

Shortfalls in the SBCT's Forward Support Companies

■ By Capt. Adam Dyet

In today's Army, forward support companies (FSCs) are some of the fastest paced and most relied on support units. During my 28 months in command of an FSC, my unit experienced a decisive action National Training Center rotation, a load out, a deployment to Kuwait, and redeployment and reintegration. I then led my company in a huge transformation as the brigade turned in tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles and transitioned to a fleet of Strykers. In between these major events, we conducted plenty of collective training.

In March 2014, the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 4th Infantry Division, was reflagged and rapidly began the transition to become the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT). It is the first SBCT to have only the double-V-hull Stryker variant. We witnessed the addition of several Stryker maneuver battalions and a dramatic restructuring of support assets and personnel.

As we transitioned, many of my subordinates and peers became concerned that we did not have the proper manpower and that the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) did not make sense.

The SBCT Support Concept

Stryker brigades, and the FSCs that now support them, are a relatively new concept in the Army. The newest edition of Army Techniques Publication 4-90, Brigade Support Battalion, specifically states that legacy SBCT brigade support battalions (BSBs) do not have FSCs.

In early Stryker units, maneuver squadrons were supported by a

massive BSB or regimental support squadron consisting of over 700 personnel and operating under a logistics support team (LST) concept. LSTs were attached to specific maneuver units depending on the mission at hand. From the beginning, the LSTs had severe problems with the amount of manpower and equipment that they had to support the maneuver units.

Instead of using the LST concept, the 1st SBCT kept the FSC concept that it used while it was an ABCT. Unfortunately, FSC commanders quickly noticed some systemic problems with the new MTOE. FSCs across the Army lack specialized personnel for maintenance and mission command, communications equipment, defensive capabilities, and major end items for critical sustainment and support operations.

Personnel Shortages

In manning FSCs, the lack of some military occupational specialties (MOSs) must be addressed. Not having an MOS 25U (signal support systems specialist) assigned to the FSC is detrimental. This critical support MOS needs to be assigned in an MTOE slot rather than as an additional duty because of the fluidity of movement and communications in a Stryker formation and the FSC's emphasis on digital systems, such as Joint Capabilities Release Logistics.

Personnel shortages extend to the headquarters sections of all FSCs. MTOE personnel authorizations for the headquarters sections do not allow for an operations sergeant, a communications sergeant, a chemical, biological, radiological, and

nuclear sergeant, an operations assistant, drivers, or radio/telephone operators. The supply sergeant position in an FSC was downgraded from an E-6 to an E-5, despite the FSCs having complex property with hugely varying line item numbers and a vast number of components.

In Stryker maneuver company MTOEs, the headquarters section alone consists of several additional personnel. Infantry company headquarters have two radio/telephone operators, two drivers, one vehicle commander, and one signal support specialist. The cavalry squadron has more. These personnel are in addition to the commander, first sergeant, executive officer, supply sergeant, and supply clerk.

The FSCs are left pulling personnel from the already scant maintenance and distribution sections to fill administrative requirements in the orderly room and to man the command post for operations in the field or in combat.

This manning shortage in the headquarters sections cannot be overlooked considering the FSC's role in unified land operations. FSCs are responsible for setting up the field trains command post (FTCP) and unit maintenance collection point (UMCP), which are often pushed far forward from the brigade support area (BSA) but still behind the forward line of troops.

FSCs play a pivotal role in relaying communications, staging support assets, serving as vital support and command nodes, and being as important to the fight as the tactical operations center or tactical command post. Without the FTCP or UMCP, there simply would not be recovery,

maintenance, or any classes of supply forward to keep the warfighter going. These posts need to have the same type of manning that we see in the maneuver companies to function properly.

One of the most pressing concerns for FSCs is the number of mechanics assigned to the formation. The Army uses manpower requirements criteria (MARC) to determine the number of personnel by MOS needed to complete duties in a specific unit. The perceived lack of manpower is not a result of an incorrect maintenance allocation chart (MAC) for time spent on each service or vehicle.

Quite the contrary, the MAC is calculated based on extensive testing and observations that factor in how long repairs should take for a specific piece of equipment. These numbers are then put into a larger formula that calculates the MARC for that unit. The issue with the MARC is that the formula it uses to authorize mechanics is based on deployed man-hours, not garrison man-hours.

In a deployed environment, the MOS availability factor, or available Soldier hours, for a BSB is calculated at 62.12 hours per week per Soldier. This is feasible during deployed operations in which Soldiers are working 12-hour days, seven days per week. Not so in a garrison environment with training and readiness requirements, weekends, federal holidays, budgetary shortages, and tasking requirements.

Coupled with the high operational readiness requirements in garrison, the reduced Soldier availability makes it extremely difficult for FSC mechanics to complete the required scheduled and unscheduled services. Major training that requires the support unit Soldiers to participate results in even more days that vehicles are deadlined.

Army Regulation 570-4, Manpower Management, recognizes the difference in garrison and deployed maintenance and further concedes that garrison Soldiers are available less often. It applies an MOS avail-

ability factor of 29 hours per Soldier per week. This differs greatly from the wartime requirement of 62.12 hours.

With the continuing transition from major combat operations overseas and a very real emphasis on operational readiness of equipment in garrison, support unit MTOEs need to be built and filled based on a compromise between wartime and peacetime requirements.

Equipment Shortages

Commanders of SBCT FSCs have also noticed equipment shortages. When they were part of the ABCT, the FSCs were given M1075 heavy expanded-mobility tactical truck (HEMTT) palletized load systems (PLSs) that were used to transport the forward repair system (FRS) for the combat repair teams that were attached to line companies.

Each FRS weighs 24,600 pounds, or about 12 short tons. This was not a problem for the PLS, which can carry 16.5 short tons because of its larger engine and an extra axle. It is, however, a problem for the M1120 HEMTT load handling system (LHS), which has a carrying capacity of 11 short tons. Almost identical to the PLS in looks and function, it has one less axle and a smaller engine.

SBCT FSCs do not have PLS variants as part of their MTOEs, so they are left with the reduced carrying capacity of the LHS to move their FRSs. The M1075 trailers that are paired with both the PLS and LHS are authorized to haul 16.5 short tons, but only when paired with a PLS. With the LHS, the trailers that are rated at 16.5 short tons can hold only 11 short tons if the LHS already has a full load on the front.

An FRS can be moved with an LHS, but it puts severe strain on the hydraulics and the operator must manually override the weight sensor on the vehicle that indicates that the load it is lifting is too heavy. To have a workaround in place that requires operators to override safety protocols is irresponsible and foolish, especially when any perceived savings

between the PLS and LHS would be lost when one considers the impact of rupturing the vehicle's hydraulics or injuring a Soldier.

In an SBCT, all equipment must be able to be airlifted by C-130 Hercules. The PLS, with its slightly larger size, is too large to fit on the aircraft. The solution was to go with the less capable LHS, sacrificing lift capacity for mobility.

However, the C-130 airlift requirement works only with the older, lighter, flat-bottomed Stryker. The new double-V-hull models that make up the 1st SBCT (and will soon become the norm for all Stryker brigades) are simply too heavy and can be airlifted only by a C-17 Globemaster or C-5 Galaxy aircraft. The PLS's airlift capability problem is now a moot point.

Convoy Security

For years, SBCTs have had the advantage of being at the forefront of research and development for armor, mobility, communications, weapons, and optics. Still, their support units' vehicles have limited capabilities, especially concerning armor and self-defense.

FSCs spend inordinate amounts of time on the road moving supplies, often within just a few kilometers of the front line. Although M66 ring mounts can be fitted onto most FSC vehicles for self-defense during convoy operations, FSCs are done a great disservice by not being authorized up-armored humvees for convoy operations.

A standard FSC supporting a Stryker infantry battalion has 12 soft-skinned humvees by MTOE. These humvees are often outdated M998s fitted with Blue Force Tracking or Joint Capabilities Release and used by the commander or distribution platoon leader as convoy escort or mission command vehicles. Older versions in the FSCs also lack the capability to have a mounted weapons system.

FSCs need up-armored humvees with crew-served weapon mounting

capability. FSCs have enough crew-served weapons available to arm a sufficient number of vehicles, so why waste the maneuverability and speed of a humvee by not properly equipping it with a larger caliber weapon? After the dissolution of reconnaissance squadrons across the Army (11 have dissolved so far), plenty of up-armored humvees should be available to units that need them.

Furthermore, FSC vehicles lack the sophisticated communications equipment that their maneuver brethren possess. Forward support units still lack authorizations for advanced radios, such as the Harris or multiband inter/intra team radio, and internal communications systems within their vehicles.

Maintenance Shortfalls

A lack of proper maintenance equipment further complicates matters for the FSCs. The FSCs have a shortage of contact trucks to be paired with maneuver companies. In the past, the contact truck and contact team (usually consisting of two skilled mechanics) would be part of the combat repair team. They would hold fast in the company trains, directly behind the front line, but they also could be quickly dispatched for expedient repairs on a vehicle or piece of equipment.

All SBCT FSCs are short by one contact truck. For example, a Stryker reconnaissance squadron has three line troops, but the FSC has only two contact trucks to support them. This formula is repeated with every FSC across the formation. Each is short one vehicle that is needed to go with that last maneuver troop.

Where are these extra contact trucks? Six of them reside with the BSB, authorized to the maintenance company. During decisive action, the BSA, which accommodates the entire BSB maintenance company, sits anywhere from 25 to 30 kilometers back from the forward line of troops.

Furthermore, the maintenance company is largely immobile in the BSA.

The FSCs expedite repairs at their respective unit maintenance collection points, which are located forward and are more than capable of doing repairs on their own.

The maintenance company has six contact trucks, yet it does not have the Stryker mechanics authorized to man them. In fact, four of these six contact trucks are assigned to the ground support equipment section, made up of generator mechanics who are, by MTOE, unable to man all the vehicles assigned to the section.

If the intent is for these assets to be attached just prior to combat operations, why not just make them part of the FSCs from the beginning? Attaching them later is like reverting to the LST concept—tailoring support packages based on need.

The late addition of a maintenance team puts that team out of the loop on its new organization's tactics, techniques, procedures, and leadership styles. The old adage, "the team that trains together, wins together," can be applied here.

Fuel Truck Shortages

FSCs also have a support asset shortage when it comes to M978 HEMTT 2,500-gallon fuel tankers. Each FSC has one less fuel truck than the number of maneuver companies it needs to support. The proposed fix for this is the modular fuel system (MFS).

With only two M978s authorized in the FSCs, the option exists to transform assigned LHSs into fuelers with an MFS tank on the back, thus leaving a trailer open to carry additional supplies.

Another option is to create a service station fuel point with the M978s or MFS where Strykers cycle through. This was already tested during a 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, combat training center rotation. At times, the distribution section would emplace a service station resupply point for class IIIB (bulk petroleum, oils, and lubricants) and class V (ammunition), and several troops would cycle through the

same location.

This is feasible in set-piece operations (moving troops in column into a screen, for example), but the most realistic training the squadron conducted demonstrated that this concept of resupply was too centralized and not dispersed enough for fluid operations. A cavalry squadron conducting a screen or zone reconnaissance is spread over 30 to 50 kilometers, often with mission objectives that require distinctly different logistics packages. Supporting a Stryker formation with just two fuel tankers in this case is not feasible.

Recommendations

What are the best ways to fix the problems in the FSCs and keep costs down? For most of the issues, the fixes are simply to make better use of the resources already at hand.

Personnel. First, the manning portion of the MTOE needs to change. FSCs need viable command posts and training rooms without having to pull personnel from already stretched platoons. Front line support units need a robust headquarters section with specialized personnel, just like line units do.

The supply sergeant position should be redesignated as an E-6 like it was previously. Signal support system specialists can be moved from the maneuver battalion S-6 section to the FSC, but this is just a temporary fix. The FSCs need a dedicated communications representative on hand, always.

Having an operations sergeant and operations assistant, like in the cavalry squadron, would bolster the FTCP and make it a much more viable command node. In garrison, these Soldiers could serve as the training room noncommissioned officer-in-charge and orderly room clerk or armorer.

Currently, the distribution platoon lacks gunners. For FSCs that decide to equip their LHSs with crew-served weapons, the truck commanders would have to act as the gunners as well.

Expecting the Army to fill FSC maintenance shortfalls based on peacetime requirements in a downsizing Army may be a bridge too far. However, it would be worthwhile to relook the available man-hours in garrison and raise the authorization of mechanics by 10 percent across the board. This would mean an extra three or four mechanics in each FSC.

Vehicles. Second, major end item distribution and MTOE authorizations need to be relooked. Provide PLSs to the FSCs so that they can lift and transport their FRSs and excessive amounts of class V (in the case of the fires battalion FSC). PLSs can be fielded from either the combat sustainment support battalion or BSB and traded for the LHSs that the FSCs already have.

During my last National Training Center rotation with the ABCT, the UMCP jumped no less than four times during decisive action operations, requiring each FRS to be picked up and transported each time.

Provide an extra 2,500-gallon fuel tanker truck to each FSC from the BSB's distribution company to mitigate the shortage of mobile refueling capability. The distribution company has 10 2,500-gallon tankers and 10 MFSs.

Giving one 2,500-gallon tanker to each FSC would leave the distribution company with four in addition to the MFSs it would retain. This is more than enough equipment to push logistics packages from the BSA to each FTCP while still providing retail bulk fuel in the BSA.

FSCs can also turn three of their LHSs into fuelers using the MFS and attach a trailer to bring out additional supplies. This configuration would allow LHSs to be assigned to each of their respective line units while transporting fuel and some other commodities like class V or class IX (repair parts) on one platform.

It seems that this option was not thought through with the MTOE redesign. There are only a total of four petroleum supply specialists

(MOS 92F) assigned, thus two in each authorized M978. There are no additional 92F Soldiers to operate the MFSs. Any proposed solution would require the redistribution of the 92F Soldiers and would leave one M978 without any 92Fs to man it.

Furthermore, using three tank racks to take up pallet space on the LHS will test the FSC load out capability. The BSB's maintenance company can supply each FSC with an extra contact truck. This would leave the maintenance company with none, but they are not the ones doing expeditious repairs at the front; the FSCs are.

The maintenance company would still maintain its own FRSs and wreckers in the BSA to perform services and repairs as needed. Put the contact trucks where they can have the most positive impact. The maintenance platoon, even with the MTOE change, has sufficient personnel to effectively man these extra vehicles. It would just take careful consideration from the FSC leaders on how best to assign these Soldiers to the vehicles.

Equipment. Third, upgrade the equipment. If the expectation is that FSCs will deploy with the equipment that they have in garrison, then the current humvee fleet that exists in the FSCs will not suffice. They need ballistic armor and gunner protective kits. The added defense, mobility, and security that these provide in addition to their mission command capability cannot be overlooked.

FSCs are behind the times without advanced radios or internal vehicle communications. Providing these would allow FSCs to communicate better internally and externally during both mounted and dismounted operations.

The Positives

The FSC concept in the SBCT has some very positive points. For one, the overall mission command capability that exists in an FSC is much better than it was under the LST concept. An FSC has dedicated po-

sitions for its commander (a captain), first sergeant, executive officer, and distribution platoon leader.

Often in the LST, the mission command was left to a lieutenant or warrant officer. In an FSC, a logistics captain and first sergeant make up the command team, so the warrant officer can focus on maintenance and the lieutenants take responsibilities as the executive officer and distribution platoon leader.

In spite of the issues addressed earlier, the maintenance setup of the FSC does allow it to set up a viable UMCP that can quickly recover and repair vehicles with the wrecker support and forward repair systems available. The field feeding section in an FSC is robust. With its authorized equipment, it is more than prepared to support the warfighters wherever they are.

The FSC, even with the reduced number of vehicles and personnel, has proven it can still move itself in one lift to a field or combat environment and support Strykers by establishing viable support nodes in the form of the FTCP and UMCP. For this to happen effectively, FSC leaders need to plan their load outs carefully and manage their personnel responsibly.

FSCs can currently provide very effective support to the SBCT, but there are still lingering issues that must be scrutinized to allow for better efficiency and efficacy. A slight reshuffling and addition of materiel and personnel will solve many of the problems within the FSC with limited or no cost.

Capt. Adam Dyet is the brigade S-4 in the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, at Fort Carson, Colorado. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Arizona. He is a Demonstrated Master Logistician and graduate of the Transportation Officer Basic Course and Combined Logistics Captains Career Course.