

Stop Shuffling S4s



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Most battalion commanders will tell you that a knowledgeable S4 is worth his weight in gold because he knows the importance of logistics to the success of any mission. Many of those same commanders, though, will not hesitate to change his S4 on the slightest pretext, leaving the S4 sergeant to work for yet another in a long series of officers with whom he has served during the past few years.

This confusing practice of switching S4 officers, no matter how valid the reason may seem at the time, has been the downfall of a number of good battalions. I am sure that in most cases the commanders of those battalions would have been far better off if they had kept the same officer in the S4 position for at least a year.

There are two good reasons why the S4 officer should retain his job for a year: property accountability, and financial planning and budget execution.

A number of recent changes in the Army's property accountability procedures requires the S4 to be personally familiar with the new automated supply procedures so that he can properly manage the unit's relief-from-responsibility system. It is not enough for the S4 to merely understand the printed regulations; he must make certain that his battalion and company commanders are also aware of their property responsibilities.

As a report of survey officer, I watched a battalion commander, the best tactician in our brigade, count mattresses late one night. He had assumed that his new S4 had control of the battalion property situation.

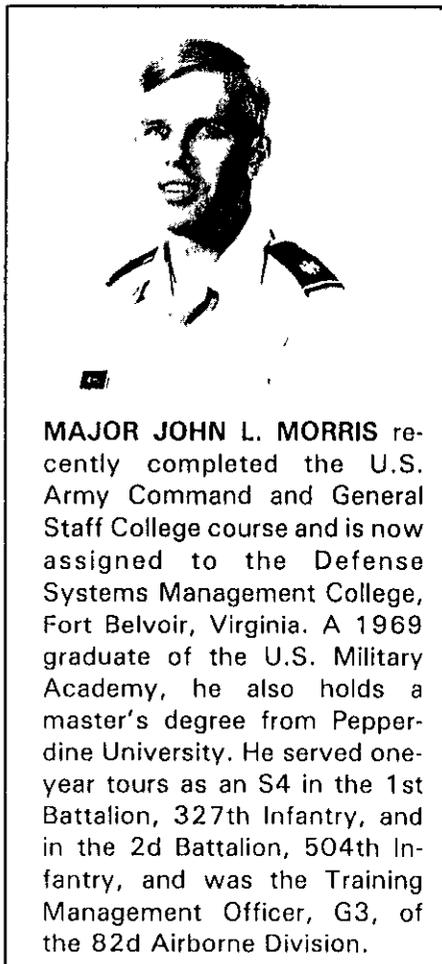
When I talked with each of his previous three S4 officers, they said they had known a problem existed, but had left the staff before they could do anything about it. Each had become a company commander before he had learned enough to control the battalion's property and, thereby, to avert disaster for the battalion commander. The average tour of an S4 officer in that battalion had been four months. Unfortunately for that commander, understanding and managing a battalion property system takes time, and he hadn't given his S4s the necessary time.

The recent trend toward decentralized budget planning and control of funds has made S4 officers even more responsible for their units' financial status and annual budgets. Even if he has little or no formal training, the S4 must now plan for and spend a substantial annual budget. He must make decisions and recommendations every day on the expenditure of organizational funds, but he has limited tools with which to analyze and define his requirements. The development of automated systems to help him, such as the training management control system (TMCS) and similar devices, simply have not kept up with the S4's needs in this area.

At least two important aspects of unit logistics, then — property accountability and funds management — require a degree of continuity in the S4 position. An officer assigned as a battalion S4 should be retained in his position for at least 12 months. Other aspects of battalion logistics, such as supporting tactical operations

and staff coordination, would also benefit from this continuity.

An effective logistics operation is often the difference between success and failure in training and in combat. It is imperative, therefore, that an S4 stay in his job long enough to learn it well and perform it effectively. This is a fact that many battalion commanders do not seem to be able to grasp. The ones who do not will probably end up counting mattresses in the middle of the night.



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