



Deploying a Combat Sustainment Support Battalion to the National Training Center

■ By Capt. Michael S. Ibrahim

A CH-47 Chinook helicopter is shown in flight, viewed from a low angle looking up. The helicopter's main rotor hub and tail rotor are visible. The fuselage is dark green with some wear and tear. The number '42' is visible on the side. Below the helicopter, several soldiers in camouflage uniforms are on the ground, working with a large, dark, cylindrical object that is being hoisted by a sling load. The ground is dusty and the background is a clear sky.

Soldiers from the 35th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion hook up supplies to a CH-47 Chinook helicopter during sling load training at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, May 19, 2014. (Photo by Sgt. Paul Sale)

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FEATURES

The 35th CSSB provided sustainment support, conducted a tactical convoy, and faced an enemy guerrilla force during a rotation at the National Training Center.

During a training exercise in May 2014, the 35th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) deployed into a notional foreign country to support the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division (2–25 SBCT), which was already on the ground. The brigade’s mission was to defend a small host country against its aggressive neighbor to the north.

While the 2–25 SBCT focused on fighting a conventional army on the northern border, the 35th CSSB faced an enemy guerrilla force. This guerrilla force was adaptive, intelligent, well-trained, and well-armed. The 35th CSSB conducted its assigned mission, protected its assets, and learned many wartime lessons.

The unit suffered more than 60 casualties while transporting supplies to the northern front. Thankfully, all of the casualties were notional. The deployment and combat operations had all taken place within the confines of the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California. The enemy guerrillas were 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment Soldiers who were trained in current enemy tactics and equipment.

Planning Sustainment

The 35th CSSB “Samurais” received notification that they would be deploying to the NTC exactly 94 days prior to their first contact with the “enemy” guerrillas. It was during those three months prior to the deployment that the unit needed to prepare itself for the test to come.

At the NTC, visiting units train in austere conditions that force them to survive on their own. This training is part of the center’s evaluation model that tests the unit’s mission command in a staged, realistic deployment without infrastructure.

Before deploying, all leaders of the 35th CSSB and the 2–25 SBCT attended a leaders’ training program conference. During the conference, the CSSB created its logistics plan and met subordinate and supporting units. These units would attach to the

35th CSSB for support during the upcoming deployment to the NTC.

Upon arrival, the 35th CSSB commander led a small contingent of his staff in the initial planning analysis. The CSSB staff was responsible for creating the logistics plan and executing mission command over subordinate units. The commander focused his staff on creating a supply plan for bulk water, bulk fuel, and ammunition. The staff estimated supply requirements for each Soldier and vehicle in the units that they would have to support.

Request for Forces

The 35th CSSB, unlike other CSSBs, has no organic transportation or supply companies and is primarily a forward supply headquarters. It can conduct mission command over sustainment operations at its home station in Japan and throughout deployed areas of operation.

In a standard combat theater deployment, the 35th CSSB would take operational control of two medium truck companies, a quartermaster company, a maintenance platoon, a signal platoon, and a medical section to conduct its mission.

In late February 2014, the unit sent up requests for forces and resources to fill the CSSB’s requirements through the Forces Command (FORSCOM). As the leader’s conference commenced, the CSSB had no clear confirmation of who would augment or support its operations. FORSCOM had tasked U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) to fill the requirement. However, USARPAC did not have the requested forces mobilized because it struggled to create a nonstandard and nondoctrinal mix of forces to fill requirements.

USARPAC eventually resourced the 35th CSSB with a distribution company (A Company, 325th Brigade Support Battalion [BSB]) and the 21st Inland Cargo Transfer Company (ICTC).

The 35th CSSB and its newly identified subordinate companies left the

conference with a plan on how they would conduct their upcoming deployment. The transportation and supply tasks were divided between the A Company and the 21st ICTC. These two companies were responsible for convoy security and hauling water, fuel, and trash. The primary mover for hauling water, fuel, and trash would be the M1088 tractor-trailer, so A Company trained 25 crews on the equipment.

The 21st ICTC focused on hauling ammunition and all other palletized loads. These palletized loads consisted of repair parts and meals ready-to-eat. The company noted that it needed to train 12 palletized load system crews and seven load handling system crews.

The CSSB later received more than 40 personnel from the Army National Guard. These personnel came to support the CSSB's maintenance operations. Because of rapid mobilization, the Guardsmen's orders came within weeks of their departure date. This time constraint severely affected their ability to prepare and plan for the deployment.

Training and Equipping

When the A Company and 21st ICTC commanders returned to their home stations, they each had six weeks to prepare their companies for the upcoming deployment. Neither of the companies had ever worked with a CSSB before this deployment. The companies conducted crew training for their specific vehicles and conducted training on individual Soldier tasks, such as weapons qualification and first aid.

The company's senior trainer, the truck master, led the crew training. This training began once the company's truck master acquired the equipment that the Soldiers needed to be licensed on, be it an M1088 tractor truck with trailer or palletized load system and load handling system.

Once the equipment was on hand, the truck master conducted in-depth classes with all potential crews. These crews showed proficiency in all tasks

required in the truck master's curriculum, which included driving with night-vision goggles, loading and unloading cargo, and handling and maintaining equipment.

The A Company had the added requirement of training three gun truck platoons for the deployment. These gun trucks provided the only security for the supply convoys traveling through enemy territory.

The A Company trained the gun truck platoons to be competent in

convoys would lose FM communications with their elements within the first few kilometers of departing the logistics support area (LSA).

During the initial mission planning conducted at its home station in Japan, the 35th CSSB identified the lack of advanced communications equipment as an issue and prepared a backup communication plan. The backup plan called for the use of the Movement Tracking System (MTS) in CSSB convoys.

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their weapon, maneuver, and cross communication skills. The Soldiers qualified on their individual and crew-served weapons. Afterward, the crews had virtual convoy training and conducted convoy live-fire exercises.

During the convoy live-fire exercises, the gun truck platoons practiced engaging targets while stationary. They also practiced and perfected engaging targets while on the move. Overall, the crews practiced extensively as a team in maneuvering and maintaining convoy security.

Equipment Problems

The CSSB's first missions were to establish ammunition caches for the brigade in forward logistics elements. During armed conflicts, communication can be difficult on the battlefield. At the NTC, the terrain is vast and hilly. The topography limits land-based communications systems and their operational usage. Satellite-based communications systems would have been ideal.

Unfortunately, advanced communications assets were not available for the 35th CSSB, so the convoys had to communicate using FM radios. Because of the terrain, the

However, the NTC had a very limited number of vehicles equipped with MTS. In fact, many NTC vehicles did not even have FM radio mounts. This placed a serious constraint on each convoy's ability to communicate within the convoy and with the higher headquarters.

Setting Up

After establishing the forward logistics elements and ensuring the brigade's immediate supply requirements could be met, the CSSB deployed into the training area. The transition took two days and required a quartering party to declare the new LSA site safe before personnel and equipment could occupy it.

The battalion's headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) led the quartering party and was responsible for checking the new LSA site for chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear contamination and enemy booby traps. Once the site was cleared and deemed safe, the 35th CSSB moved to it and established LSA Santa Fe as the battalion headquarters.

The battalion tactical operations center (TOC) was established in

a large deployable rapid assembly shelter and acted as the command and control node for all battalion operations during the deployment.

The companies established their TOCs in smaller general purpose medium tents next to the battalion TOC. This arrangement was done out of necessity, despite the tactical risk, because of the lack of communications systems.

The TOCs needed to maintain close proximity to the communications centers. The battalion TOC organized itself into two different sections: operations and administration. This arrangement made cross communication immediate, improved situational awareness between sections, and reduced planning time for missions.

Defensive Operations

After the battalion and company TOCs were established, the focus switched to establishing the LSA's defenses. At this point, convoy operations were ongoing, but it was essential to respond immediately to enemy forces advancing on the perimeter. This essential defensive countermeasure became the responsibility of the CSSB HHC.

Enemy operations began within the first 24 hours of occupying the LSA. The enemy divided its attacks between the LSA and convoys. When attacking the LSA, the enemy took a traditional approach of conducting a series of surveillance and harassment operations before launching a large-scale assault.

The assault included 33 enemy personnel, rocket-propelled grenades, light machine guns, and several vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The LSA's defense was an entry control point guarded by gun trucks and Soldiers.

A quick reaction force (QRF) of Soldiers also responded to threats. As the attacks on the LSA intensified, the HHC found that the defenses at the entry control point and the QRF were not enough to defend the LSA.

The HHC understood that it was dealing with an experienced enemy and had to improve the defense of the LSA. It came up with a defense plan that called for dividing the LSA into sectors and assigning companies to secure them. If an attack occurred, a company moved to guard its assigned sector, clear it of enemy personnel, and transport any friendly casualties to the aid station.

Convoy Operations

With base defenses emplaced, the 35th CSSB focused on the primary mission of supplying the deployed SBCT. The requirements for the SBCT were enormous; fuel consumption alone outpaced the transportation capability for each day.

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In order to forecast supply requirements, the 35th CSSB's support operations officer (SPO) worked with the BSB SPO. The brigade's SPO had trouble providing a realistic forecast of the supply requirements because of a lack of communication with the supply officers. Because of this, the CSSB had to react to the brigade's needs at a moment's notice.

A CSSB convoy works from a supply request derived from the BCT's operating tempo. This request, or transportation movement release (TMR), is the guiding requirement logisticians use to build logistics convoy packages. The TMR lists the requirements for fuel and water or for any of the classes of supply.

TMRs from the brigade were to be submitted 48 hours prior to the convoy's initial movement. However, because of the lack of forecasting from the brigade, the CSSB organized the convoys 12 hours before movement on average. This hindered the CSSB's ability to plan or con-

solidate convoys for movement and also degraded the companies' ability to plan work and rest cycles.

To complicate matters further, because of the nature of the fast-paced battle rhythm, the brigade often changed its TMR within hours of a convoy's departure. This made creating the correct convoy package chaotic and problematic in dangerous environments.

To limit the chaos, the CSSB instituted several standard operating procedures that helped bring structure to the convoys in the rush of assembling. These procedures also helped the convoy commander maintain accountability and safety. The battalion referred to these standard procedures as a convoy packet.

Each packet included a risk management assessment, which was a manifest of sensitive items and personnel. The packet also included the latest intelligence about the route the convoy would take and the signal operating instructions.

As soon as the packet reached the convoy commander for approval, a mission rehearsal was conducted. Members of the SPO and S-2 would provide updates from their sections to all the crewmembers going out on the mission.

After the briefing concluded, the convoy commander and the assistant convoy commander performed precombat checks and inspections to verify the information with convoy members. With all checks completed, the convoy requested permission from the battalion TOC to depart, and the mission would begin.

The Convoy Through Nabran

A convoy operation is generally a laborious undertaking. Convoys move at slow speeds, and the NTC has the added threat of extreme heat and dust, which can reduce visibility to within 10 meters. It was under these conditions that the 35th CSSB conducted its missions and fought for survival against enemy forces.

On May 29, 2014, when the sun was just beginning to rise, CSSB

Soldiers prepared their vehicles for their upcoming mission. The convoy commander received the mission order the night before from his company commander. The convoy commander conducted his rehearsal and precombat checks and briefed the mission, which was to bring food and water to the brigade support area (BSA). The Soldiers were ready.

On the other side of the battlefield, the enemy was having a similar briefing. An enemy guerrilla leader, code named "Road Runner," was standing outside of the small town of Nabran. Nabran was tactically important because it sat directly on the main road running through the area.

Road Runner briefed his men on how to ambush a U.S. supply convoy. His experience made him a meticulous planner. He knew everything from IED placement to support by fire positions.

As midday approached, a last-minute request for fuel came from the brigade. It took an extra two hours to assemble and check the added crews and vehicles, but by 1300 hours, the convoy and security vehicles were assembled and ready to receive the convoy briefing.

The convoy leaders were eager to receive the latest intelligence on enemy operations along their route. They also requested reconnaissance assets to support their movement eastward. Intelligence reported that the only suitable route would be through the town of Nabran, but enemy contact was expected in the areas surrounding the town. Approximately 20 enemy fighters reinforced Nabran, and the town acted as an enemy base of operations.

An alternate route to the north, avoiding Nabran, had been closed because of enemy artillery observers; this forced the convoy to drive past the town. Brigade reconnaissance assets were all dedicated to the ongoing battle in the north and could not support the 35th CSSB that day.

When the intelligence briefing

concluded, the convoy commander conducted his safety brief and requested permission from the battalion to depart. At 1400 hours, the convoy departed on its mission, which would require driving more than 100 kilometers through the heart of enemy guerrilla operations.

The Battle

In the late afternoon, the convoy entered Road Runner's ambush. Road Runner had placed an observer on a nearby hill, which gave him and his guerrillas advanced warning of the convoy's presence. Road Runner had worked very hard to conceal his ambush, which included a set of daisy-chained IEDs.

At 1610 hours, three IEDs exploded in quick succession, destroying the first two vehicles in the convoy, including one gun truck. The instant the smoke cleared, Road Runner and his guerrillas went into action, assaulting the convoy from both sides.

Rocket-propelled grenades, and light machine-gun fire provided cover fire as the guerrillas assaulted. Their goal was to destroy the three remaining gun trucks and then finish off the rest of the convoy, one vehicle at a time.

Once the IEDs detonated, the convoy commander used his FM radio to direct the assistant convoy commander to send a situation report to the battalion TOC and began directing a counterattack with his three remaining gun trucks.

The ambush location was exceptionally well-placed. It was less than 500 meters from the town of Nabran and in a natural defile. The maneuver room was limited, and the remaining gun trucks had difficulty maneuvering but managed to squeeze between the vehicles and the attacking guerrillas. In the ensuing gunfight, Road Runner was forced to retreat after losing 10 guerrilla fighters.

Both sides had taken heavy casualties. After the retreat, the convoy commander requested medical evacuation support for 17 casualties

and directed recovery operations for six disabled vehicles. With medical evacuation and recovery efforts complete, the convoy moved on to the BSA. The convoy made it to the BSA by nightfall and returned to the LSA the next day.

Lessons Learned

The convoy operation was an example of all the challenges the 35th CSSB faced during the deployment to the NTC. It was an exceptionally tough training event, but the lessons learned by the 35th CSSB were invaluable. The 35th CSSB will take these lessons learned with them wherever they go in the future:

- Rehearse tasks with your subordinate units before you deploy because creating a team once deployed is like building an airplane while in flight.
- Plan and rehearse communication, especially your satellite-based communications architecture. Communicating is the hardest thing to do on the battlefield.
- Plan intricately. Leaders are required to fill gaps and focus the officers and Soldiers on what is most important.
- Use liaison officers to help fill communications gaps and coordinate logistics operations when in the BSA.

The experiences taken from this training event are valuable for veteran and junior Soldiers alike. The CSSB increased its combat effectiveness, and it stands ready to deploy when called upon.

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