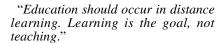# COMMANDER'S HATCH

Major General R. Steven Whitcomb
Commanding General
U.S. Army Armor Center

Distance Learning —
A Tool for Today and Tomorrow

"Education should occur in distance learning. Learning is the goal, not teaching."

> — General Eric K. Shinseki,
> Chief of Staff, Army, 21 June 2001

There are few training initiatives that stir up emotions more than distance learning (DL). If you currently view DL as the enemy, then we are the enemy, because Fort Knox has been a DL trailblazer for TRADOC for the past several years. The reasons why we are using DL are clear: there are operational requirements that drive its use; and the technology is available that allows us to leverage DL as a training tool for the entire force. I'm tackling this controversial issue to address your concerns. Let me say up front that I will not take any action that reduces the standards of the great training programs we have built. I consider that to be my unbreakable contract with the Force.

It seems DL is a topic of two extremes — people are either absolutely opposed to DL or so enamored by it that they believe everything can be taught by DL. The reality is somewhere in the middle. Army Transformation to the Objective Force is driving officer, warrant officer, and NCO Education System changes. We are building capabilities to lead this transformation in the training arena that will enable our Army's Transformation. Some of the required capabilities we are building, such as Assignment Oriented Training and training soldiers and leaders as we expect them to fight, are beneficial if we develop a robust DL capability. This capability will not only connect a soldier to information, but connects the soldier to a learning environment, anywhere — anytime.

Because of changes in our operating environment, we can no longer afford an "alert-train-deploy" methodology, which depends on major training events that are planned and executed after the alert. We must train our force with the flexibility and precision so that when alerted, we can deploy and employ rapidly. How we attain and maintain that warfighting edge is the challenge. At its best, DL will allow soldiers and units in the field to train in necessary skills when and where the training is needed. Since DL training material is "turn key," leaders can focus on training and achieving the standard, instead of other time-consuming aspects of training management. The DL training blocks give commanders a monitoring capability so that they ensure the training is done to standard.

Filling the TOE force and increasing the stability for our troops between deployments are two other factors that encourage development of DL instruction. These two factors drive the Armor Center to optimize the time soldiers and leaders spend in the schoolhouse. Units have a tough time maintaining their training and readiness if key soldiers and leaders are away. We should not take soldiers and leaders away from home and their unit training if there is an alternative. DL is a piece of that alternative because it provides continuing institutional training to standard while reducing the time soldiers and leaders spend at the institution.

DL has been around for a while, but the initial results were not spectacular. Initial attempts at DL were similar to a high-speed correspondence course. Correspondence courses provide information, but do not have the interactivity required to assist learning. Early CD-ROM lessons were an improvement, but are subject to distribution problems and maintainability problems (keeping the material current). The increased capability of the Internet has given us the capability to overcome most of the problems of earlier distance learning. The Internet provides the potential for interactivity and an ability to update training materials and ship those materials to AC and RC forces instantly. "Train as we fight" training challenges that we work through now with DL will be similar to future issues as we increase our reliance on the tactical internet and computerized vehicular command and control systems in our digitized force, Stryker BCTs, and ultimately in the Objective Force.

Distance learning is about soldier learning, not about instructor teaching. At Fort Knox, we believe we have DL about right. We have adopted a model that looks at courseware materials and examines the type and level of learning that takes place. Essentially, we see three levels of training: knowledge-based instruction, which can readily be accomplished through distance learning; applying that knowledge, which may or may not lend itself to a distance-learning format; and problem-solving. Depending on the task being trained, DL may or may not be accomplished in a distance-learning format. So our initial work with DL is aimed at knowledge-based instruction.

Commander's Hatch

Fort Knox is converting, or piloting, a number of courses to a partial distance-learning format. I want to emphasize the point that these courses will continue to have a resident component. The knowledge, application, and problem-solving skills will still be integrated when soldiers and leaders come to a training institution. But having a DL knowledge-based portion has many advantages. It means soldiers and leaders will show up with a common groundwork that will lead to faster learning in residence. It will also mean that the force can use the instruction at the time and place that it is needed. Imagine the value of a downloadable, interactive tank boresighting block of instruction that your Armor soldiers and leaders can train with that moves at their speed and monitors their proficiency in the task!

We are currently working on the 19D/K Reclassification Course, Scout Leader Course, 19D BNCOC, M1A2 Tank Commander Certification Course, and M1A1 Master Gunner Course. We are converting a portion of the 19D/K Reclassification Course currently being taught in The Army School System (TASS) battalions. This course was formerly taught as a series of Inactive Duty Training (IDT) weekends with a final Active Duty Training (ADT) phase of 2 weeks. When the program of instruction rewrite is complete, the IDT phase will be done via DL, followed by an ADT resident phase in the TASS battalions. We will pilot this course in January '03 with two TASS battalions. We have also begun work on 19D BNCOC for the TASS battalions. Current materials are being taught during IDT and ADT. Converting approximately 15 days of material to DL will see this course brought up-to-date with resident instruction at Fort Knox. The 15 days of resident training, which follows, will be performance and experience based. When students arrive for resident training, they will focus on problemsolving and operational application of the training they have received through DL. We will pilot this course in March '03.

The next course we are working is the Scout Leader Course. The current course is 19 days of resident instruction. The DL course will consist of a 40-hour DL phase of web-based instruction, followed by a 10-day resident phase. We will pilot this course in January '03. Recently, we began converting the M1A2 Tank Commander Certification Course. The 15-day resident course will now consist of a 40-hour DL phase of web-based instruction, followed by a 10-day resident phase. Our tentative pilot date is fourth quarter FY03.

The final course that we are working on is the M1A1 Master Gunner Course. I know there is a lot of emotion generated by this conversion. I am staying close to this one, and I think we are doing this right. The Master Gunner Course is considered by many to be our best course. As I stated before, I don't want to do anything to change that. The current course is 11 weeks of resident training. The pilot course will consist of 9 weeks of resident instruction here at Fort Knox and approximately 56 hours of DL instruction.

There are a number of concerns with DL. Because it is a new technique, we need to be very careful while selecting tasks for conversion, and we need to make very sure that we are maintaining standards. This also calls for unit commanders to commit time and resources so soldiers and leaders can take these courses during duty hours, much like the time we dedicate to Sergeant's Time Training. We recognize this will be difficult since units are already resource constrained. These are Armywide concerns and I am committed to helping find solutions and am convinced our soldiers and leaders will meet these challenges.

The Armor Center is leaning forward in the saddle to continuously improve the distance learning strategy and take it to new levels by developing outstanding and challenging learning. The Force is the ultimate judge of this training strategy's usefulness and flexibility. I ask that you join me in giving this strategy a chance. Understand it and where it can best be used — together we can employ this cutting-edge capability to hone our skills and knowledge.

FORGE THE THUNDERBOLT!