Is the Army Ready for Expeditionary Operations?

Retired Maj. Gen. Charles W. Fletcher Jr., who took part in one of the Army's last major expeditionary efforts, provides insight into the Army's preparedness for expeditionary operations.

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Taiwo Akiwowo

Soldiers from the 143rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) defend an entry control point during Combat Support Training Exercise 78-16-01 at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, on March 12, 2016. The Army Reserve exercise is designed to challenge Soldiers to improve and sustain skills necessary during a deployment. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Dalton Smith)

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During his 37 years of service, retired Maj. Gen. Charles W. Fletcher Jr. led numerous mobility and logistics commands. The Transportation Corps officer was the commanding general of the 3rd Corps Support Command during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was the commanding general of the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command and eventually retired from the military while serving as the director of operations and plans for the Transportation Command.

Fletcher was also involved in the logistics planning and execution for one of the Army's last major expeditionary efforts, Operation Iraqi Freedom 1. In this interview, we sat down with him to get his thoughts on the Army's efforts to improve force projection for expeditionary operations and the challenges it faces in this arena.

What is the biggest challenge facing the expeditionary deployment process?

I think there is a lack of recent experience in expeditionary deployment. We certainly have 15 years of deployment experience, but that involved long lead times, established transportation capabilities, and mature theater distribution networks.

The last major expeditionary deployment was in late 2002 and early 2003 for Operation Iraqi Freedom. We [the Army] had a year to determine the forces that were going in, and we had eight different plans. We got better at the planning process over that year, but there were major staging issues.

When we finally deployed into Iraq, all of the Soldiers carried five days of food and water with them because we weren't able to resupply them for the first five days. They went 30 to 60 days without repair parts and 60 to 90 days without hot meals and showers—this is much different from deployments after 2003.

Today's biggest challenge is lack of training with the processes, the communications, the authorities, and the

Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Charles W. Fletcher Jr.

adjustments that you have to make in expeditionary deployments.

What does the Army need to do to recapture its ability to deploy rapidly with no notice?

It's important to know the process, execute it with discipline, give commanders their required resources, and then hold commanders responsible. Put simply, plan your load and load your plan.

What recommendations do you have for how Army units can conduct deployment operations training?

Getting back to basics in deployment operations really starts with a strategic assessment of the Army deployment processes. The first question is, "What is the level of proficiency the Army must achieve in order to be expeditionary?" The next question is, "What are the roles of the key commands and staff?"

The operational environment has changed in the last 10 to 15 years. You have to know what the responsibilities of deploying units, supporting units and organizations, and contractors are and what individual and collective training is needed to validate units for deployment.

If you review Army actions taken

in the late '80s after the Mobility Requirements Study Bottom Up Review Update, you will find a primer on how the Army transitioned from a forward deployed force to an expeditionary force. I was fortunate to be part of that process.

It started with a doctrine review. Once we wrote the required doctrine, we held Armywide rehearsal of concept drills to educate leaders. We did this for over a hundred general officers and thousands of Soldiers. There was associated collective training. There were new advanced individual training courses developed. Deployment training was also put into existing leader development coursework. In addition, we invested in information technologies and infrastructure.

So we don't have to start from zero in recapturing expeditionary capability. I think there is a good blueprint in that update, and it's probably a good way to analyze today's challenges.

You have now been with private industry eight years. What capabilities do you think the Army should retain, and where should industry be leveraged?

The Army has to decide if deployment is a core capability that every unit should perform. Is it a core capability only for those designated as early deploying units? Or should it be a commercially available capability that we provide to units?

My previous experience has taught me that commercial capability is attainable, but it is probably unaffordable and too risky as a solution for early deploying units. On the other hand, requiring every unit to be rapidly deployable is probably too resource-intensive. So a hybrid solution may be best.

It may be viewed as tiered readiness to say we should fully invest and train only expeditionary deployment capabilities for first deployers, but realistically, I think this is the most achievable solution. Units deploying later in a deployment plan have additional time to leverage external capabilities, both military and commercial, that are not available to early deployers.

What commercial practices should the Army look into to improve the deployment process?

There are three. First, commercial loading of unit equipment. We ran an exercise on this in the late '90s at Fort Hood, Texas, for a signal company. We had a contractor come to the unit motor pool and load all the major equipment for that signal company. The unit rejoined its equipment in Kuwait. The process worked relatively well.

Commercial support teams are the second option. They are analogous to the FORSCOM [Forces Command] deployment support teams that come in to help a unit deploy.

The third is commercial management of the end-to-end deployment process. This is a variation on what we did in Pakistan. No Soldiers could be in Pakistan, so we contracted the delivery of equipment to the port. We had another contractor that picked it up and moved it through the Pakistan ground lines of communication. We had a third contractor who watched the activities of the other two. I am not saying that all of these should be used, but they are available options to consider.

What technologies are available to improve the deployment process?

Cloud computing is the first one that comes to mind. It is the most secure, the most available, and the most conducive to the information sharing that the Army is going to need. Another is automated sizing, weighing, and tagging technologies at the unit and installation levels. They are available and relatively inexpensive.

How has the Logistics Branch affected expeditionary readiness, and what are your thoughts on the future of the Logistics Officer Corps?

In 2008, when the branch was established, it was said that it would make "pentathletes" of the current logistics "athletes." Pentathletes perform multiple tasks well but don't necessarily excel in every sport.

I was a triathlete in college. I was a very average swimmer, but I masked that weakness by being able to excel in the other two events. I think we need to relook at the logistics tasks of our future force and ensure that if we need a logistics expert with a particular functional skill that we are able to provide it.

This was the original intent of the Logistics Branch. While it created a capability to designate and train officers as multifunctional logisticians earlier in their careers, it also continued existing capabilities to encourage and retain functional expertise. We did not give up functional; we added multifunctional.

The problem appears to be that the policies and procedures to encourage multifunctionality were done, at least in part, by discouraging functional expertise. The result is an erosion of functional expertise and the loss of balance between the two. As a result, overall readiness has gradually degraded.

Demonstrated functional capability in several key logistics functional areas, to include expeditionary operations, was no longer tracked, developed, or encouraged. The goals of the Logistics Officer Corps remain sound, but I believe it needs to be reexamined to restore an appropriate balance between multifunctional and functional.

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