

Examining Decisive Action Sustainment Operations at the Task Force Level

The change from counterinsurgency operations to decisive action operations will require some changes in the way sustainers do business.

By Capt. Sean P. Dunstan

With the conflict in Iraq having ended in 2011 and the rapid responsible drawdown of forces in Afghanistan underway, Army sustainers accustomed to the support requirements inherent in stability operations must be prepared to transition logistics assets from counterinsurgency (COIN) to decisive action operations. This article, which centers on the logistics of a combined arms battalion in an armored brigade combat team, explores the viability of existing doctrine and recommends ways to mitigate logistics friction and shortfalls. These recommendations are based on lessons learned during the first decisive action mission rehearsal exercise at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif.

Command Post Operations

In contrast to its method of operations during the COIN fight, the forward support company (FSC) must remain mobile during decisive action operations. During COIN operations, an FSC can expect to operate from a single location—often a forward operating base. In decisive action operations, however, success hinges on the ability of the FSC to provide mission command and maintenance support while on the move.

Effective command post operations can be performed using the two command vehicles currently authorized. Having portable shop supplies enables maintainers to repair combat platforms as close to the fight as possible. The FSC should requisition and install parts-bin kits for shop-van trucks and trailers to facilitate mobilization of nearly all of the battalion's shop supply.

Communications Systems

Effective communication across the battlefield is of particular importance because sustainment assets are dispersed throughout the battlefield during decisive action operations. Maintaining contact among logistics nodes is challenging because of the absence of compensatory luxuries, such as

telephone and Internet access, which are typically associated with COIN operations. So, with long-range communications limited to a few Blue Force Trackers, FSC leaders are forced to rely on line-of-sight communications that prove inadequate when task-force trains are stretched 30 or more kilometers.

The FSC's communications infrastructure needs to be reexamined. An initial issue of high-frequency radios and the fielding of additional Army Battle Command Systems would increase the FSC's ability to plan and synchronize operations from multiple locations over long distances. Suites such as Blue Force Tracker and Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below compensate for line-of-sight platform blackouts stemming from lengthy lines of communication but are somewhat unreliable, particularly if free text-message server queues become jammed. Until an initiative is implemented to enhance the company's existing signal architecture, FSC leaders must ensure that every vehicle is outfitted with, at a minimum, a single-channel radio system.

Recovery Systems

FSCs need heavy equipment transporter (HET) personnel and equipment in order to expand the service and recovery section's ability to conduct far-forward recovery and retrograde of downed equipment. Tracked recovery vehicles such as the M88A2 are predisposed to maintenance issues, especially when they are used to tow disabled vehicles over long distances. Leaders should expect to encounter these maintenance issues in high-intensity conflicts during decisive action as the recovery section is sent out on multiple turns (often continuing operations well after the battle is over) to recover destroyed or broken-down equipment and vehicles.

Incorporating HETs into the FSC modified table of organization and equipment would also enable the FSC to expeditiously retrieve and transport not-mission-capable equipment when battlefield conditions force the unit maintenance collection point to move. Having merely two HET systems

and trained personnel at the FSC's disposal can alleviate the strain on existing recovery operators and equipment, expedite vehicle recovery over greater distances, decrease not-mission-capable time, and mitigate the frustration associated with prioritizing HET assets controlled outside of the battalion.

CBRNE

The risk of encountering a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosives (CBRNE) threat greatly increases in decisive action. Unfortunately, the latest modified table of organization and equipment stripped the FSC of a CBRNE operations specialist. Until this position is restored, FSCs must train personnel in CBRNE as an additional duty in order to enhance the formation's ability to successfully react to a CBRNE attack.

Critical Individual and Collective Training

Training management for logistics commanders is already exceedingly difficult, given the myriad sustainment tasks associated with supporting combined arms gunneries and field maneuvers in the task force. Nevertheless, logisticians in a decisive action environment must strive to fit the objectives outlined below into their training plans.

Field trains command post. By doctrine, the FSC headquarters section has limited administrative and mission

command capabilities outside of the command group despite being responsible for establishing and maintaining the field trains command post. The success of this critical logistics node hinges on how well the FSC headquarters interfaces with the battalion staff. The logistics fusion cell created with proper interface allows the FSC commander time to participate in sustainment planning during the task force military decisionmaking process while staying abreast of sustainment execution in support of the maneuver battalion.

Unlike COIN-driven mission sets, which do not require a field trains command post, FSCs will likely employ a field trains command post during decisive action operations. Senior company leaders must immediately establish a rapport with the maneuver battalion staff—the S-1 and S-4 in particular. FSC headquarters personnel should participate in staff training activities such as mission analysis to foster this relationship.

Moreover, field trains command post personnel need charts, matrices, and graphics to track company personnel actions (internal and battalion) and maintenance and supply statuses. A battalion-wide initiative such as command maintenance operations can be used to validate the ability of the field trains command post to monitor and accurately report the condition of downed equipment.

Gunnery. The crews of vehicles capable of carrying a major weapons system should be qualified on table six (un-

A convoy of Army Reserve Soldiers in mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles avoids a simulated IED explosion during training conducted by the 479th Field Artillery Brigade at Fort Hood, Texas. Logistics Soldiers in a decisive action will have to be prepared to conduct convoys safely with or without the aid of an Army Battle Command System. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Gail Braymen, First Army Division West Public Affairs)





Soldiers from the 1452nd Transportation Company, North Carolina Army National Guard, prepare to convoy with heavy equipment transporters (HETs) to Camp Buehring, Kuwait. In a decisive action, the forward support company will need at least two HETs to assist with recovery. (Photo by Maj. Matthew Devivo)

stabilized platform gunnery) using the heavy brigade combat team gunnery manual as a guide. Those vehicles include the medium tactical vehicle and heavy expanded-mobility tactical truck. The principal implied task is the careful management of personnel to avoid having undermanned vehicles. This is a significant departure from COIN operations, but in a decisive action environment, every vehicle regardless of purpose must alternatively be a combat platform.

Night vision devices. In addition to training the entire force on mounted gunnery skills, Soldiers must also be exceptionally confident and competent in employing night vision devices during hours of limited visibility. Regardless of an enemy's capabilities, the safest time to maneuver sustainment assets is at night. However, performing such actions without exhaustive, tough, realistic training on optics is dangerous.

Logistics convoys. Ultimately, the ability to safely execute and participate in tactical convoy operations rests with every potential vehicle operator and vehicle commander in the FSC. This includes the ability to successfully navigate from a mounted position with or without the aid of an Army Battle Command System. Leaders take this for granted because traditionally under COIN only select personnel conducted logistics convoys. However, in decisive action, Soldiers at

any given logistics node may be called on to displace to either elude enemy forces or enhance responsiveness to the supported maneuver battalion.

Defense. Performing logistics operations at sustainment nodes often becomes the singular priority in the COIN environment. However, during decisive action operations, failing to adequately plan for and prepare a defense can have catastrophic results. Being set roughly five to seven kilometers from the front lines means that Soldiers must be familiar with the fundamentals of defense in order to be able to defend an area such as the unit maintenance collection point, which is a high payoff target for the enemy.

Key tasks include drafting range cards for each mounted and dismounted major weapon system, developing a comprehensive sector sketch, enhancing fighting positions as time permits, and if available, integrating indirect fire support. Personnel positioned at these nodes must have a ready knowledge of defensive operations in addition to performing their occupational skill sets. Much like nighttime tactical convoy operations, leaders must enforce absolute noise and light discipline within the perimeters of forward areas to stave off enemy surveillance.

To enhance efficiency in establishing a robust defense of a position, develop and implement company tactical standard

operating procedures, specifically pertaining to priorities of work in an assembly area. A company-level handbook highlighting key actions is especially useful when indoctrinating personnel. Additionally, appoint an officer-in-charge or noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the defense of the forward logistics area and liken the responsibilities to those of any garrison additional duty.

STAMIS operations. Understanding how to perform Standard Army Management Information System (STAMIS) operations manually is also vital, particularly given the inherent austerity of a decisive action environment. In decisive action, expect to lose STAMIS connectivity to either equipment malfunction or battle loss. Develop contingencies in the absence of digital capabilities to avoid prolonged interruption in critical fleet reporting and parts ordering. Rehearse these actions in garrison by prohibiting supply clerks from digitally transmitting data, thereby forcing them to generate data disks and hard copy registries or reports for physical delivery to higher headquarters.

Unit Maintenance Collection Point

Plan to establish and operate the combat trains command post and unit maintenance collection point as sovereign, independent entities on the battlefield. The combat trains command post, which will move continuously during decisive action to remain within approximately three to five kilometers of the front lines, can lose momentum if tied to a unit maintenance collection point mired in not-mission-capable equipment.

However, the unit maintenance collection point should remain in a relatively stand-alone and stable location—positioned close enough to the brigade support area to ensure responsive parts flow but within operational reach of the company trains. The productivity of mechanics is directly tied to the stability of the unit maintenance collection point. Repair operations will grind to a halt if the unit maintenance collection point is consistently forced to move. Still, the unit maintenance collection point must be able to mobilize rapidly, so consider echeloning mechanics and maintenance assets between the unit maintenance collection point and the brigade support area.

The success of a task force internally tiered maintenance system hinges on aggressive enforcement of the projected repair times prescribed in the unit's maintenance standard operating procedures. To keep the node from transforming into a cannibalization point, the anticipated repair time at the unit maintenance collection point should not exceed 24 hours. Regardless of the established repair time, strive to retrograde equipment with long leadtimes to the brigade support area.

Avoid attaching maintainers outright to supported line companies. The FSC commander must have uncontested mission command of mechanics. The commander and the senior maintenance control section leaders understand how best to employ the field maintenance teams to achieve unity of effort in battalion maintenance. When mechanics remain

under the mission command of the FSC, they can be used more effectively to repair equipment.

Distribution Assets

Use caution when basing resupply assets in the field trains—particularly when they are colocated with the brigade support area. Account for the duration of the maneuver operation and the distance and type of terrain covered before pinning distribution assets to the field trains. Also take into consideration the ability of the brigade support battalion to effectively resupply the FSCs.

Typically, the brigade support area during decisive action will be at least 30 kilometers from the forward line of troops. Thirty kilometers seems a relatively short distance to travel. However, moving logistics vehicles over rough terrain or unimproved surfaces or conducting convoy operations in hours of limited visibility using night vision devices can make the average resupply mission run between six and eight hours.

Synchronizing replenishment operations over that time and distance is incredibly challenging even without factoring in operational interference stemming from maintenance issues or enemy activity. However, FSC commanders can change sustainment risk into tactical risk by staging some distribution assets forward in the combat trains.

Instead of housing ammunition, bulk water, or bulk petroleum resources in the brigade support area, dispersing assets based on the supported task force maneuver operation can assuage sustainment risk. For example, during a task force movement to contact, position refueling assets in the combat trains to sustain the supported battalion's momentum. Similarly, when the battalion is set in a hasty defense, preposition ammunition stocks forward to avoid friction associated with poor ammunition management and reporting.

The recommendations in this article are based on only one exercise. Precisely how decisive action will affect comprehensive logistics operations remains uncertain. However, baseline analysis of modified table of organization and equipment resourcing shortfalls, identified training priorities, and the expansive application of sustainment doctrine certainly establishes a foundation for senior leaders throughout the divisional support community to shape planning considerations for upcoming decisive action training and operations.

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