

Rucksacks Vs Expectations:

Are Expectations for Expeditionary Operations Realistic?

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Having units ready to deploy at any time and able to move at a moment's notice is a constant talking point in the Army. "Fight tonight," "If it doesn't fit in a rucksack, it doesn't go," or "You've got to be expeditionary" are numerous buzz phrases and messages heard across the Army. This article will discuss the recent realities of expeditionary operations and ways to be successful in them; it will also introduce a discussion of expectations and capabilities within mission sets.

Despite numerous phrases being thrown around, the Army does not define expeditionary operations for itself. We rely on the broad definition in the *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, which defines an expeditionary force as "[a]n armed force organized to accomplish a specific objective in a foreign country."¹ By that standard, we have executed expeditionary operations for decades. The Marine Corps Training Command states: "The term 'expeditionary' implies a temporary duration with the intention to withdraw from foreign soil after the accomplishment of the specified mission. The term 'expeditionary' also implies austere conditions and support. This does not mean that an expeditionary force is necessarily small or lightly equipped, but that it is no larger or heavier than necessary to accomplish the mission. Supplies, equipment, and infrastructure are limited to operational necessities; amenities are strictly minimized."²

This definition provides a better reference for expeditionary operations, but it is not an Army definition. So, what do we need to do to be successful in an ambiguously defined operational environment?



Paratroopers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, prepare to load a U.S. Air Force C-130 at Aviano Airbase, Italy, during an emergency deployment readiness exercise on 23 February 2019.

(Photo by SGT Henry Villarama)

Recent Realities

Fight tonight is a great slogan, but is it feasible? During Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), units moved with their partnered force across Iraq to help ensure the defeat, destruction, and eradication of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from Iraq. A small element moving 50 kilometers with commonly utilized equipment in theater was feasible in a day and ready to fight that night; however, a task force repositioning 300 kilometers could take weeks to accomplish, as vehicle and container movement requests, hazardous material (HAZMAT), class V, and flights for personnel all take time to process. Units deployed to Africa are often tasked to detach platoons and sections to locations outside of current country boundaries, which takes commensurate effort. The process of moving an element vast distances is often associated with deployment into theater and back to home station. However, jumping countries or hundreds of miles within a country has very similar requirements. Certifying HAZMAT, container paperwork/inventories, and aircraft or contracted ground convoys are just some of the considerations units must account for conducting jumps.

The Army has a vast experience in executing stability operations from fixed enduring locations, as well as establishing and retrograding these locations. Although the Army trains in a Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE), we often still deploy to execute stability operations or support a partnered force or nation. A 14-17-day DATE rotation at a Combat Training Center (CTC) offers extreme challenges and is necessary to ensure units are ready to face the harsh conditions of warfare. However, during most CTC rotations, the sustainment required is relatively minimal for the maneuver forces, and it is very feasible for a light maneuver unit to live out of a rucksack with limited trains. Casualty evacuation is often the biggest logistical problem for a light infantry unit during a CTC rotation. Excess equipment and shipping containers are rarely moved during a DATE rotation, which allow units to become more agile and mobile for the short duration of the exercise. Army doctrine for logistical operations to support DATE or stability operations is well developed and understood. Air, shore, and rail bridges bring classes of supply to depots that are then pushed or pulled to the forward units. This takes time to develop, and the ability to receive classes of supply during expeditionary operations will be slower than most experienced during Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF), Resolute Support (ORS), Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or similar operations.

During OIR, organic unit equipment was slow to arrive in theater. The steady stream of personnel, equipment, and repair parts that veterans of OIF remember was no longer in place or reconstituted. The mission set called for a scalable military force to train, advise, assist, accompany, and enable (TA3E) the Iraqi military, with a large focus on assisting through joint fires and accompanying them down to Iraqi battalion headquarters level. The massive U.S. military infrastructure that once existed in Iraq was not there, and in some cases, organic rolling stock and containers were not received by their units for months. Certifying HAZMAT for movements, requesting contracted semi-trailers to move containers and rolling stock long distances, and obtaining flights were limiting factors in repositioning forces.

What It Takes

An expeditionary force must be projected from a secure area that can provide support. A temporary perimeter is sufficient and can provide a location for excess equipment, containers, recovery assets, classes of supply, and medical support as necessary. Enduring locations provide this effectively, but they are not a requirement. For the elements executing the operations outside of the secured locations, there are a lot of shortfalls in terms of organic equipment. Power generation is a huge challenge. A light infantry company has 1-kilowatt generators as part of the Net Warrior system. These are great for charging AN/PRC-154 Rifleman Radios but not sufficient for operating a command post capable of providing timely and accurate reports and the flow of information often expected. Army 5-kilowatt generators are excessively large and heavy. The MEP-802a weighs more than 800 pounds while the Rapid Equipping Force issues a 5-kilowatt that's roughly a quarter of that size. A 5-kilowatt generator is sufficient to run computers, light sets, battery chargers, and upper tactical internet (TI) systems expected of a command post in the current operational environments.

Over-the-horizon communication redundancy should be a priority when building an expeditionary element. The sad truth is many times civilian applications have been substituted for Army systems. Training on Army systems used in theater should not first occur in theater; yet this is often the case. The flow of information needs to occur, and the transition points from lower TI to upper TI are essential to planning. The capabilities of small, portable



A group of Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, disembarks a CH-47 Chinook helicopter during an exercise in Croatia on 16 May 2019. (Photo by SSG Austin Berner)

upper TI systems are outstanding, but proficiency takes time and repetitions that should occur before deployments. Communications capabilities and system transitions must be planned and rehearsed to be successful; both the expeditionary element and those receiving the report must be part of this effort. Upper TI systems provide easy communication on multiple platforms at the same time to quickly disseminate mass information and provide data for a large common operating picture of the area or theater. Phone calls, emails, secure chat rooms, and the almighty PowerPoint are all expected and capable through upper TI systems.

Planning and resourcing the equipment you identify as essential must be part of tailoring an expeditionary element and should be clearly communicated up and down.

Lastly, the ability to quickly adapt to the mission set, tailor an element and its equipment, and move equipment across a wide range of platforms is essential. Repositioning forces is part of an expeditionary mission, whether it's a change of mission, retrograde to a secure location, or a jump across the country. Moving containers, certifying HAZMAT and sling loads, palletizing equipment, or contracting to move equipment are some factors to consider for this.

Rucksacks

Living out of a rucksack is a common occurrence in training for most maneuver elements and the sustainers with them. During DATE rotations at CTCs, units execute this throughout the training exercise and they are expected to. Conducting expeditionary operations out of a rucksack is absolutely feasible and probably more accurately reflects what the term should mean; however, the operational cost may or may not be acceptable.

Air movement is much simpler, and HAZMAT certification requirements are negated, as personnel with rucksacks in laps require very little to conduct air movements. They are easy to scale, and sustainment requirements can be reduced to classes I, V, and batteries for radios. A scalable force of Soldiers operating out of rucksacks is an extremely reactive force when given the assets to move them wherever the mission requires. A 300-kilometer jump for personnel with rucksacks can happen within hours of the aircraft allocation. They are also more mobile than a dismounted element with upper TI and power generation, which may be severely restrictive unless it has vehicles.

There are a lot of positive things that can be attributed to living out of a rucksack; however, it comes at a high

cost of information flow. Upper TI systems along with the generators and class III required to run them will not fit in a rucksack along with the packing list to sustain the warfighter. Satellite (SATCOM), high frequency (HF) , and frequency modulation (FM) radios are easily carried and employed from a rucksack. SATCOM channel availability, lack of proficiency with HF voice and data employment, and required FM proximity are all limiting factors. Command post battle tracking is restricted to analog products. Pictures and small files are possible to transfer through HF, but easy communication to quickly disseminate mass information and provide and receive a large common operating picture of the area or theater is lost. Senior leaders are accustomed to and often expect to have available vast quantities of data about units, and living out of rucksacks would reduce that.

Living out of a rucksack and executing operations is not only feasible but trained on by maneuver units in the Army. However, mass data and information flow at a cost of more equipment and sustainment efforts versus more flexibility with less information and more effort to build common operating pictures for everyone.

What We Need to Do

First, as an Army, we need to define expeditionary operations for ourselves. We say words have meaning, but in this case, we use buzz words more than quantifiably desired results. A definition does not need to restrict capability sets or limit expeditionary operations to rucksacks, but without a candid discussion and a defined parameter, we fail to provide any frame of reference for what is now just buzz words.

Second, current power-generation capabilities are a major challenge that needs to be addressed. The systems required to operate a command post that provides the flow of information and reports expected, requires increased power generation for some units or better generators. A compact 5-kilowatt generator that can be moved by two people would be ideal for most command posts.

Third, training needs to build confidence and proficiency in Army communication systems that will be employed. Reinforced planning for transitions between lower and upper TI at echelon is essential. Prioritizing mobility schools for unit mobility officers, HAZMAT personnel, sling load inspectors, air movement officers, field ordering officers, and pay agents all help increase an element's capability. Many of these are requirements at a company or battalion



**Equipment assigned to the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division is loaded into an aircraft bound for the U.S. Central Command area of operations from Fort Bragg, NC, on 4 January 2020.
(Photo by SFC Zachary Vandyke)**

level, but having qualified Soldiers as part of every expeditionary element is a huge increase in capability.

Finally, without a realistic discussion of capabilities and desired effects, an organization is failing to adequately prepare itself. This includes commanders at all levels providing realistic expectations about operational capabilities and requirements. Current operational environments allow for the expectation of mass data and information flow across a formation to be met through upper TI systems. Repositioning a unit in 24 hours is not a reality with these systems. Unless we are willing to part with that or in a peer-contested environment, conducting operations out of rucksacks is not a realistic expectation. A realistic and candid conversation about the mission set's reality and expectations for operations can establish firm expectations and intent to plan and scale as needed.

Notes

¹ *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 78.

² The Basic School Marine Corps Training Command Amphibious Operations I & II Student Handout, Basic Officer Course.

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