

Commandant's Note

MG DAVID M. HODNE



Preparing our Infantry Soldiers to Close With, Destroy Enemy Remains Key

I am a proud product of the Infantry School and am deeply appreciative of the talented NCOs and officers who first coached and trained me here many years ago. Having now served in the U.S. Army Infantry School, I am even more appreciative of today's talented NCOs and officers who invest in the future of tomorrow's Army.

Our fundamental responsibility remains to prepare our Infantry Soldiers and leaders to close with and destroy the enemy in close combat. Instilling and inspiring the Spirit of the Bayonet remains essential to all that we do. The final yards that define close combat always have, and always will, represent the most dangerous place on the planet. The importance of these final yards can't be ignored... and our ability to close in these final yards can never be assumed. In addition to the obvious danger inherent here, these final yards are both unimaginably horrible... and intensely personal. These final yards also remain essential to winning our Nation's wars.

Tomorrow's battlefield, and the final yards necessary for victory, will be more brutal and more dangerous than ever before. The luxury, and potentially the illusion, of standoff afforded by new capabilities never relieves the Infantry of closing the final yards. Our Army retains experience in small unit action following two decades of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. However, this experience is neither uniform across formations nor is it uniform across the cohorts of NCOs and officers. We've been here before. Throughout our Nation's history, our Army always relied on Fort Benning to teach, train, maintain, and in some cases, restore, individual, collective, and leader tasks. These three categories of tasks are equally important. You can't achieve collective proficiency without first achieving proficiency and confidence in individual tasks. Leaders can't achieve proficiency without units and Soldiers proficient in both their individual and collective tasks. Future leaders and entire formations will never realize their full potential if their leaders don't set the example in mastering their leader tasks. Throughout our training here, two key ingredients to all that we achieve at Fort Benning are the winning combination of a "capable instructor" and a "willing student." While GEN Marshall didn't include "dedicated staff" in his formula, I know he, like I, absolutely recognized the value of our committed Soldiers and Civilians as a third key ingredient who enables every aspect of our mission.

Lastly, while we boast proficiency in small unit action, we have much work to do in this area, and also have much work to do in the realm of individual skills. I recall certifying

my formation bound for Iraq in our "Individual skills in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment." Our Combat Training Centers (CTCs) even modified the training path to support this. Today, CTCs appropriately refocus on fighting at echelon, but we still need to apply the same urgency to ensuring proficiency in the individual skills necessary to survive, fight, and win in large-scale combat operations. Decades ago, our Army trained in similar context following Vietnam in the Cold War. Throughout that period, we understood we would have to fight outnumbered and win.

Together, we need to produce Soldiers and leaders who intuitively understand that failure to properly camouflage self and individual equipment, poor noise and light discipline, poor radio discipline, amateurish use of hand and arm signals, lack of familiarity with constructing fighting positions, etc., leaves our formations vulnerable when facing any adversary. When facing peer or near peer adversaries, these vulnerabilities are potentially catastrophic. These skills will also evolve with the contemporary battlefield environment. For example, we no longer own the night... we share it... and in this shared space, today's lasers are yesterday's parachute flares. Poor discipline in designating targets, directing fires, or marking locations (friendly or enemy) creates easy target reference points for our enemy. In understanding skills necessary to fight outnumbered and while in unfamiliar terrain, look no further than the standing orders of Rogers Rangers to remind us of the basic principles that still apply.

I have faith in the efforts of dedicated professionals across our Army modernization enterprise in our endeavor to restore overmatch across warfighting functions. However, our Army's source of overmatch always rests with our people (our Infantry Sergeants in particular), and we should be able to trade our equipment with the enemy and still beat them (one of my favorite quotes from GEN Paul LaCamera). I also have faith that if the U.S. Army Infantry School earnestly produces leaders and Soldiers proficient in individual, collective, and leader skills we will defeat any enemy, anytime, anywhere, and under any conditions.

Lastly, I am proud of you, and prouder to serve with you. Again, we invest in meaningful and necessary work. In the words of Medal of Honor Recipient COL (Retired) Ralph Puckett, "Be proud, but never satisfied."

"Wherever brave men fight... and die, for freedom, you will find me. I am always ready... now and forever. I am the Infantry! Follow me!"