

Nonstandard Logistics Success in Unconventional Warfare

■ By Capt. Christopher J. Sheehan

NSL

Army Special Forces Soldiers proceed to their objective during a joint training exercise in Louisiana on March 8, 2014. (Photo by Spc. Travis Jones)



FEATURES

Logistics support for special operations forces requires the right people, flexibility, and creative thinking.

Sustaining Army special operations forces (ARSOF) can be difficult in any operational environment (OE). But it can be almost overwhelming in a complex environment such as the tactical level of unconventional warfare (UW).

UW is defined in Training Circular 18-01, Special Forces Unconventional Warfare, as “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”

The UW environment replicated during training rotations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, has allowed ARSOF units to test and validate UW sustainment, which is known as nonstandard logistics (NSL). These JRTC exercises are focused on validating UW operations and NSL as nested within the vision and priorities of ARSOF 2022.

Through the use of decisive action training environment exercises with regionally aligned force brigade combat teams, ARSOF can meet its 2022 requirements by focusing on interdependent operations in a joint environment. This interdependence with joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) partners enables a testing ground for UW and NSL operations at JRTC.

Although NSL in a UW environment can be daunting at first, it is practical when the right people plan operations with creativity and thoroughness. Successful sustainment in UW requires the right people in the support center (SUPCEN), a plan that has redundancy and flexibility, and creative planning and execution.

The Right Leaders

During operations in a UW environment, a special operations task force (SOTF) will conduct crucial warfighting functions to enable and protect ARSOF and indigenous elements on the ground. A unit’s operations center (OPCEN) provides

mission command, and its SUPCEN is the battalion-level entity responsible for all sustainment functions. The SOTF headquarters, encompassing the OPCEN and SUPCEN, normally operates in a secured area with interdependent ties to the brigade combat team.

The SOTF SUPCEN is the critical node that plans, synchronizes, and conducts sustainment operations for all SOTF elements, regardless of location in the area of responsibility. Traditionally the SUPCEN will be the sustainment node that connects operations for all classes of supply and provides administrative and medical oversight.

Normally the SUPCEN operates under the auspices of the headquarters and headquarters support company (HSC) commander, who is usually an area of concentration 18A (Special Forces officer). With guidance from the SOTF command team, the HSC commander will provide direction for the SUPCEN.

This is different than a conventional battalion’s support structure in which a forward support company commander and a battalion S-4 conduct sustainment operations. In the conventional battalion, both of these officers would normally be logistics officers. In the SOTF SUPCEN structure, the HSC commander is in charge of sustainment overall but is supported by the SOTF S-4, who may or may not be a logistics officer.

Having the right people in the SUPCEN is vital to success when conducting NSL. This selection starts with the SUPCEN director and his noncommissioned officer-in-charge. The director will normally be the HSC commander, and his noncommissioned officer (NCO) will traditionally be the HSC first sergeant. These two individuals provide senior special operations experience and mission command to the SUPCEN.

The Right Support

The SUPCEN director and NCO are further enabled by support from their staff members who are nor-



Soldiers use a nonstandard platform to covertly transport supplies through the resistance network at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Photo by Capt. Christopher Sheehan)

mally conventional logistics Soldiers trained in special operations support. The SUPCEN staff mirrors that of a conventional brigade support battalion support operations section. This staff should include senior and experienced Soldiers such as the SOTF S-4 supply officer, a class III (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) NCO, a class V (ammunition) NCO, and Soldiers specializing in other critical sustainment functions.

The SUPCEN's logistics Soldiers bring both conventional and unconventional knowledge of sustainment processes and provide a foundation for the SUPCEN to conduct sustainment operations. The section's senior and experienced ARSOF Soldiers build upon this foundation with their knowledge of building and using resistance networks.

Intelligence analysis within the SOTF from forward elements and

JiIM partners also adds situational awareness. The HSC commander and first sergeant provide continuous direction with operational and intelligence support from the OPCEN. The OPCEN will also dictate logistics priorities and help synchronize and forecast sustainment operations.

Ensuring that operations, intelligence, and sustainment are tied together is critical to maintaining a common operational picture. These three functions are tied through shared knowledge during shift changeover briefs and update briefs in which representatives for all warfighting functions are present to ensure the commander and his subordinate directors are fully aware of the common operational picture.

This picture is maintained and developed as the operation progresses through continued synchronization within the SOTF and with JiIM

partners.

Sustainment operations are more challenging when operations are compartmentalized because of security concerns. This requires greater flexibility when more conventional and interdependent means of intelligence and logistics cannot be used.

Successful NSL starts with the combination of logistics and special operations in the SUPCEN and is furthered through the SUPCEN's ability to synchronize and fuse with the OPCEN and its mission command functions.

The Right Plan

After choosing the right people and integrating them into the proper mission command nodes, it is time to start developing a concept of support. The formatting of this plan will be similar to a conventional concept of support, but its details will be drasti-



Medical supplies are hidden in a painter's can for transport through the resistance network at the Joint Readiness Training Center. (Photo by Capt. Christopher Sheehan)

cally different.

The most important aspect of this plan is ensuring redundancy and flexibility. The plan is developed well in advance of operations with bottom-up input from the ARSOF teams that will be forward. The SOTF commander will have final approval of the concept of support, and the SUPCEN will be responsible for resourcing it.

Input from the lowest levels is critical because the main distribution network will be the local or host-nation resistance network during early phases of UW when ARSOF elements are forward of the line of troops, international borders, or other boundaries. These networks will be developed and used by senior ARSOF Soldiers on the ground.

While conducting logistics operations forward of the line of troops,

security is paramount. During a UW campaign, even the slightest U.S. signature in a denied area can compromise the overall campaign. To ensure security throughout the operation, it is best to use varying methods for distributing supplies to forward elements.

Unlike a conventional distribution network in which conspicuous Army vehicles travel the same supply routes at predictable times, the resistance distribution network has to use inconsistent methods and platforms. This includes using a variety of vehicles and local national drivers and operating during the most secure and inconspicuous times to ensure no disruption to the local pattern of life.

Flexibility in the Plan

Having various distribution sys-

tems will allow flexibility in case one network, individual, or shipment becomes compromised. A system of backups will make sustainment to forward elements more reliable.

To identify primary and backup methods of communication, Army units use the acronym PACE, which stands for primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency. Using this method, units determine four ways to communicate with their team members and headquarters. The PACE method can be applied to sustainment as well.

A PACE plan for a class I (subsistence) in conventional warfare might identify rotary-wing assets as the primary plan for moving class I to a supported unit. But in a UW environment, this method would immediately compromise operational security and would most likely be

identified as the emergency plan. A better example of a primary method of class I sustainment in UW would be forward elements procuring food and water from local farms, vendors, and markets.

The PACE plan would be constantly updated as the operational picture changes, such as a variation in the local area security or movement of the friendly forward line of troops. The plan must be validated and tested operationally for security and sustainability. For example, if a forward element is purchasing a noticeable amount of rice from a local farm, the team might begin purchasing rice from a vendor in a different town to maintain a low signature.

The PACE plan would be different for an element in another area of operations that has no local market or vendors. In that case, the PACE plan might rely on resupply activities from the SOTF instead of local procurement. This may compromise the element's security, but it might be the only sustainment available until later phases of the operation.

Sometimes multiple elements can use the same mechanisms and networks for sustainment, but this may risk operational security if compartmentalization is necessary to the overall campaign. This is where redundancy and flexibility are key.

The worthiness of the plan is not measured in efficiency as it is in conventional methods in which the goal is to move supplies expeditiously to maneuver elements. The NSL plan is based on effectively resupplying forward elements with minimal chance of compromise. These mechanisms may be expensive, time-consuming, and inefficient, but security and sustainment are the priority above all else.

With this mindset, certain friction must be accepted into the plan. A 50-percent loss (from pilferage or theft) of supplies during a resupply mechanism might have to be acceptable if it is an operationally secure method of resupply. This may be an acceptable risk for class I resupply

activities but a dangerous course of action for class V.

No plan survives first contact, and a logistics support plan is no different. Combining doctrinally trained and experienced logisticians with ARSOF officers and NCOs will provide the best knowledge base for building a plan that requires unconventional methods of distribution, procurement, and security. The right people making the right plan with backup methods of support will allow for success. Once again, ensure the plan is thorough, refined from the bottom up, redundant, and flexible.

The Right Thinking

With an emphasis Armywide to improve, implement, and use doctrine, units should not have to reinvent the wheel when planning a military operation. Although UW is, of course, unconventional, UW units should not throw out doctrine during their planning processes. Instead, they should take available doctrine (such as Army Techniques Publication 3-05.40, Special Operations Sustainment) and use it as a foundation to build the plan.

The thought processes and formatting of traditional logistics planning, such as the concept of support and the logistics estimate, have value. We must take these processes and add flexibility and creativity in order to shape them to the current OE. The emphasis on creativity will allow special operations logisticians to use all available assets to safely and effectively sustain forward elements on the battlefield.

Funding

Doctrinal framework adds relevance to the funding and authorities aspects of ARSOF and UW sustainment. The conventional logistics understanding of funds distribution and methods are a useful knowledge base. In addition to that base, logisticians should understand the legal ramifications and authorities for using funding when supporting UW elements, especially in denied territories.

As with the overall concept of support, the commander will have final approval on the release of funds, but only after a thorough legal review from the SOTF staff judge advocate. Once the commander has approved a legally cleared plan, it becomes the OPCEN's responsibility to synchronize it and the SUPCEN's responsibility to resource it.

One creative approach to logistics problem-solving is the sustainment of forward elements through monetary means. This does not mean a simple cash transfer or even a bank account transfer. Both raise signatures and are easily compromised in an environment where maintaining a steady pattern of life means success.

Figuring out how to creatively, effectively, and safely transfer money, or something that can be used as currency, to a forward element presents a unique problem set that is different in every OE. The SOTF may be able to use local money in one area but in another OE be forced to use another item that has value. Cash may work in a city center, but a goat in a rural area is just as valuable and easily sold or traded.

The smart planner must also exercise legal caution when using money as an enabler. As with any plan in UW, the chain of command must approve the course of action before execution and a legal review must be conducted to ensure the proper titles and authorities.

Creative Procurement

While conducting NSL in UW, a logistics resupply operation will at some point become a tactical operation that also includes logistics. During this shift in operational stance, maneuver and security become paramount to ensure that resistance distribution networks do not become compromised. Compromising a network has dire consequences, to include loss of trusted resistance personnel, effects on morale, and least importantly, loss of critical supplies.

To avoid this defeat, it is critical for the OPCEN and SUPCEN both

to exercise creativity in planning and executing logistics operations. This creativity is expressed in the SOTF's ability to fill standardized military supplies requests with nonstandard supplies. This means looking outside of the normal Army supply system and using commercial off-the-shelf products as well as locally purchased items.

effort, and once the resourcing and packaging is complete and supplies are ready for forward movement to the forward line of troops and beyond, the OPCEN takes over planning and execution. This is where the logisticians' work is handed off to the seasoned ARSOF Soldiers who then conduct the tactical planning for movement, distribution, and use

The SOTF is responsible for training and directing the resistance network and locals to better support and augment logistics operations. A partnership between a senior mechanic in the SOTF and a local auto-body shop can support an entire SOTF's ground maintenance needs.

An ARSOF sergeant training with a dairy farmer in his area of operations can support his team's internal class I needs. The forward distribution of supplies may be required months or years in advance to ensure security and to meet the needs of an expanding resistance force that is conducting combat operations. This is where effectiveness is king, and greed for efficiency can cause a downfall.

A class I request could be met with a sack of grain and maybe even a live goat as opposed to a box of meals ready-to-eat.

Because operational security is a critical aspect of NSL, it is wise to use locally procured items that maintain low visibility as opposed to items that may appear American. A class I request could be met with a sack of grain and maybe even a live goat as opposed to a box of meals ready-to-eat. Acquiring a goat and grain through local supply networks is much more challenging for a supply sergeant than simply dropping a request through the dining facility.

Similarly, logisticians will have to work hand in hand with medical planners to fill class VIII (medical materiel) requests. Medical planners cannot push forward U.S. Army improved first aid kits to teams in denied territories. Instead, the planners need to identify the availability of and method of procurement for local medical supplies in advance.

An item as simple as gauze may not be easily procured in a foreign territory where drug stores are not local fixtures. Prior arrangements, contracting, and goodwill gestures with local hospitals and discreet private doctors might be required. Creatively and discreetly resourcing these supply requests is the job of ARSOF logisticians.

Once the concept of support is an actionable and ongoing sustainment

of the supplies.

Although the mission may appear to be a simple resupply of batteries, gauze, and oil filters, it is handled the same as any tactical mission with inherent risks to the campaign's mission and to the lives of the Soldiers and locals involved.

When approaching the concept of support, planners must be creative and think beyond normal asset utilization. A planner might identify as suitable transportation a donkey in one OE, resistance rail lines in another OE, and an ambulance in a third. All of these assets have varying degrees of speed, security, and maximum gross weight, but they must be applied to effectively, not efficiently, sustain forward elements.

Partnerships

Interdependence also plays a large role. It is critical for ARSOF to partner with conventional military forces to sustain a SOTF. The SOTF's relationship, whether direct support or area support, with brigade combat teams, sustainment brigades, and other units is necessary as the SOTF's sustainment needs can sometimes outgrow its internal capabilities. Nesting into the local conventional support plan is critical if operationally feasible.

The challenges of NSL in UW have no set solutions. Doctrinal sources help build a framework, but to truly support special operations in UW we must choose the right people regardless of rank and position while using the right thought processes to produce a viable plan.

The warfighting functions of protection, intelligence, and movement and maneuver are all fused under mission command to enable the OPCEN and the SUPCEN to allow the warfighter on the ground to stay in the fight with reduced risk of compromise. UW units must close the gap between the sustainment and operations functions, involve the right people with the right guidance, and think creatively in order to successfully sustain the force in a UW environment.

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