

Improving Efficiency in Expeditionary Movement Control

Putting full responsibility for logistics movements back in the hands of the movement control battalion can save money and expedite shipments.

■ By 1st Lt. Ryan M. Waldorf

Commanders always demand an effective transportation system. They want their equipment, they want it intact and right now, and they are very vocal when their wants are not met. Conversely, commanders rarely demand an efficient transportation system. They seldom complain when their cargo is shipped unnecessarily quickly, safely, or expensively, even though such shipments have cost the military hundreds of millions of dollars during the past few years.

This cost is concealed because commanders do not pay for their own transportation expenses. Transportation costs are charged to a variety of theater-level accounts that fund transportation for all organizations in the theater. Centralized transportation funding ensures units' missions never fail because they lack transportation funds. However, it does not ensure units use funds efficiently and cost effectively.

The MCB's Role in Cost Control

To help instill cost discipline, the military developed a comprehensive theory of movement control and deployed movement control battalions (MCBs) to theaters to manage expeditionary transportation systems.

In the past, MCBs enforced cost discipline in theater by assuming the responsibility for shipping cargo. Once a customer identified cargo for shipment, the MCB processed cargo through a central receiving and shipping point (CRSP) yard, selected the best mode of transportation for the cargo, and coordinated delivery to its

follow-on destination.

Over the course of the war in Afghanistan, however, MCBs relinquished the responsibility for shipping cargo. Customers began to request and coordinate their own modes of transportation and used the MCB primarily to process their movement requests. These changes resulted in an inordinately expensive transportation system.

Because customers, not the MCB, determine the transportation modes used, a significant amount of money is spent shipping cargo by needlessly quick and expensive modes of transportation. Simultaneously, since trucks are associated with individual customers instead of the MCB, significant funds are also spent on underutilized ground transportation assets, expedited ground transportation assets, and demurrage that often lengthens delivery times.

If an MCB were to resume full responsibility for shipping cargo throughout Afghanistan, the military would expedite shipments and save hundreds of millions of dollars on transportation costs that may be better spent elsewhere.

The Conflict of Interest

Our military transportation system in Afghanistan operates the way the U.S. postal system would if customers were not charged different prices for different shipping options. Postal customers generally want their packages to arrive as quickly as possible, but their desire to pay as little as possible usually discourages them

from unnecessarily expediting their shipments. If customers did not pay for their own shipments, or if their expenses were charged to a government account that few people scrutinized, most customers would ship their packages via overnight air at an enormous cost.

Unfortunately, the military transportation system in Afghanistan has operated this way for years. Every new fiscal year, the military allocates hundreds of millions of dollars to theaterwide transportation accounts to cover costs that would otherwise be paid by individual units. These accounts give commanders the flexibility they need to quickly and effectively react to changing situations on the ground by eliminating the need to estimate individual transportation expenses and request new funds every time an unforeseen or unpredicted expense arises.

At the same time, theaterwide funds eliminate the incentive for commanders to examine costs. When managing an operation, commanders generally measure success by the delivery of their cargo, not the cost of delivery. Since they are not paying for their own transportation, they rarely consider whether or not they could have achieved the same result with less money.

The Case for the MCB

Because shippers have no incentive to be attentive to costs, the transportation system needs to be overseen by an organization that is not directly accountable to its customers.

This organization needs to be able to validate and, if necessary, contest customer-assigned required delivery dates (RDDs), since the government spends substantially more when expediting shipments to meet early RDDs. At the same time, this organization needs the flexibility to match in-transit safety to the cargo's value when considering different modes of transportation.

In the past, the MCB fulfilled this role; its movement control teams (MCTs) accepted logistics movement requests from customers and determined the cargo's mode of transportation based on the cargo's RDD, the cargo's value and sensitivity, enemy activity, higher headquarters guidance, and shipment cost.

After selecting the mode of transportation, the MCT then coordinated cargo movement by completing transportation movement releases (TMRs) for ground movement, completing rotary air movement requests for rotary-wing movement, or transferring the cargo to the arrival/departure airfield control group for fixed-wing movement.

If the MCB resumed this responsibility, it could better direct customers' cargo to the most appropriate mode of transportation, saving a significant amount of money in the process.

The Inefficient Links

Currently, when a customer goes to his local ground MCT to send a tricon shipping container from Bagram Airfield to Kandahar Airfield, the MCT helps the customer fill out a TMR, provides the estimated pickup date, and submits the TMR to the MCB for truck allocation. Often a second customer will come in shortly after to ship another container to Kandahar. The MCT repeats the same process with the second customer.

Three more times throughout the day, different customers may come to the MCT to ship a container from Bagram to Kandahar, and each time the MCT will submit a separate truck request for a separate custom-



Soldiers assigned to the 10th Sustainment Brigade and the 330th Movement Control Battalion in support of retrograde operations load and secure recovered logistics information systems onto the back of a heavy expanded mobility tactical truck load handling system at the top of the Salang Pass on July 15, 2014.

er. Subsequently five separate trucks will come for pickups even though a single truck could move all five containers at a considerable cost savings.

In other cases, organizations need to resupply outlying forward operating bases with emergency cargo. To expedite shipments, they may ship their emergency cargo either by working with the air MCT to have it flown out on a plane leaving the next day or by submitting a TMR through the ground MCT to request an expensive expedited truck pickup.

While the customer and MCTs

coordinate, regularly priced trucks may be leaving for the same outlying bases that day with low-priority cargo. Often, an MCT could easily have swapped out this lower-priority cargo for the higher-priority cargo.

In other instances a customer may order a truck to move a 20-foot container but may not load the truck until four days after the truck arrives. The first three days, the military incurs an implicit cost because

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a three-day loading period is built into the price of all the trucking contracts. On the fourth day, the Afghan trucking company charges the military demurrage, an explicit cost that compensates trucking companies for the additional time they spent waiting instead of moving other cargo. While the driver waits, multiple other trucks may arrive, load 20-foot equivalent containers, and leave for the same destination.

Each of these examples highlights an inefficiency that results from associating trucks with individual customers. In the first instance, the MCB could have mixed and matched cargo to ensure that it fully utilized all its trucks. More cargo could therefore be put on fewer trucks, saving the military the cost of the additional trucks.

In the second instance, the MCB could have reprioritized its cargo, placing the emergency cargo on regular-priced ground transportation assets scheduled to leave that day. No ground transportation shortage required the MCB to use expedited and expensive methods of transportation.

In the third instance, the MCB could have saved money in two ways. In the immediate term, it could have avoided demurrage by placing cargo that was already backlogged on the truck waiting to be moved. In the longer term, by centralizing the shipping process, the MCB could likely reduce the average time it takes to load a truck. This would enable the MCB to reduce the three-day load time built into the contracts and therefore reduce the cost of the contracts associated with that time.

In the past, the MCB in Afghanistan minimized all these inefficiencies by fully coordinating the shipment of its customers' cargo. The MCB funneled cargo to CRSP yards where it was sorted by mode and destination and loaded onto trucks based on RDD and truck availability.

The MCB ensured that trucks were fully utilized before releasing them for movement, expedited shipments on regular-priced forms of transportation, and reduced demurrage associated with truck-loading times. By reinstating these practices, the MCB could both save the military money and accelerate shipments.

Room for Further Exploration

The Army needs to explore a few things to ensure that this change would be cost effective and consistent with the logistics mission in Afghanistan.

Does the cost of adjusting this system outweigh the cost of continuing it?

From a monetary perspective, if the cost of reestablishing and operating CRSP yards, expanding existing base infrastructure, or rewriting the trucking contracts is higher than the savings these recommendations bring, then it may not be beneficial for the MCB to implement this system.

Do current MCTs have the expertise necessary to execute this system?

A significant amount of control needs to be transferred to the MCTs for this system to work. If the movement control specialists that comprise the MCTs have lost the ability to operate efficiently with sound decision-making processes, then these changes could decrease rather than increase efficiency and effectiveness.

Would adjusting the logistics system adversely affect wartime operations?

Logistics systems do not exist in a bubble, and this is particularly true in Afghanistan since Afghan trucking companies support U.S. logistics operations. Any increase or decrease in the amount of money paid to these companies could affect their support of the U.S. and Afghan governments and should be considered before making significant changes to logistics operations.

Will the guiding theory of expeditionary transportation continue to equally weigh cost, speed, and safety when making transportation decisions?

Largely because of safety concerns, the U.S. Central Command

directs its subordinate units to ship lower value cargo by ground and higher value cargo by air. There has been a push, however, to move more cargo by air and less by ground because air movement is quicker and safer, and the cost is often masked. If this push continues, the military may decide to move all cargo by air and use ground assets solely to make up the shortfall, despite the significant cost the military would incur.

The theater sustainment command should give an MCB full responsibility for shipping cargo throughout Afghanistan, determining cargo's mode of transportation, and fully coordinating cargo movements. By reducing the use of the most expensive forms of transportation, better using less expensive modes, expediting shipments on the cheapest forms of transportation, and reducing demurrage, the military would easily save tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars per year on transportation costs alone.

These effects could have short- and long-term significance. Our military spent years in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait developing our current expeditionary movement control doctrine.

If we allow our doctrine to lapse at the end of these conflicts, then we may find it difficult to revive for the next conflicts. Our military may cease to understand the true purpose of the MCB and, in the process, lose money that could be allocated to other areas of our current and future war efforts.

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