

Protecting the Tail of the Tiger: Reshaping the Way We Train Logistics

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

by CPT Travis Michelena

Throughout history, each powerful military either has learned to master logistics or has 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 its 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 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 United States' relative isolation kept its manufacturing resources safe. 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 (JRTC) in Louisiana and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany do an excellent job of preparing forces for combat. However, they fail to stress logistics infrastructure or teach vital lessons in resource management and expectations.



Figure 1. Soldiers from Dragon Troop, 4-10 Cavalry, 3rd ABCT, 4th Infantry Division, conduct recovery operations on a mired humvee. (Photo by CPT Travis Michelena)

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 to reinforce proper contingency planning and resource management.

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 (BCT)'s brigade-support battalion (BSB). The 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 Twenty-Nine Palms Marine Corps Base, or for JRTC, locating the CSSB at Barksdale AFB 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.



Figure 2. Soldiers from Dragon Troop, 4-10 Cavalry, 3rd ABCT, 4th Infantry Division, conduct field-maintenance operations at a maintenance collection point at NTC. (Photo by CPT Travis Michelena)

Supply

It is hard to imagine having a lack of fuel, ammunition or parts. In 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.

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 machinegun 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.



Figure 3. Sustainment Soldiers of a CSSB in thin-skinned vehicles must rely on crew-served weapons such as the M240 and M2HB for self-protection. The future operating environment of widely dispersed BCTs conducting semi-independent operations will require a renewed emphasis on security operations between unit areas. (U.S. Army photo)

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 have been destroyed, then why allow the resupply to continue to its destination? If that destruction were reality, the logistics planners such as the FSC leadership, battalion S-4s and the BSB 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 their supported battalion.

No Soldiers would starve, but they may have to eat two meals-ready-to-eat that day instead of three. The loss of fuel might require tanks to turn off instead of idling all day, or scouts to use humvees 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 operational tempo for periods up to seven days over extended lines with reduced reliance on echelons-above-brigade support. For the Army to enable the freedom of maneuver described in the AFC-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 combat training. Disruption is exactly what will happen, but when properly administered, it will have positive training value for both logistics and combat leaders.



Figure 4. Since an ABCT consumes more than 100,000 gallons of fuel per day, protecting its supply line is critical for operational success. (U.S. Army photo)

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.

CPT Travis Michelena is a senior observer / coach / trainer and the S-3 for 1-351st BSB, 181st Infantry Brigade, at Fort McCoy, WI. Previous assignments include commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 181st Infantry, Fort McCoy; forward-support troop commander, 4-10th Cavalry, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO; security-forces adviser team, Afghan National Army brigade logistics adviser, 3rd ABCT, Afghanistan; aide de camp, 3rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command, Fort Knox, KY; and port logistics officer-in-charge, Operation Unified Response, Haiti (earthquake response). His military schooling includes Combined Logistics Captain's Career Course, Defense Support of Civil Authorities Course and airborne and air-assault schools. He holds a bachelor's of science degree in interdisciplinary studies from Tennessee Tech and is currently completing his master's of arts degree in emergency management and homeland security through Arizona State University.

*Reprinted from **Army Sustainment** March-April 2017 edition with author's revisions.*

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AFC-M&M – Army Functional Concept for Movement and Maneuver

BCT – brigade combat team

BSB – brigade-support battalion

CSSB – combat-sustainment support battalion

FSC – forward-support company

JRTC – Joint Readiness Training Center

NTC – National Training Center