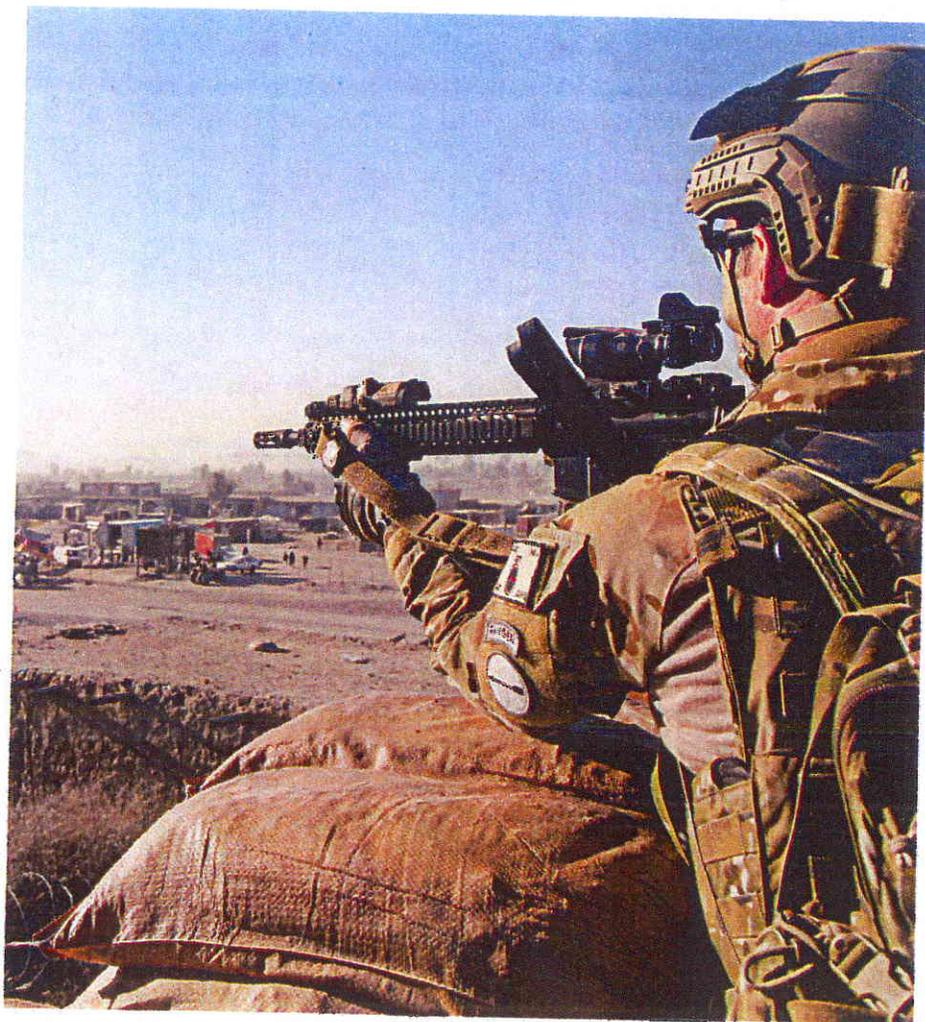
“Once you start putting people together, giving them an awareness of what their siblings to the left and right are doing, it not only makes each entity more effective just through awareness, but now they’re able to plan and share,” he said. “Bringing them together makes them more effective than what individual units can do.”

When it comes to material solutions, the group’s Dog Squadron coordinates with project managers in the Army’s acquisition apparatus to tweak and improve equipment large and small.

“That could mean anything from better spare tires to weapons suppressors,” said Sgt. Maj. Marc Griffith, a troop sergeant major in Dog Squadron. “It could mean culvert denial operations up through

**An Asymmetric Warfare Group Soldier provides security March 13, 2011, from an observation post overlooking the Kholbesat bazaar in Khowst province, Afghanistan.**

PHOTO BY PFC. DONALD WATKINS



“It’s about thinking through the situations and coming up with creative solutions.”

— MASTER SGT. JOE SCHOCH

small, miniature aerial vehicles. You name it, the gamut has been run. I don’t think there’s a maneuver, fire or effect that we have not touched over the past few years.”

“We’ll go out on operations and ask, ‘What do you think of this?’” Lahoda said. “We’ll hear, ‘Oh, that’s a piece of garbage, and here’s why.’ ‘Well, how can we make it better?’ We’ll take it back to the designers developing these things, and we make it better.”

“We have the ability to do things in parallel as opposed to in sequence,” Griffith said. “Our solution development is much more rapid, but it is not an enduring thing. It is normally designed to fit a capability gap that is niche and could have a timestamp on it requiring us to rapidly exploit. For the things we’ve worked on that do have an enduring characteristic, we try as much as possible to empower the project managers with information.”

“With some of our earlier successes, we had [improved equipment] literally in a Soldier’s hand within six months. It lightened the Soldier’s load, and we worked with [Program Executive Office] Soldier to help field 22 items that reduced Soldiers’ weight by 20 to 25 pounds. But we’ve continued to work with leaders, because whenever we’ve reduced the weight, it’s easy to say, ‘Here’s what you can carry instead.’”

“We’re right there with them; that’s why we’re able to have input on the Soldier’s load,” said Master Sgt. Joe Schoch, who runs the group’s training courses. “Because we’re walking with them up

the mountain, I don’t want to carry what I don’t need either.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Sean Bradley, the command sergeant major of Able Squadron, recalled how the group used its collective experience and know-how with one particular unit’s weaponry in Afghanistan.

“We saw issues with guys carrying M240 machine guns up the mountains,” he said. “That’s a heavy piece of equipment. There were two machine guns in the system, a Mk 48 and a Mk 46, both tested by the Army and used by special operations units. We took that capability and got it put into [a non-SF

unit in] the northern mountains of Afghanistan in a short amount of time, so those guys could have the same capability to conduct assaults.”

However, the AWG’s involvement didn’t stop with equipping just that unit, Griffith said.

“The Army was already working on the M240L, which drops seven or eight pounds off the Mk 48,” he said. “The Army was able to accelerate that program based on the comments we brought to them.”

“When a project manager partners with us, he’s getting a combat-experienced NCO who is providing no-kidding feedback relevant to what is going on right now,” Griffith said.

“We bring something to the fight instead of just a big head,” Bradley added.

#### A UNIQUE MIX

The AWG’s noncommissioned officers attribute much of the group’s success to bringing together the right individuals who possess the ideal blend of backgrounds and skills.

“The way AWG was formed, a lot of the members were in special operations,” Masson said. “But right now, we’ve got a pretty good split of operational advisors that are from conventional [forces] and special operations.”

“We have a unique mix,” Lahoda said. “It’s about your experiences and your leadership capabilities. We want a good mix, all focused on making the Army more effective, more flexible.”

“There’s a holistic synergy here; really, it’s us learning from one another,” Akridge said.

“A guy that grew up in SF has a unique perspective, but so does the infantry guy who has done different things,” Lahoda said. “Here, we merge all that together, and it’s very effective.”

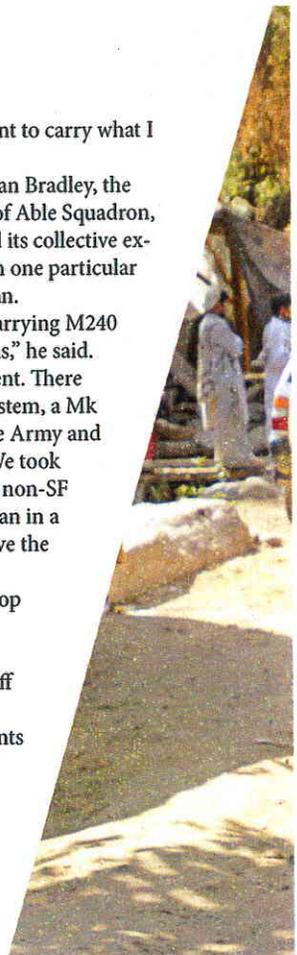
## LOSING ONE OF THEIR OWN

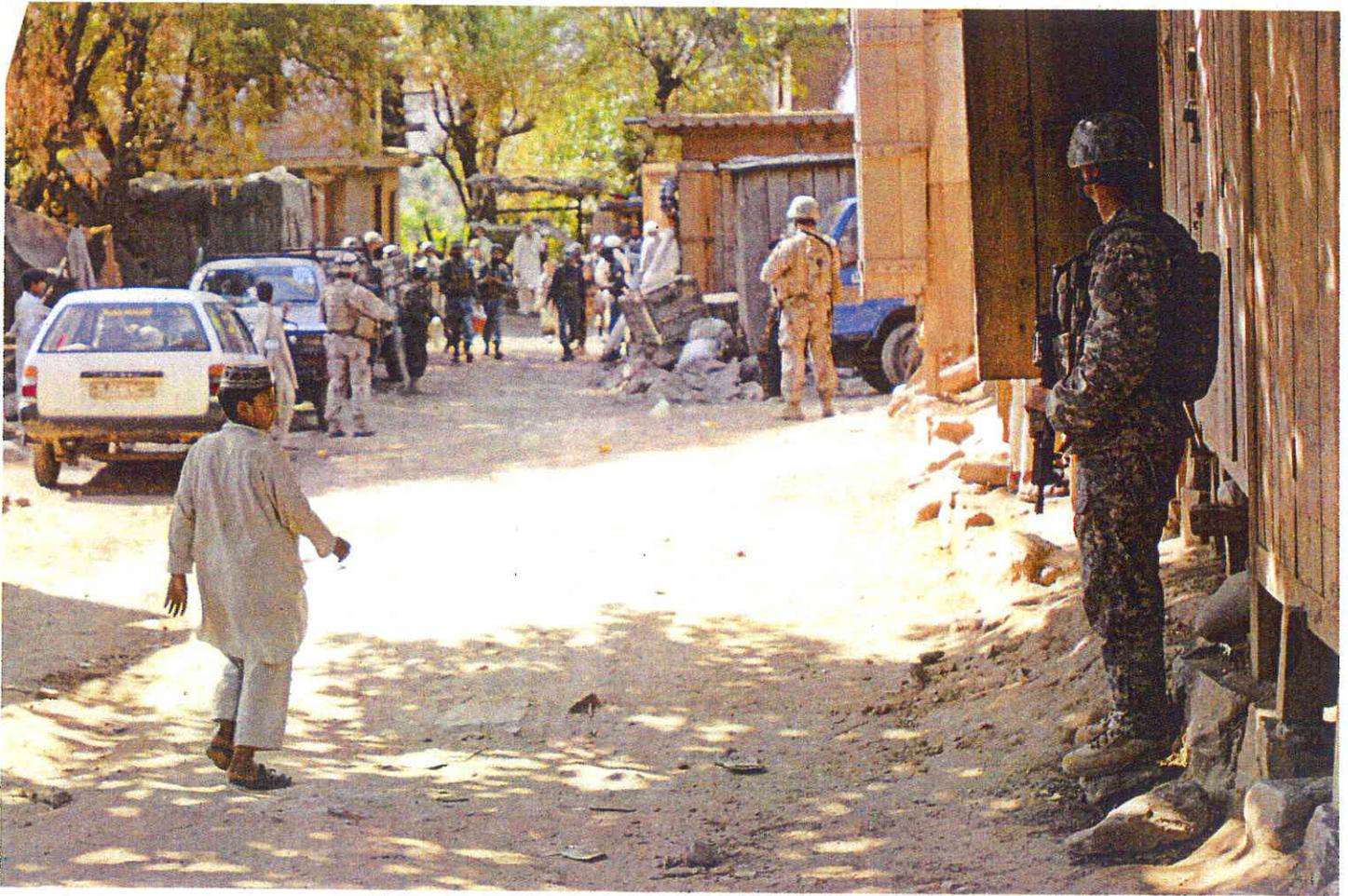
Because Asymmetric Warfare Group teams go wherever their units go, they sometimes find themselves in combat scenarios, fighting alongside the members of the unit they are there to advise. During one such encounter, retired Master Sgt. Robert “Pitt” Pittman lost his life — AWG’s sole fallen comrade.

Pittman, a decorated Special Forces operations sergeant who had been hired by AWG as a contractor, was advising a unit in Afghanistan on July 29, 2010, when his patrol was ambushed. In the ensuing firefight, he used his special forces training to help organize returning fire.

“Rob Pittman had become the go-to guy for our organization,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Akridge, AWG’s command sergeant major. “He then gave his life in that service while he continued to move to the sound of the guns to make sure he was there when the unit needed him to be. He provided sound advice and counsel to the organization up until his last breath.”

Today, a monument to Pittman stands inside AWG’s headquarters at Fort Meade, Md., and the group’s annual Best Warrior event was named in his honor.





**An Afghan boy looks at an AWG team member July 2009 as Soldiers wait for the Afghan national police to escort them to Hajibad in Nishagam, Afghanistan. PHOTO BY SPC. EVAN MARCY**

When the AWG recruits NCOs from throughout the Army, it isn't necessarily looking for the "best of the best," Akridge said.

"Our selection process is designed to find that person with the right attributes for the organization," he said. "It's not trying to find the 'ultimate warriors.' We need critical thinkers, those who can look at the problem, define exactly what the problem is and come up with unique, viable courses of action."

"The NCOs who do well here know *how* to think, not *what* to think — guys who can deal with ambiguity," Schoch said. "Normally, the Army isn't very ambiguous; there are training schedules, guidelines, certain things have to be done every day. NCOs who make it here have the ability to deal with that ambiguity."

"That's why we have the selection process," Lahoda said. "It's to get after those attributes that allow people to work well in an accelerated environment where there's not a lot of supervision."

Once selected, all AWG personnel go through a five-month course that hones students' critical-thinking and communication skills. That initial training is reinforced through continuing education events throughout the year, such as "Chicken Fridays," luncheons followed by competitive tasks that require unconventional thinking, Schoch said. "It's about thinking through the situations and coming up with creative solutions," he said.

Each quarter, the group also runs the Asymmetric Warfare Adaptive Leader Program, a 10-day intensive course for non-AWG personnel from throughout the Army.

"They come down to Fort A.P. Hill, Va., and we put them through scenarios and educational processes to help foster adapt-

ability," Akridge said. "It's about expanding their horizons.

"As people learn 'it's not against the rules,' it forces them to think through the problem set they are presented with," he said. "If I don't tell someone, 'No photos,' and it's a memory game, and they have a camera on their kit, then by all means use it. Or assembling and disassembling a number of weapons in the dark. In that darkened room, you can use anything to help you assemble the weapons — there are glow sticks and a small flashlight. But there's also a light switch."

"That's why we don't say 'outside-the-box thinking' here, because it's overused," Schoch said. "Sometimes it's inside-the-box thinking, like coming into a room and turning the light switch on. You don't need to think outside the box to do that."

Though his NCOs' critical-thinking skills are essential to the AWG completing its missions, Akridge reiterates that the group's ultimate goal is to proliferate such skills throughout the Army.

"There's value in having someone come here for, say, four years and then go back and impart what they've learned here to another unit," he said. "It's a constant struggle to keep quality guys here for that core institutional knowledge and, at the same time, the desire to share that knowledge with the rest of the Army." ♡

To contact Michael L. Lewis, email [michael.lewis73@us.army.mil](mailto:michael.lewis73@us.army.mil).