

The Trials of a Forward Support Company at the JRTC

One forward support company learned the hard way how important training and planning are to providing support for a field artillery regiment.

■ By Capt. Vanessa L. Hooperyan and Master Sgt. Neil M. Lamont

During a recent rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, a forward support company (FSC) supported the 1st Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment (1-319 AFAR), 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, solely through reactive logistics and emergency resupply. The company's inability to provide proactive sustainment to its firing batteries was caused by several breakdowns within the system.

The 1-319th AFAR received support for all of its fire missions; however, the costs of the FSC being completely reactive for the 14-day training exercise were significant. These costs included Soldiers having minimal sleep between tactical convoys, the wrong supplies being delivered to firing bases, and the distribution platoon having to execute back-to-back convoys because of an inaccurate logistics common operational picture.

Tactical Convoy Operations

A tactical convoy is a deliberately planned combat operation to move personnel or cargo using ground transportation in a secure manner under the control of a single commander. Tactical convoys must have access to the current common operational picture and maintain an aggressive posture that is both agile and unpredictable.

Despite their danger, tactical convoy operations (TCOs) are necessary to get personnel and supplies

from point A to point B on the battlefield. A distribution platoon with a solid battle rhythm and higher headquarters planning support can provide its own security and ensure that the correct equipment and personnel are delivered with minimal incidents. The FSC executed 17 inefficient resupply TCOs and sometimes delivered no supplies at all.

The failures of these convoys occurred at various friction points in the brigade, battalion, and company logistics operations. These friction points were caused by the inability to come to a consensus on the firing battery's support requirements and what capabilities the FSC needed.

TCO Execution

Proper planning at the company and platoon levels plays a significant role in the success or failure of a TCO. According to Army Doctrine Publication 4-0, Sustainment, "through responsive sustainment, commanders maintain operational focus and pressure, set the tempo of friendly operations to prevent exhaustion, replace ineffective units, and extend operational reach."

The first TCO that the FSC executed put them on the road at night for more than 8 hours, and planning for the mission was nonexistent. Additionally, the convoy commander did not have any grid coordinates for the supported unit locations and only knew of general vicinities he had seen them occupy during the day. The convoy commander and assistant convoy com-

mander split up their TCO twice.

The first split was to get a wrecker because several trucks got stuck en route to the first firing base. In this first split, 360-degree security was never established, 0-5-25-200 meter scan checks for improvised explosive devices were not conducted, and the recovery crew had never conducted rehearsals or an actual TCO with their own distribution platoon.

The second split was to find the brigade support battalion and pick up a class V (ammunition) load to deliver to A Battery. During the second split, the assistant convoy commander had no clear picture of the route and locations of the brigade support battalion or the firing batteries, and the TCO had to reorient itself three times to reunite with the convoy proper.

Before departing for this mission, troop leading procedures were not executed to standard. Rehearsals were not conducted, precombat checks and inspections were glossed over using an ineffective checklist, load plans were not completed, and noncommissioned officer (NCO) supervision was lacking.

Even though the FSC was successful in recovering its stuck vehicles, no supplies were delivered to the firing points.

Several times the distribution platoon delivered to the firing batteries class V packages that did not have compatible projectile-fuse combinations because support requirements were inaccurately pro-

jected and given to the FSC. This caused batteries to receive only partial resupply packages, and the FSC had to execute back-to-back TCOs to deliver proper packages.

Staffing Challenges

The distribution platoon was made up mostly of new Soldiers with limited experience in conducting TCOs. They had never established a battle rhythm, a platoon mission-essential task list, or a standard operating procedure (SOP).

Given that this was a decisive action rotation, the platoon was unable to practice troop leading procedures with observer-coach/trainers before the force-on-force exercise and had not gone through the combat convoy lane of a situational training exercise. This training would have proven instrumental to their success. It also would have given them a chance to consider actions like react to an improvised explosive device, react to contact, and set a battle rhythm. Most importantly, the training would have helped them understand the planning process for conducting a successful TCO.

Learning Through Experience

The distribution platoon was challenged even with simple tasks throughout the rotation. Although the FSC Soldiers experienced many rotational pains, their openness to suggestion and doctrine and their eagerness to learn and grow assisted them in eventually setting battle rhythms and developing their troop leading procedures. TCO planning and NCO involvement became priorities and increased the morale of the FSC.

Many basic TCO questions were asked and answered at JRTC, including the following:

- How is recovery being applied to the TCO? Are the recovery crews embedded with the distribution platoon as they train and rehearse TCOs? Does the recovery SOP

make sense for both platoons?

- How is medical care under fire being conducted? Is the medic being employed correctly?
- What do the TCO primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency plans look like?
- Can the FSC communicate with the units within the area of operations and the batteries to which it is delivering supplies?
- Do the other units (to include

enough supplies were available to make the TCO worthwhile but instead with how to get the supplies on the road immediately.

Many times, the lack of planning led to the distribution platoon arriving back at the brigade support area after completing a resupply run to the three firing batteries only to learn that one of the batteries that they had just supplied needed one additional item delivered. This

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the unit being resupplied) know the FSC's location and where it is set up in a defensive posture outside of a firing point?

- Is the FSC familiar with the products that it is delivering? If a certain type of round is needed, does the requesting unit also need fuses or charges?
- Do NCOs and platoon leaders know their roles in planning a TCO with regard to pre-combat checks and inspections, load plans, and checklists? Who is submitting the trip ticket?
- Is the FSC delivering class III (petroleum, oils, and lubricants), class I (subsistence), and water in the most efficient and correct way? Should it deliver fuel to each truck or set up a safe fuel point on each compound? Should it do the same with water?
- Is composite risk management being conducted properly?
- Are leaders documenting failures in conjunction with after-action reviews in order to develop platoon and company SOPs and mission-essential task lists that make the FSC effective?

Lack of Planning

The battalion S-3 did not allow the FSC commander time to assess and get feedback from his leaders in the distribution platoon. The S-3 was not concerned about whether

in turn made most of the TCOs futile and destroyed the morale of the sustainment Soldiers who delivered these supplies.

On one such TCO to deliver class V to C Battery, the distribution platoon arrived at the firing base to find out that the whole battery had jumped locations in the middle of the night without notifying the FSC.

The S-3 should continuously track the location of the battalion's convoys along the routes and specify events that convoys must report to the tactical operations center, such as convoy departure, maintenance halts, and passes through checkpoints.

Staff Shortcomings

The battalion S-3 never got involved with TCO responsibilities. During one resupply TCO, the distribution platoon arrived at B Battery and set up a defensive posture on the north side of the battery's fighting position. (The distribution platoon was never able to get all of its vehicles on a fire position, so it became customary for them to form 360-degree security against the berm of the battery's fire point that they were resupplying.)

On this particular TCO, the mission was conducted at night, and as the platoon was set up in the defen-

sive posture, it received small-arms fire from the opposing force from the northeast. As distribution Soldiers returned fire, Soldiers from B Battery began to shoot their weapons at the FSC.

- level.
- Back brief the convoy reception plan, which must ensure a rapid turnaround so that the convoy can proceed to its next destination. The plan must include an

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The battalion S-4 struggled to get a clear picture of what was on the ground, what was available for issue, and what firing batteries really needed. The failure to conduct sustainment synchronization meetings and be connected with the support operations section created a complete accountability breakdown. For example, a battery ran out of water, which should have been a wakeup call to the S-4.

Even when the battalion S-4 communicated accurate support requirements to the FSC, it was not always clear if the supplies were available and where they were located. Not having a point of contact or knowing where the container delivery system bundles were dropped made it impossible for the battalion to know the amount and type of class V that was available for their firing points.

The S-4 should have completed the following actions:

- Know and report quantities of supplies on hand in the battalion.
- Know planned maneuver operations 24, 48, and 72 hours in advance.
- Forecast items and quantities on the logistics status report based on expected consumption within 24 to 72 hours of upcoming operations.
- Specify desired delivery time windows for convoys to arrive at their destinations to allow resupply down to the platoon

intelligence update and procedures to be followed by gate security personnel, ground guides, forklift operators, and security escorts.

- Coordinate with the battalion S-3 to identify restricted routes and routes that complement the maneuver plan.

Lessons Learned

Overall, many of the challenges that the FSC faced in supporting 1-319th AFAR were caused by friction points at multiple sustainment levels. These challenges provided valuable lessons learned for the fires battalion logistics planners. The top three lessons learned are all related to each other and can be valuable for any sustainment unit:

- Troop leading procedures must be executed to standard; otherwise, Soldiers can potentially spend hours on the road with no purposeful end state. There is no such thing as an administrative movement in a combat zone, so conducting proper planning in a training environment ensures tactical convoys are trained to standard.
- Combat and sustainment operations must be synchronized for predictive logistics to be executed properly. A lack of synchronization can significantly affect platoon- and company-level sustainment.
- A logistics common operation-

al picture must be established to accurately visualize logistics assets and status of supplies. Without an accurate logistics common operational picture, the second and third order effects on subordinate sustainers can be detrimental.

A valid common operational picture, proper commodity supply reporting, and effective battalion logistics synchronization would enable the FSC to operate proactively rather than reactively. The FSC should continue to rehearse and conduct troop leading procedures with its recovery crews and develop a unit SOP that complements company- and platoon-level mission-essential task lists for TCO operations and supply distribution. This will ensure that the battalion has fluid continuity as new faces assume leadership roles and that responsibilities are clearly defined.

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