Fly to Supply: Executing Aerial Resupply in an ABCT

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From the squad to brigade echelon, across all warfighting functions, Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations expose issues within our formations which cannot be replicated in other training events. At the conclusion of these rotations, there is rarely a shortage of identified areas for improvement. For anyone who has taken part in these events, issues such as an ineffective allocation of reconnaissance assets, a concept of medical support which does not nest with the maneuver plan, or desynchronized logistical distribution most likely sound familiar. However, a frequent issue often overlooked by leaders within an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) is the ineffective use of aerial lift assets to supplement the brigade's concept of distribution.

It is no surprise why this oversight occurs. ABCTs have large logistical requirements, most of which cannot be delivered by aerial platforms. The complexities associated with supplying an ABCT often convince sustainment planners their time would be better served focusing on their concept of ground distribution in lieu of examining how aerial lift can supplement their plans.

One cannot fault these planners. Most Army logistics operations centers (ALOC) struggle to execute current sustainment operations, let alone create future concepts of sustainment which support maneuver plans. However, National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 22-04 was uniquely situated to leverage echelons above brigade (EAB) assets due to the integration of a security force assistance brigade task force (SFAB TF).

During 22-04, 2nd ABCT, 1st Infantry Division (2/1 ID) partnered with an SFAB TF as a proof of concept for the integration of the SFAB during large-scale ground combat operations. As a part of the scenario, 2/1 ID served as a partner foreign security force (FSF) ABCT, and the SFAB TF operated as part of a simulated coalition task force which provided support to an FSF maneuver division. In this role, the SFAB TF possessed operational control (OPCON) over all coalition aviation assets, but it could provide tactical control (TACON) of these assets to the FSF

Advisors with the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade and their 3rd Infantry Division security element exit UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters during a mission in Afghanistan on 19 September 2018. (U.S. Army photo)

upon request. As a part of this scenario, a maneuver advisor team (MAT) from the task force partnered with the FSF ALOC.

During reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI), the MAT identified it could provide additional support to the FSF ALOC by leveraging EAB aerial lift assets to supplement their sustainment plan. After developing a concept of aerial resupply and executing the air mission planning process, the MAT assisted the partner force in conducting a daily aerial resupply mission that utilized a UH-60 and CH-47 for the entirety of the force-on-force portion of the exercise. Due to the efforts of the MAT, the FSF transported more classes of supply and personnel than any rotational training unit (RTU) in the history of NTC. The following article describes the best practices used by the MAT during the planning, coordination, and execution of the aerial resupply mission known as the "Brown Line."

Aerial Resupply Planning

Prior to the execution of the Brown Line, we had to determine what the aerial resupply mission should deliver. As discussed earlier, the purpose of aerial resupply was not to replace but rather supplement the FSF's distribution capabilities. To do so, we prioritized the following:

1. Class IX parts ordered against deadline faults for pacing items that were not moved from the division support area (DSA) to the brigade support area (BSA) during the daily ground logistics package (LOGPAC). By moving these parts via aerial resupply, they could be delivered to the unit for installation at least 24 hours prior to when they otherwise would have been.

2. Reconstituted personnel moving from the division personnel holding area (PHA) who were not transported during the daily LOGPAC. Oftentimes, subordinate units do not have the means to transport personnel from the DSA. This results in a backlog of personnel in the PHA, which can be alleviated by air movement of these passengers.

3. Class II or IX parts for units with extended interior lines of communication or that were separated from the BSA by restrictive terrain.

4. Commonly used Class II, IIIP, IV, and VIII that are frequently requested by the BSA or subordinate units. Transporting these items on a daily basis increased the size of bench stocks in the support zone, which enabled support units to effectively respond to unforecasted supply requests.

Once we determined the priorities for aerial resupply, the next step was to ensure the Brown Line possessed the means to distribute the supplies and personnel. To do so, the MAT had to ensure the resources required to execute the mission were forecasted and available. This required an understanding of the assets available to the aviation task force, as well as coordinating with the SFAB TF staff to ensure the assets were allocated to support the Brown Line in lieu of other missions which required aerial lift (distinguished visitor flights, air movements, air assaults, etc.).

For the task force, this coordination took place at the daily targeting working group. At this group, members of the TF staff determined how EAB assets would be allocated during the following three daily tasking orders (DTOs). While most of this meeting was dedicated towards synchronizing intelligence and fires assets, it served as an opportunity for TF advisors to discuss how all EAB assets would be allocated based on operational requirements in the next three DTOs. By attending the targeting working group, the MAT assigned to the ALOC could lock in its lift assets, which enabled it to properly coordinate future aerial resupply operations.

Once the lift assets were allocated, the MAT had to determine what the lift assets were going to deliver. This required a series of inputs from the partner force. To coordinate the submission of these inputs, we developed the following process:

1. The MAT assigned to the ALOC would confirm the status of the aerial lift assets during the SFAB TF combat update brief (CUB).

2. Once the status of the aircraft was confirmed, the FSF S1 would coordinate with his/her counterpart in the DSA to determine which personnel required movement via the Brown Line. The identified personnel would then be added to that day's air mission request (AMR).

A flight engineer with the 1st Armored Division guides a forklift operator while placing an M1A2 Abrams tank engine onto a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Fort Bliss, TX, on 4 May 2015. (Photo by CPT W. Scott Walters)

3. The MAT would attend the partner force's daily logistics synchronization meeting (LOGSYNCH) and maintenance meeting to determine which critical parts and supplies would be delivered on the Brown Line. These were determined based on if the part was designated for a deadline fault on a pacing item, if it was present in the DSA, and if it had not been transported via the daily ground LOGPAC. In addition, the LOGSYNCH provided the FSF the opportunity to make unforecasted requests for Class II, IIIP, IV, or VIII. If available in the DSA, these supplies could be added to the evening Brown Line.

4. Once these parts/supplies were identified, they were added to the AMR and shared with the FSF representatives located in the DSA. These representatives (usually a member of the FSF S4 who is familiar with operations in the SSA) would then locate, pack, palletize (if required), and move the equipment to the pickup zone (PZ) at the DSA.

5. Once the personnel and equipment were identified, the MAT would produce the final AMR and share it with advisor teams aligned to subordinate combat trains command posts (CTCP). During this coordination, the ALOC MAT would confirm the following information:

a. The CTCP landing zone (LZ) location (8-digit grid).

b. Whether the CTCP is capable of monitoring the correct communications PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency).

c. The CTCP has the requisite personnel to secure the LZ (minimum force was one dismounted squad or two gun trucks).

6. The final step was the production of the final AMR which was shared with the SFAB TF aviation cell; this cell would then coordinate with the aviation task force (AVN TF).

Once the AMR was submitted to the AVN TF, there was a deliberate command and control transition which took place between the ALOC MAT and SFAB TF current operations cell (CUOPS). At that point, all further coordination concerning the Brown Line took place through the CUOPs. This was an important transition because the CUOPs cell had both the bandwidth and communications infrastructure to make reliable and timely coordination with subordinate elements.

Aerial Resupply Execution

One hour prior to the initiation of the Brown Line, the AVN TF would provide a mission update to the TF CUOPS, and any delays were communicated with the CTCPs that would receive the aircraft. If there were no delays, the

LZ controller was required to be postured at least 30 minutes prior to the arrival time listed on the AMR. After takeoff, the aircraft would communicate with the SFAB TF CUOPS via the published PACE, and the CUOPS cell would provide LZ controllers with wheels up and down times when they were reported by the aircraft.

The first stop of the Brown Line was always the DSA. The DSA and the BSA were the only two heavy LZs (capable of loading and unloading equipment with a forklift). After the equipment was secured, the passengers and pallet rider would load the aircraft. The pallet rider would communicate with the crew throughout the mission and help off-load passengers and equipment at each LZ.

The next stop for the Brown Line was the BSA. The LZ controller at the BSA would communicate directly with the aircraft and have a forklift as well as personnel postured near the LZ to unload the aircraft. Upon far recognition of the aircraft, the LZ controller would mark the LZ with the pre-coordinated marking signal and await confirmation from the crew that the forklift and personnel could unload the aircraft. Since the BSA was the only LZ capable of unloading heavy loads, all equipment which required a forklift needed to be unloaded at that location. After equipment was dropped at the BSA, the aircraft would continue to the subsequent stops on the AMR.

At the CTCPs, personnel and equipment were off-loaded once the aircraft made contact with the LZ controller at the CTCPs. If contact could not be made with the LZ controller, the aircraft would provide itself enough time to return to the BSA to drop off the remaining personnel and equipment prior to its return to the DSA (required to drop off the pallet rider) and ultimately the AVN TF.

Using this method of coordination and execution enabled the brigade to move more than 300 personnel and 50,000 pounds of supplies from the DSA throughout the FSF's support area during the 10-day force-on-force exercise. According to the NTC observer coach/trainers (OC/Ts), this was more than any other ABCT in the training center's history. However, despite the success of the Brown Line, there were still areas which could have been improved.

Areas for Improvement

Regarding the planning of the Brown Line, we did not reevaluate the enemy situation in the support zone prior to the execution of these missions. Although we executed an initial intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) assessment as a part of our air mission planning process during RSOI, we did not consult the engineer battalion (responsible for security in the support zone) or the AVN TF intelligence cells (S2) for a reevaluation of the enemy situation during the exercise. While this may be permissible at NTC, doing so could be a lethal mistake during large-scale ground combat operations.

If the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh or Ukraine have taught us anything, it is that air defense systems have made aerial lift operations vulnerable throughout the entire length of a unit's interior lines.[1-2] In addition, coordination with the intelligence cell responsible for rear area security would enable the aircraft to serve as non-traditional sensors, which could help answer intelligence requirements for an S2 which does not normally receive assets to assist with its collection efforts.

In addition, the FSF as well as the SFAB TF did not come to NTC with the requisite equipment or expertise required to conduct sling load operations which limited the type of equipment that could be transported. While we partially solved this problem through the use of heavy LZs at the DSA and the BSA, we could not transport palletized Class IX parts to the battalion support zones where they could have been rapidly installed. Prior to the start of any operation where a unit wants to leverage aerial resupply, leaders must ensure the requisite equipment and expertise are available within the division, brigade, and battalion support zones to enable the use of sling loads.

Finally, coordinating with LZ controllers in the battalion support zones was challenging which limited the effectiveness of the Brown Line. Communication is always a challenge, and coordination for aerial resupply was no different. These challenges were magnified because the partner force never executed aerial resupply during home-station training. Therefore, the LZ controllers in the battalion support zones did not understand the battle rhythm, reporting requirements, or LZ marking procedures required to receive aerial resupply. If an organization plans to use aerial resupply, they should use this method of distribution during collective training so that stakeholders in the process are aware of their responsibilities.

Conclusion

While aerial resupply cannot replace an ABCT's ground distribution plan, it can certainly supplement one. For good

reasons during operations within an ABCT, planners become consumed with coordinating complex intelligence, fires, maneuver, and sustainment plans while allowing aerial lift assets to go latent. Developing a coherent and reliable concept of aerial resupply can expedite the delivery of mission-critical parts and personnel to geographically dispersed units to help them maintain momentum during large-scale ground combat operations. By doing so, a formation can avoid culmination, which will enable them to turn tactical opportunities into operational success.

Notes

[1] Nicole Thomas, LTC Matt Jamison, CPT Kendall Gomber, and Derek Walton, "What the United States Military Can Learn from the Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Small Wars Journal*, 4 April 2021, accessed from https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-united-states-military-can-learn-nagorno-karabakh-war.

[2] Douglas Barrie and Yohann Michel, "The War in Ukraine, Where Quantity as well as Quality Matters," iiss.org, 22 April 2022, accessed from https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2022/04/war-in-ukraine-where-quantity-as-well-as-quality-matters.

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