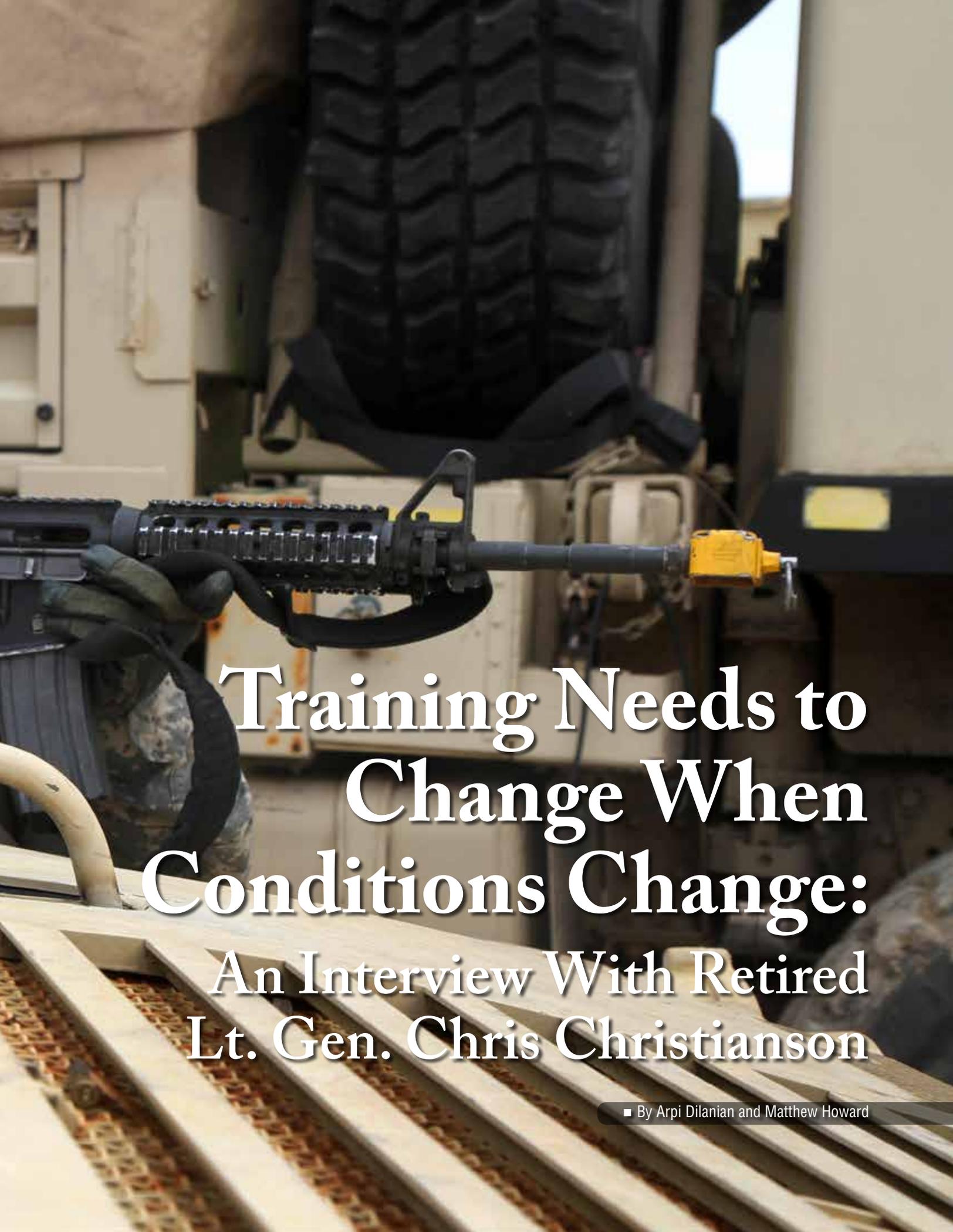




Spc. Moises Leon, 87th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, guards his fighting position on Dec. 7, 2016, in a training area at Fort Stewart, Georgia. (Photo by Spc. Jamie Beale)



Training Needs to Change When Conditions Change:

An Interview With Retired
Lt. Gen. Chris Christianson

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard

FEATURES

After training thousands of sustainers during his 37-year career, a retired logistics general discusses training management and logistics transformation.

Retired Lt. Gen. Claude V. “Chris” Christianson was the top logistics planner for the Army and then for the Joint staff during the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was an advocate for logistics transformation, and his policies greatly contributed to the success of logisticians in both wars. During his 37-year career, he trained thousands of sustainers. We sat down with him to find out what trainers can do better.

What do you think is the most important aspect of training management?

Without doubt, the most critical element of an effective training management system is feedback. Too often we do not take the time after training events to go back and talk about what we thought was going to happen, what actually happened, and then discuss the differences between the two. That process is important because we rarely do exactly what we planned.

For example, we were planning to execute A, B, and C during a training event. When we executed the training event, we did some of A, none of B, a little bit of C, and some other tasks that weren’t planned. Why those differences occurred is as important, and possibly more important, than what actually happened.

I would always try to hold training meetings once a week. We scheduled them right after our prime training day or event. For example, if the majority of training was conducted on Thursday, we would hold our training management meetings on Friday.

The first item on the agenda was to review what happened the day before. We conducted the review not in the manner of a graded report card, but by having the junior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and leaders talk about what they had planned, what actually happened, and why there were differences.

Out of those round table discussions, particularly at the battalion

level, came a wealth of knowledge that directly impacted our training program over the next several weeks. We changed our training based on what actually happened on the ground. I think that process is very important.

The Army has been very good for many years in using the after action review process, particularly at the National Training Center [at Fort Irwin, California] and the Joint Readiness Training Center [at Fort Polk, Louisiana], to help leaders understand what happened on the battlefield and why. We should use this same approach all the time in our training management process.

How did you develop your company commanders and NCOs to manage training?

The most important thing we tried to do was to make sure our junior NCOs and leaders took ownership of the process itself. I tried to give them the freedom to do the things they thought were right and made sure through feedback and support that they were held accountable. But I also gave them the freedom to try things that were different than what we had done before.

Too often, I would go to motor stables on Fridays and see the same thing being done week after week. That wasn’t training. We needed to be much better than that, so I encouraged creativity.

If we were to look at physical fitness as another training program example, it would not seem to make a lot of sense to go out every day and perform the same sets of exercises. However, I have seen a lot of that during my career. There has to be a better way to develop overall physical fitness than to just do pushups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run every day.

Not only will Soldiers get bored, but the resulting physical readiness outcomes would become too narrow. Creativity in this type of training program is important to keep a high



Spc. William Manley, a combat medic from the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, prepares to give Spc. Katie McConnell, a fellow combat medic, an IV during a mass casualty scenario in Lorton, Virginia, on Nov. 18, 2016. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Robert Cloys)

level of excitement about physical training, but also to ensure every Soldier maintains high all-around physical readiness.

I always tried to create a supportive training environment. Junior NCOs and leaders would try new, creative ideas, and some of them didn't always work. When a junior leader tried something that did not work, I did not want that to be a fatal mistake or one that caused them to curl up in a corner and quit.

Can you share some training techniques to prepare units for deployment?

I think the most important technique is also the hardest to do, and that is to force organizations to use in garrison the same tools, capabilities, and techniques they would use if they were operationally deployed.

For example, if in a support battalion we believe that uploading

the authorized stockage list is very time-consuming and could put a short-notice deployment at risk, then configuring our garrison to look as much like a deployed authorized stockage list would clearly reduce that risk.

If we could do that, then upon deployment, we could brace our stocks in their containers, close and lock the doors, and deploy. Upon arrival in the operational area, Soldiers would unlock the doors and operate just as they did in garrison.

This is a difficult challenge because it is so much easier to operate out of a warehouse, where everything is on fixed shelves. Operating out of containers takes more time, it is less efficient, and it takes longer to respond to customers. This is why operating in a deployed mode is so difficult.

Another technique that helps is to focus on just a few critical tasks that

absolutely must be accomplished to deliver success. I would tell my junior leaders, "Explain why you think these three tasks are really important and those other four are less important. We don't have time to do all seven of them; we can only do three, and we want to focus on the most important tasks."

That kind of discussion is important to have collectively amongst the leaders of an organization. The result should be a shared agreement on where the organization is going to focus its time.

The other technique I would try was to get junior leaders to define the end states they expected during the phases of deployment. I wanted them to be able to explain what logistics conditions would exist at the end of each phase. From each of those end states we could then backward plan the training needed to achieve those objectives.



Retired Lt. Gen. Chris Christianson shares his insights on training.

As the Army focused on fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we collectively lost the art of training management. How do we as an Army get back to the basics of training management?

I am not sure I agree that as an institution we have lost this art, and I am also not convinced that we want to go back to the way we did it 20 years ago. The world has changed significantly. We have to look at training management differently than we did before.

If we believe the world is very unpredictable, we can deduce that operationally we won't know exactly where we might be asked to go; we may not know who will be on our team when we go or who our adversaries might be. If that is so, then we should not have a training management system that is a lock-step process.

We want to have a system that is much more adaptive and flexible and

much more responsive to a world that is constantly changing.

I think the most important challenge for junior leaders and NCOs is to identify a handful of critical tasks that must be accomplished to deliver success. That is not easy in the uncertainty that defines today's world, but the danger is that we will try to do everything and we may end up not being really good at anything.

Since technology is changing rapidly, and threats are evolving, what is your perspective on what our institutional Army must do to adapt and change to better train leaders and Soldiers?

I recommend that the Army invest in a global knowledge network. Let me explain what I mean. In today's environment, every logistician ought to be able to take advantage of the collective knowledge of the Army

enterprise. If a Soldier is working on a piece of equipment that is unknown to him or her, it would really be good if the Soldier could rapidly access the Army's knowledge enterprise to enable success at the point of need.

Every Soldier ought to be able to "google it" when they run into something they cannot fix or haven't been trained to fix. When I say "google it," I am not talking about the commercial Google. I am talking about the Army's institutional google. Today that does not exist.

If you wanted to know who the lead actor in a 1954 movie was, you could do that today in a matter of 30 seconds on your phone. Our Soldiers ought to be able to access that same sort of capability with regard to the Army knowledge enterprise. If our institutions can invest in this kind of global knowledge network, it will significantly enhance our capabilities.

I also think that we can decentral-

ize training management much more than we have, and that starts with giving our instructors more freedom.

Additionally, our institutions have to figure out how to be more adaptive and dynamic. Taking two to three years to create a new course doesn't fit into today's uncertain environment.

If there was a profound event in the commercial supply chain management sector during a break between terms at an institutional school, we want the ability to integrate that outside event into the next term's course content. We can't do that today.

If a professor at a civilian university told the school administration that it would take three years to create a course, I don't think the professor would stay on the job long.

How can we better use information and technology to impact training in the future?

We should look at how we use technology in our own lives. For example, we bank on our phones. If we have to transfer money from one account to another, we do it using an app on our phones.

We don't get any training for this; we don't get a military occupational specialty that qualifies us to move money electronically, but the application is so intuitive that we don't need training.

These apps also are very secure, enabling us to deposit checks, move money, pay bills, and make investment decisions with peace of mind. We can do all of this at home or almost anywhere in the world.

We need these same kinds of capabilities for our logisticians. The tools that we have available for today's Soldiers are not much more advanced than they were when I was a brigade commander. We have an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, but the ERP data that's in that system is not coming back and forth to decisionmakers in a way as simple as my banking app brings ERP data to me.

To take the best advantage of technology, I think we should focus on the decisions that logisticians need

to make and then create the kind of applications that are intuitive, easy to use, and that draw data from all of the relevant sources across the logistics enterprise. Not only will that give us better logisticians; it will help focus training programs on what information is needed to make better decisions.

Let's say we are trying to determine where we can best position Bradley transmissions. Should we position 10 Bradley transmissions in Iraq? Or, maybe we should place 20 transmissions in Kuwait and none in Iraq. Maybe we could support more effectively if we kept 40 transmissions at Red River [Army Depot, Texas] and none in either Kuwait or Iraq. What data would we need to make that kind of decision?

Today the data we need resides in a lot of disconnected locations. In the future, we want people to be able to access this data very quickly and very accurately so that we will be able to make better decisions.

Can you provide an example of how we can train jointly to increase readiness?

Sure, I can give you an example. Let's say we are part of a transportation organization, and we are training our truck platoons. We decide one of our most critical tasks is to clear incoming supplies from an aerial port and move them forward to supply support activities located forward in the operational area.

Most Army organizations will conduct this kind of training in an Army-only environment. We train on the critical task, but we do so within the Army environment.

But what if we could create the conditions in training where our Soldiers pick up supplies from an Air Force forward air terminal? In other words, the Soldiers would deal with Air Force jargon, organizations, and culture while executing their tasks.

We could also create joint conditions at the other end by having the Soldiers deliver those supplies to a

Marine Corps air-ground task force supply organization. That's actually what happened in Operation Iraqi Freedom all the time.

So, if we actually created joint conditions in training, what happens to the Soldiers' learning? The critical tasks for the Soldiers (drivers, platoon leaders, and platoon sergeants) remain the same, but the joint conditions fundamentally change the learning. Now our Soldiers will begin to gain an understanding that they are part of a much larger, more complex supply chain. Change the conditions, change the learning!

What advice would you provide young leaders on how to best keep their Soldiers engaged during training?

Leaders have to be there! If our junior leaders think that training is important enough that their Soldiers have to be there, then the leaders have to be there as well. I can't tell you how many times I've gone out to visit a training event and found very few leaders there. The NCO responsible will always be there. But sometimes the Soldiers going through training are from two or three different platoons, squads, and sections, and often their leaders just don't show up. That's not right.

Young leaders have got to be there. If Soldiers see three or four times in a row that their leaders are not there, they will be thinking, "Why am I out here doing all this stuff and my sergeant or lieutenant is not here? If it's not worth their time, why is it worth mine?" Young leaders must be there.

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