

INTERVIEW WITH
LT. GEN. CLAUDE CHRISTIANSON

A new way to train leaders

Rewarding officers for toeing the line throughout their early careers is no way to develop the creative thinkers needed to fill the military's most senior positions. Lt. Gen. Claude Christianson aims to change that.

RETIRED LT. GEN. CLAUDE CHRISTIANSON BRINGS A long résumé to his latest assignment as senior director of the Center for Joint and Strategic Logistics at the National Defense University. His role there is to lead the center in developing the next generation of logistics professionals with special expertise in national security. The center is also working to improve joint logistics education across the military and national security services and support logistics research efforts both within the Department of Defense (DOD) and across U.S. government.

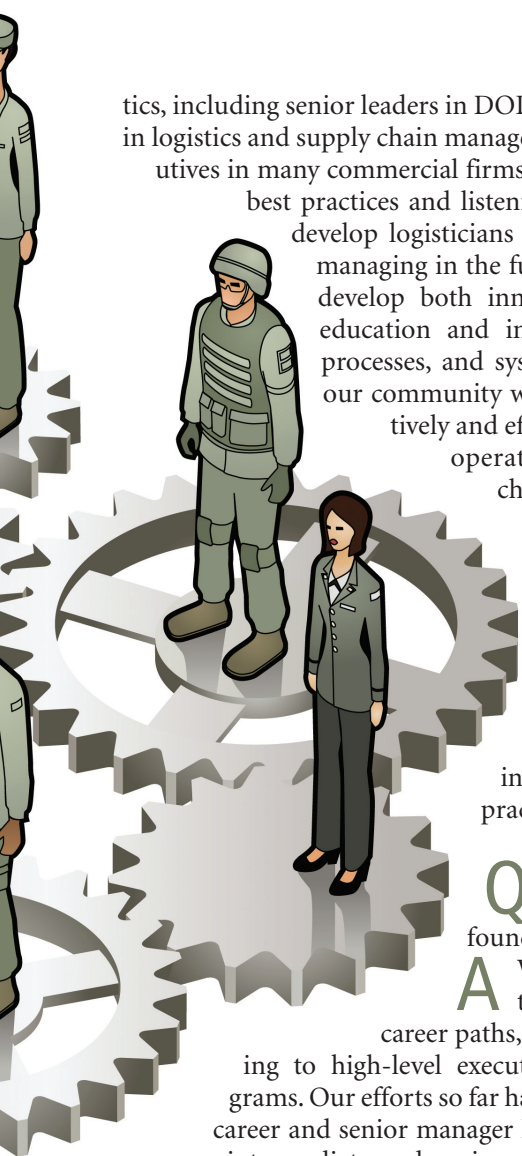
Lt. Gen. Christianson's last position before retiring from the Army in 2008 was director of logistics for the Joint Staff in Washington, D.C. In that role, he coordinated efforts across the defense logistics community, including the office



of the secretary of defense, the services, the combatant commands, the industrial base, and our multinational and inter-agency partners. Prior to that, he had major responsibility during the combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, where he directed in-theater logistics support for all land forces.

Lt. Gen. Christianson has been described by some as perhaps the finest logistics operator ever produced by the U.S. military. He spoke recently with *DC VELOCITY* Editor at Large Steve Geary.

Q Can you fill us in on what you've been doing since you arrived at the center?
A Since joining the center in October 2009, I've had the opportunity to work with experts across defense logis-



tics, including senior leaders in DOD, leading academicians in logistics and supply chain management, and senior executives in many commercial firms. We've been looking at

best practices and listening to ideas on how to develop logisticians capable of successfully managing in the future. We're working to develop both innovative approaches to education and improvements to tools, processes, and systems that will provide our community with the ability to effectively and efficiently support future operations and meet any challenges we might face.

We need leaders—both now and in the future—who are able to understand logistics and supply chain theory and conceptual approaches, and translate them into useful principles and practical applications.

Q What sort of opportunities have you found?

A We have looked at military education along career paths, from pre-commissioning to high-level executive management programs. Our efforts so far have focused on the mid-career and senior manager levels; we refer to them as intermediate and senior service college levels of education.

At the senior service college level, there are three areas where we see great opportunities to enhance the educational experience for our leaders. The first is an understanding of supply chain management: the defense supply chain, how it operates, and how it might operate to be more successful in the future. Second, there is hardly any instruction at all about life-cycle systems management as a culture, a philosophy, and a way of doing business. Finally, we believe we should help develop a stronger understanding around the nexus of resourcing, readiness, and national security outcomes to help answer the question "How can you best resource national security strategy under conditions of uncertainty and constrained resources?"

Q What about the intermediate-level officers with 10 to 12 years of experience?

A We're convinced that our major focus area at this level of education should be on joint logistics planning. We aren't doing a good enough job with our mid-career professionals in helping them understand how to effectively plan joint logistics operations. Keep in mind that we don't deploy as the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, or the Marines. We blend together as a joint force under a joint command structure.

That opinion—that we need to do a better job teaching joint logistics—was formed by what we found in observing and training units headed into Iraq and Afghanistan. This skill is very challenging to develop in the classroom environment because it requires extensive practice and interaction with experienced planners who are comfortable discussing planning, coaching, and assessing students in an interactive learning environment. It is my belief that you can't teach planning effectively using a stack of PowerPoint charts.

Q If you had to pick one skill that all future leaders need, what would it be?

A I believe the most important skill for future leaders to possess is the ability to influence people they don't control. That will require developing skills in negotiation, mediation, and facilitation—skills that today are underserved in our educational system. An uncertain environment also requires leaders who see things as they are and can find unique ways of applying the capabilities they have at their disposal.

It is also important to note that in order for us to be successful in uncertainty, we will often need to have different relationships between organizations and people than we have today. In some cases, we may need completely new relationships with people and organizations that may not even exist today. We want to develop the kind of leaders who can make these relationships grow and actually bear fruit.

Q How do you foster a collaborative mindset in military leaders who grow up in a command and control environment?

A I think we have to focus on unity of effort as our guiding principle. In the military, we have talked about unity of effort without unity of command for a long time, and I think today's students, students who are coming out of multiple assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan, get it. We need to reinforce that in our classrooms and help the military institutions adapt to what the students have already learned.

Unity of effort is really driven by a few, very key components, one of the most important of which is finding common ground. Is it possible that we can all agree on what we are trying to accomplish? Can we all see the same picture? Are we sharing information that allows us to see the same thing? Having agreement on the common outcomes becomes the key to getting unity of effort.

You don't have to have a military command and control structure to do that. In fact, a rigid hierarchical structure may in some ways impede mission accomplishment by limiting collaboration and creative thought.

Q How did you end up here? What insights can we gain as logisticians from your experience?

A I've been blessed throughout my career with the opportunity to work with exceptional people from all walks of life and professional disciplines. Personally, I was also very lucky to have done things that Army officers were, at one time, told not to do. One of those "no-nos" was to teach ROTC. The second was to serve a tour with the reserve components, where I spent three years. At the time, those two assignments were pretty much considered a death knell for one's career. But as I got older, those two assignments helped me understand important things that, had I not had those assignments, probably would have made my jobs a lot more difficult as I got to more senior positions.

My advice to younger officers and leaders—which at this point is just about everyone—is to work hard at every job



you have and learn as much as you can from each of them. Look around you, and pay special attention to what your subordinates see, know, and do. Every job offers remarkable potential—except, of course, my current one. [Editor's note: Gen. Christianson smiles and chuckles.]

Q Is there anything else in your career path that helped you be successful?

A I've had lots of foreign exposure, almost 20 years outside of the continental United States during my 37 years in uniform. That has helped me immensely to develop a deeper understanding of how to work with people who don't think like you do, don't do things like you do, and don't share the same sense of priorities.

My exposure to peoples and cultures that did not share the same perspective as I did helped to build a deeper understanding of alternative views. Spending lots of time in places like Thailand, Korea, Germany, Italy, and the Middle East gave me a much broader look at my profession. My combat experiences in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq were also very important. I think all of those things—when blended together—have given me what might be considered an eclectic career path. However, from an intellectual

perspective, those experiences have allowed me to see things differently, and hopefully more broadly and deeply.

Q Are you saying that the fact that you like to color outside the lines actually helped make you a better leader?

A To the extent that coloring outside the lines has helped me find new paths, it has helped me. If we believe that the future is going to be uncertain, then we will send our leaders into places where they will be asked to accomplish something we haven't seen before.

In that regard, we want to be able to develop officers who are creative. If they try to apply standard templates—cookie cutters—to solve problems that are unknown, they are going to fail. We need leaders who can be creative, who will understand the problems they face in the context in which those problems are presented, and can recognize when a template solution will not fit.

Q But most organizations—and certainly the U.S. Army—live within structures. How do you reconcile the need to be creative with that reality?

A Organizations have structures for good reasons. We have to have the discipline—both organizational discipline and personal discipline—so that under extreme pressure, we can depend on the guy next to us and we can

depend on the organization next to us.

However, at the senior leadership level, how one applies capabilities—these structures—should not be looked at as one size fits all. There is really an art to senior leadership that is challenging, especially under the pressure of military requirements and life-and-death decisions.

Q That goes back to your earlier point about how a diverse set of experiences helped prepare you for senior leadership. You learned to see things from a variety of perspectives?

A The fact that I colored outside the lines at times has helped me. However, it is important to understand that coloring outside the lines as a lieutenant and a captain is not always good. Recognizing when you can step outside the lines and when to stay inside the lines is very important.

Interestingly, my perspective is that we tend to reward officers who toe the line throughout their early careers and then all of a sudden—when they advance to the most senior positions—we want them to be critical thinkers, strategic thinkers. In other words, we want our most senior leaders to be able to envision new ways of doing business. That's a lot easier said than done, and that is why the center is looking at how we teach our logistics leaders in the military. We believe that what we teach is important, but it's *how* we teach that is most important. □