Protecting the Tail of the Tiger:

Reshaping the Way We Train Logistics

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Throughout history, powerful militaries have either learned to master logistics or have withered without it. Keen military strategists such as Julius Caesar and Genghis Khan recognized that if they cut off the supply lines (the tail), they could simply wait for the enemy to weaken or grind to a halt as flow of logistics trickled and stopped.

As the Army shifts its training focus from fighting counterinsurgency to combating a hybrid threat, it is increasingly important to address how the Army's logistics infrastructure, security, and training support the continued superiority of its combat forces.

Questions for the Future Fight

During World Wars I and II, U.S. forces had advance warning and a period of protection from Allied forces in which to mobilize. Production facilities had years to ramp up the war effort. As the wars progressed, the relative isolation of the United States kept its manufacturing resources safe, however, this may not be the case in the next major conflict. How long will U.S. stockpiles of materiel last? Are the nation's logistics assets ready to provide continual support across the world?

Current operational logistics training includes abundant supply that is usually within close proximity and is provided with little regard to time, distance, priorities, repair, or limitations. This raises the following questions: Can combat leaders function with limited supply? When was the last time they did? Are U.S. forces conditioned to expect bottomless supply?

Protecting the supply lines is important in sustained conflicts. No amount of combat power can win a battle while it waits for fuel and ammunition.

Current Training

The current Army training structure focuses on preparing the combat arms branches for conflict anywhere in the world. The first-class training facilities and personnel at the National Training Center (NTC) in California, the Joint Readiness Training Center in Louisiana, and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Germany do an excellent job of preparing forces for combat. However, they fail to stress logistics infrastructure or to teach vital lessons in resource management and expectations.

While there are challenges, there are no true limits on available supply; no consequences exist for losing supplies during enemy action; and support moves over hours, not days.

I propose that because our logistics system is so reliable, some combat leaders dismiss proper logistics planning and have not experienced the effects of limited or lost supply. It is vital to stretch current logistics capabilities and allow limited disruption of the supply chain in order to reinforce proper contingency planning and resource management.

Soldiers assigned to 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division refuel their vehicles during a rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA, on 27 August 2016.
Photo by PFC Jordan Roy

Training for Distance

Logistics systems and units are designed to move supplies over the long distances that contingency operations will likely present, yet the Army trains with logistics in relatively close proximity. During training, even long-haul transportation assets drive just a few miles to resupply the sustainment brigade's combat sustainment support battalion (CSSB) or the brigade combat team's (BCT's) brigade support battalion. This availability diminishes the need for correct tracking and reporting because resupply is never far away.

What happens when the CSSB is located 100 miles from the front lines and has to support several BCTs? There is no perfect solution, but it would add training value for both the logistics unit and their customers to push the CSSB and higher echelons of support from much farther away.

At NTC, the CSSB could be placed at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base, or for JRTC, locating the CSSB at Barksdale Air Force Base would create distances of around 150 miles. The extended distances would benefit both the supporting and supported units because it would ensure each forecasts and validates requirements prior to logistics convoys, and it would allow convoy commanders to gain experience with complex long-distance moves.

Supply

It is hard to imagine having a lack of fuel, ammunition, or parts. From my experience as forward support company (FSC) commander in a cavalry squadron, the FSC did its best to provide as many supplies as possible. The logistics status reports sent from the supported companies were not accurate, but it did not matter that much. The FSC pushed fuel and food daily and mission-configured loads of ammunition any time there was a firefight.

The FSC's Soldiers took a lot of pride in not allowing logistics to be the point of failure. However, this is not realistic and does not teach the supported company executive officers how or why to track their internal supplies, especially fuel.

There is value in limiting available supplies. For instance, given a constrained amount of fuel and ammunition, what units have priority for the next mission? How much fuel is held in reserve? I would wager that in this scenario the senior commanders would pay more attention to logistics movements, distribution, and sustainment rehearsals, which in turn would result in more well-rounded leaders.

The Consequences of Loss

Perhaps the most important element missing in training logistics is the consequences of loss. Too often, logistics assets are soft targets with limited radio or battlefield tracking systems. Units are frequently left to defend their own convoys even though they do not have the equipment or personnel to do so. Vehicles are retrofitted with radio mounts and machine-gun ring mounts, but security has not been made a priority.

The combat battalions resist losing forward assets to defend supply routes and convoys. Logistics units are most often left to defend themselves and, for the most part, do a fine job of executing missions. However, they are also left relatively undisturbed during combat training center rotations. There may be an improvised explosive device here or there (or maybe some small-arms fire or civilians blocking the road), but the supplies never stop.

While supporting the fight is essential, combined arms commanders should learn what it is like to go without during training.

If a convoy is attacked and the observer-coach-trainer assesses that one fuel truck and one palletized load system carrying meals ready-to-eat (MREs) have been destroyed, then why allow the resupply to continue to its destination? If that destruction were reality, then the logistics planners such as the FSC leadership, battalion S4s, and the brigade support battalion support operations officer would have to work together to develop an integrated resupply plan. They would have to put thought into alternate routes, various start point times, and asset management. The logistics and combat elements would have to fully develop primary and tertiary plans, mitigate risks, and provide cohesive support rather than each element narrowly focusing on its supported battalion. No Soldiers would starve, but they may have to eat two MREs that day instead of three. The loss of fuel might require tanks to turn off instead of idling all day or scouts to use high mobility multipurpose vehicles (HMMWVs) instead of Bradley Fighting Vehicles for a reconnaissance mission. Interrupting supply chains will not stop the combat missions, but it will broaden the scope for the commanders and staff officers taking part.

In the Maneuver Center of Excellence's latest Army Functional Concept for Movement and Maneuver (AFC-M&M), it describes a future in which the BCT will operate semi-independently at a high operations tempo for periods up to seven days over extended lines with reduced reliance on echelons above brigade support. In order for the Army to enable the freedom of maneuver described in the AFFC-M&M, commanders and staffs must think through all the problems, not just the combat one. There is truth to the military adage "amateurs talk tactics, while professionals talk logistics," but we continue to ignore the potential weaknesses in our support structure.

In the current structured training scenarios, the supply flow is not touched for fear that it will interrupt the combat training. Disruption is exactly what will happen, but when properly administered, it will have positive training value for both logistics and combat leaders.

History implores us to train, build, and protect the tail of the tiger as much as we do the teeth, and it is imperative that we do not wait. While both offensive and defense tactics and technology perpetually seek to counter one another, logistics remains the true linchpin in victory or defeat.

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