



Part III-From the Field to the Page: Warfighters Who Write Doctrine, and What Every Airman Can Use from Their Process

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The elevator doors open with a soft chime that feels out of place for the kind of work that happens beyond them. The hallway is clean, quiet, almost clinical; nothing like a flight line at launch time or an operations floor when the clock is collapsing. A new arrival steps out carrying a small bag, a laptop case, and something that looks too ordinary to matter: a battered notebook, corners rounded, pages swollen with humidity and use.

The boots are still dusty.

Not literally. These corridors don't tolerate much grit, but the dust is in the posture, in the eyes, in the way the Airman's mind still runs ahead of the present moment. This is the residue of the field: comms that died mid-execution, plans that deformed under pressure, decisions made with imperfect information because waiting for perfection would have been the most dangerous option available.

This is how the Air Force's doctrine writers arrive: the authenticity of the field is necessary if Air Force intends to stay ahead of the fight.

They are not brought in because they are good with words. They are brought in because they are good with reality, and because they are willing to do the hardest part: translate that reality into guidance the entire force can use.

That translation is not just valuable for doctrine developers. It is a process every Airman can adopt, right now, to improve how they help guide the fight in their own unit, shop, flight, squadron, and staff.

In a conference room that smells faintly of coffee and printer paper, the notebook lands on the table with a soft thud. Around it, a small team gathers operators, planners, sustainers, communicators, people from different disciplines with different scars. Some are quiet. Some are sharp-edged. All of them have seen enough to distrust easy answers.

A senior doctrine developer nods toward the notebook.

"Hard lessons?" he asks.

The new arrival doesn't give a speech. They flip to a page and point to a line written in cramped handwriting:

When comms died, the timeline didn't. Nobody laughs. Nobody needs the joke.



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That one line is a tangible takeaway for any Airman reading this: **write down what broke when pressure hit, then ask what principle would have prevented it from breaking again.** That is lessons-learned and doctrine work in miniature. And it is how the Air Force turns individual experience into institutional advantage.

The stories don't come out as grand narratives. They come out as fragments, quick vignettes, sharp enough to cut through abstraction.

One Airman describes contested communications: radios turning into dead weight at the worst moment, data links flickering, a mission that suddenly becomes a test of initiative and intent. Another talks about dynamic targeting that changed faster than the brief could keep up, targets emerging, moving, disappearing into noise. A third describes degraded intelligence: sensors that should have been decisive becoming partial and deceptive, the battlespace turning into a mosaic with missing tiles.

Then coalition friction: partners interpreting terms differently, authorities misaligned, timelines out of sync. The mission still must succeed, but the seams between organizations become operational terrain, terrain an adversary will exploit if the force cannot unify its language and intent.

Finally, sustainment under attack: supply lines pressured, lift capacity rationed, maintenance cycles disrupted, generation itself targeted. The enemy has learned a blunt truth: if they can break the system that generates combat power, they can shape the battle without ever fighting where they are weakest.

These vignettes aren't told for drama. They are told to test whether doctrine is earning its place. The question in the room is always the same:

Would this have helped? Would this have guided? Would this have held?

What Airmen can take and use immediately

Here's what lessons-learned and doctrine writers do with these vignettes, steps any Airman can adopt in their own team after an exercise, mission, deployment, inspection, or major event:

- **Capture the "break point," not the entire story.**
Don't write a novel. Write the moment something failed or nearly failed: comms died, priorities conflicted, authorities unclear, sustainment plan collapsed, assumptions proved false.
- **Name the constraint you couldn't out-muscle.**
Time, bandwidth, access, authorities, weather, adversary action, classification barriers, coalition limitations, identify what you couldn't "work harder" to solve.
- **Extract the principle beneath the technique.**
The technique is what you did. The principle is why it worked, or why it failed.



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Doctrine lives at the principle level.

- **Ask one ruthless question: “Would this repeat if I ran it again?”**

If yes, you don’t have a one-time hiccup. You have a pattern, something worth fixing, documenting, teaching, or elevating.

That process does something powerful: it turns experience into clarity. And clarity, quiet, shared, repeatable, is where advantage begins.

This is where the hard work starts. Raw experience is not doctrine. It’s personal, specific, shaped by a time, place, and circumstance. Doctrine, even at the tactical level, must extract what endures without turning into a checklist or a scrapbook of war stories.

In the room, much as in many a mission debrief, one practitioner offers a technique that worked in a particular scenario. Another pushes back immediately, not because it’s wrong, but because doctrine cannot become a manual for one environment. A third reframes it:

“What matters isn’t the trick. It’s the principle underneath it.”

That is professional friction used as a tool. Doctrine improves because it survives disagreement.

These practical lessons are codified for use, this is the doctrinal “upgrade loop” you can apply to your own processes, even if you never touch a doctrine publication:

- **Replace “We should...” with “Under these conditions, the best practice is...”**

That forces specificity without becoming tactical.

- **Build a two-column check: “What must be standardized” vs “What must remain flexible.”**

Standardize what creates alignment (terms, handoffs, authorities, minimum comm plan, battle rhythm triggers).

Keep flexible what demands creativity (tactics, local adaptation, unique threat patterns).

- **Run a “definition audit” on your team’s language.**

If two people on your team use the same term and mean two different things, you are already bleeding tempo. Fix it before the enemy forces you to.

- **Treat debate as a readiness tool, not a personality clash.**

If your process can’t survive tough questions, it won’t survive a contested environment.

And yes, there’s a message embedded here for adversaries, too: the Air Force does not simply accumulate lessons. It converts them into institutional advantage. It takes what the enemy hoped would remain isolated and makes it systemic.

A commander under pressure does not need perfection. They need a reliable answer, fast.



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That's why doctrine is often described as an **80–90% solution**: it should provide the baseline so leaders don't waste time rebuilding fundamentals when time is the one asset no one can surge once the fight begins.

Inside the engine room, someone says, "If we write this right, we give the commander time."

Time is the currency of modern conflict. An adversary may design operations to compress it, attack decision cycles, flood systems with noise, degrade comms, disrupt space, shape perception. Under those conditions, doctrine becomes a mechanism for preserving tempo because it gives the force a shared way to frame problems and act with coherence.

Mission command is the steel reinforcement running through it all: initiative within commander's intent and mission-type orders. That is not a philosophical preference. It is a survival requirement when centralized control becomes fragile.

You don't need to be a commander to build an 80–90% solution for your team. We have seen great success in teams using these:

- **Write a one-page "Intent and Boundaries" sheet for your team.**
 - What is the mission outcome?
 - What are the non-negotiables?
 - What authorities do we have?
 - What triggers a shift in plan?
 - What decisions are delegated by default?

- **Create a "comm-degraded" version of your process.**

If comms go down, what does your team do *without waiting*? Who acts? Who informs? What is the fallback rhythm?

- **Design your handoffs to survive disruption.**

If your process requires perfect timing, perfect staffing, and perfect connectivity, it will collapse exactly when it matters most.

- **Pre-brief your decision points.**

Identify the 3–5 moments where delay kills momentum, then agree in advance how the team will decide.

These are doctrinally-grounded habits, even if they never appear in a publication. They are ways to guide the fight from wherever you stand.

No one throws a party when doctrine updates publish. There's no ribbon cutting. The moment arrives quietly: an email notification, some links updated, a publication refreshed. It appears clean and authoritative without showing the debates that sharpened it.

The practitioners sit with a strange satisfaction, no sip of punch or military music playing in the background, only a decisive reality that the next complex problem awaits. Most times they will



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not see the future Airman who benefits. They will never watch the moment when a young commander moves faster because the baseline is already there, already understood, already trusted, codified in a playbook of extent best practices.

That is the real payoff: **unseen competence.**

Somewhere down the line, an Airman will make the right call faster because doctrine helped frame the problem. Somewhere, a staff will align quicker because doctrine provided the common language. Somewhere, a unit will respond with coherence instead of confusion because the fundamentals were institutionalized ahead of crisis.

Airmen reading this should take a final, concrete idea from that quiet impact:

If you fix your team's baseline, language, intent, handoffs, comm-degraded execution, you may never be credited for the moment it saves. But you may feel it in terms of mission success.

And that is the point.

- Doctrine converts operational lessons into institutional advantage, and those same habits can improve any unit's local processes. Interested? Check us out.
- Practitioners prevent relearning hard lessons by extracting principles that endure beyond a single mission or environment.
- Their credibility strengthens adoption across the force because Airmen trust guidance written by those who have carried the weight of execution.

What Comes Next

Part IV turns the spotlight to the civilian force, the continuity backbone. They protect the long game across rotations, maintain precision in language, and keep doctrine sharp, trusted, and usable while the rest of the force turns over. If you want to learn more about how doctrine can shape your unit's best into a force to be reckoned with, visit us at <http://www.doctrine.af.mil>.