

Processing Financial Liability Investigations of Property Loss in a Deployed Sustainment Brigade

Reporting property loss in a deployed environment presents a number of unique challenges, especially to sustainment brigades.

■ By Capt. Scott R. Hockenberry

Everybody loses stuff. A deployed sustainment brigade loses a lot of stuff. Sustainment brigades are responsible for large quantities of property, and accountability is difficult in today's complex battlespace. Accordingly, financial liability investigations of property loss (FLIPLs) are a constant reality in this operational environment.

While effective command supply discipline is the first step to ensuring property accountability, FLIPLs will inevitably arise. The swift and thorough processing of these actions can contribute greatly to the unit's mission, incentivizing good stewardship of equipment, reconciling property books, and freeing up command teams to focus on operational goals.

Complications of Deployment

Although staffs of all units are familiar with FLIPLs, the staff of a deploying sustainment brigade must recognize and anticipate that the volume and complexity of these actions will greatly increase during deployment. By the nature of the sustainment mission, a deployed brigade will be responsible for an immense amount of equipment and property.

Not only is there more equipment to lose while deployed, but there are also more opportunities to lose it. The constant movement inherent in the sustainment mission exponentially complicates the task of maintaining accountability.

Adding another layer of complexity are changes to the organizational structure of the sustainment brigade. Units and command teams come and go every nine to 12 months, interrupting the continuity of processes and cutting short institutional knowledge. Additionally, deployed sustainment brigades inevitably swell in size with the administrative attachment of additional battalions.

Support to Coalition Partners

Deployed sustainment brigades and their subordinate units routinely provide equipment to foreign militaries. Equipment is provided under various frameworks: lift and sustain support, acquisition and cross-servicing agreements, and sometimes simply as a practical part of day-to-day joint operations.

Property in the custody of coalition partners adds even more complexity to the property accountability process and, when lost, to the resulting FLIPLs. Foreign officers are understandably unfamiliar with the nuances of U.S. regulations and policies on the technical aspects of property accountability. Foreign officers responsible for U.S. property are usually senior in rank, and since financial liability officers must be senior to the individual under investigation, FLIPLs involving property lost under foreign custody often require the appointment of a high-ranking U.S. investigating officer.

Command and Control

Command and control over subordinate units processing FLIPLs is also complicated in a deployed environment because many of the units that the sustainment brigade has administrative control (ADCON) of fall outside of its operational control (OPCON). Engineer brigades, for example, often have OPCON of engineer battalions, of which the sustainment brigade has ADCON.

Logisticians should embrace these opportunities to support occupationally diverse units. According to Army Doctrine Publication 4-0, Sustainment, ensuring freedom of action, and extending the operational reach of supported units are key aspects of the sustainment warfighting function; providing ADCON support is a key element in accomplishing this.

The supply and logistics expertise of a sustainment brigade's staff makes it particularly well suited to assist in property accountability and financial reconciliation. Nonetheless, providing ADCON services to non-organic, often geographically disparate, units poses challenges. Close interaction and coordination with battalion-level staffs is essential to effectively processing actions arising from these units.

A deployed brigade staff must establish a clear understanding of the proper channels and relevant battalion action officers involved in processing FLIPLs and other ADCON

actions. Clear and constant communication will go a long way toward bridging the continuity gaps inherent in partial attachment.

With regard to the challenge of geographic separation of units sharing a command relationship, there are no tricks or shortcuts. Hard work, clear communication, and consistent procedures are the only way to successfully route FLIPLs through the necessary channels, which are often on forward operating bases.

Keeping It Short

Processing FLIPLs always is tedious and time-consuming. From start to finish, the simplest of FLIPLs requires action by at least 10 individuals (the initiator, responsible officer, battalion S-4, brigade S-4, accountable officer, property book officer, appointing authority, investigating officer, legal advisor, and approval authority). This number can increase in more complex cases.

To compare it with the military legal system, processing a special court martial from initiation to sentencing requires action by only seven individuals (the prosecutor, company commander, battalion commander, brigade commander, division commander, defense attorney, and the military judge).

However, an efficient staff with a working knowledge of Army Regulation 735-5, Property Accountability Policies, will recognize opportunities to streamline the process. They will not do this by cutting corners, which will only compound the problem of property accountability, but instead by leveraging regulatory leniency where possible.

The easiest way to streamline the FLIPL process is to conduct "short FLIPLs" in situations where the facts are readily apparent, and unnecessary investigative steps can be avoided. Commanders have the regulatory authority to direct short FLIPLs when the facts clearly indicate whether or not a loss resulted from negligence. Rather than appoint an investigating of-



Capt. Zachary Savarie, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) foreign excess personal property officer for Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan, conducts a joint inventory with soldiers from the Afghan National Army. (Photo by Spc. Charles M. Willingham)

ficer to make a recommendation, a commander can simply make a determination.

Short FLIPLs can be used more often than they are, and the option should always be kept in mind, especially while deployed. Battlefield losses, which represent a large portion of items lost in theater, often present an excellent opportunity to bypass the investigative process and make a determination based on known facts.

It is usually undisputed in the case of battlefield losses that the damage or destruction was caused by enemy action rather than fault on the part of the Soldiers involved. Using short FLIPLs in such cases can significantly reduce processing time and, just as importantly, shield busy units from unnecessary expenditure of resources at a time when they should be particularly focused on their mission and Soldiers' needs.

Before recommending a short FLIPL, staffs should be cognizant that there may be other considerations beyond financial responsibility. For example, investigations are required when controlled items are

lost or destroyed, regardless of suspicion of fault.

An awareness of the property accountability challenges that will be faced in a deployed environment will go a long way toward taking the steps necessary to meet them. A brigade staff that is prepared from the outset will be able to provide quality support both to the brigade commander and subordinate command teams.

In the end, there is no substitute for hard work, consistent procedures, clear communication, and thorough regulatory knowledge. While property accountability in theater is necessarily tedious and at times aggravating, the efficient processing of FLIPLs inestimably supports the sustainment function, attached units, and mission accomplishment.

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