

Time to Go Back to the Basics in Logistics

As defense spending is reduced, the author argues a need for the force to reestablish a technical knowledge base before it is lost.

By Brigadier General Steven A. Shapiro

In this time of diminishing resources, senior logistics leaders need to coach, teach, and mentor subordinates on the technical basics of the profession. If we do not, the Army may lose a set of skills developed over decades that will be critical in the next several years and exists only in a cadre of people approaching retirement.

The last decade of war has seen the culture of our logistics force transform dramatically. We have a generation of sustainment leaders with more combat experience than most other generations, yet we have sacrificed technical expertise because of the uniqueness of the current fight. That technical expertise, hard fought for and reinforced by generations of senior warrant officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and Department of the Army (DA) civilians, must not perish. This expertise must form the nucleus of the profession of arms for logisticians.

In Years Past

Much of the technical knowledge that I have learned has come from subordinates during my 27-year career. One of my earliest memories of being a second lieutenant is that of the senior warrant officer in the battalion throwing an Army regulation at me and telling me to research something. I did not know it then, but he was training and mentoring me in his own way—technical mentorship. He had experienced the post-Vietnam War Army, and this was his way of ensuring that Soldiers like me got the technical knowledge to care for his Army in the future. As senior logisticians, we must ensure that we do the same for the next generation of logisticians.

It is easy to recognize the importance of tactical proficiency. For example, no one can deny the importance of having Soldiers experienced in conducting logistics convoys under fire. However, many junior logisticians do not understand that being technically proficient is just as important.

The Recent Fight

Since 11 September 2001, Logistics Corps Soldiers have been required to operate outside of their core com-

petencies in many ways. As Soldiers, we have accepted this, but it has contributed to the eroding of our technical competence. We have relied heavily on the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) to provide the majority of our support structure at large forward operating bases (FOBs) and even at some of our combat outposts (COP) in both Iraq and Afghanistan. LOGCAP performs many functions, such as retail and wholesale fuel farms, supply support activities (SSAs), dining facility operations, and Arrival/Departure Airfield Control Group (ADACG) operations.

As a result, many logistics Soldiers have been available to function outside their military occupational specialties (MOSs) to fill gaps identified by commanders. For instance, petroleum supply and maintenance companies have been operating as convoy security companies, providing security to contracted host-nation trucks rather than operating fuel points or maintenance shops.

Every day I see examples of our junior leaders relying on contractors for logistics missions that will be theirs in the coming years. This erodes not only the Soldiers' technical abilities but also the ability of our junior leaders to lead from a technical perspective. We have to stem the tide on this now before it becomes irreversible.

Technical Mentorship Gaps

Even when our deployed Soldiers are performing their MOSs on a daily basis, they are often hampered by a lack of nearby senior NCOs and warrant officers to provide mentorship. Most of the COPs in Regional Command East are dispersed throughout several mountain ranges and are accessible only by air or poor roads. Most have only a handful of junior logisticians to provide support because of the dispersion of each forward support company. For instance, most of the COPs are supported by only one food service specialist (MOS 92G) in the rank of specialist or private first class. That junior Soldier runs an expeditionary tricon kitchen system by himself often without visits from food service NCOs for months at a time because of geographic challenges. This Soldier operates on limited experience without the

benefit of having a mentor on hand to provide technical guidance.

Back to Basics

We must take steps now, such as reading, understanding and complying with regulations, and creating mentor relationships, to stop the erosion of our technical competencies, or the next generation of senior leaders may lack the requisite technical knowledge to lead our Logistics Corps. We now hear the call for “back to basics” from our senior leaders and I believe the timing is spot on. In many instances, the “basics” for logisticians means reading and following regulations and standard operating procedures and doing things by the book. I submit that the keepers of these basics are our senior warrant officers, NCOs, and DA civilians who grew up in an Army with Inspector General and other command inspections.

I was raised by a group of warrant officers, NCOs, and DA civilians who knew their trade. The warrant officers made me read the Army regulations before I asked them questions. In this way, they made sure all of my decisions were based on a true requirement. If the regulations did not support what needed to be done, they knew where to go for an exception to policy. They did not fly by the seat of their pants.

The supply sergeants and motor sergeants were hardliners. If it was not in black and white, it was not worth talking about. Verbal (or email) requests were not accepted for anything. Stock numbers and document numbers were required. I was never allowed to just do what I wanted; I had to sign for everything. In this time of diminishing budgets, we must get back to adhering to regulations, and we must train our subordinates to do the same.

I now see this type of mentoring happening regularly when dealing with the senior logisticians on the U.S. Army Europe staff and in its formations. I see chief warrant officer 5s and senior DA civilians mentoring junior warrant officers on Property Book Unit Supply Enhanced operations and the transition from left-behind equipment to the unit-maintained equipment program.

We need to encourage and formalize this mentoring process and make it a priority. We need to get back to these standards because we cannot afford to continue business as usual. I believe that empowering the warrant officers, NCOs, and DA civilians who run the technical aspects of our Army is best way to get there. When we identify mid-level leaders who are not ready, we need our senior warrant officers and NCOs to prepare those leaders through professional development programs and by coaching and mentoring them. If we do not, we are in danger of losing skills developed over decades, which are needed to get through the austere times ahead.

The Way Ahead

Leaders can help bridge the gap to get back to basics in the following ways:

- First, make technical mentorship a priority. This is the best way to make sure the next generation of leaders understands their trade. Some of this may take the form of “tough love”—that is okay.
- Read, understand, and discuss Army regulations, unit standard operating procedures, and other essential documents. (This should form part of your professional reading.)
- Train and empower mid-level managers. They are tomorrow’s future logistics leaders.
- Do not make your surroundings a “zero defect” area. Underwrite your junior leaders and technicians. If you do this, they can become informal leaders among their peers.
- Take responsibility for your footprint. Too often we find excess in somebody’s footprint that they claim is not theirs. If it happens in your battlespace it is your responsibility, even with logistics.
- Take control of Global Combat Support System—Army fielding for your organization. (Do not leave this to the product manager.)
- Own your logistics data because it is one of the Army’s most critical logistics assets.
- Use the Standard Army Management Information System the way it was designed to be used. If you are unsure about its operation, break out the user’s manual or ask a senior technician.
- Find out what you need to do to make the Army audit ready by 2017.
- Check on the Soldiers who are spending the Army’s money. They need your guidance.
- Reestablish maintenance “shoot outs” as we enter the unit-maintained equipment program. Running these forums is a lost art in the greater Army. The lack of a materiel management command at the division, corps, and theater levels will make this hard, but it is worth it.
- Consider making motor stables a regimented process. It may sound old fashioned, but it worked in the past.
- Do your best to work field service representatives out of a job. They won’t be around forever.
- And finally, get ready for unit-maintained equipment. It’s coming.

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