
The Battalion S-4 in the Field

CAPTAIN WILLIAM M. CONNOR, V

The battalion S-4 has a big job when he is deployed to the field. To start with, he is the commander of the combat trains, responsible for everything that goes on there. This includes the trains' emplacement and security, the soldiers' discipline and daily activities, and the information flow from the battalion headquarters to the combat trains.

In addition, he plans and supervises all logistics activities in the battalion. He writes paragraph IV of the operations order and plans the day-to-day resupply activities. He tracks all classes of supply and updates the battalion commander. He establishes the administrative/logistical (admin/log) radio net and keeps the flow of logistics information running from top to bottom and bottom to top. In a light infantry unit, he also serves as the battalion maintenance officer, continually tracking maintenance functions and ensuring that repairs are timely and complete. Unfortunately, few doctrinal references are available dealing with the S-4's duties in the field.

I served as S-4 of a light infantry battalion, including training for and deploying to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). When I first started this job, I studied the training and evaluation outline performance measures for everything related to the S-4.

The problem was that the performance measures were extremely broad and general. Tasks such as setting up the combat trains and task organizing to provide a defensive plan were left to me to figure out. During my many deployments to the field, I discovered (usually the hard way) some good techniques that made the job easier.

One of the first decisions the battalion S-4 has to make is how to set up his command post. If he sets up an operations cell using M577 tent extensions, he has more room and a nicer environment in which to track the battle; the problem is that, given the mobile nature of light infantry combat trains, the time it takes to set up and take down the extensions is usually not worth the benefits gained. Another option is to work out of the back of one covered HMMWV (high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle). This vehicle is very mobile but also very small. Most important, the medical platoon command post is then in a separate vehicle (because of space problems and the separate vehicle radio mounts the platoon needs).

The solution we found was to park the S-4 HMMWV and the medical platoon leader's HMMWV back-to-back in the center of the combat trains. We then put a board between the two so we

could walk back and forth, and a tarp over the opening between the two vehicles so that no light would escape at night. We had as much room as if we had used tent extensions, and were just as mobile as we would have been using the back of one HMMWV.

Another decision the S-4 has to make is how to establish the combat trains and how to task organize to control it. The first thing he must do is to ensure that he and the S-1 are cross-trained. Each needs to know the other's job, and both need to work as a team. In my unit, to establish the chain of command below us, we first established which NCO would be in charge of the combat trains and then appointed section points of contact.

Since the medical platoon was always the largest section, our medical platoon sergeant filled the role of trains noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC). He was responsible for the guard schedule, individual camouflage, fighting positions, and internal food support. Essentially, he was the first sergeant of the combat trains. Each of the sections had an NCOIC and turned to him for all NCO-related issues. The sections that were habitually with us were elements of the support platoon, the command post, the air defense artillery slice, and the antitank platoon.

TRAINING NOTES

The support platoon element had the support platoon sergeant as NCOIC. The command post element had the battalion signal NCO (who was also in charge of keeping the battalion admin/log net up). Each of the other sections was generally led by its highest ranking NCO.

Before the start of each field problems, the medical platoon sergeant and I got the NCOICs together and gave out all of our standing operating procedures (SOPs). We had an SOP on our quartering party, one on setting up initial security, and one on where each element would set up in our assembly area. (The assembly area was based on clock direction, with 12 o'clock being our direction of movement, and everyone had a portion of the clock to occupy.) At the JRTC we had to establish security quickly and jumped frequently. Since we all knew where we were supposed to go in the assembly area, there was no confusion when we occupied it. The most vulnerable time for a unit is during occupation, and we were never compromised. (Another advantage to having an SOP for section set-up locations is that each section knows where the others are.)

We had an SOP for establishing concertina wire around the perimeter: All vehicles carried concertina, and the first things drivers did when they occupied was to tie in their concertina with that of sections to their right and left. That established a 360-degree concertina fence. We also set up many daily business types of SOPs, such as stand-to and guard shift. (It takes some detailed work to set up the guard shift in the combat trains. One of the first things we discovered was that medics pull most of the guard duty and must be fully proficient in infantry skills. Before deploying to the field, the S-4 must get involved in medical platoon training to make sure those soldiers can help defend the trains.) We also handed off a copy of the SOPs to attachments,

which quickly assimilated them into our team.

Outside of setting up the combat trains, about the biggest problem the S-4 must deal with is delivering resupply from the logistical release point (LRP) to the individual companies. The first option is to deliver supplies straight to the companies from the LRP using the company resupply vehicle. This is a quick way to run LOGPAC, but it leaves those vehicles extremely vulnerable to ambush. The next option is to bring all the resupply vehicles into the combat trains and send them out one by one with a complete security package. Although this keeps the resupply vehicles relatively safe, it takes far too much time. The solution we came up with was to send three vehicles from the support platoon element to the LRP. Each of these vehicles guarded one company vehicle on the way to the company. One man on top of a support platoon HMMWV with an automatic weapon is adequate protection. This allows the antitank security element to concentrate on securing the convoy coming to the LRP, and then secure the LRP itself. Because the support platoon vehicles go to the companies, supplies from the combat trains can be sent out during LOGPAC. The companies can use the support platoon vehicles to backhaul casualties or anything else to be moved. If security has to be improved because of an increased threat, then the antitank vehicles can also be sent out to each company. Three vehicles, two with automatic weapons, make a very secure convoy going to each company.

One of the major problems an S-4 encounters is keeping up with supply status in the field. This is generally because the companies do not monitor the admin/log net and do not send LOGSTAT (daily status of current supply levels) or SPOTLOSS (lost equipment update) reports. The reason they do not is the shortage of radios to

monitor the admin/log net in light infantry companies. Company executive officers (XOs) and first sergeants are usually ordered to stay on the command net because they cannot monitor both the command and the admin/log nets. At the JRTC we discovered that the combat trains had no authority to make the companies stay on the admin/log net, especially when we were seven or eight kilometers away. The technique we used was to train our radio operators to listen closely for losses on the command net. When there was a lull in radio traffic, they asked the XOs to switch to admin/log for a quick logistics update. That way, the company XOs were not off the command net long, and we received the information we needed. Our radio operators were trained to follow the battle, and when anything happened that dealt with supply (such as a company capturing enemy supplies), they knew to break in on the command net the first chance they had and have the XO switch to admin/log.

I recommend that the Army incorporate into current doctrine more information on S-4 field functions. The field manuals and training and evaluation outlines do not adequately tell the S-4 what he needs to do in the field to accomplish his mission. He must learn mostly from long, hard experience. After being an observer-controller for another S-4, I discovered that new S-4s learn quickly only when the old S-4s share the techniques they have learned. New references need to be written on the battalion combat trains and on the battalion S-4 in the field. A unit that cannot be sustained in combat is doomed, and it is up to us to figure out how to best support the combat force.

Captain William M. Connor, V, served as S-4 of the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, and is now a company commander in the battalion. He is a 1990 ROTC graduate of The Citadel.

