

Sustaining the Warfighter in the Arctic

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In the summer of 2021, I learned that I would be changing duty stations from Fort Drum, NY, all the way to Fort Wainwright, AK, to join the Arctic Wolves of the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 25th Infantry Division. I was beyond ecstatic to have the opportunity to serve in America's last frontier as a junior logistics captain in the U.S. Army. As I was chatting with my peers about my upcoming move, all of my colleagues informed me how difficult it will be to conduct sustainment operations in Alaska's arctic conditions. Fighting and winning on the battlefield in extreme arctic conditions that entail temperatures below negative 50-degree Fahrenheit requires behind-the-scenes sustainment operations that demand discipline and initiative from Army sustainers.

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 4-0, *Sustainment*, states: "Sustainment operations maintain Army forces by equipping it with materiel, funding it with required resources, staffing it with trained Soldiers and leaders, and by providing it with the force health protection needed." Ensuring the warfighter is properly sustained on the battlefield requires the implementation of sustainment concepts that incorporate detailed analysis at every step, especially during arctic warfare. The U.S. military currently has thousands of personnel operating and training in Alaska's frigid arctic temperatures who are capable of dominating America's enemy in arctic warfare.

In March 2021, the Army unleashed its official "Arctic Strategy" which outlines how the Army is regaining arctic dominance, particularly in America's last frontier. "The Arctic, a vital area containing many of our nation's natural resources and key shipping channels, is a platform for projecting global power and a possible avenue of attack in conflict. This enhanced Arctic capability will increase the Army's ability to operate in extremely cold weather, mountainous, and high-latitude environments and supports the DoD's Arctic Strategy."¹ The implementation of the Army's Arctic Strategy birthed one of the newest Army training exercises, a full-scale training exercise located in the heart of Alaska that is comparable to a rotation at the Army's National Training Center and Joint Readiness Training Center. The key difference between training in Alaska versus training in the lower 48 is the ability to stress arctic capabilities, especially sustaining and maintaining Army assets.



Soldiers with the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division conduct a live-fire exercise in Alaska as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center Rotation 22-02 on 15 March 2022. (Photo by Benjamin Wilson)

In the fall of 2021, I had the experience of a lifetime that allowed me to see firsthand how the arctic can cripple sustainment operations during my first arctic field training exercise (FTX). Traditionally, warfighters are sustained on the front lines through the "Train" concept, which entails a common operating picture that enables the forward support company (FSC) to transport food, water, ammunition, and medical supplies to the warfighter. The FSC is supplied by the brigade support battalion (BSB), which is supplied from the division sustainment support battalion (DSSB). This concept briefs well on paper, but what about when vehicles don't move because their engines are frozen or the transporter is not able to drive because of snow mounds blocking the roadway? Learning to adapt to arctic conditions is something that all Arctic Wolves learn to do while they are stationed in Alaska, and it is truly remarkable how quickly the adaptation occurs.

My primary responsibility during the fall FTX was to gain experience on how the FSC overcomes arctic obstacles, take note of any shortfalls, and use these lessons learned when I assumed company command days after the completion of the exercise. The exercise lasted approximately two weeks and was a great introduction to how the Army can provide sustainment in frigid temperatures. The bulk of logistical issues that we came across during the exercise involved vehicles that either would not start or became stuck in snow-covered ditches. Vehicles that don't start have second and third-order effects, especially when those vehicles are relied upon to provide sustaining capabilities. One way that our unit was able to ensure most of our vehicles would start when required was not allowing them to be turned off for more than a certain amount of time. During our exercise, we relied on extremely competent NCOs to enforce this, even during the night.

During my first Leader's Time Training in Alaska, I learned that correct placement of snow chains on Army vehicles during convoy operations is paramount in ensuring vehicles do not slide off of the icy roads that often leads to vehicles being stuck. Applying snow chains properly onto tires seems simple enough; however, it is a time-consuming process that can go awry if the chains are not secured properly. The summed-up version of properly securing snow chains onto Army vehicles is laying them flat behind the back tires, backing the vehicle just less than halfway over the chain, and then laying the remainder of the chain over the tire and securing the fastener. More often than not, vehicles that were stuck in snow ditches often did not have their snow chains applied properly to the rear tires.

Extreme arctic conditions that are experienced every winter in Alaska demonstrate how Soldiers rely on sustainment operations at every step on the battlefield. From the instant warfighters enter the environment, the arctic begins to reveal the brutal truth of how quickly negative temperatures can stagger sustainment operations. The 1-25 SBCT has proven to the Army how crucial sustainment operations are to surviving life-threatening arctic elements. The frigid cold can affect ammunition and firearms from firing properly, wreak havoc on warfighting vehicles, and narrow the chance of a Soldier receiving a hot meal. Applying arctic-enduring lubrication on firearms is not only suggested but a necessity for firearms to work in Alaska's negative temperatures. One of the Army's favorite modern advances is the invention of the Meal, Cold Weather (MCW). The MCW replaces the traditional Meal, Ready to Eat (MRE) in frigidly cold conditions; it provides more calories to the warfighter and is freeze-dried food that is heated up and served hot. Speaking from experience, not only is the MCW filled with more calories and snacks than the traditional MRE, but having a physically hot meal enter the body also provides positive mental stimulation. For those interested, the spaghetti MCW is almost always the first to be eaten.

The 1-25 SBCT is one of the only units authorized the wear of extreme cold weather gear as an everyday duty uniform from September through April. The unique seven-layer system ditches the traditional Army OCP undershirt, blouse, trousers, patrol cap, and boots for a much warmer approach, allowing Soldiers the ability to fight without needing an external heating source. Vital to the success of the seven-layer system is the additional implementations of arctic mittens and "bunny boots," which will keep fingers and toes warm deep into the negatives. On my first day in the field, I found myself having to switch from my normal winter gloves and boots into my Arctic mittens and bunny boots, and while I almost began laughing at my appearance, my fingers and toes began to feel warm almost instantly. A common phrase you will hear Soldiers say is that while the Army has its challenges, it does a great job at keeping its Soldiers warm.

In addition to being issued arctic equipment, learning how to properly use these items is just as important when sustaining a large combat power. The Army's Cold Weather Orientation Course (CWOC) is designed to demonstrate to leaders the importance of understanding how the seven-layer system protects against the frigid cold. This weeklong course instructs Soldiers on the proper wear of arctic equipment as well as teaches the basics



Soldiers from the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division conduct reconnaissance at Donnelly Training Area, AK, on 22 March 2022. (Photo by SSG Christopher Dennis)

of snow-shoeing and combat skiing. Fewer cold-weather injuries on the battlefield means less-strained medical assets, allowing them to focus instead on combat-related injuries.

Vehicle maintenance is the bane of every Soldier's existence, and in the arctic maintenance can be more miserable than most can imagine. When a vehicle breaks down or requires annual and semi-annual services, it must be warmed up before being worked on. To combat the arctic's brutal weather, Fort Wainwright built winter maintenance facilities (WIN-MATs). Army vehicles that can't be stored in WIN-MATs that require maintenance must first be defrosted before they are even able to be worked on due to the lubricants and bolts being nearly frozen. Nearly every battalion within the Arctic Wolves has been augmented with a WIN-MAT to store Strykers and sustainment vehicles. These facilities provide exceptional coverage from arctic temperatures, snow, and ice; however, another challenge to being in Alaska is the availability of parts.

Maintenance parts including bolts, screws, tires, steering wheels, starters, and axles are rarely manufactured in America's last frontier. These parts are often shipped via vessel to the ports of Alaska and then transported over land utilizing the Alaskan Highway. Snowy white-out conditions can hinder this travel; however, Army mechanics are experts in fabricating maintenance parts and thinking outside of the box to ensure Arctic Wolves are always ready to fight and dominate the enemy in close combat. I have the privilege of having roughly 40 mechanics assigned under my command, and the work ethic that is executed daily to combat the arctic elements continues to shock me daily.

One way that the Army could continue to improve sustainment operations in the arctic is by entertaining the idea of an Arctic modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). With the exception of tents and heaters, arctic units use the same equipment utilized by units in the rest of the country. Introducing Army fuel trucks and palletized load system vehicles that are equipped with advanced batteries and spiked tires would likely increase sustainment capabilities in the arctic ten-fold. If the Army's Arctic Strategy incorporated a revamped MTOE that replaced traditional Army equipment with arctic-specific equipment, arctic Soldiers would be able to sustain and maintain the warfighter at levels previously unimagined.

The U.S Army has done an exceptional job over the years of sustaining its Soldiers in the arctic, and as it continues to recognize the importance of arctic dominance, the more effective sustainment operations will be, especially with the potential implementation of an arctic MTOE. As I prepare to enter Alaska's first arctic combat training center rotation as an FSC company commander, I am excited to demonstrate how properly planning and preparing to sustain and maintain in the arctic will enable frontline Soldiers to crush their opposing forces.

Notes

¹ U.S Public Affairs, "Army Announces Release of Arctic Strategy," 28 February 2022, accessed from https://www.army.mil/article/244261/army_announces_release_of_arctic_strategy.

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Soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment move through the Donnelly Training Area, AK, on 22 March 2022 as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center Rotation 22-02. (Photo by John Pennell)