

Re-establishing an Expeditionary Force: An Interview with LTG Gustave F. Perna, U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, G-4

Inside the Pentagon, Chief of Staff GEN Mark A. Milley's chief adviser on logistics is LTG Gustave (Gus) F. Perna, a 32-year Army veteran. LTG Perna is responsible for developing the policies and procedures to maintain, supply and transport everything our million-Soldier Army needs.

LTG Perna's primary focus is developing a more expeditionary logistics force that can quickly respond to global hotspots. We talked with him about how this is going, what it means to Armor personnel, and what's new in the maintenance field. We also asked him his advice for new commanders.

ARMOR: We know the future Army needs Soldiers to have an expeditionary mindset, no matter what their basic branch is. What are your observations from your travels around the Army?

My standard for expeditionary capability goes back to 2001, before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when the entire Army was geared toward being expeditionary. We have to relearn how to both project and support an expeditionary Army -- how to be ready to execute expeditionary logistics from fort to port, port to port, port to foxhole, and beyond. We have to focus on executing core missions to standard, missions that provide the basis for everything else we do in support of the warfighter.

While much work remains to get us back to that standard, I am noticing progress. Would I like to see it happen more quickly? Of course, but what is encouraging is that it is leader-led, and it is supported by noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

As an example, recently, I visited 1st Cavalry Division, and I felt good after that visit. They are taking on many challenges, ensuring their maintenance posture is where it needs to be. They are getting after supply accountability aggressively. Leaders are involved in figuring out how to stuff containers and how to load their vehicles on rail. I saw many positive things on my visit.



Figure 1. LTG Gustave Perna meets with leaders of 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, TX.

ARMOR: Given GEN Milley's focus on readiness, what is your vision of maintenance readiness for the future?

I think an appropriate goal is to be so good at executing maintenance, managing our Class IX supply chain and ensuring that we have the right equipment and special tools that we will no longer need LARs [logistics-assistance representatives] and FSRs [field-service representatives] to help us execute maintenance. We put those

representatives in formations as safety nets -- to ensure high maintenance standards while we were deployed -- and I know our leaders and Soldiers have grown used to them. But our readiness standard should be to execute without them.

ARMOR: How do we make that happen?

Most importantly, we need to make sure Soldiers at all levels – privates, NCOs and warrant officers – get the training they need so they can properly maintain all the equipment in their formations. And we have to make sure our leaders get the coaching, teaching and mentoring they need to be able to run effective maintenance programs.

At the operational level, we have to ensure we have the right supply chain to support maintaining our own equipment – this means from industry all the way down to SSAs [supply-support activities]. We need the right tools in place and fielded to everybody who needs them.

In a perfect world, at the strategic level we would enable this by providing a greater focus from the birth of a piece of equipment until we decide that equipment is no longer needed. Our acquisition strategy would focus on bringing in new equipment in a timely manner and then getting rid of the old equipment so we are not sustaining two types of equipment. Then when we field the equipment, we would bring it out in full capability sets so Soldiers understand what they have.

That is a perfect world I am describing, and the world is not perfect. But if we were to execute it as I've described, we would no longer need LARS and FSRs. Soldiers would be able to execute maintenance on their own, and I am completely confident they have the skills and determination to do so. However, right now we are teaching bad habits. There are absolutely areas in which we can improve at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

ARMOR: What are your thoughts on unit-level maintenance over the past decade?

Unfortunately, we haven't been executing unit-level maintenance to what I believe the standard should be. That is not the fault of any unit. We have been in a very high [operational tempo] environment, which has required Soldiers, units and leaders to deploy every other year. So it has forced us to focus on that mission.

To alleviate stress, we have brought in contractors to do unit-level maintenance, both in garrison and overseas. We also brought them in to do supply management. We also had the luxury of having not just one fleet, but two and three fleets to support our mission. As a result, our maintenance skills have atrophied across the board – from the leader who is responsible for supervising it to the Soldier who has to execute it.

Fortunately, we are bringing those skills back, but it only has been in the last 12 to 18 months that that we started this surge. In my opinion, it will take some time to get our skills back completely.

ARMOR: Given competing demands and limited resources, what's the No. 1 investment a maneuver leader can do to impact readiness?

I believe commanders are responsible for vision, resources, time and risk assessment. The greatest impact they can provide starts with articulating a clear vision about what they are trying to achieve and then setting the conditions and providing time – time being the most precious resource their Soldiers need to accomplish the requirement.

Personally, my approach has been to ensure that an appropriate battle rhythm is executed with discipline across the formation so that both Soldiers and leaders can be in the right places for mission accomplishment. The last thing you want to do is have Soldiers waiting around because leaders are in meetings. What you want is Soldiers who are executing based on your intent and able to use all the time available to them.

What some leaders miss is that the most important thing about a battle rhythm is that it must be connected to output. So motor stables are connected to maintenance meetings, maintenance meetings are connected to training meetings, training meetings are connected to command and staff updates, and all are connected to the readiness of the unit, which will be presented in quarterly and annual training briefs to division and corps commanders. So it is the synchronized integration of our ability to execute mission command. That is the key.

ARMOR: Can you share some of the best maintenance-readiness practices for the company, battalion or brigade level?

First and foremost, standards and discipline are the key. You must hold yourselves accountable for execution. You cannot lower your standards. As soon as you let them start to slip, as soon as you approve something at less than 100 percent, as soon as you accept poor performance in the supply chain, you will have a degradation of maintenance that will build on itself like a snowball going down a hill.

The second thing is what I said earlier. You must have processes and systems to enable the things you want accomplished. That is leaders' business, and it is enforced by NCOs.

The third thing, leaders must understand the output of the processes and systems they are putting in place. You can't just arbitrarily have meetings because you think that is what you are supposed to do. You have to operationalize the execution of everything you do.

ARMOR: If you are a brand-new brigade executive officer leading your first brigade maintenance meeting, how do you synchronize all maintenance efforts?

This may sound obvious, but first you must have an agenda, and it has to be an agenda designed to achieve the output you want. You must personally be involved in developing the agenda and understand what each agenda task is trying to achieve. Don't be a bystander, be a participant.

Second, you have to make sure your maintenance meetings are connected to the other processes and routines within your formation. There is no such thing as a stand-alone maintenance meeting. Maintenance meetings are connected to motor stables, to training meetings and to quarterly and annual training briefs.

Third, you must be the keeper of the standards and hold all accountable. It's not an excuse to say you're not a logistician. You need to learn what right looks like and hold everybody accountable.

Fourth, you have to ensure the right people are playing. It does the formation no good if you don't have the right leaders in your meetings. You must ensure leaders are involved so that when subsequent briefings go to the brigade and division commanders, leaders at all appropriate levels are involved. So my coaching is that executive officers, warrant officers, motor sergeants – these types of leaders – need to be involved.

Fifth, the meeting is not about you. It is clearly about the output. Check your ego at the door and develop a team approach to the output. You will garner much more success when those around you figure out the solution. What I mean by that is, it is time to coach, teach, mentor and hold people to standards; it is not time for theatrics with one person's ego taking center stage.

With these positive approaches, you will get so much more out of the team's collective efforts. The key is that when you go across the line of departure, you want maintenance and other critical processes to occur without you, not because of you.

ARMOR: How will the Global Combat Support System-Army (GCSS-A) impact the future of maintenance readiness?

GCSS-A is a game changer. It brings together all the necessary information for you to have in real time. It brings you the supply status of your property as well as for your Class IX and Class II. It adds your financial status. Then it brings all your equipment maintenance into one sight picture. Never before have we had this. This is a huge enabler to those who take the time to learn the system. It saves time. It allows you to focus your energies. And it creates a culture of personal pride. It helps create organizations that know how to see themselves and hold themselves accountable and bring themselves to the highest standard, and not just for an inspection, but on a routine basis. This tool will truly enable Army readiness.

Last year we finished fielding Wave I at all the SSAs. Now we are executing Wave II, putting it into motorpools and supply rooms. In future waves, we will bring in aviation maintenance and business intelligence. It will be a tremendous asset for the Army.

But the key is leaders must be involved. They cannot delegate. They have to own it. They won't be expected to be the technical expert, but they clearly need to understand how it works. They need to understand the data it provides and give guidance on how to use that data. Otherwise it will just be another computer sitting in the room.

ARMOR: In an expeditionary environment, what are some cultural changes leaders can make to enable operational endurance?

Every opportunity needs to be a training event to learn how to be expeditionary. Every time you go out to the field, there are ways to be expeditionary. For example, if you are going out to do lane training, platoon live fires, gunneries or company field-training exercises, the SSA ought to deploy out to the field. They ought to learn how to be mobile and how to issue parts from the field. They ought to learn how to operate GCSS-A in an expeditionary environment. Units need to figure out how to do showers, how to cook, how to do laundry.

My feeling is you go hard, you learn the lessons, and you get yourself to the right levels. Soldiers will adapt. They will figure out how to pack rucksacks. They will figure out how to load equipment onto trains and how to pack their trucks. They will figure out how to eat. But leaders have to create conditions for Soldiers to learn. Soldiers will figure out how to do PMCS [preventive maintenance checks and services] in the rain and in the mud because they will need their trucks for their next objective. If you call off PMCS because you are in the field for a week, you are not teaching them how to be expeditionary.

But I leave that to commanders. They have the imagination. They can bring that home. They are the ones who are making us ready so when we go into a decisive-action environment, everything will fall into place.