

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #369

The Anatomy of Failure: Inside the Military Probe

Published January 30, 2026 • Runtime: 27:50

<https://myweirdprompts.com/episode/military-failure-investigation-mechanics/>

EPISODE SYNOPSIS

When a military institution fails, the fallout is often catastrophic. But what happens behind closed doors in the planning center once the dust settles? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn examine the "anatomy of a probe"—the rigorous, data-driven process of internal military investigations. They explore the Swiss Cheese Model of systemic collapse, the "hot wash" debrief where rank is left at the door, and the "Five Whys" technique used to trace technical glitches back to high-level strategic miscalculations. It is a deep dive into the difference between finding a scapegoat and finding a cure, moving beyond the public blame game to understand how organizations truly learn from their darkest hours.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd like to discuss the process of military investigations and internal probes following a major failure. Instead of focusing on blame, what lessons can be learned to ensure such events never happen again? If we were a fly on the wall in a military planning center, what would that investigation process look like—from establishing what went wrong and formulating new procedures to ensuring they are properly implemented?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am sitting here in our living room in Jerusalem with my brother. It is a quiet Friday afternoon, January thirtieth, twenty twenty-six, and the light over the Old City is doing that golden thing it does, but the mood in the house is a bit more somber today.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And man, Corn, the prompt our housemate Daniel sent over this morning is a heavy one, but it is also incredibly necessary. It is something we have felt the weight of right here where we live, especially lately. Given everything that has transpired in this region over the last couple of years, the question of how institutions account for their own failures is not just academic. It is a matter of survival.

Corn

It really is. Daniel was asking about the internal mechanics of military investigations. Specifically, what happens after a massive failure? Not just the public-facing blame game or the political fallout, but the actual, internal process of a military looking at itself in the mirror and asking, how did we let this happen? He wants to know what it looks like if we were a fly on the wall in the planning center during the actual probe.

Herman

Right. And he framed it in a way that I think is vital. He wants us to look past the blame. Blame is easy. Blame is what you do when you want to feel better in the short term. It is cathartic to point a finger and say, that person failed. But learning? Learning is hard. Learning requires a level of institutional honesty that is almost painful because it often reveals that the problem was not one person, but the very foundation everyone was standing on.

Corn

Exactly. We are talking about the difference between finding a scapegoat and finding the root cause. So today, we are going to be that fly on the wall in the military planning center. We are going to look at the anatomy of a probe, from the initial shock to the rewriting of the standard operating procedures. We are going to look at how a professional military deconstructs a disaster to ensure it never happens again.

Herman

I love that framing. Because when a military fails, it is rarely just one person making one bad choice. It is usually a systemic collapse. It is a series of small, seemingly insignificant errors that align perfectly to create a catastrophe. People in the industry often call this the Swiss Cheese Model. It was developed by James Reason, a professor who studied human error in complex systems.

Corn

Oh, I have heard of that. That is the idea where each layer of a system has holes, like a slice of Swiss cheese. Usually, the holes do not line up, so the system catches the error. If the radar operator misses a blip, the supervisor sees it. If the supervisor misses it, the automated alarm goes off. The system is designed with redundancy.

Herman

Precisely. But every once in a while, the holes in every single slice align. The radar is down for maintenance, the supervisor is distracted by a secondary crisis, and the alarm has been muted because of previous false positives. The failure passes right through every single defense. The goal of a military investigation is to figure out why those holes aligned and how to shift the slices so it never happens again. It is a fascinating, brutal, and deeply technical process that involves thousands of pages of data and hundreds of hours of testimony.

Corn

So, let's start at the beginning. The failure has happened. The dust is still settling. What is the very first thing that happens inside the planning center? Is it just chaos?

Herman

It can feel like chaos, but there is a protocol. The first stage is what is often called the After Action Review, or the AAR. Now, every unit does AARs after every mission, even the successful ones. But after a major failure, the AAR becomes a forensic operation. The very first goal is establishing a ground truth. Before you can ask why, you have to know exactly what.

Corn

And that sounds easier than it actually is, especially in a military context. You have the fog of war, you have conflicting reports, and you have people who are traumatized or defensive. How do they get to the truth when everyone has a different version of the story?

Herman

They start with the digital breadcrumbs. In twenty twenty-six, a modern military is a data-generating machine. They do not just rely on memory. They pull the GPS logs from every vehicle and every individual soldier's wearable device. They download the encrypted chat logs from systems like ATAK. They sync the drone feeds with the sensor data from border fences and satellite imagery. The investigators create a synchronized timeline that is accurate to the millisecond. They want to know exactly what was seen on a screen, what was whispered over a radio, and what was clicked on a mouse at every single second.

Corn

So it is less about what people remember and more about what the machines recorded? That feels a bit cold, Herman.

Herman

It is cold, but it is necessary because human memory is notoriously unreliable under stress. Cortisol literally rewrites how we store memories during a crisis. But once they have that digital skeleton, they bring in the people to put meat on the bones. And this is where the fly on the wall would see something really interesting. In a truly professional investigation, rank is supposed to be left at the door. They call it a hot wash.

Corn

Really? That seems counter-intuitive for the military, which is built entirely on a rigid hierarchy. You are telling me a private can tell a colonel he messed up?

Herman

In a healthy military culture, yes. It is a survival mechanism. If a junior analyst saw a warning sign on a screen at three in the morning and did not report it because they were intimidated by a colonel who was sleeping, the military needs to know that. If the colonel ignored the analyst because of ego, they need to know that too. If you maintain the hierarchy during the debrief, you only get the version of the truth that the highest-ranking person wants to tell. You get a filtered truth, and a filtered truth is just a polite lie.

Corn

So they create this sort of safe space for honesty. But let's be real, Herman, we are in Jerusalem. We have seen how these things play out in the news. People are still worried about their careers. They are worried about being the one who goes to jail or gets discharged. How do they overcome that fear?

Herman

That is the ultimate tension. The best militaries in the world strive for what is called a Just Culture. It is a concept borrowed heavily from commercial aviation. In a Just Culture, you do not punish people for honest mistakes. If a pilot misreads a dial because the dial was poorly designed, you do not fire the pilot; you fix the dial. You only punish people for negligence or willful violations. If someone followed the procedure and the procedure failed, you protect them. Because if you fire them, the next person will just hide their mistakes to save their job, and the system stays broken until the next tragedy.

Corn

Okay, so they have the timeline. They have the interviews. They are starting to see the holes in the Swiss cheese. What is the next step? How do they move from what happened to why it happened? Is there a specific formula they use?

Herman

There is. This is where we get into Root Cause Analysis. The investigators often use a technique called the Five Whys. It was originally developed by Sakichi Toyoda for the Toyota production line, but the military has perfected it. It sounds simple, but it is incredibly effective at stripping away excuses. You state the failure, and then you ask why. Then you ask why to that answer, and you keep going at least five layers deep.

Corn

Give me a concrete example. Let's say we are looking at a hypothetical border breach, something that feels very relevant to our current context.

Herman

Okay, let's try it. Failure: The border was breached by an adversary. Why? Because the automated sensors failed to trigger an alarm in the command center. Why? Because the software had been updated the week before and a bug was introduced that suppressed low-level alerts. Why? Because the testing environment for the update did not match the real-world deployment conditions. Why? Because the budget for the testing facility was cut to save money. Why? Because the high-level leadership prioritized offensive cyber capabilities over defensive maintenance and infrastructure.

Corn

Wow. So you go from a sensor failure to a high-level strategic miscalculation in five steps. That is a massive jump.

Herman

Exactly. And that is where the real work begins. If the investigation just says the sensor failed, they will just fix the sensor. But if the investigation says the leadership is under-funding defense, that leads to a fundamental shift in how the military operates. It moves the conversation from a technical glitch to a systemic failure of vision.

Corn

That is a massive distinction. It is the difference between fixing a symptom and curing the disease. But I imagine there is a lot of internal resistance when the investigation starts pointing toward the top brass. If you are a general and a report says your strategy was the problem, you are going to fight back.

Herman

Oh, absolutely. This is where the fly on the wall would see the sparks fly. You have the investigators, who are often independent officers brought in from other units specifically to avoid bias, clashing with the commanders who were in charge during the failure. It is a battle of narratives. The commanders might argue that they were given an impossible task with limited resources. The investigators might argue that the commanders were complacent or ignored early warning signs. This is why the documentation we talked about earlier is so vital. It is the only thing that can cut through the politics.

Corn

And this is where the documentation becomes the shield. If the investigators can show a pattern of warnings that were ignored, it becomes very hard for the leadership to deflect. But Herman, what about the things that went right? Does the investigation just ignore the heroes?

Herman

Not at all. That is a great point. These investigations are also about identifying Bright Spots. Even in a catastrophic failure, there are usually individuals or small units that performed exceptionally well. Maybe one platoon held their ground while everyone else retreated. The military wants to know why they succeeded when everything else was falling apart. Was it their specific training? Their leadership style? A piece of equipment they modified themselves? You want to replicate the success and isolate the failure.

Corn

So you have the root causes and the bright spots. Now you have to actually fix it. You mentioned earlier that change in the military usually takes three forms. Let's dive into those.

Herman

Right. In military circles, they use an acronym called DOTMLPF-P. It stands for Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership, Personnel, Facilities, and Policy. But for our purposes, we can focus on the big three: Doctrine, Training, and Equipment.

Corn

Let's start with Doctrine. That sounds like the most abstract one, but I suspect it is actually the most important.

Herman

It is the foundation. Doctrine is the philosophy of how you fight. It is the playbook. If the failure showed that the current playbook is obsolete, they have to rewrite it. This isn't just a few tweaks; it might mean changing how thousands of people are organized. For example, after the nineteen seventy-three Yom Kippur War, the Agranat Commission realized the Israeli doctrine for tank warfare was too reliant on the idea that tanks could operate without infantry support. They had to fundamentally rewrite their entire approach to combined arms. They had to change the very DNA of the army.

Corn

And that leads directly into Training. You can't just give someone a new playbook and expect them to know how to run the plays on a dark, rainy night under fire.

Herman

Right. Training is where the new doctrine is internalized. After a failure, you will see a massive shift in the types of exercises being run. If the failure happened because of a breakdown in communication during a night operation, you will see a huge increase in night-fighting drills where the radios are intentionally jammed. They want to stress-test the new procedures until they become muscle memory. They want the soldiers to be able to do the right thing even when they are exhausted and terrified.

Corn

It is about building that resilience. But what about the third one? Equipment? That seems like the part that takes the longest.

Herman

Equipment, or Materiel, is often the most expensive and the slowest to change, but it is sometimes the most visible. If a failure reveals that the radios did not work in mountainous terrain, or that the body armor was too heavy for the mission, the military-industrial complex kicks in. In twenty twenty-five, we saw a lot of this with the rapid integration of electronic warfare suites onto standard vehicles because of lessons learned in recent conflicts. They start fast-tracking technologies that were previously stuck in development for years.

Corn

So you have this plan. You have the new doctrine, the new training, and the new equipment. But the military is a massive, slow-moving beast. How do they ensure that these changes actually happen? How do they make sure the report doesn't just sit on a shelf gathering dust while everyone goes back to business as usual?

Herman

This is the implementation phase, and it is where many organizations fail. The fly on the wall would see a lot of bureaucracy here, but it is necessary bureaucracy. They create something called a Corrective Action Plan. Every single recommendation in the investigation report is assigned to a specific person or office, and they are given a hard deadline. It is not a suggestion; it is an order.

Corn

And there is oversight to make sure they actually do it?

Herman

Constant oversight. In many militaries, there is an Inspector General's office or a Government Accountability Office equivalent that tracks these things. They will literally go out to units in the field six months or a year later and ask, are you using the new standard operating procedure? Show me the training logs. If the changes aren't being made, the commanders responsible are held accountable. In a professional military, failing to implement a safety recommendation is often seen as a more serious offense than the original mistake itself.

Corn

It sounds very clinical when you describe it like that. But I keep thinking about the human element. These investigations are happening while people are grieving. There is so much emotion involved. How does a military handle the psychological impact on the investigators themselves? They are staring at the worst day of someone's life for months on end.

Herman

That is a great question, Corn. It is a huge burden. Imagine being the officer who has to tell a family that their loved one died because of a preventable procedural error that you just discovered. That is why many modern investigation teams now include psychologists and chaplains. Not just for the witnesses, but for the investigators. They have to process the trauma of the failure while remaining objective enough to fix it. It is a delicate balance.

Corn

It is a heavy weight to carry. But I think there is also a sense of purpose in it. If you can fix the system, you are honoring the people who were lost by making sure no one else has to die for the same reason. It turns a tragedy into a lesson.

Herman

That is exactly the mindset. There is a saying in aviation that the flight manuals are written in blood. The same is true for military standard operating procedures. Every rule, every checklist, every safety protocol usually exists because someone, somewhere, died when it wasn't there. When you look at a boring military manual, you are actually looking at a collection of lessons learned from past sacrifices.

Corn

That is a sobering thought. It makes you look at those manuals in a completely different light. They are survival guides. Now, Herman, you mentioned earlier that things are changing in twenty twenty-six. How does AI fit into a military probe today?

Herman

It is a game-changer for pattern recognition. An investigation into a single failure is one thing, but what if you could analyze ten thousand small incidents across the entire military over the last decade? An AI can look at years of data and say, hey, every time we have a failure in this specific type of urban mission, these three factors are present: a specific radio frequency was used, the temperature was over ninety degrees, and the unit had less than four hours of sleep. A human investigator might miss those correlations because they are too focused on the one big event.

Corn

So it is about moving from reactive to proactive. Instead of waiting for a failure to happen and then investigating it, you are looking for the precursors to failure. You are looking for the holes in the Swiss cheese before they ever align.

Herman

Precisely. It is called Predictive Readiness. In twenty twenty-five, we started seeing the implementation of Digital Twins for entire units. They simulate missions thousands of times using AI to see where the system breaks. It is the holy grail of military planning. But even with the best AI, you still need that human element. You still need the commander who is willing to listen to the bad news. You still need the culture of honesty we talked about.

Corn

That brings up an interesting point about the Fly on the Wall scenario Daniel mentioned. If we were in that room, would we see a lot of disagreement? Would it be a heated environment, or is it all very professional and quiet?

Herman

Oh, it is often very heated. One of the most important parts of a high-level investigation is something called Red Teaming. They will actually appoint a group of highly skilled people whose entire job is to argue against the findings of the investigation. They are the professional devil's advocates.

Corn

Wait, so they have a team whose job is to tell the investigators they are wrong?

Herman

Yes. Their job is to find the flaws in the logic. They will say, you claim the sensor failed because of a bug, but what if it was actually a sophisticated cyber attack from a nation-state? You claim the commander was complacent, but what if his orders were intentionally vague to give him flexibility? The goal of the Red Team is to stress-test the investigation. If the findings can survive the Red Team, they are probably solid. It is a built-in mechanism to prevent groupthink, which is the silent killer of many large organizations.

Corn

That is fascinating. It reminds me of the tenth man rule they talk about in some intelligence circles. If nine people agree, it is the tenth person's job to disagree and find out why the other nine might be wrong. It forces you to look at the problem from a completely different angle.

Herman

Exactly. It is a vital check on human nature. We all want to find a simple answer, blame a person, and move on. The Red Team forces you to keep digging until you find the uncomfortable truth.

Corn

So, let's talk about the aftermath. The investigation is done. The report is written. The changes are being implemented. Does the military ever share these findings with the public? Especially in a place like Jerusalem, where the public is so deeply connected to the military.

Herman

That is a very delicate balance. On one hand, you have national security concerns. You do not want to tell your enemies exactly where your weaknesses are or how your sensors work. On the other hand, in a democracy, the military is accountable to the people. If the failure was public, the public deserves to know why it happened and what is being done to fix it.

Corn

Right. And if you don't tell the public anything, they start to fill in the gaps with conspiracy theories or lose trust in the institution entirely.

Herman

Usually, what happens is a two-track system. There is a classified report that contains all the technical details, specific names, and sensitive intelligence. And then there is a redacted, public version that outlines the general findings and the steps being taken to fix the problem. It is never enough for everyone, but it is the middle ground. Some countries also use civilian oversight committees—parliamentary groups or independent commissions—to review the military's internal probe. They act as a second level of verification to ensure the military isn't just marking its own homework.

Corn

It is a complex system of checks and balances. But at the end of the day, it all comes back to that one goal: never again. Herman, as we are looking at this from the perspective of a fly on the wall, what is the biggest takeaway for our listeners? Most of them aren't generals or military investigators.

Herman

I think the biggest lesson is to separate the person from the process. When something goes wrong in your business, your family, or your own life, don't ask who messed up. Ask what part of the system allowed the mistake to happen. If you create an environment where people are afraid to admit their errors, you are guaranteeing that those errors will happen again. You have to be relentless about the truth. The military doesn't survive by being polite; it survives by being accurate. If you sugarcoat the truth to protect someone's feelings, you are putting everyone else at risk.

Corn

That is a tough lesson to learn, but a necessary one. It is about a different kind of loyalty. Not loyalty to a person, but loyalty to the mission and the team. It is about having the courage to say, I was wrong, or we were wrong, so that we can be better tomorrow.

Herman

Exactly. And I think that is a good place to start wrapping this up. This was a deep dive, and I hope it gave some perspective on what is happening behind those closed doors. It is not just about power or politics. Most of the time, it is about a group of very dedicated people trying to make sense of a tragedy so they can prevent the next one.

Corn

It is a noble, if painful, pursuit. And hey, if you have been listening for a while and you are finding these deep dives helpful, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious people find the show. We are trying to reach more people who want to look past the headlines and understand the mechanics of how the world actually works.

Herman

It really does. We love seeing the community grow. And remember, you can find all our past episodes and a way to get in touch with us at our website, [myweirdprompts dot com](http://myweirdprompts.com). We love getting prompts like this one from Daniel.

Corn

Thanks again to Daniel for sending this one in. It was a lot to chew on, but I think it is a conversation worth having, especially today.

Herman

Definitely. Alright, I think that is it for today.

Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. Thanks for listening, and we will talk to you next time.

Herman

See ya.

Corn

So, Herman, before we go, I have to ask. If you were the fly on the wall in one of these rooms, what is the one thing you would be most curious to see?

Herman

Honestly? I would want to see the moment when a senior general realizes that the failure was their own fault. That moment of realization, where the ego drops away and the responsibility takes over. That is where the real leadership happens. That is the moment the system actually starts to heal.

Corn

That would be a powerful thing to witness. It is the ultimate test of character. Anyway, let's head out. I think I hear Daniel in the kitchen.

Herman

Probably looking for his next weird prompt. I hope it is something lighter next time, like the history of competitive cheese rolling.

Corn

We can only hope. Bye everyone!