Enterprise Resource Planning Systems: New Weapons for Building Readiness

■ By Lt. Gen. Gustave "Gus" Perna

"What am I doing that I should not be doing, and what am I not doing that I should be doing?" When I face new challenges, these are the questions I often ask myself. I learned this from the legendary retired Lt. Gen. Harold Moore, who as a battalion commander in Vietnam led his troops in the war's first major battle in the Ia Drang Valley.

Moore explains that over the course of two nights and three days he would regularly take a few seconds to detach himself mentally from the chaos and the intensity of it all to ask himself what he could do next to influence things in his favor. In my opinion, he was looking for greater visibility.

I use this analogy because, thanks to the introduction of our logistics enterprise resource planning systems, today's sustainers and warfighters have more visibility than they have had at any time in history. And we are just getting started.

The Global Combat Support System–Army (GCSS–Army) now has 40,000 users, and by December 2017, when the Increment 1 fielding (Waves 1 and 2) is complete, it will have 140,000 users. The whole Army, not just sustainers, will feel its positive impact as more functions go online.

I am not concerned about our young Soldiers learning our new information systems; they know how to learn systems like they learn to use the mobile phones in their pockets. The more buttons they push, the more they get from the user experience.

My focus is on commanders. Will they push all the buttons to take full advantage of the systems' new capabilities? Will they take sustainment estimates and other new data that these systems produce and then utilize, synchronize, and integrate them into operations to improve echeloning of commodities and materiel in support of the maneuver commanders?

Here are some issues we all should be thinking about as we make enterprise resource planning systems our new weapon for building readiness.

Leaders Need to Be Engaged

As a commander, if you want to demonstrate to all your Soldiers that something is important, you need to own it and not delegate it. Soldiers do what the commander monitors, right?

The key for the Army to successfully finish fielding GCSS–Army to 100,000 more users is for all leaders to demonstrate that GCSS–Army is important. It should be at the top of your list. You will not be expected to be the technical expert, but you need to clearly understand how it works and what information it provides. I know it will be an uphill climb to learn to use the information for the benefit of your unit, but until you do, the Army will not get the most out of the systems.

Start by setting standards, and keep questioning how the information will affect your readiness. You will get many reports from the information systems, but if you wait for the reports you will be too late. Waiting means that you are being reactive, not proactive. You need to get ahead of the data. So set your standards and use the information as validation that your standards are right and that your training is getting your unit ready for expeditionary operations.

Remember, we cannot slack off on improving our craft, doctrine, capabilities, and requirements. Without the fundamentals, the reports will not help you. And do not get overwhelmed by the information.

Employ GCSS–Army Tactically

Being able to operate GCSS–Army plugged into the wall at your desk is a good first step, but that does not make you ready to log in on a battlefield. In theater, you will depend on one of the Army's 4,500 very small aperture terminals (VSATs), which are portable satellites, to get into the system. The VSATs performed well during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and gave us the ability to connect to our supply system through the internet. But they will be challenged by GCSS–Army since it consumes more bandwidth.

We have been running tests to prove that VSATs will work, and the results are positive. But if the VSATs are not updated with the latest software, or if not all of the certificates are in order, the system will not perform responsively. You cannot take these things lightly; this is the standard, and you need the discipline to enforce it.

Experts tell me that right now

many of the Army's VSATs are not actively being used, and that tells me we are not doing enough training with GCSS–Army in the field. Take GCSS–Army with you every time you train in a tactical environment, or just set it up in the motor pool.

This issue's hip-pocket guide outlines the best practices for operating GCSS–Army and keeping your VSATs and Combat Service Support Automated Information System Interface updated. I encourage you to read it, share it, and keep it handy.

Ask How They Improve Readiness

Keep asking yourself this question: How do the new information management systems improve my unit's readiness? The advanced capabilities in GCSS–Army provide us with decisive advantages in our logistics management process and supply chain management. You will be able to see your unit's readiness in real time. You will know what parts are available in the supply chain right now and whether vehicles are operationally ready at any given time.

Now every vehicle will have a record that shows its entire history—whether or not it is still under warranty, how many times it has leaked or experienced component failures, and if and when it has been damaged and repaired. That is incredibly valuable information, whether you are a maintainer at a depot or a property book officer laterally transferring a vehicle to your unit.

The possibilities of what we can do with these systems are just starting to emerge. New capabilities will dramatically improve sustainment management. For example, if you are a planner preparing your command to go on the offense, you can better see what commodities and materiel you have. You can estimate what you need based on visibility and usage trends. If you can query the system and find out your vehicle fleet goes through a starter every six days, you will know whether or not you are ordering and stocking enough.

This is enterprise visibility that the Army has never had before. We need to work on our ability to convert all of this new data into a comprehensive, analytically complete picture that drives sustainment decision-making through such integrating systems as the Materiel Common Operating Picture (the interim enterprise Business Information Warehouse functionality).

All of our enterprise resource planning systems will allow users to manage their specific areas of sustainment better than before, as long as leaders have the foresight and sound decision-making to hold people to a high standard. On the pages that follow, you will see many examples of this already happening.

Retired Lt. Gen. Mitchell H. Stevenson, one of the champions of the system, summed it up best in his interview with *Army Sustainment*. "Managing readiness is all about information," he said. "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."

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WAVE 1
100%
FIELDED

GCSS-ARMY
~155,000 USERS
BY DECEMBER 2017

WAVE 2
~50%
FIELDED BY
NOV 2016

GCSS-Army
GLOBAL COMBAT SUPPORT SYSTEM - ARMY