

Capable Sustainment Units Understand the Big Picture

■ By Gen. Gustave “Gus” Perna



Two years ago, I would have said that more than a decade of counterinsurgency war caused the skills of sustainment units to atrophy. Soldiers lost the art of repair, warrant officers lost the ability to diagnose problems, and leaders stopped understanding how our systems and processes work.

Seeing ourselves and our environment allowed us to pivot our efforts to decisive action. We have been focused on reinvigorating that lost muscle memory to rebuild sustainment units that can plan, synchronize, integrate, and echelon transportation and commodities, all while firing back.

We are leading through this, focusing on the basic tenets of our doctrine and the ability to link operations and sustainment. We must draw the line from the tactical tip of the spear back to the materiel enterprise.

The most proficient and capable sustainment units understand the big picture and demonstrate and incorporate sustainment fundamentals to inform their decisions and actions in support of the operational force.

Army doctrine defines how capa-

ble sustainment units operate across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Army Doctrine Publication 4-0, Sustainment, definitively states, “Sustainment requires an unbreakable bond between the strategic base that provides a continuous flow of resources and capabilities; the operational force that plans, synchronizes and distributes sustainment to the tactical level; and the maneuver force whose sustainment maintains their combat readiness, strength and endurance.”

Capable sustainment units understand and seamlessly contribute to the essential links between tactical-level operations and the strategic base.

At the tactical level, sustainment brigades, Army field support brigades, and support battalions focus on providing direct support to units. Sustainment brigades must be flexible, multifunctional, and task-organized to support the operational mission. Beyond having knowledge of their own capabilities, sustainment units must also be able to communicate their shortfalls to leverage the broader sustainment enterprise.

It is up to sustainment leaders at the brigade level to understand their roles while attached to theater or expeditionary sustainment commands and while building relationships with operational units. Articulating and delivering capabilities forms a foundation of trust—an important component between sustainers who are supporting and units who are supported. Theater and expeditionary sustainment commands convey the operational-level requirements to the strategic base.

Within the materiel enterprise, the Army Materiel Command, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and

Technology, and the Headquarters, Department of the Army, G-4, are the strategic providers and integrators. Led by senior sustainers, these organizations set priorities, review and publish policy, provide guidance and direction, and advance the art and science of the Army’s sustainment strategy.

While Army doctrine provides a foundation, mission command dictates that it does not direct our specific actions. Leaders and logisticians should find this flexibility both challenging and enabling as they operate within the doctrinal space while using their own knowledge, skill sets, and experience to support the maneuver force.

Capable sustainment units require Soldiers, warrant officers, and leaders who know sustainment doctrine and maintain mastery of the basics of their craft. They must understand their roles in the larger materiel enterprise and always explicitly see themselves in the supporting role to the operational force. Leaders and logisticians must be able to self-assess and determine the right metrics to drive us to the right output.

Recognizing and understanding the inextricable link between tactical and strategic sustainment capabilities forms that unbreakable bond that sustainment doctrine addresses. It also contributes to our success as we carry out the sustainment warfighting function that ensures freedom of action, extends operational reach, and prolongs endurance.

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