



Sustainment at the Forefront in the Future

*An Interview With Retired
Gen. John Campbell*

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard



Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Gen. John Campbell, and Afghan Defense Minister Mohammed Masoom Stanekzai visit Forward Operating Base Fenty in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on Dec. 18, 2015. (Photo by Air Force Staff Sgt. Tony Coronado)

The 34th vice chief of staff of the Army discusses his experiences with sustainment and the importance it will play on tomorrow's battlefield.

After serving as the 34th Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. John F. Campbell's distinguished career culminated with his assignment as commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, during which he oversaw the day-to-day operations of joint forces across the region. Throughout his 36 years of service, the Army regularly transformed its approach to sustainment on the battlefield. In this interview, Campbell offers his impressions of how the Army can build readiness for the future fight.

Can you discuss the evolution of battlefield sustainment and readiness throughout your career?

I break my career into two big segments: everything prior to 9/11 and everything after. Growing up as an infantry platoon leader, company commander, and battalion commander pre-9/11, I really just focused on that small unit. Sustainment in those days was making sure you had enough chow, fuel, and water for your particular unit for a particular mission. You didn't think much outside that box.

For the most part, we had light and heavy forces; I was a lieutenant in the heavy, mechanized world and was a captain and above in the light world. In the heavy world, we were more unit-equipment focused, and warrant officers handled all of our maintenance issues. In the light world, we were Soldier-equipment focused and carried what we needed on our backs. We'd go in with about 72 hours of supplies and then, hopefully, sustainment would arrive.

After 9/11, everything changed in how we did sustainment, particularly the force structure. I was the executive officer for Gen. Pete Schoomaker when he became chief of staff of the Army in 2003. He started off looking at a modular force and how we got brigade combat teams to the fight. Our idea of logistics changed completely in how we had to organize and where we

put our great logisticians. We talked about being expeditionary and tried to do that early on, but we really didn't understand what we were getting into in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

After a while, we fell in on combat outposts and forward operating bases, and we got spoiled. Operator-type people come to expect it's just going to happen, and that's what happened to me because I always had great S-4s and G-4s. The biggest thing for me was how you viewed logistics based on the positions of leadership you held.

For commanders at any level, logistics can be the thing that hampers where you go and the ability to sustain your forces for whatever mission you're going on. In the world I grew up in, exercises like Reforger and Team Spirit trained logistics in real time at the division and corps levels. And we always took sustainment for granted because we had great people and great systems.

What were your biggest logistics challenges while deployed, and how did your logisticians overcome them?

Initially, the biggest challenge was making sure our logisticians were synced with the commander. In the past as we developed a plan, we'd have different courses of action and then it was kind of an afterthought—can we sustain the plan? Then we'd bring logisticians in, and they'd say we can or we can't and we'd have to adjust. Today we understand how important it is to bring our logisticians into the planning process from the very beginning.

Our logisticians have taken advantage of lessons learned from the years in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the past we might have said we couldn't move from point A to point B because we didn't have the trucks to be able to move all the equipment and people. So they figured out that we can go buy or rent the trucks or something simple like that. They've been very creative with taking a

complex problem set and coming up with a solution to support the operator. They understand that, in the end, it's their job to support operations on the ground.

For the past 16 years, the Army has relied on contractor support and supplies and equipment that were readily available in theater. How should the Army prepare to be more expeditionary in the future?

The Army has gotten away from the expeditionary mindset because we've been spoiled all these years. We are probably going to go into contested areas in the future where we will not be able to depend on contractors early on.

Much of the need for contractors developed because we did not have, or got rid of, those skill sets. Some of it had to do with how we fought using restricted force manning levels and could only have a certain number of Soldiers on the ground.

We had to be creative, and using contractors was a solution. I think we will continue to have contractors in the long run, but we may not have them initially when we enter a theater.

In the past we've gotten through this challenge by pre-positioning stocks. Whether water, fuel, or vehicles, we've been able to pre-position stocks in places where we might have to fight. There are pluses and minuses as you do that in terms of maintaining stocks and keeping them ready to go, but pre-positioning has definitely helped us.

Technology is also going to help us get things quicker. You see it today in the commercial world with drones delivering fast food or packages. Maybe we'll prepackage a whole bunch of drones to quickly resupply Soldiers going in on the ground on a contested battlefield.

In the end, what has hurt us in the past is money and budget. The Army struggled because we did not

have a predictable budget, and we have to have a predictable budget to help the warfighter and enable our logisticians.

I also think a lot of it is mindset. We have to get out of the mindset of expecting to go in and have hot food within 24 hours. I keep saying it: we're spoiled. We go to Afghanistan and Iraq and we have McDonald's, we have Burger King. But we have very, very resilient Soldiers, and I think if they understand what they're going into, they'll do fine.

Can you elaborate on the effects technology will have on future Army sustainment operations?

Technology is wonderful and saves lives. Whether it's in the medical arena, better protection on vehicles, or ammunition that can go farther and faster, I think that's all good. Aerial platforms that enable supplies to be brought forward quicker help our logisticians reduce



During an interview, retired Gen. John F. Campbell discusses his experiences with logistics during his Army career. (Photo by Matthew Howard)

the amount of weight we take in. And when we don't have to take in as much water, food, or ammunition, we don't have to burn as much fuel.

Information technology is also making our logisticians more efficient. Things like Global Combat Support System—Army and radio-frequency identification technology are enabling more modern business processes across the force, from arms rooms to motor pools.

But we can never forget that we have to continue bringing in the best and brightest Soldiers. We must continue educating them to make sure they understand their capabilities, and then we can couple that education with technology as we move forward. Technology is meant to make the job more efficient, lethal, and capable, but the Soldier has to understand how to utilize it.

In the end, it's still going to come down to the Soldier on the ground. An easy example is this: all of our Soldiers understand how to use GPS devices to figure out where they're going. But if somebody jams

it, do they know how to use a compass? The human performance piece is going to be key in anything the Army does.

You've talked about the slow decision-making processes in the military. How can we benefit from improving our processes?

We always need to look at our processes and planning efforts and continue to improve them. Technology now evolves faster than a budget cycle, and we need to keep pace with logistics requirements. Looking at different businesses and how they interact with the Army, I try to ask, "What's the issue with industry and the Army, and why is this working or not working?"

A theme that keeps coming up is talking to industry early on, making sure you're synced, and working out the requirement. Industry wants to get out there and help and invest some of its own money to get where the Army wants to go. But if the Army's not talking to industry early on,

we're not helping each other.

In the commercial world, technology is out there that our Soldiers already use. Whether it's the latest phone or you name it, Soldiers continually adapt and upgrade every two years. But the Army is still stuck on the phone from four or five years ago. Why can't we get the same thing and the best that industry has to offer? We can, but our processes stop us.

I know there's a lot of work being done by the secretary of the Army and chief of staff of the Army to get after acquisition reform. When we fight as a joint force alongside the other services, we fight very well together. But we come back in the building [the Pentagon], and we're fighting each other over budget. We're stovepiped.

Why do we have three of the six largest air forces in the world? The Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps all have fighter aircraft. Do we need that? The same with radios; we all have different radios. So I think our processes, if working from a joint perspective, can make us better, more efficient, and save money, while at the same time get the best possible equipment for our Soldiers in the future.

Sustainment will be key in the future fight. How do you see the flow of supplies into a theater in a contested environment?

I was looking at a quote from Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower recently, which says, "You will not find it difficult to prove that battles, campaigns, and even wars have been won or lost primarily because of logistics."

As all the services continue to plan for future battles, sustainment is going to be at the forefront as they think about executing those battles. You're going to have to look at how to move equipment there—whether by pre-positioning or by getting more ships, vehicles, or aircraft to move it. We're limited by the number of trucks, ships, and aircraft that



Gen. John Campbell observes Afghan National Army commandos performing a mortar training exercise at Camp Morehead, Afghanistan, on Nov. 19, 2015. (Photo by Air Force Staff Sgt. Tony Coronado)

can move stuff and by the time and distance that it takes to get there.

In a perfect world, we would know exactly where we're going to fight ahead of time. But like we saw in Desert Storm and other operations, we need six to nine months to build up the force before we cross the line. In the world we live in today, we're not going to have that luxury. We have to get into a contested environment much quicker. But we shouldn't think it's going to be easy; it's always going to be very, very tough.

We have great combatant commanders that are looking at all the different theaters and figuring out where their hot spots are. Prior to Afghanistan, if you had said we'd be there for 16 years, nobody would've believed you—the same with Iraq. But I know those combatant commanders are now thinking about where we'll be in the future, and they'll plan accordingly to make sure we're set as we go in.

From your experiences, how can we work with our coalition partners to build capacity and better enable logistics?

We have the best logistics system in the world. We have the best logisticians, and we're the envy of every other country I've ever dealt with. As the International Security Assistance Force and Resolute Support commander, I had about 48 troop-supporting countries in Afghanistan that all looked to us for help. They didn't have the capabilities.

What we're trying to do now is help build their capacity. And there's a lot of ways to get after that, especially education. Bringing officers from other countries and tying them into our school system and all of our logistics courses can develop leaders that are able to do what we do.

In the end, it's about having the resources and the capabilities. Most countries don't spend enough on defense to be able to have those, so

it's going to take time. NATO and other partners continue to get better and grow their capabilities, not only from a warfighting perspective but also from a sustainment perspective. We've got to continue to help them. Identifying our logisticians who have worked alongside coalition partners and leveraging that experience certainly helps.

Joint exercises with those coali-

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tion partners also grow their capacity. Some nations have particular skill sets in logistics that, I think, they do very well. We have to continue encouraging them to build upon that but, at the same time, look at the holistic picture of where they can go and sometimes provide them with the resources to get there. We had to do that in Afghanistan because some country would provide several hundred folks but no truck or water capability, no cooks able to provide hot chow, and no medics to provide health care. These are areas that we have to continue to look at.

Having been to Afghanistan many, many times, I've seen how much they want to continue building their fighting force. But they know they're only as good as what they build in the sustainment piece of it. We can't have what's happened in the past when we've provided them with vehicles. They drive them, they break, then they don't have the means to fix them, and we just continue to give them more. We need to get to the point where we show them how to do it, and they can feed thousands, so to speak. Education is key.

What was the greatest lesson you learned in the Army that you'd like to share with leaders and Soldiers?

Leadership makes a difference. You have to have accountability, and everyone has to be accountable for their own actions. Leaders get Soldiers to do what they thought they couldn't do.

When you're involved in this crucible that we call combat, you can try to prepare yourself, but it's unlike anything you thought it could be. You want your decision-making

ability to be split-second because you will have to make life or death calls in an instant. The way you get there is continually training and talking to leadership. For me, continuing to educate our young Soldiers is everything.

The second thing is the relationships and trust that you build when you're a private joining a squad or a lieutenant joining a platoon. With the exception of maybe firefighters and police officers, our profession differs from others because Soldiers put their lives on the line and depend on that guy to their left or that gal to their right. And so this trust factor—trust in your fellow Soldiers, trust in your leadership—is really, really key. Leadership makes a difference.

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