

# From Tradition to Transformation: Army Training in Metamorphosis



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By Dr. Ruth A. Busby, Mr. Dietrek G. Louis, and Dr. Keith A. Stampley

The U.S. Army made 2025 a memorable year with the announcement of the Army Transformation Initiative (ATI), a plan to "transform to a leaner, more lethal force by adapting how we fight, train, organize, and buy equipment" (Driscoll & George, 2025). This plan requires a fundamental shift in how we train. The transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly is a fitting analogy for the changes needed in Army Aviation training. For Army Aviation, this means shedding outdated training methods—like a caterpillar sheds its chrysalis—for innovative approaches that address modern operational challenges. This article explores how the ATI will transform Army Aviation training and what that will look like in practice.

## ATI: A Call to Change

The term "transformation" has become a frequently discussed concept recently, but what does it mean for the Army? Shared understanding is a key principle of the U.S. Army's Mission Command that ensures clarity in communication and in goals, thereby ensuring the force is unified in the mission (Department of the Army, 2019b). In this article, we seek to contribute to a shared understanding of what transformation means, to avoid fragmented perspectives and ensure consistent implementation.

Jack Mezirow's (Taylor & Laros, 2014) transformative learning theory provides a framework that explains how people progress through stages as they change their beliefs through a process of



Image created by Bill Herrin with Grok artificial intelligence.

questioning preconceived ideas and assumptions. This process is different from simply adding new knowledge to what they already know. For Army Aviation, transformation means rethinking how Soldiers and leaders are trained rather than simply updating old methods. Soldiers develop critical thinking and

teamwork skills to solve problems as they adapt to new challenges, some of which are unexpected. The Table (page 24) illustrates how Mezirow's stages of transformation might apply to Army training.

## Why Army Aviation Needs Transformation

Historically, Army Aviation training included a combination of classroom instruction, simulators, and live flight hours. While effective in the past, these methods are time- and resource-intensive. Additionally, they are unable to keep up with the rapidly evolving nature of threats and technologies.

Lessons learned from exercises such as Defender Europe 2023 provide insights into the need to transform training methods for modern warfare. The exercise involved more than 20,000 troops from 17 nations and emphasized the need for interoperability, dynamic decision-making, and adaptability in complex environments (Prohaska, 2023). Army Aviation units were tested in scenarios involving cyberattacks, electronic warfare, and contested logistics (Crockett, 2023). Gaps in traditional training methods were revealed, including reliance on predictable scenarios and outdated communication systems.

Stage	Explanation of the Stage	Connection to Army Training Transformation	What Must Change	Example
<b>Stage 1: Disorienting Dilemma</b>	A person encounters a problem or experience that challenges their current beliefs, causing them to question their assumptions.	Soldiers encounter realistic, high-stakes scenarios that challenge their assumptions about traditional warfare.	Training must shift from static, predictable exercises to dynamic scenarios that reflect modern warfare complexities.	Soldiers are presented with a simulated cyberattack that forces them to question their reliance on current communication systems.
<b>Stage 2: Critical Reflection</b>	Individuals' underlying assumptions are scrutinized during a period of self-reflection. Resistance to change can result.	Soldiers analyze their decisions, question assumptions, and identify gaps in their knowledge and skills.	Training programs must incorporate structured opportunities for self-reflection, such as after-action reviews (AARs).	Soldiers critically reflect on their responses to a cyberattack during an AAR, assessing gaps in adaptability.
<b>Stage 3: Exploration of Alternatives</b>	The person explores new ways of understanding the problem, often through dialogue with others and testing new ideas.	Soldiers collaborate to develop and test new approaches to solving challenges identified during critical reflection.	Training must prioritize creativity, collaboration, and experimentation, encouraging Soldiers to test new strategies.	Soldiers work with cyber teams and space assets to develop alternative communication methods after a cyberattack.
<b>Stage 4: Acquisition and Testing of New Knowledge</b>	The individual acquires new knowledge, experiences "aha" moments, and tests their new paradigm in real-life situations.	Soldiers apply new paradigms in real-life or simulated scenarios, refining their skills through iterative testing and feedback.	Training must integrate advanced technologies like synthetic training environments (STEs), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) to create immersive, realistic training scenarios.	Soldiers use STEs to practice decision-making in multidomain operations (MDOs) within a reorganized or decentralized command structure.

Table. Transformative learning stages and Army training transformation. Table developed by the authors, 2025.

Advanced technologies such as STEs, VR, and AI proved valuable for training by providing realistic, unpredictable battlefield scenarios and immediate feedback. Opportunities to practice decision-making under stressful, degraded conditions were provided (Burton, 2023). This new reality demands that Soldiers think critically to analyze data, adjust to rapid changes, and make decisions quickly. General James B. Hecker maintains, “I have established Agile Combat Employment (ACE) as one of my five priorities ... to regain some of the agility and interoperability in how we maintain and support our aircraft ... We must train and exercise like we fight—already in peacetime and make it part of the fabric of national education, training, planning, operations and future investment” (U.S. Europe World

Affairs, 2024, para. 10).

The Army Learning Concept should guide modernization efforts for Army Aviation training. Transformation may “require challenging, and in some cases, wholly new efforts from teachers, trainers, instructional designers, material developers, and other contributors” (Training and Doctrine Command, 2024, p. 18).

### Opportunities for Transformation

The ATI challenges us to incorporate more learner-centered instruction by creating experiences, rather than just delivering information. Learner-centered instruction includes self-discovery, critical thinking, and learning by doing facilitated by open-ended

questions (Conover, 2024). Advanced technology, leadership development, and innovation are three key areas identified in the ATI for this new approach (Driscoll & George, 2025).

### 1. Embracing Advanced Technology

The Army’s transformation efforts depend on advanced technology. Technology tools will revolutionize training methods by creating realistic training exercises while reducing risks associated with live exercises (Rozman, 2020; Arjun & Sanjay, 2024).

- **STEs and VR:** These tools immerse Soldiers in complex situations, such as responding to cyberattacks and coordinating MDO. Soldiers practice decision-making in high-stress environments—all within the confines of the classroom. Opportunities requiring critical thinking, such as making judgments and using data analysis to make decisions, are provided to adapt quickly and make decisions in unpredictable circumstances.

- **AI:** AI can provide realistic battlefield scenarios that challenge Soldiers in unpredictable ways, more closely aligning with real warfare. Immediate, data-driven feedback can be provided that personalizes training for individual Soldiers’ strengths and weaknesses. The National Training Center is one example of how AI can create and modify training exercises to simulate current and future conflicts, including incorporating geopolitical, cultural, and technological factors (Coombs, 2024). The University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies “is using AI to create military training materials in (near) real-time” (Nye, 2025).

### 2. Leadership Development

Like Soldiers, leaders must also be adaptable, innovative, and capable of operating in rapidly changing environments of modern warfare (Department of the Army, 2019a). Cultivating these traits should be an integral part of leadership development. Hands-on simulations, peer learning, and collaborative scenarios will replace long PowerPoint presentations to provide the training leaders need to adapt and innovate.



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### 3. Innovation

For transformation to take root, the Army must nurture a culture of innovation that encourages experimentation, including taking calculated risks as creative solutions are sought for complex problems (Department of the Army, 2021a). More than 70 transformation projects are already being implemented and tracked by digital dashboards to monitor progress (Ponder, 2025). For training developers in aviation, the most promising development is the Modular, Adaptive, Relearning Training (MART) model from the Cyber Center of Excellence. The MART model allows instructors to update lessons as systems evolve, instead of waiting years for course rewrites. Aircraft systems, mission software, and unmanned teaming technology change faster than manuals. Training that adapts in real time can create the agile aviators needed for modern warfare (Lynch, 2024).

### Challenges

The path is not without challenges. Historically, the Army has been resistant to change by reverting to familiar methods. For example, the Future Combat Systems program failed in part because training could not keep pace with technology that never fully arrived, resulting in few measurable changes in how Soldiers learn and fight (Gouré, 2011). The ATI offers a unique opportunity to get it right by embracing change. Focusing on adaptive training models and leveraging

technologies can address past shortcomings and become an example for building a force ready for future challenges. Many current training methods still rely on models that worked in the past, such as lecture slides, PowerPoints, and “sage-on-the-stage” instruction, which produce passive learners and limit initiative. Transformation in training should not be considered a supporting effort but rather a vital component of developing a lethal force (Department of the Army, 2021b).

Recent efforts, such as redirecting nearly \$5 billion in legacy divestments toward modernization and training priorities, show that the Army is serious about change (Judson, 2025). In Congressional Research Service Report R48606 (2025), author Andrew Feickert has urged the Army to define clear “measures of effectiveness” to prove that transformation is producing tangible outcomes and improved readiness.

The ATI is the right step, but it will not succeed through revision alone. Transformation means creating a learning culture that prioritizes agility, experimentation, and critical thinking for all ranks. Modernization efforts by the Army are not new. The difference this time will be whether training itself transforms, rather than solely, the tools supporting it. If the ATI can deliver that kind of change, the Army will not just train better; it will fight better. Moreover, that is the only transformation that counts.

### Conclusion

The ATI provides a shared understanding of the transformation needed for Army Aviation to move forward. We must not get distracted by updating tools or processes such as AI and VR; instead, we should focus on the real changes that must happen in our classrooms and culture. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, this transformation will create a more lethal force that can adapt to rapidly changing threats. Moving from tradition to transformation means creating a culture where agility, innovation, and critical thinking are the norm, not the exception. By shifting from passive instruction to active, experience-based

**If  
you don't  
like change,  
you'll like  
irrelevance  
even less.**

**General Eric Shinseki, former  
Chief of Staff of the Army**

learning, we will not just train better; we will fight better. While there will be challenges, there will also be growth opportunities. If we commit to this change, we can ensure Army Aviation is ready to meet whatever challenges the future may bring. The time to act is now, and it is up to all of us to make it happen.

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