

Online forum lets NCOs share experiences, ideas

By Jim Tice

TIMES STAFF WRITER

FORT BLISS, Texas — Noncommissioned officers can now meet online in a chat room to better prepare soldiers, leaders and units for combat operations.

Called NCONet, the new virtual forum is part of the Battle Command Knowledge System and its growing inventory of online services, such as Warrior Knowledge Base, an electronic library of war-fighting documents, photos and video clips.

NCONet, which was officially launched here at the Sergeants Major Academy on Sept. 12, "is a structured professional forum where NCOs can come online and share their knowledge and experiences, and ask questions," said retired Sgt. Maj. Joe Pearson, chief of the digital training division of Cubic Applications, one of the private contracting firms that runs NCONet.

Unlike some of the specialized — and unofficial — soldier forums that have been operating on the Web for the past few years, "we are designed for the generic NCO," Pearson said.

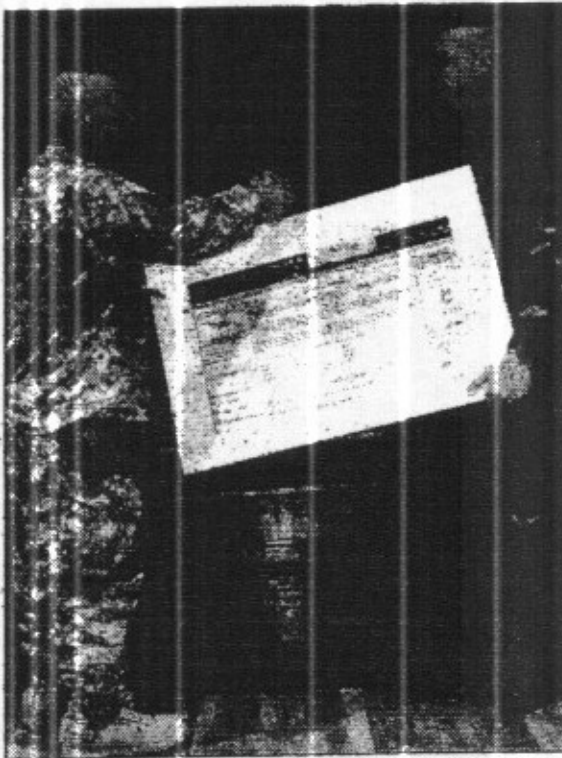
"You can ask a question on some given subject, and get comments or answers from NCOs in the ranks of corporal to sergeant major. However, within that generic site, we have subcategories for targeted communities, such as sergeants major and first sergeants," he said. "The system is designed so that it can be restrictive ... meaning people within a particular community can have discussions that are closed to others."

NCONet is part of the Battle Command Knowledge System that was approved by Army leaders last September, and has since been established at the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

The roots of this system, and particularly NCONet, date to 1998 when Command Sgt. Maj. Dan Elder, now the top enlisted soldier of the Army Materiel Command, established NCOTeam.org on his own time and with his own money, according to Lt. Col. (P) James Galvin, director of the Battle Command Knowledge System at Leavenworth.

Realizing the value of professional knowledge-sharing for soldier and unit readiness, service leaders decided to establish a system in which everyone could collaborate online in a more secure "dot-mil" environment, Galvin said.

Employing Army Knowledge Online, and its sign-in and password requirements, the Battle Command Knowledge System of-



STAFF SGT. KRISHNA GAMBLE, NCO JOURNAL

Command Sgt. Maj. Dan Elder, left, gives the copyrights and usage to Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Clem, Sergeants Major Academy battalion commander, during a Sept. 12 ceremony at Fort Bliss, Texas, announcing the launch of NCONet.

fers a degree of security protection Army leaders were looking for.

"The AKO sign-in allows us to communicate at the level of 'for official use only,'" Pearson said.

The evolving Battle Command Knowledge System so far consists of four primary services, Galvin said.

First are the online professional forums, such as NCONet, S1Net, S3-XONet and LOGNet that facilitate knowledge-sharing among an estimated 50,000 soldiers, Army civilians and authorized contractors.

The Battle Command Knowledge System management office at Leavenworth provides facilitators for the various forums "who help guide discussions, connect forum members with each other and [gather] new information for the Army," Galvin said.

For example, he said, in late August, the facilitator for the logistics forum was helping

guide discussions among the Center for Army Lessons Learned at Leavenworth; members of the 84th Army Reserve Training Command, Fort McCoy, Wis.; the Office of the G-4 at the Pentagon; the Combined Arms Support Command, Fort Lee, Va.; and several forum members in the field to help reserve logistics units pre-

pare for deployment to Iraq.

A second component provides knowledge management and knowledge-sharing support to corps, divisions and brigade combat teams.

This is an emerging capability, Galvin said, "driven by a number of general officers and implemented by an expanding group of innovative company- and field-grade officers and NCOs throughout the Army knowledge management of-ficers."

In response to Hurricane Katrina, the Battle Command Knowledge System team at Leavenworth established collaborative Web sites for the 1st Cavalry Division and is working with other units to provide similar support, Galvin said.

The third component is continued development of a Warrior Knowledge Base and a power information retrieval capability for extracting and packaging data from numerous sources, such as field manuals, after-action reviews and online discussions.

"Much of the disaster relief documentation associated with the hurricane relief sites emanated from material collected in the Warrior Knowledge Base," Galvin said.

The fourth component is an increasingly efficient capability for responding to requests for information by directing queries to appropriate experts and forming virtual teams of specialists for assisting soldiers in the field.

As an example, Galvin cited the recent case of a first sergeant in Iraq who, after waiting several

months for a supply requisition, requested Battle Command Knowledge System assistance. He received an answer to his question within 24 hours, and the equipment he requested within weeks, Galvin said.

Referring to a popular unofficial Web site for junior officers, Brig. Gen. Volney Warner described the Battle Command Knowledge System "as a

kind of Companycommander.com on steroids."

"It's a leader net with different levels of leadership," said the deputy commandant of the Command and General Staff College. "Wherever you are in the Army, there is some fusion point using the Battle Command Knowledge System." □

ON THE WEB

Active Army, National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers with an Army Knowledge Online account can log into the Battle Command Knowledge System at <https://bcks.army.mil>.

The new virtual forum for noncommissioned officers, NCONet, also can be accessed via Army Knowledge Online sign-in at <https://nconet.bcks.army.mil>.