

# Logistics Movements in a Changing Afghan Environment

BY CAPTAIN OWEN A. ROSE

**L**ogistics movements in Afghanistan face major challenges. During the year the 17th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) was deployed in Afghanistan conducting convoys and escorting supplies, the issues and requirements facing our forces on a daily basis constantly evolved. From dealing with host-nation trucks (HNTs) to confronting enemy activity, our convoys bravely traversed many routes over the rugged terrain of Afghanistan to bring vital equipment and supplies to our fighting forces. This article will summarize the major friction points and issues that affected the battalion's mission across Regional Commands East, North, and South.

## Trucks and Drivers Pose Challenges

During our deployment from May 2010 to May 2011, we completed more than 400 convoys that moved more than 10,000 pieces of equipment. These movements were primarily executed using military-escorted HNTs. This in itself posed significant problems because the poor quality and unreliability of the trucks exposed our convoys to dangerous situations on the road. Some movements were accomplished using palletized load systems, but their use was restricted to transporting munitions, palletized sensitive cargo, and 20-foot containers.

Eight carrier companies operated under the host-nation contract. They had varying rates of reliability, and none was particularly distinguished in the quality of its performance. The carriers used many local drivers, who frequently switched between carrier companies and had no loyalty to any one carrier. The quality of the trucks supplied by the carriers under the host-nation contract was deplorable in every sense of the word. The age of the fleet and the general condition of the trucks resulted in frequent breakdowns during missions.

The rate of breakdowns became such a problem that the battalion instituted an internal quality assurance/quality control program for the trucks. This initially caused a mass outcry from the carriers because 80 percent of their trucks failed the checks performed according to the guidelines in the performance work statement. The missions that had to be canceled because of unsatisfactory trucks resulted in a significant loss of revenue for the carriers.

About a month into the program, marked improvements could be seen in the quality of the trucks sent by the carriers for missions. The problem was not totally

solved since trucks continued to break down. However, breakdowns occurred at a much lower rate than before the program was implemented and generally for reasons that could not be pinpointed during the checks performed by the quality assurance/quality control team.

Most of the HNT drivers had no proof of qualification or licensure on the trucks they operated. To see teenagers operating these trucks was quite common and left one to question the authenticity of the carriers and their commitment to the contract. The performance work statement said that operators would be properly licensed for the vehicles they operated, but I never saw an Afghan driver's license.

Driving the trucks through some areas was dangerous, and at times some drivers refused to travel certain routes. The fear of being identified as sympathetic to the United States and labeled as such by the Taliban, coupled with the bribes being paid to Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army officials at checkpoints, contributed greatly to the unwillingness of the drivers to travel along certain routes.

## Fuel Supply Frustrates Carriers

Providing fuel for the trucks posed significant challenges. The lack of a defined standard for supporting HNTs across the Afghanistan combined joint area of operations caused some forward operating bases (FOBs) to refuse to give fuel to HNTs in convoys. The performance work statement dictated that trucks arrive at the point of mission origin with sufficient fuel to complete the assigned mission.

Ninety-eight percent of the time, HNTs showed up at the FOBs with barely enough fuel to make it through the entry control point. The carriers argued that they provided the drivers with money to purchase fuel and even fueled the trucks before they left the carrier holding yards, but this could not be verified. There was speculation that the drivers sold the fuel in their trucks before they got to the FOBs, knowing that the United States would provide them fuel before they started the mission.

If an HNT has passed all the necessary quality assurance/quality control checks and was selected for a mission but had no fuel, we supplied that truck with enough fuel to complete the assigned mission. The carriers were charged \$15 per gallon for the fuel that we supplied to the HNTs, which was five times more than the price paid for fuel on the local market.

Was that a fair charge levied by the United States?

That is open for debate, but what needs to be considered is that once a convoy was on the road, the convoy commander, because of the threat conditions, would not stop at local gas stations to allow the HNT drivers to refuel. During the course of the mission moving between FOBs, the drivers were then faced with a problem: either the local U.S. personnel would refuse to refuel them, or, if they did get fuel, they were charged the \$15 per gallon rate.

The price of fuel charged to the carriers needs to be revised. The price has to be fair and equitable, taking into consideration that sometimes the HNT drivers do not have the option to refuel on the road. They therefore should not be penalized by having to pay the high rate to refuel with U.S. Government fuel.

### **Eagle Express Helps Convoy Management**

The Eagle Express initiative was implemented in January 2011. Its intent was to alleviate the shortfall in transportation assets resulting from the loss of some of the rotary-flight routes in the area of operations and to provide customers with more reliable information about convoy schedules and planned movements.

Under the Eagle Express initiative, the monthly schedule for convoys dedicated to three routes, which were identified as gold, black, and white, was sent to customers by the 20th day of the preceding month. Customers then had the option to track our convoy movements and build their movement requirements around them.

The advantage of the Eagle Express was that it allowed customers to predict when each convoy would be at the respective FOBs. Before the Eagle Express, our convoy movements were driven by demand: The customer would submit its movement requests, and once a full load was reached, the convoy was planned. With the Eagle Express, the convoys were already planned and the customer could submit movement requests for those routes.

The biggest disadvantage of the Eagle Express was that convoy assets were often underused. Convoys often went out on certain routes with only one or two loads just to abide by the schedule. It was certainly not economical or safe for Soldiers to traverse the dangerous routes without having a reasonable amount of loads to escort.

### **Finding Time for Maintenance**

The pace at which the 17th CSSB ran convoys allowed little, if any, time for performing proper maintenance on vehicles. Command maintenance is a term reserved for those units that have a strictly “on the FOB” mission. M-ATVs (MRAP [mine-resistant ambush-protected] all-terrain vehicles), MaxxPros, palletized load systems, wreckers, and other equipment that go out on convoys were subjected to 48-hour and 24-hour unit quality assurance/quality control checks, as well as a

4-hour battalion-level quality assurance/quality control check before they left on missions. This did not take the place of a command maintenance program, as was demonstrated by the number of trucks being deadlined, some temporarily, while on the road running convoys.

Attempts were made to establish a quarterly maintenance standdown to allow each element to reset and focus on a comprehensive maintenance service for each vehicle. But mitigating circumstances, such as scheduling issues, prevented the establishment of a sustained policy on maintenance stand-downs.

### **Accounting for Equipment**

Equipment accountability has always been a challenge. On a few occasions during our rotation, sensitive items were reported missing from escorted vehicles; in a couple of cases, whole vehicles were missing. All of the missing vehicles were eventually recovered, but the missing sensitive items continued to be a mystery. In response to this, the battalion convoy standard operating procedures were amended to require that customers remove sensitive items from vehicles before shipping.

Our local procedures were also enforced by a battalion directive requiring all convoy commodity managers to turn in a signed copy of the load logs, signifying that the customers had physically signed for their equipment. In the convoy staging yard, operations were also modified to ensure that all HNTs were correctly assigned the equipment’s destination, heights of loads were verified for the specific route to be followed, and the customers had removed all sensitive items.

The 17th CSSB improved the way logistics movements were executed across Regional Commands East, North, and South. Over the year of our deployment, we adopted new policies and procedures and shaped others to better reflect the changes we faced in threats, demands, and capabilities. Our customers continued to have diverse and challenging requirements, but we were able to meet and surpass them all. Our replacements assumed an operation that had been refined and tested, and they will only continue to make it better as they respond to the demands of their customers.

**CAPTAIN OWEN A. ROSE IS COMPLETING THE ENGINEER CAPTAINS CAREER COURSE. HIS NEXT ASSIGNMENT WILL BE AT HEADQUARTERS, EIGHTH U.S. ARMY, IN KOREA. HE WAS THE TRANSPORTATION OFFICER OF THE 17TH COMBAT SUSTAINMENT SUPPORT BATTALION DURING ITS DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN. HE HAS AN ASSOCIATE’S DEGREE IN BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING AND A BACHELOR’S DEGREE IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT AND IS PURSUING A MASTER’S DEGREE IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA AT ANCHORAGE AND IN GEOLOGICAL ENGINEERING FROM THE MISSOURI UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.**