



Today's enterprise resource planning systems such as the Logistics Modernization Program and the Global Combat Support System–Army are replacing legacy systems with a single, fully integrated enterprise solution to give commanders more timely and accurate information.

Managing Readiness Is All About Managing Information:

*An Interview With Retired
Lt. Gen. Mitchell H. Stevenson*

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Taiwo Akiworo



FEATURES

A former Army G-4 discusses the importance of developing and integrating enterprise resource planning systems to provide commanders with more timely and accurate information.

A 37-year Army veteran, retired Lt. Gen. Mitchell H. Stevenson rose through the ranks to become the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, G-4. In that position, Stevenson developed the policies that led to the successful retrograde of 2.3 million pieces of equipment and the closure of more than 400 bases in Iraq at the end of Operations Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn. In his position as the Army G-4, Stevenson also orchestrated the deployment of 30,000 troops and their equipment to support the surge in Afghanistan.

Stevenson established the Army's transformation to the two-level maintenance system, and he initiated many programs aimed at repairing and returning battle-damaged equipment to combat. Always a champion of information technologies, Stevenson discusses how enterprise solutions have an impact on readiness.

What was the impetus that drove the Army to move from legacy logistics information systems? Can you review the history?

I can probably give you the entire history. In short, I was working in the Pentagon in 1997 when GCSS-Army [Global Combat Support System-Army] and the LMP [Logistics Modernization Program] were born. At the time, our logistics systems were not very integrated, even though they were all managed by the same program manager. We knew we needed to do better.

For GCSS-Army, we started out by pursuing custom-built software. Then, in about 2003, the Army made a significant decision to abandon that approach and move toward a commercial enterprise resource planning system. The Army went with a [Systems, Applications, and Products in Data Processing] SAP-based solution, the same as the Army Materiel Command did in the late '90s with the LMP.

It's taken a lot longer than any of us wanted it to, from the birth of the idea in 1997 to fully fielding GCSS-Army by the end of 2017. That's 20 years.

One of the reasons is that we wanted to ensure the system would work in combat. This is not just about developing a peacetime system. Anybody can set up a system to work in a building with nice fat pipes that bring in and send out data. But to do it in an expeditionary environment through satellites—that is much harder.

Will information technology be a big factor in helping logisticians build readiness?

Yes, absolutely. Managing readiness is all about information. The more accurate and the more timely that information can be provided to decision-makers, the better the Army is going to be at managing readiness.

One of the things that Soldiers who have fielded GCSS-Army remark about is the ability to see what's going on elsewhere in the enterprise. Say the part I'm looking for in a repair action is not available locally. Where is it available? In a pre-GCSS-Army environment, we had to go to more than one system to get visibility. Today in GCSS-Army, it's right there in front of you. You can see it immediately; you know how far away it is and what it's going to take to get it there. So you have an instant effect on readiness. And, just multiply that a thousand fold and you can see how important just this one aspect is. There are many others.

What other changes will the enterprise solution yield?

The biggest advantage that we will realize eventually—it's not there yet—is the ability to eliminate reconciliation between disparate systems.

Before GCSS-Army, the systems we were using were stovepipes that did not use a common source of data. So you were constantly having to reconcile [data]. Is all of the property in the property book registered in the motor pool? Or, conversely, is everything in the equipment master file in SAMS [the Standard Army Maintenance System], or do I have something I'm maintaining that's not in the property



Retired Lt. Gen. Mitchell H. Stevenson discusses managing information within Army sustainment formations. (Photo by Samuel Curtis)

book? You literally had to print the two, set them side-by-side, and check them off. And this was happening regularly in every company, battery, troop, and detachment throughout the Army. It took enormous amounts of manpower. We don't have to do that anymore.

Now, ratchet that up. Between GCSS-Army and the Army LMP, we will work in a single Army enterprise where we use common master files between the two systems. So now a piece of equipment that is being issued out of a depot, for example, will come to a unit that is going to use it, and with it comes all of its historical information because it's part of the enterprise.

It gets used in the unit for years, and at some point it's going to go back to the depot to be repaired. And all of that user-level information—services performed, the maintenance actions that have taken place over its lifetime, all of that history—will go back with it to the depot. Imagine how valuable having that history is.

It's like my medical file. Everything that's ever been done to me—the physical exams I've had, the medications I've had, everything throughout my life, immunizations I've had—is all in a file. Doctors find that very valuable because they can then determine whether or not something has cropped up over time that needs to be addressed and so forth. I would submit to you that logisticians need that same kind

of historical information to make good decisions.

What was the biggest game-changing technology for you?

VSAT—the very small aperture terminal. It is a small, commercial satellite dish that you can set on this desk. It's not very big, and it's portable. It gives us the ability to stay connected to the World Wide Web wherever we go in the world.

Back in 2003, when we went into Iraq, there were times that we had no communications, no network, because the network was actually moving. We didn't know who was where, we didn't know what the readiness was, and we didn't know who needed what. Transactions were not moving, and requisitions that were coming out of the theater were not being passed to the sources of supply. We were reordering things that didn't need to be reordered. All because we couldn't communicate. The VSAT has solved that.

Go to a readiness meeting today and the level of information that the captain, the major, and the sergeant first class have at their fingertips will astound you. Not only do they know what is needed and when it's going to be there, but they can tell you where it is at that moment—all because of an interconnected network. That's the world in which we live, and we should

expect no less than that for a modern Army such as ours.

What else do you think the Army can do to facilitate the enterprise?

People have heard me say this before, so this will sound to some like a broken record, but we have got to enable smartphones.

We used to agonize over how many bar code readers we should authorize in a typical company so that they can do property accountability. And my question is, why authorize any at all? No self-respecting 18-year-old Soldier today isn't carrying a smartphone. So why are we buying barcode readers? They've got one. It's their smartphone. We've just got to enable it onto the network. Then, imagine how quickly you can do an inventory, for example.

You had a reputation of being an early adopter of email use. Can you talk about how technology helped you manage?

People say that I have a good memory, but it is actually computers that are really good at remembering things. Microsoft Outlook has a really nice feature to it that has gotten better over the years. It allows you to search through .pst files to find things, and so all you have to do is be smart enough to do searches.

It has come in very handy over the years. I just use the product and its capabilities to help me do my job. That's really what technology is all about.

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