



# Army Rail: Highballing to Logistics Success

by Colonel Lawrence M. Curtin

An Army Reserve rail unit came to the rescue when the demands of the Gulf War threatened to overwhelm the Sunny Point ammunition port.

**“G**eneral, if we can’t get the 1205th Transportation Railway Service Unit mobilized, I can’t fully support the war effort, and we’re going to have a mission failure.”

Sounds like a statement out of a Tom Clancy novel, something that probably would make enjoyable reading. That is, unless you were Colonel Michael S. Featherston and, instead of reading a book, you were talking to the Military Traffic Management Command (MTMC) Eastern Area commander about a real wartime mission and a real possibility of failure

on your watch. [Colonel Featherston is now retired from the Army.]

During the Persian Gulf War, Colonel Featherston commanded the 1303d Major Port Command (MPC) at Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, North Carolina. As the Army’s only ammunition port in the United States, Sunny Point had the mission of transshipping over 90 percent of the resupply munitions sent to and from the Gulf during Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Desert Sortie. The 1303d MPC loaded and discharged 2.1 million tons of munitions from 186 vessels in support of those operations.

## **Needed: More Rail Crews**

However, working on 186 vessels was the easy part of the unit’s mission. The port reception and clearance of such vast amounts of cargo, in a relatively short period of time, were the most challenging and difficult tasks facing Colonel Featherston and his work force. Eighty percent of all ammunition that came to Sunny Point during the war arrived by rail, requiring the unloading of some 27,000 railcars. But the terminal’s table of distribution and allowances provided only enough manpower for executing its

peacetime mission, which called for a single shift each day to work on a single vessel.

Like many other support units during the war, the terminal operated around the clock, 7 days a week, and worked on as many as four vessels at a time to push out the ammunition needed by our troops in the Gulf. The terminal's civilian work force had to work well beyond its safety limits. To meet the work load, Sunny Point rail crews were asked to put in 18-hour days and then be back at work with only 6 hours of rest; rail crews in the private sector are routinely restricted to 12-hour days, with a mandatory 10-hour rest period in between. Colonel Featherston knew that such work-load strain was a clear formula for disaster. "The fact that Sunny Point did not have a serious accident during this time was nothing short of incredible and a great tribute to the professionalism of the terminal's employees," he later observed.

### **Needed: Track Repair**

Unfortunately, the lack of adequate crews wasn't Colonel Featherston's only rail challenge. Like many of the rail lines on Army installations throughout the United States, Sunny Point's 100 miles of track had not been heavily used since the Vietnam War; as a result, they had been maintained only to meet minimum standards. To put it simply, the track was not in condition to suddenly accept a tenfold increase in use. The sudden demand created by the war presented the commander with the real possibility of a serious derailment that could bring all cargo operations to a halt. Repair of Sunny Point's track had to be a priority.

### **Searching for Solutions**

These two major challenges—acquiring more rail crews and initiating track repair immediately—confronted Colonel Featherston early in the war, right as the pressure to meet the theater commander's closure times for munitions was becoming critical. It simply was not feasible to postpone the vital MTMC mission until the Army could analyze the situation further. Therefore, like any good commander, Colonel Featherston looked for realistic alternatives. His first instinct was to "just contract it out."

As he worked feverishly with local rail companies and rail unions to obtain emergency replacement crews, Colonel Featherston soon realized that contracting for help would be easier said than done. The companies indicated that they might be able to assist, but only after they hired and trained additional qualified personnel. Downsizing had affected their personnel levels, and the trained labor pool that had previously existed was no longer available. Colonel Featherston's efforts to hire workers from the com-

mercial rail industry produced only one additional rail-qualified employee; this obviously was not the fix for which he had been hoping.

Another possible solution to the shortage of rail crews was to use motor carriers instead of railroads as the primary means of carriage. However, as all first-year business college students learn, railroads are always significantly more efficient and cost-effective than trucks for transporting large quantities over long distances. The 27,000 railcars processed by Sunny Point during the war would have equated to some 71,000 trailer loads. Some substitution of motor carriers for rail did occur; but whether the commercial truck industry could have adequately supported our war efforts with the vast quantities of trailers required on short notice, or whether Sunny Point could have handled such a significant increase in trailer traffic, is highly questionable.

### **Reserve Rail Units to the Rescue**

Fortunately for the Army and the soldiers in the Gulf, there was an answer for these pressing problems. The solution had its roots in the early 1980's, when the Army was undergoing major restructuring and facing great pressure to eliminate nonessential units—very much as is happening today. Army rail units were among the areas targeted for reduction.

Major General Michael "Iron Mike" Healey, then commander of Army Readiness and Mobilization Region V (a forerunner of today's Army Reserve regional support commands) at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and his transportation coordinator, Lieutenant Colonel Robert S. Wilhelm, clearly understood the continued need for rail units. So they went to work selling Army rail, making sure that Army decisionmakers understood the need for rail transportation and the capabilities of rail units. Their vision and efforts probably saved Army rail as we know it from extinction.

Little could they have suspected at the time that their efforts would play a major role in avoiding a wartime mission failure for the Transportation Corps and the Army. For it was one of the Army Reserve rail units they saved that came to Colonel Featherston's rescue. The 1205th Transportation Railway Services Unit (TRSU) provided Sunny Point with the critical mix of manpower, skills, and training that ensured rail cargo operations would not be slowed or halted during the rest of the war.

The 1205th TRSU answered Sunny Point's shortfalls in the two critical areas of need. First, it quickly provided fully trained rail operating crews who, upon their arrival, were prepared to immediately conduct 24-hour operations. Second, it provided fully trained maintenance-of-way (track repair) personnel who,



□ Soldiers of the 1205th Transportation Railway Service Unit spread rock ballast while repairing a rail line at Sunny Point.

from day one of their activation and throughout the rest of the Gulf mission, identified and quickly repaired critically needed rail lines.

In the early stages of Operation Desert Shield, only volunteers from the 1205th TRSU worked at Sunny Point. While these soldiers significantly assisted in easing the terminal's manpower shortages, they were not enough. Even with additional manpower from the 757th Transportation Railway Battalion (Reserve Component) in West Allis, Wisconsin, more help was needed to get the job done.

That's when Colonel Featherston made his call to the MTMC Eastern Area commander, Brigadier General (now Major General) Hubert G. Smith, and asked for the activation of the full 1205th TRSU; that was accomplished on 15 January 1991. The unit responded with the "can-do" attitude that our Army Reserve units are known for, conducting both rail operations and track repair in an exceptionally professional manner until its deactivation 7 months later.

As Colonel Featherston put it, "My call to the MTMC Eastern Area commander was not a hard sell. He had been to Sunny Point many times during Desert Shield and knew and appreciated the severe strain put upon the civilian railway work force. We simply could not have accomplished what we were being asked to do without the reserves. Most importantly, they had the right skills and the right training to hit the ground running."

### Ongoing Need for Rail Units

Today, as in the early 1980's, the Army is looking to deactivate units that have no viable mission in our declining force structure. The absence of a unit on any theater commander's operation plan (OPLAN) or time-phased force deployment list appears to be a major factor in this elimination process. A quick look

through the family of OPLAN's reveals that Army rail units have not been slated against a major OPLAN. Yet, in a sense they *have* been slated, at least implicitly, because every major OPLAN requires ammunition support out of Sunny Point—and providing that support will depend on using Army rail units. Of the three highly valued Reserve battalions assigned as Capstone units to Sunny Point, the 1205th Railway Operating Battalion (parent of the 1205th TRSU) remains first on the priority list for activation in a major mobilization.

In today's Army—designed to be a no-notice, continental United States-based, power-projection force—it is more important than ever to take a hard, realistic look at every unit and the value it adds to our warfighting capabilities. Without question, the 1205th TRSU demonstrated its value during the Persian Gulf War and will do so again when called.

While Army rail is not a high-profile, glamorous, or exotic activity to some, it is a unique resource essential to supporting today's power-projection Army. As such, retaining Army rail in our current force structure may prevent another wartime phone call that begins with the words, "General, we are going to have a mission failure." **ALOG**

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