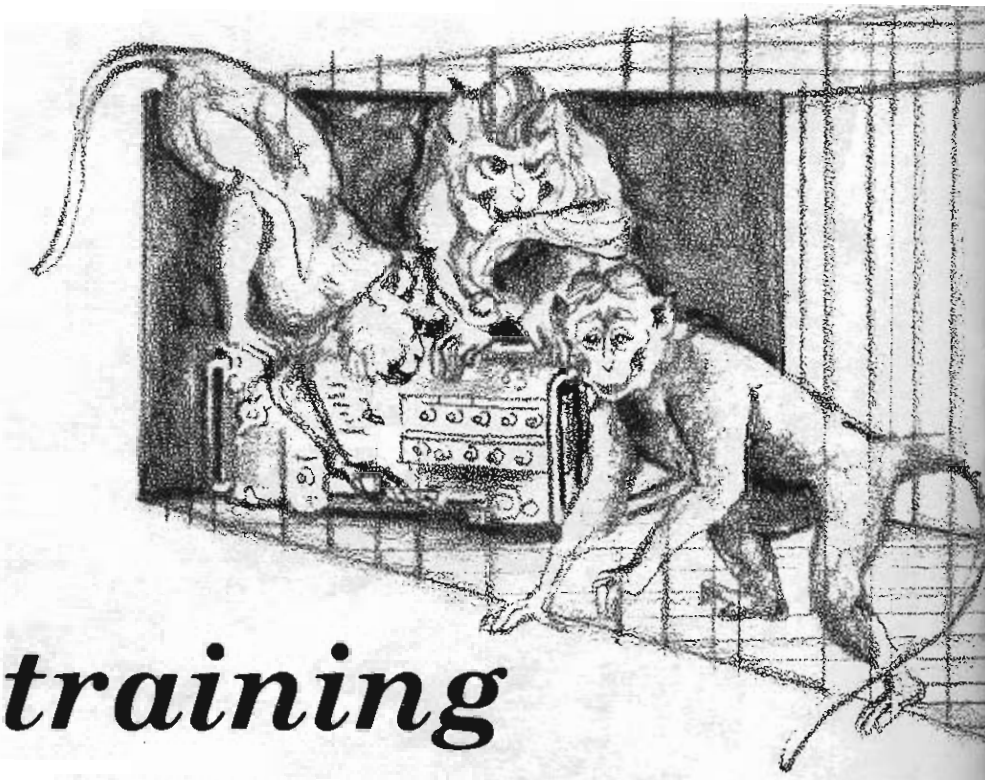

Generic training

It now appears we may not have been smart enough to know the difference between "nice-to-know" and "need-to-know" information.

by Beverly Friend

Training soldiers is our most important task at the Signal Center. However, serious questions are being asked about just how well we're accomplishing that task. Academic journals, field commanders, and the media have all recently speculated on the causes of weak competitive performances by our soldiers. A conclusion commonly reached is that we have concentrated too much on specific task training, while slighting the "generic training" necessary if student soldiers are to be able to apply their knowledge to a broad range of tasks. ("Generic training" as used in this article refers neither to the use of instructors without brand-name nor to the study of genres; rather, it is training that gives the student a fundamental background in a relatively large number of related specialties, training that will allow the student/soldier to transfer between two related specialties with minimal retraining.)

Actually, what has been at fault in our declining force readiness has not been so much a concentration on teaching specific skills as a failure to build that teaching upon a base of more general, theoretical knowledge. The generic training concept is not meant to replace the training methods that have been used in the past. These methods have contributed to the formulation of good training strategies—strategies especially useful during periods of rapid mobilization. However, a framework of training that combines "*how* we do things" with "*why* we do things" is necessary.

The real challenge lies in identifying the body of knowledge a soldier needs to know in order to maintain a wide variety of equipment—from the black boxes a maintainer must repair on the bench to the systems an operator must troubleshoot. The educators, classroom instructors, and field-experienced NCOs must pool their knowledge and seek out the necessary common factors to be taught in a generic program. We can then apply the vast knowledge in training techniques/methodology we have gained over the years in formulating programs to train all Signal soldiers regardless of background or level of expertise.

In our generic approach to solving the training dilemma, we must not overlook knowledge/theory training. Such training is not an expensive "luxury." In fact, we can save money in education if students master abstract material that has broad application. Abstract knowledge is sometimes viewed unfavorably by students because they fail to see the immediate application in their area of specialization. One example is mathematics, which is studied throughout primary and secondary schools and in the early years of college. Indeed, most students at one

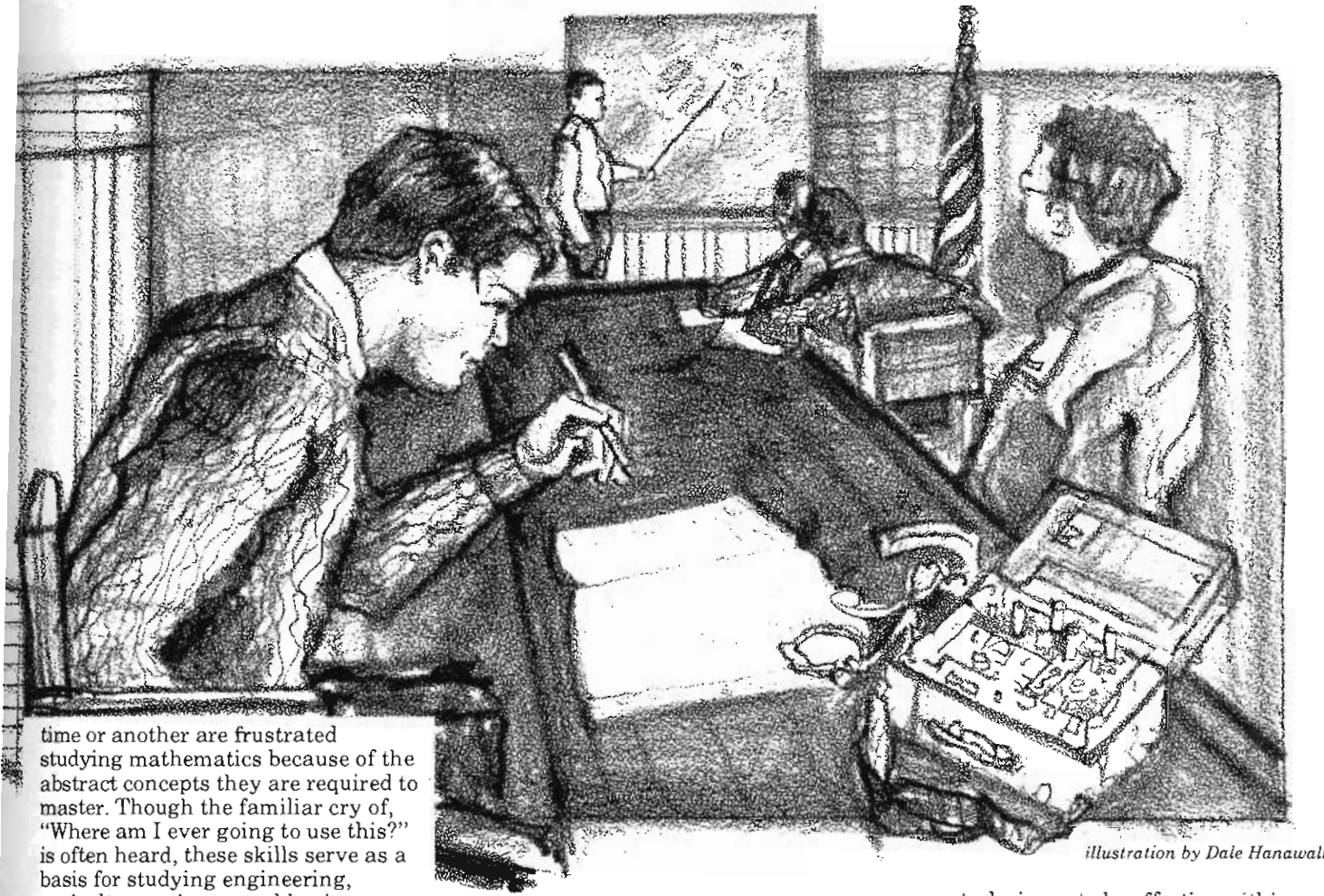

illustration by Dale Hanawalt

time or another are frustrated studying mathematics because of the abstract concepts they are required to master. Though the familiar cry of, "Where am I ever going to use this?" is often heard, these skills serve as a basis for studying engineering, agriculture, science, and business. Similarly, certain abstract skills serve as a basis for Signal soldiers studying technical communications, electronics, and computer disciplines.

Over the years, trainers have been caught up in this same dismissal of "irrelevant" theory. In the early sixties, training was functionalized with zealous abandon. We purged the training of "nice-to-know" information. Theory had to be stringently justified to remain part of the curriculum. The school went to extremely high percentages of hands-on training, while reducing explanation to a minimum. Training became rote. "Monkey see-monkey do" was a familiar—and unfortunately apt—phrase used to describe the training.

It now appears we may not have been smart enough to know the difference between "nice-to-know" and "need-to-know" information. In some cases, the trainers were not able to successfully articulate the need for theory training to the development experts who were trained in and responsible for implementing the new training concepts. In any case, training took on a new face and veered off from the older traditional approach. It became hands-on or performance-oriented, and almost totally excluded the knowledge base.

If generic training is to succeed, we must reemphasize the theory underlying the tasks that we teach. This abstract element of training is necessary to facilitate the transferability of soldiers from one MOS to another. Concentration on a strong knowledge base will provide the lubricant for "training for transfer."

However, as we move toward implementation of generic training, we must seek the optimum middle ground between formal education and shallow, task-oriented training. While the "monkey see-monkey do" approach is clearly inadequate, we cannot afford to ricochet to the other extreme and make our classes *all* abstract theory. We must develop our learning objectives around the processes inherent in the tasks of the soldier/communicator; we must work with a high school graduate who frequently has a limited motivation to study the hard sciences; we must train soldiers as best we can within a limited period of time and with limited resources; and we must use contractor support judiciously and ensure that the product of the contractor is controlled by our statements of work/specifications. Implementation of generic training depends wholly on how well we prune our techniques to be effective within these constraints.

We must not forget the problems of mobilization in creating our new strategy. A truly generic approach will work in our time-constrained environment only if we follow it up with excellent task-oriented job training packages for use by unit commanders. These packages must be developed to build on the generic base taught at the schoolhouse. If we have done our job successfully during peacetime, the Army in the field will have an excellent base of technically competent NCOs to make efficient use of the more narrowly trained soldiers assigned to them during periods of mobilization.

I hope this article will provide an important stimulant to research that will lead to even deeper understanding of how to best train our soldiers.

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