

Synchronizing the Seaport of Embarkation

■ By Maj. Joseph D. Komanetz

Deploying a unit overseas is a monumental task that requires a level of experience not typically resident in most staffs. Planning the railhead operation comes fairly easily: put a unit in charge, sequence units with trains, and emphasize safety. The deploying unit has many things working in its favor while conducting rail operations at home station. Leaders understand the railhead location in relation to their unit areas. Soldiers handle their own life support as they go home at night. Everyone generally knows what to do.

But the port is different. What is the deploying unit responsible for? How do you plan base life support in a place you have never been? What does the deploying unit actually do? Who is in charge?

The Port Support Activity

The Soldiers tasked to the port become the port support activity (PSA) and represent the unit's interests, provide understanding of equipment status and progress, and preserve combat power through the transition. It behooves deploying units to resource a PSA at the seaport of embarkation (SPOE) in order to move equipment from home station onto vessels and provide transparency.

Moving the heavy equipment of an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) from several busy motor pools to a few waiting ships creates a huge amount of friction that can be mitigated through the PSA's expertise, capabilities, and leadership. The PSA, a unit-sourced team of teams, travels to the port to ensure all equipment is successfully loaded onto the ships.

Gather the Experts

Identifying and emplacing expertise is critical. This differs from gathering commanders and staffs during the planning phase. How many of the unit's leaders and planners have port experience? The answer is likely none or just a couple staff members, which puts staffs in the difficult position of planning a complicated and unfamiliar mission.

Most of the expertise within the unit will reside at the Soldier and noncommissioned officer (NCO) levels, but it will not be enough for planning. Organizations like the installation transportation office, the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC), and the subordinate transportation battalion responsible for that specific port have the requisite knowledge and experience.

The primary mission of an ABCT is not to conduct port operations, so it is important to build a team of subject matter experts early in the planning process. Conduct a data call within the organization that includes everyone with port operations experience.

Concurrently, reach out to external organizations to identify key players who can provide invaluable information and lessons learned. Read articles from the Center for Army Lesson Learned for historical data, and share that data to create an understanding of transportation terminology. Making a concerted effort up front will ultimately save time because the faster a unit understands the mission, the more time it will have to plan.

After you identify the experts, determine where and when they provide the most value. Do they need to reside physically at the port during

the entire operation or can they be consulted by phone?

Define the Requirements

Once you have the experts, they can help define requirements. Defining requirements drives the PSA's composition and processes. Equipment must be moved from trains to ships. The onus for this process is on SDDC, which is responsible for surface transportation and is the interface between Department of Defense shippers and commercial transportation companies.

SDDC has transportation brigades and subordinate battalions spread around the world. The 842nd Transportation Battalion deployed all 2nd ABCT, 1st Infantry Division, equipment from Beaumont, Texas, to Central Europe in the summer of 2017. SDDC provided invaluable insight during the planning phase and outstanding support during execution. The unit should also contact the transportation battalion at the SPOE and include it early in the planning.

In defining requirements, it is helpful to separate major muscle movements to understand how the port works. Equipment is downloaded, staged, and reloaded. Equipment is driven and possibly broken. Equipment is accounted for and manifested for loading. The transportation battalion coordinates with the commercial port to contract a civilian labor force to download and stage all equipment off the rail.

Equipment arriving by line-haul comes in the gate and is met by transportation battalion Soldiers who receive it and ensure proper staging. The transportation battalion develops a staging plan that best facili-

tates ship-loading and the use of the commercial port staging areas. For example, the transportation battalion staged the 2nd ABCT's equipment into three separate areas by type: tracked vehicles, wheeled vehicles, and containers. The major requirements at this point are preserving, operating, fixing, certifying, battle tracking, manifesting, and reporting.

As ships come in, a civilian workforce is hired to drive (and tow) equipment from staging areas onto the ship. What happens when military shipping labels (MSLs) don't match? What happens when a tank slides off a rail car or a rail car slides off the track? What happens when

the unit's destination port changes or equipment breaks down or unit locations in theater change? Leaders at the port will deal with these and many other nonstandard problems.

Build the Team

Identifying leaders is a great place to start when building the team to meet requirements.

An officer. The fluid operational environment at the destination could change the port operations plan and things could go wrong. Such situations require on-site leadership. The unit should place someone at the port with a vested interest in the unit's personnel and equipment and

who can make quick decisions, get quick answers, and work well with civilians. This is field-grade business.

A transportation field-grade officer is the best choice, but factors such as personality, experience, training, and education also matter. A field-grade officer carries the experience required for quick planning, dynamic action, reporting, and dealing with nonstandard problems. A logistician works well in this position because of the transportation and maintenance mission sets of the port.

A senior NCO. The deploying unit might be tempted to avoid using a senior NCO as an NCO-in-charge because of competing requirements.

Soldiers from the 149th Seaport Operations Company, 10th Transportation Battalion, 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary), move vehicles onto a vessel during Exercise Dragon Lifeline on July 31, 2018, at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Charleston, S.C. The exercise trained participants in the planning and processes of rail, convoy, port, and vessel operations. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Hubenthal)



Investing in NCO leadership builds the health and welfare of the team in an unfamiliar and risky environment. A senior NCO can handle Soldier issues, track personnel accountability, and keep constant tabs on the welfare of the team.

Civilians. Within the civilian workforce, stevedores are the operators of marine terminals who employ longshoremen to move cargo. Longshoremen load and unload cargo on the docks of every port in the United States.

Longshoremen have varying levels of expertise with military equipment. Some will perform startup and shutdown procedures of tracked vehicles incorrectly. They will activate fire suppression systems. They will have accidents in the staging area. These problems drive the need to deliberately place equipment operators in the PSA. Position them at the rail download site and also in the staging area.

The transportation battalion holds regular meetings with the union representative to synchronize future operations. The unit should use the meeting as a venue to coordinate for Soldiers to start tracked vehicles on the rail cars and shut them off in the staging area. The task does not take away work from the longshoremen and will preserve combat power.

Equipment operators. Equipment operators add flexibility. When a longshoreman blocks in a critical asset, an equipment operator can move it and keep operations going. They can also move equipment back and forth from the staging area to a maintenance area without disrupting operations. This requires understanding between the union representatives and the transportation battalion up front.

Maintenance personnel. Equipment will break down. At a minimum, mechanics must stop fuel and oil leaks. Put two tracked and wheeled vehicle mechanics at the rail download site and one of each in the staging area. The additional number at the download site accounts for

multiple rail spurs and also provides flexibility; while one crew troubleshoots, the other can battle track.

In addition to diagnosing problems, the mechanics also keep track of faults by administrative number. This is important for three main reasons: to track combat power throughout port operations, to start requisitioning parts, and to identify safety issues to communicate to the destination PSA.

A maintenance warrant officer is absolutely essential. This person researches parts, tracks not mission capable (NMC) statuses, offers troubleshooting expertise, and coordinates to fill resource shortfalls.

The level of maintenance performed at the port depends on many variables. A warehouse became vacant prior to the 2nd ABCT's deployment, and the transportation battalion coordinated space dedicated to the maintenance operation. The unit line-hauled a Tricon container with petroleum products, batteries, and high-demand parts. Batteries, petroleum products, and absorbent sweeping compound proved to be most critical.

The 2nd ABCT used an M88 Hercules recovery vehicle, M7 forward repair system, and M984 heavy expanded-mobility tactical truck wrecker to pull packs, pull engines, and access tools. It also placed a maintenance control sergeant at Fort Hood, Texas, to bring parts from a supply support activity.

Two rented trucks were used for hauling parts and major assemblies: a pickup truck for standard parts and a moving van style truck for major assemblies. The PSA officer-in-charge identified the requirement, the brigade executive officer validated the requirement, and the unit S-8 added the rental vehicle to a senior NCO's travel authorization.

Unit movement officers. Accounting for and manifesting equipment requires unit movement officers (UMOs). Each piece of equipment is programmed for movement in the Transportation Coordinators' Auto-

mated Information for Movements System and marked with MSLs.

The UMOs validate that everything arrived at the port and is marked correctly. They take direction from the brigade mobility warrant officer or mobility NCO. The mobility warrant officer and NCO provide invaluable expertise to assist UMOs and arbitrate between the unit and transportation battalion. The transportation battalion also accounts for equipment and fixes MSLs, but the process goes more smoothly when the unit has the manpower to fix its own mistakes.

How will the unit determine piece count? Are five flat racks counted as one nested load on a trailer or as six pieces? The UMO cares about tracking every piece of equipment. The transportation battalion counts equipment as annotated on its spreadsheets printed from the Global Air Transportation Execution System, which will have nested loads. If the PSA reports piece count to its parent headquarters, it should use the same counting method as the transportation battalion to eliminate confusion.

A hazmat certifier. A hazmat certifier may be required to fix documentation and even repack a container. If the agency shipping the container identifies discrepancies, it can reject the container and even have the unit open it to verify its contents.

After the hazmat container arrives, the hazmat certifier can drive down in a government vehicle instead of flying. This way, frustrated hazmat cargo has a way back to home station. Also, if any repair parts for the mechanics become available while the hazmat certifier is at home station, the certifier can bring them down at the same time.

A sustainment brigade element. The home-station sustainment brigade may decide to send an element to facilitate port operations. For the 2nd ABCT's deployment, the 1st Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade provided a movement control team (MCT), augmented with a 5,000-gallon fueler, and a mainte-

nance contact team. The transportation battalion administers MCT duties, but working with the MCT is a great opportunity to develop experience and ease the burden on the transportation battalion.

Petroleum supply specialists. Fuel requirements depend on the level of focus prior to rail load. The 2nd ABCT support operations shop conducted a deliberate refuel the week prior to rail load, which required more than 10,000 gallons of fuel. Leaders checked tanks in the motor pools and also at the railhead staging area. Additionally, the sustainment brigade provided fuel at the railhead staging area.

With this level of effort, a few hundred gallons is adequate at the port and provides fuel internal to the sustainment brigade. The maintenance contact team takes care of the internal support package but also provides assistance to the PSA. If equipment runs dry, longshoremen will tow vehicles on board. The difference between equipment rolling off the ship at discharge versus being towed off is monumental in terms of both speed of assembly (during reception, staging, onward movement, and integration) and also strategic messaging.

Building a PSA as suggested above will satisfy requirements to preserve combat power, operate equipment when needed, fix equipment, certify hazmat, battle-track progress, manifest for loading, and report to higher headquarters.

Load the Vessel

Once all equipment is downloaded and properly marked, it is time to prepare for vessel loading. During loading, the unit must focus on being safe, counting pieces, and capturing anything that did not fit.

Many people want to get on the ship for the experience, but doing so with no plan increases risk. Mechanics will have last-minute parts to install. Leaders want tours, and everyone wants to see how it works.

Loading can be dangerous. The unit should minimize trips onto the ship

by getting everyone on board prior to loading and have an internal system to track Soldiers moving on and off the vessel. Ensure all personnel boarding the ship have a leader with them.

Capturing piece count is the next concern. PSA leaders must capture equipment disposition throughout the operation in a relevant way. Most pieces will load as planned, but those that do not will have administrative, operational, and logistics impacts. The transportation battalion will place a team at the loading deck to conduct piece count.

The loadmaster may run out of room, so it is important to communicate priorities prior to load day and be clear about what can load on a subsequent ship if needed. When this happens, the PSA leaders need to influence the process as much as possible prior to ship loading and accurately report changes.

Equipment that arrives at a different destination port than planned becomes an administrative problem for the company commander, who is trying to account for property. It also creates a rail or line-haul challenge for brigade mobility, thus impacting logistics resources. A timing and capability problem creates an operational impact on the brigade.

Additionally, some pieces may become frustrated because of severe mechanical problems or unresolved documentation discrepancies. It is not realistic for PSA leaders to track every piece of equipment with bumper-number fidelity, but it is realistic to track the outliers that way.

Where does the broken equipment go? Logically, NMC equipment, which cannot move under its own power, should load first so it is buried in the back and will not embarrass the deploying unit at the destination. However, it is also logical for it to go on last because towing NMC equipment through an entire ship is difficult and dangerous. Or it could go to the bulkheads as a compromise between the two.

The unit absolutely has a say on which way to do it, but it has little

to no control over execution. Also, each ship has different limitations. The ship is a series of decks, rather than a big square box, on the inside. Each deck has different height and weight restrictions, and the ship must be balanced. The ship's captain ultimately decides what goes where depending on the loadmaster's storage plan. A way to influence where NMC equipment goes is to communicate unit intent in all forums.

Once NMC equipment is loaded, mechanics can still perform some maintenance actions after equipment is chained down, but it is extremely difficult and dangerous. Unless it is a pacing item that cannot afford to take down days as it transits the ocean or it is an easy fix, the best option is to put the part in the vehicle for mechanics to install at the destination.

Deliberate supervision and shared understanding is required and needs to be communicated to the loadmaster. As the ship is loaded, an increasing number of Soldiers will find themselves with nothing to do.

The PSA remains at the port until all cargo is loaded, but once rail operations are complete, the unit should take the opportunity to progressively redeploy PSA members. This is also around the time the supercargo Soldiers will arrive to escort the equipment to the destination.

The PSA should be prepared to also act as supercargo Soldiers. Problems will arise at home station, and Soldiers already at the port become the quickest solution. This can easily add a month to a Soldier's timeline as commercial ships stop at other ports along the way. It is not just your brigade equipment on the boat unless the U.S. Transportation Command sources military vessels.

The unit should make sure battalions communicate flight information for supercargo personnel to PSA leaders because the PSA detail will pick them up and get them either into a hotel or directly onto the ship. The ship provides all base life support, but it is a good idea to bring 15 days of supply of basic use items and



A longshoreman carefully drives an M88 armored recovery vehicle off a rail car for staging at the Port of Beaumont, Texas, on Aug. 13, 2017. (Photo by Maj. Joseph D. Komanetz)

30 days of supply of special items like medications.

Supercargo personnel should be sent three days prior to the available to load date. A number of factors can affect a commercial ship's departure date. Throughout this entire complicated process, PSA members' phones will ring constantly.

Establish Reporting

Establishing reporting requirements is key to situational understanding throughout the process. First, determine who is in charge. Many people are in charge of many things, and confusion will prevail if command and support relationships are not defined. It is more than merely getting along.

The unit identified to run the port, the field-grade officer assigned mission command, the division tactical command post, the sustainment brigade tactical command post, the transportation battalion, the union representative, and the ship captain all have their roles. At some point, a situation will require a decision, and everyone needs to understand who holds 51 percent of the vote.

It is appropriate for the deploying unit to authorize the PSA to be a direct liaison to the transportation battalion. This way, the PSA can consult and coordinate action with an agency outside its chain of command and keep the parent commander informed during the process.

The division establishes command and support relationships between divisional units and creates reporting requirements. The PSA leaders are supported by the parent sustainment brigade (if applicable) and coordinate with the transportation battalion. These elements should not be sent to the port and be expected to "work it out."

In terms of reporting, the situation is fluid and changes rapidly at the port. Not all reports have time to travel through a hierarchy of command levels. Everyone invested needs the same information at the same time rather than just the most up-to-date information. To remedy this, a conference call works well.

The transportation battalion provides progress reports to its parent brigade. The PSA provides reports to

its parent brigade. If a sustainment brigade package is used, it reports to its brigade. A conference call brings leaders from all organizations together to identify and resolve friction points.

Very little of what we do in the Army is new; it's just new to us. Although deployment is complicated, Army units can successfully deploy their equipment through the SPOE by identifying experts, defining requirements, building and resourcing teams, and establishing reporting requirements. If done properly, the team will preserve combat power, have transparency, and ultimately increase the speed of assembly at the destination.

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