

The Art and Science of Setting a Theater:

*An Interview With Retired
Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason*

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard



Lt. Col. Michelle Letcher, commander of the 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, discusses disposition of materiel with Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason, the Army G-4, at the Bagram Airfield retro-sort yard on Nov. 16, 2012. (Photo by 1st Lt. Henry Chan)

When it comes to setting a theater, this retired sustainer with 35 years of experience suggests, “Do not reinvent the wheel.”

As a former Army G-4 and a commander in both the Pacific and Central Commands, retired Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason led Soldiers during peace and war. Today, he is pursuing a passion, leading the Army Emergency Relief team that provides financial assistance to active and retired Soldiers and their families. It’s a job that caps a 35-year career of taking care of Soldiers. In this interview, he shares his experiences and best practices for setting a theater.

There are many considerations for setting a theater. Can you walk us through some of the most important concerns?

First, you have to execute a detailed military decisionmaking process and figure out the scope of the mission and what it will require to accomplish it. Some basic questions to ask upfront are, “Is this going to be long term? Is it a full-up combat operation or is it train and assist? Is it a contingency operation? What are the time horizons for planning and execution? Who’s in charge of the mission and what authorities do they have from the combatant commander? What is the operational commander’s intent for the level of quality of life?”

You also have to think about a battle rhythm and processes you will need to track and monitor progress, with clearly defined metrics. There are lots of Army organizations that have done the theater setting mission already, so do not reinvent the wheel. Go out and look at how the U.S. Central Command did it, or how the U.S. Pacific Command is doing it, and take the best of breed.

The other thing you have to do is fully leverage the national providers, specifically the Defense Logistics Agency and the U.S. Transportation Command. Put it all on the table. Don’t leave anything out. Make sure you’re tapping all available capabilities. It’s often said, but so true in this case, “You don’t have to own the asset to leverage it.”

You then have some operational-level questions to address: Are units going to bring their own equipment, or are they going to draw from an equipment set already in the theater? Where and how would you establish that theater set of equipment? The answers to these questions will drive a lot of your requirements and resources for transportation, property accountability, and maintenance.

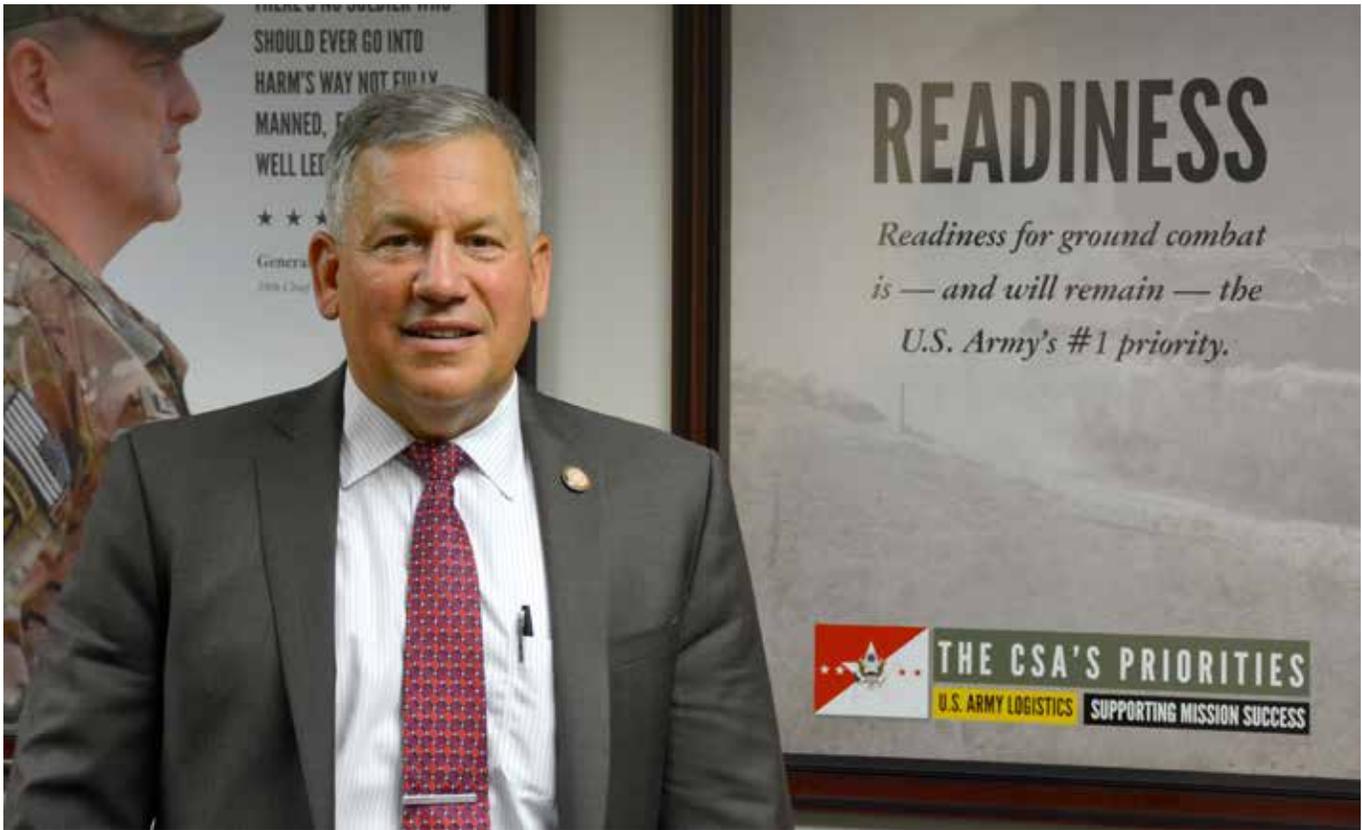
Most importantly, you have to build flexibility into your plan. Many times these operations begin as a contingency missions, but end up becoming longer-term operations. You need to have enough branches and sequels in your plan to deal with the unexpected.

How has force reception and onward movement changed over time, and how do they need to evolve to meet future challenges?

Leaders of my generation can relate to the REFORGER [Return of Forces to Germany] exercise we did every year. It was very deliberate with the goal of deploying 10 divisions in 10 days to Western Europe. The U.S. European Command and U.S. Army Europe had this down to a science; it is a totally repeatable process with all the transportation, pre-positioned sets, and support units in place and fully ready to execute the [European] General Defense Plan.

Obviously the world has changed drastically since then. Think about operations during the past 16 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa. They were contingency operations early on; then they became permanent rotational missions. There was really no rear area or communication zone, in the way that we used to think of them during the Cold War. Those conditions drove a different solution set.

Additionally, the battlespace has become continuous, 360 degrees; we must have force protection throughout the battlespace. The Army also went through the modular redesign in the early 2000s, so some theater-level logistics units were deactivated,



Retired Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason (Photo by Matthew Howard)

while others were stood-up. So we had to rethink who was going to execute what.

Today, we have the very capable theater sustainment commands (TSCs), which I think are key to setting the theater and to overall strategic sustainment support. Expeditionary sustainment commands (ESCs) are central for the operational to tactical logistics missions. My philosophy is that the TSC is there to unweight the ESC, so the ESC can focus down to and into the battlespace while the TSC handles the theater logistics mission, specifically the interface with the national providers and other capabilities such as joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (JRSOI), pre-positioned stocks, the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program, and contingency contracting.

Planning contracted support up front is key to managing the literally hundreds of contracts and tens of thousands of contractors that are

required for a theater-level mission. You've got to have a specific plan for the requirements that you develop, you must write very detailed and measurable statements of work, and you must have really good contracting officers and contracting officer representatives.

In my opinion, we have not focused on picking the very best people to be contracting officer representatives, and in the past, we did not train them well. This has to change.

Also, in terms of requirements, a best practice of establishing a general officer-level contract requirements determination board was put in place in the later years of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom and paid huge dividends in terms of effectiveness and efficiency.

Additionally, in Iraq and Afghanistan there was constantly new equipment being fielded. We always tried to stay a step ahead of the enemy with new capabilities that our magnificent industrial base was able to produce. The

influx of new equipment, particularly in wartime, has always existed, but managing this fielding piece has reached a highly complex level. It is paramount to have folks that understand and manage this process to reduce the burden on the operational units while getting them the latest equipment.

What were your biggest concerns in setting the theater during your service in the Pacific?

I commanded the 19th ESC in Korea and then moved to the 8th TSC in Hawaii. One of the biggest challenges in the Pacific theater is the tyranny of distance. You're dealing with thousands of miles and multiple time zones. Backward planning and thinking through how time and distance affect your battlespace and mission are key.

The other big challenge is dealing with multiple headquarters and Army, joint, and coalition commands. In my experience the best

way to organize for that situation is a fairly simplistic approach, but it is very powerful; it's called "support to supporting relationships."

Gen. B.B. Bell, who was the [United Nations Command] Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea commander when I served in Korea, perfected this relationship. He understood that as the war plan progressed, priorities constantly changed. He would designate a supported commander for a particular phase, and all other commanders were in supporting roles. He did not worry about lines on a chart and command bureaucracy. This concept did not solve all challenges, but it was very effective for aligning priorities and focusing resources in the Pacific theater.

The concept of "you don't have to own it to leverage it" is very powerful. Take a unit that is not assigned to you but has a capability that you need. Through committed partnership development and the power of personality, a leader can establish a working relationship with that unit, and the two units can share capabilities. This truly achieves a combat multiplier effect.

A major challenge in the Pacific theater right now is that there are only two sustainment brigades in zone. Day-to-day, you don't have the logistics force structure to train and execute missions. The unit rotational program [regionally aligned forces] in Korea and throughout U.S. Pacific Command is critical to setting the theater. It allows you to bring units in to train, which simulates what would be needed for JRSOI and sustainment in any kind of operation or contingency.

The other piece that is unique in Korea is the noncombatant evacuation mission. Not only must Eighth Army rehearse moving units and forces into Korea, they must also simultaneously train to move hundreds of thousands of U.S. and allied civilians out of the theater.

You've got people and equipment moving in both directions, and the logistics community is usually tasked with synchronizing and executing

these missions. In my opinion, few missions are more challenging than the simultaneous noncombatant evacuation operation and JRSOI mission in Korea; that's why we must train on them all the time. Every preparatory action that can be taken during phase 0 of setting the theater will be invaluable.

How important is the Army's role in supporting other services when setting a theater?

The Army's support of other services is absolutely key to setting the theater. You have to plan up front to support the joint force and coalition partners. The Army is responsible for a multitude of joint sustainment needs that provide capabilities, services, and requirements to the other services. These includes ground transportation, ammunition, and fuel. We have to build these capabilities into the force structure or at a minimum, contract for them.

The Army's support of other services requirements must be recognized and accounted for as part of the Total Army Analysis. My concern is that the requirement for the Army's support of other services missions frequently gets assumed away, with some Army- and theater-level planners believing that the current logistics force structure can simply handle it in stride. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Is host-nation support critical?

Depending on where you are in the world, certainly in Korea, host-nation support (HNS) is a force multiplier. There are lots of capabilities HNS can and must provide, especially early on, because the Army cannot get there fast enough to meet the early-on requirements.

Having relationships with the local community and political and commercial leaders is paramount. You've got the science side of it, which is understanding the requirements for HNS. You can put contingency con-

tracts in place that you can use when needed. But there also is an art to HNS. It's the relationships that you develop. You want to be able to pick up the phone, call the local businessman, and say, "I need 300 buses right now at this location."

Based on how you nurtured the relationship during phase 0, he knows you, you know him, you have built trust over time, and he is there to support you.

You can put in place contingency contracts, relationships, and memorandums of agreement with the host nation, and then you must exercise it often. However, you have to be careful that HNS is not overly promised or relied upon. My experience is that in some planning documents there is an assumption that HNS will be there with a capability. However, either we did not develop sufficient relationships with the local military or commercial entities or we did not properly exercise the HNS agreement on an annual basis.

HNS agreements must be living documents that are tested and stressed often. I witnessed situations where the HNS agreement stated a local company would provide 500 buses at a given time. However, we would test it by using just five buses. That is not stressing the system. I fully recognize this is not a simple issue. I'm just of the opinion that we should not overly rely on HNS, especially in operation plan development.

With so many sustainment forces in the Army Reserve and National Guard, how can the total Army better train for setting the theater?

The active duty, reserve, and National Guard truly must be one seamless force. I think we achieved that in the past 16 years of combat. I know as many Army Reserve and National Guard logistics general officers as I know active duty general officers.

However, my concern is that as we deploy less, which is a good thing, opportunities to train together to keep the relationships going also lessen.

So we have to ask, “How do we keep those active-reserve touch points that we developed intact and thriving?”

If there is an active duty installation with reserve units located nearby, they should train together. When reservists do their weekend drills, maybe there is some training synergy there. We need to be innovative and exploit opportunities for training and relationships everywhere.

After Vietnam, the Department of Defense made some decisions about how much force structure would be put in the Army Reserve and the National Guard. The strategy was that if the decision is to go to war, you’re going to have to commit the Army Reserve and National Guard because a large percentage of capability is resident there, especially in the logistics area. By default, this commits every little town in the nation; therefore, the nation is committed. I think that’s the right approach. We should not go to war without the nation and our citizens buying in.

So the active and reserve component design generally makes sense; I’m pretty comfortable with the mix. I just think there are some particular capabilities that are out of balance where we have assumed too much risk. We’ve got to adjust a little, especially for those first 30, 60, and 90 days of combat while the mobilization process takes place.

I know the Army G-4, the Army Reserve, and the National Guard are working on this. We don’t need every reserve component unit to be fully ready on D-Day, but we need some specific capabilities ready very early, including fuel delivery, ammunition, long-haul transportation and theater logistics command and control.

What concepts can help set the theater in places where there are no staging bases or where we are denied access?

I can see many scenarios in the future where the Army will not have the luxury of a place like Kuwait to build up for six months before moving across the line of departure. Any po-

tential foe of the United States is going to do its best to deny us the ability to build up our forces in sanctuary.

So at the strategic departmental level, the Army needs to build force packages. If there is a particular kind of mission and you need a certain capability, then here is force package A. If you need another capability, then here is force package B. If you’re concerned about force structure size or force management levels or political implications, here’s force package C.

We must build multiple packages that are both efficient and effective; then when you need them, you have a menu to select from based on the mission.

Time-phased force deployment data, while still a good planning tool, is not how we are going to deploy in the 21st century. We must provide our political leaders with flexible, tailorable force options. I will offer a word of caution here. The other extreme to the time-phased force deployment data is the use of hundreds of requests for forces. That is micromanagement and cumbersome, in my opinion.

Another thing the Army needs to do is expand its partnership with the Navy for seabasing. During the Haiti mission, the 101st Airborne Division put its helicopters on an aircraft carrier. We did not need a lot of fighter jets in Haiti, but we needed a whole bunch of helicopters to deliver troops and supplies; that type of joint synergy must be expanded.

Here are a few other thoughts that can help us overcome the anti-access challenge and lower logistics demand. Increase investment in the sealift emergency deployment readiness exercise program. Expand investment in and use of Army watercraft. Build pre-configured combat resupply loads outside of the battlespace that are called forward as needed. Expand investment in airdrop and aerial delivery systems. Work with the U.S. Transportation Command to deploy forces in a ready-to-fight mode. Increase investment in operational energy technology. Develop a truly rapid, deployable tactical fuel delivery system, and expand the use of pre-positioned stocks.

What advice would you provide sustainment leaders and Soldiers to improve their readiness to support setting the theater?

In the Pentagon, leaders need to build resources into the budget that can assist with setting the theater. They need to justify and fight for the money. The challenge is that setting the theater does not usually have an immediate return on the investment, so it is difficult for that requirement to compete in the budget process.

At the operational and tactical levels, it starts with the basics: understanding your equipment and load plans, who is in charge at the unit level, and what information technology systems the movement officer needs to be able to use. Units must have a well thought out and tested deployment standard operating procedure. Tactical leaders must focus on their local deployment processes and train, train, train.

There’s no doubt in my mind that there is an art and science to properly setting a theater. We have a significant amount of successful experience with setting the theater. If we fully leverage that experience, and continue to build the requirements into planning, get those requirements funded and test them, we will be in good shape.

The past 16 years of combat have proven that U.S. military leaders can accomplish any mission anywhere. With the superb quality of our current generation of officers and non-commissioned officers, I have no doubt that legacy of excellence will continue into the future.

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