Moving Liquid Gold

BY MAJOR JONATHAN MCDOUGAL

Fuel delivery operations in Afghanistan are complicated by host-nation trucking system challenges, including pilferage, maintenance problems, and life support issues.

When I arrived in the Afghanistan theater, I realized that I was in for a rude awakening when it came to managing fuel operations. I was the battalion maintenance officer in the support operations section, so I was not really aware of the challenges that fuel operations managers faced. When the support operations officer went on rest and recuperation leave, I was placed in her position and saw firsthand the challenges she encountered in her attempts to manage this ever-increasing problem.

Fuel Operations in Regional Command East

How coalition forces deliver, consume, and distribute class III (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) in Afghanistan has been the subject of many contract negotiations, and the process seems to be improving. As the sole combat sustainment support battalion (CSSB) in Regional Command East, the 17th CSSB, also called Task Force 17, based out of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, was challenged in June 2010 to continue to improve the class III (bulk) distribution system put in place by the 524th CSSB, based out of Hawaii. What was discovered through extensive research and painful "trial and error" attempts was that there were entirely too many different ideas on how to improve the bulk fuel management system.

One idea was that a stationary pipeline should be put in place. This has finally been accomplished. TS–1 (an aviation fuel for fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft), which had been delivered by rail from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, is now delivered by pipeline. The use of the pipeline has replaced fuel deliveries by vehicle to various Defense Logistics Agency sites in Kandahar, Kabul, and Bagram, Afghanistan. The number of fuel delivery trucks on Bagram Airfield was also reduced because of direct delivery to some forward operating bases, namely Camp Phoenix in Regional Command Capital and Forward Operating Base Ghazni.

Host-Nation Trucking Challenges

The stationary pipeline is a much more streamlined, efficient way of delivering fuel than the host-nation trucking (HNT) system. The deliveries made by HNT contractors often are short on fuel amounts because of the shabby construction of some trucks, tank leaks, trash found in the fuel tanks, and lags in download time.

Contractually, fuel trucks are given 7 days to arrive at destinations that normally take several hours to reach. Because of this, many military units program fuel trucks into their logistics convoys to increase reliability and guarantee that trucks will arrive at the final destination with their full loads.

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Even when a fuel truck is escorted by military convoys, a driver occasionally will leave a convoy and not return. It is suspected that some drivers leave convoys because they do not want to be targeted along with coalition forces. Sometimes they will return with less fuel cargo than they originally were carrying, leading coalition personnel to conclude that they sold some of the fuel to make extra money. Usually when the fuel truck drivers return, the fuel's quality is degraded because the missing fuel has been replaced with some other liquid.

Pilferage is the leading cause of failed delivery missions. The trucks have distinct identification numbers and seals on their fuel tank valves. If, during a convoy or delivery mission, these seals are tampered with, replaced, or damaged before reaching the destination, the truck driver is not paid for the mission and his employer's company is charged on average $15 per gallon for the missing fuel.

When a driver is apprehended for stealing, he is

banned from conducting fuel delivery at Bagram Airfield. Banned drivers often circumvent this safety measure and continue getting paid for completing deliveries by having relatives drive in their place.

An added challenge is fuel delivery validation. Only one person is qualified by the contract to stamp and approve the driver's delivery paperwork. Some drivers have to remain at the fuel station on one side of the installation for several hours until the contractor can arrive at the fuel station from the other side of the forward operating base to approve the delivery. This often angers the drivers and puts an added strain on managing the flow of traffic into and out of the fuel point.

Host-Nation Truck Maintenance

Host-nation truck maintenance was a constant challenge for Task Force 17. Practices put in place by the performance work statement of the HNT contract, which establishes rules and guidelines for transport vehicles, should assist trucking companies in ensuring that the best equipment rolls in and out of the gate. But this is not the case for fuel transportation and delivery.

Task Force 17 had to put an HNT quality assurance/quality control program in place to mitigate the loss of cargo from host-nation supply trucks and to ensure that fuel transport trucks were in complete working order according to the contract. Disqualifying trucks from transportation missions because of either faulty equipment or a lack of roadworthiness cost the unit more than $600,000 a month.

Although it was effective, the quality assurance/quality control program could not continue because of an increased need for fuel in the theater. Fuel delivery demands resulted in the lowering of standards for fuel truck readiness.

It is very frustrating for a convoy commander to have a fuel truck break down immediately after it exits the installation. It brings up a twofold problem: Do you transfer the fuel to another transport truck, and if so, how? And do you attempt to fix the fuel truck onsite, or do you leave it at the installation for repair? Fixing the fuel truck off of the installation is significantly easier because of the ability of the drivers to acquire local maintenance assistance.

When a fuel transport truck breaks down on the installation, however, it causes a series of problems. The first is the initial traffic stoppage caused by the disabled vehicle. Next is the risk of further damaging the vehicle with military recovery assets, which are not designed to recover HNT equipment. Then there is the delay in coordinating local maintenance assistance and getting a civilian mechanic through the screening process to be granted access to the installation. The security measures to screen civilians who enter the installation can sometimes take several days. Finally, once access has been granted, the mechanic may not even have the proper tools and parts to repair the disabled truck.

Life Support for HNT Drivers

Life support problems were as consistent as the loss of fuel resources and theft. Some fuel truck drivers would arrive at Bagram Airfield at around 0800 and not be allowed to leave for 8 to 12 hours because they were waiting for a fuel load stamp that must accompany their paperwork for payment. The rations they were required to bring with them would not sustain them for the duration of their wait, so they became agitated, belligerent, and sometimes would threaten to leave the fuel station.

Sometimes when fuel truck drivers would show up without food, the fuel escorts would ensure that the drivers were issued a meal ready-to-eat, a halal meal, or an alternative regionally customized meal. As a contingency plan, Task Force 17 dedicated a 20-foot container for meal and bottled water storage to support drivers who had to stay at Bagram Airfield before being assigned to a convoy.

Some drivers were unhappy with the quality of the meals provided to them by the military. Task Force 17 and the 101st Sustainment Brigade coordinated to have an Afghan food vendor at one of the entry control points to meet increased driver food requirements.

It may be surprising that these various challenges could have such an impact on the fuel distribution industry in Afghanistan. Like many other cultural, industrial, and corporate practices that have come to be recognized as "how it is done here," Task Force 17, as a fighting force, had to learn to embrace unique cultural differences to foster progress that would remain long after its mission was complete. Considering that Bagram Airfield's average weekly fuel consumption rate was nearly 1.5 million gallons of JP8, more than 250,000 gallons of DF2 (diesel fuel), and 125,000 gallons of gasoline, it is safe to say that any fuel truck that was disabled, delayed, destroyed, detoured, or mechanically unsafe caught the attention of leaders at all levels.

Task Force 17's progress toward stable fuel distribution operations inspires hope for the future. The task force endeavored to foster a working relationship that was conducive to moving toward a unique system of coalition forces and local nationals sharing the responsibility of securing a prosperous future for Afghanistan.

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