

A photograph of two soldiers in camouflage uniforms working with ammunition. The soldier on the left is wearing a headset and looking down at a large spool of ammunition. The soldier on the right, wearing a name tag that reads "JOHNSON", is also looking down at the ammunition. They are in an outdoor setting, possibly a training range, with a wooden table in front of them. The background is slightly blurred, showing trees and a building.

Joint Special Operations Forces Logistics Talent Management

■ By Col. Steven L. Allen and Lt. Col. Dan Heape

Master Sgt. Sanfa Johnson, assigned to Special Operations Command Europe, works with his German counterpart to prepare ammunition during the German Armed Forces Badge for Weapons Proficiency (Schuetzenschnur) qualification at Panzer Range Complex in Boeblingen, Germany, on Nov. 19, 2014. (Photo by Jason Johnston)



All leaders seek to recruit, develop, and retain the very best personnel for their organizations. The core competencies and attributes that special operations forces (SOF) desire in a logistician are no more “special” than those of any other logistician in the conventional force. However, logisticians assigned in support of SOF are exposed to additional skills, authorities, funding streams, and nonstandard means to sustain geographically dispersed, small-scale operations.

Recruiting, developing, and retaining logisticians to perform these skills can be much more difficult in the joint environment. The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has enjoyed success in recruiting and developing SOF logisticians by instituting a holistic, cyclic process.

SOCOM’s ideal joint logistics officers are multifunctional experts in core functions. They possess specific skill sets to support SOF operations using conventional and nonstandard logistics. Critical thinking skills and the ability to communicate effectively are paramount. These logisticians must be able to influence outside, within, and between disparate organizations and chains of command.

They must possess technical skills and the ability to apply those skills in austere environments, often acting alone. They must be broadly experienced and adaptable across all levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic). Understanding industrial base capability and capacity is critical. They must be able to operate in the

joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial framework.

SOF Operational Environment

SOCOM’s mission is to synchronize the planning of special operations and provide SOF personnel to support persistent, networked, and distributed geographic combatant command operations and protect and advance the nation’s interests. SOCOM understands the importance of operating in a joint environment and knowing each service component’s selection process when considering logistics officers for joint assignments.

When it comes to logisticians, SOCOM’s goal is to focus on recruiting the best and relying on strong leadership and training to develop joint SOF logisticians who are able to meet the complex demands of the future joint operational environment.

The realities of today’s strategic environment demand that our logisticians refine how they think about challenges and how the global joint logistics enterprise applies the principles of logistics in support of military strategy.

A new era of increasingly complex challenges has increased competition short of armed conflict, formerly called the “gray zone.” SOF is uniquely designed to operate in this environment, and in this environment SOF provides the greatest value to the nation by engaging early to prevent and deter armed conflict.

Consequently, the demand for

FEATURES

The U.S. Special Operations Command recruits logistics officers with specific skills to support special operations forces in a joint environment.

SOF has increased. SOF has been transformed from forces designed to deploy globally for short-duration missions to globally deployed forces that are geographically dispersed for long-duration operations.

By design, SOF logistics capabilities are built to sustain small-scale episodic operations, actions, and activities. SOF relies heavily on service component support to provide common-user logistics starting 15 days after initial entry. This has worked well over the past 15 years because SOF leveraged mature theaters alongside the conventional force and strategic partners—and in a relatively resource-rich environment.

Today, SOF has increased its presence in immature theaters, mostly outside the declared theater of active armed conflict and definitely where conventional force logistics support is less robust or nonexistent. Even in historically mature theaters like the U.S. Central Command, force management constraints have resulted in fewer logisticians being deployed to support operations.

Moreover, the joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial community operates in a global environment in which access, basing, and overflight authorities have significantly reduced logistics lines of communication. Sometimes authorities, processes, and systems do not move at the speed of operations, which ultimately increases the operational risk of sustaining SOF.

The Joint SOF Logistician

As the global SOF enterprise expands because of operational needs, SOF logisticians are increasingly required to operate semiautonomously, within austere environments, and by leveraging conventional and non-standard logistics capabilities. This operational environment demands logisticians who are masters of the eight principles of sustainment. Those principles, outlined in Army Doctrine Publication 4-0, Sustainment, are integration, anticipation, responsiveness, simplicity, econ-

omy, survivability, continuity, and improvisation.

SOF assignments provide logisticians with opportunities to perfect these principles and then return to the conventional force with that experience. SOCOM has multiple joint logistics officer assignments at various places, including at SOCOM headquarters, at one of its seven theater special operations commands (TSOCs), which are operationally controlled by the geographic combatant commands, and within special operations joint task forces or combined joint special operations task forces.

Given SOF's expanded role, how does SOCOM recruit or influence assignments for SOF joint logisticians who have the right skills? And how does SOCOM work within the framework of each service component's SOF assignments, personnel selection processes, talent management practices, and assignment cycles? First, let's review each service component's SOF officer selection process.

Army SOF Assignments

Army logisticians are ultimately selected for SOF assignment through a comprehensive process involving the SOCOM logistics director, the Human Resources Command, the Army Special Operations Command G-4, the 528th Sustainment Brigade commander, the 1st Special Forces Command, and the TSOC J-4s.

Working in advance of the Army's two assignment cycles, SOF leaders recruit or seek to retain logisticians to fill SOF assignments. A list of officers is provided to the Human Resources Command usually no later than the first week of November.

The Army's senior logistics leaders also play a critical role in selecting G-4s and J-4s for the Army Special Operations Command, SOCOM, and the TSOCs. It is important to note that the needs of the Army may still take precedence. Although SOCOM prefers logistics officers who have previous SOF experience, the

reality is that too much time in SOF assignments may not enhance a logistician's career.

An ideal Army candidate is an officer whose early key developmental time was spent in an Army Special Forces group forward support company or group support battalion and who later returned to SOF for broadening time as a field-grade officer.

Air Force SOF Assignments

The Air Force operates on a three-movement cycle and considers SOF time to be a natural part of a logistician's potential career assignments. The Air Force uses a board of developmental teams that vet officers with a documented record of superb performance and high potential to serve in positions of greater responsibility. Although the developmental teams play a large role in assignments for officers to SOCOM, leaders within SOCOM are also able to influence assignments.

For the most part, the Air Force picks its very best to support SOF; that being said, it would prefer to have its officers placed in SOF assignments earlier in their careers so they can meet other milestones that the Air Force deems important to their careers. Most SOF billets for Air Force officers are at the field-grade level.

Navy SOF Assignments

The Navy's process of selecting Supply Corps officers is driven by an internal SOCOM board working with the Navy Personnel Command. The senior Navy supply officer at SOCOM leverages the experience and expertise of the other supply officers at SOCOM to select incoming officers.

Professional reputation within the community, previous experience, education, subspecialties, and an operational board screening are factors in the selection process. Other considerations are the officer's desires, career progression, and the needs of the Navy.

In considering career progression, the timing for assignment to SOCOM or the SOF enterprise is important. Navy Supply Corps officers under consideration for SOF are expected to be well-rounded and have experience in many areas within the Navy and joint services. Having too many tours in one focus area may not be career-enhancing and must be considered during the selection process.

Marine Corps SOF Assignments

The Marine Corps seeks officers who have completed certain joint requirements or have demonstrated success in a joint environment. The joint duty assignment list drives manning requirements. After a 10-day review period, the SOCOM J-1 formally responds to Marine Corps Manpower Management Officer Assignments with a "concur" or "non-concur" for the assignment of a Marine Corps logistics officer.

If selections are rejected, SOCOM provides justification and the Marine Corps offers new nominees until concurrence is reached. Once a Marine is deemed qualified and validated by Marine Corps leaders in the SOCOM J-1 and J-4, then a report date is set.

Return on Investment

The attributes and core competencies of SOF logisticians allow the joint global SOF logistics enterprise to meet the demands of SOF now and in the future. Recruiting, educating, and empowering talented officers with the desired traits is the true goal behind SOF talent management. This process cultivates well-rounded and resilient logisticians who understand how to apply these skills to support conventional and SOF missions.

SOCOM recognizes the importance of educating the broader joint community about SOF in an effort to advance the global logistics network. The SOCOM J-4 has achieved much success by working with the joint staff and the Army Logistics

University to implement an eight-hour course of instruction about SOF in the Joint Logistics Course at Fort Lee, Virginia.

SOCOM also recruits SOF logisticians by leveraging service programs in which logisticians are exposed to different strategic partners, skills, and authorities. An example of these programs include interagency fellowships, Training With Industry, advanced civil schooling, and other joint assignments.

As SOCOM strives to meet the requirements of future special operations in support of national strategic objectives, a logistics force with a wider array of experiences and skills is required to ensure success.

The logistics community must cultivate talented logistics officers so that it can provide the SOF community with greater adaptability and broader skill sets. Broadening, key developmental, and functional and multifunctional assignments within SOF are the trajectory for success for officers, SOCOM, and the service components.

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