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Lessons Learned From Deploying a Supply Support Activity (SSA) to an Immature Operational Area



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Lessons Learned From Deploying a Supply Support Activity (SSA) to an Immature Operational Area

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The 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team's supply support activity learned that when a unit must provide sustainment in an immature operational area, it must stay mobile, conduct reconnaissance and coordination, make inventories a priority, and rally before the objective.

CALL Analyst note: The purpose of this article is to provide lessons learned and best practices from a brigade support battalion (BSB) supply support activity (SSA) that deployed in support of a named operation, Operation Atlantic Resolve.

According to Army Materiel Command officials, the Army had not deployed a Supply Support Activity (SSA) to a forward area in over a decade. The SSA of the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 4th Infantry Division, packed up their entire warehouse of more than 3,000 lines of stock, from nuts and bolts to tank tracks and engines, and deployed it to a completely new operational area. Although a whole SSA had been moved before, it had not been done like this.

When the Soldiers of the 64th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), 3rd ABCT, arrived in Poland in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, they found no unit to replace, no pre-established supply structures to fall in on, and certainly no one to show them the ropes. The brigade built everything from the ground up.

As the troops and tanks came rolling in, the SSA's job was to build combat power for an ABCT spread out along eight countries in Eastern Europe. As expected, not everything went right. However, leaders and soldiers learned lessons every step of the way and always accomplished the mission. These lessons are applicable to SSAs, BSBs, and professional logisticians.

Be mobile, even when not deployed

Even though Army doctrine tells SSAs to stay mobile, it is too easy for them to spread out and get comfortable. When an SSA goes to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, typically it does not need to bring its entire stock. The NTC has parts and supplies on site ready to issue as soon as the units arrive. When units arrive in Iraq or Afghanistan, nine times out of ten, they fall in on a preexisting SSA. Therefore, unless they receive a warning of a need to be mobile, there is no urgency to turn an SSA into a mobile warehouse capable of rapidly deploying and maneuvering around the battlefield.

Most of the issues faced by the 3rd ABCT's SSA were caused by rapidly transforming from a garrison-style warehouse into a highly mobile SSA capable of supporting a brigade in a deployed environment.

A key lesson learned from this experience is to go mobile, even if the Army is not ordering it directly.

By the time an SSA receives notification of a pending deployment, it is almost too late. Scheduled training exercises, ranges, gunneries, and taskings begin to take priority over a conversion to a mobile SSA. To make matters worse, when the brigade receives funding, supplies flood the warehouse. The SSA's workload goes

from 15 pallets of work per day to 50 pallets per day. All the pallets can be processed on the same day if personnel and processes are managed properly, but this leaves very little time to become mobile and expeditionary.

If SSA personnel choose to wait until the predeployment cycle to improve mobility, they should not wait until the end of the cycle. They should start as soon as possible. Waiting until the chaos stops may seem like the only time to accomplish the task, but it will create a significant backlog that will still be there when the unit arrives at its destination. If an SSA were to shut down 60 days early to prepare stock, deploy forces, and stand back up, it could face a situation much like the 3rd ABCT's SSA faced. When the SSA hit the ground on the other side, it had 20 containers or more of backlog. In addition, when an SSA deploys to an unestablished area, the support structures to catch back up are not available like they are in garrison. Having a backlog in the rear and a reasonable plan to overcome it is far better than having a backlog while deployed with limited resources to fix the problem.

Some of the things the 3rd ABCT's SSA did to increase its mobility index (which measures a warehouse's ability to deploy at a moment's notice) include:

- move stock into field pack-up mobile warehouse containers,
- position bulk items (such as engines and tank tracks) in 20-foot containers,
- and rework some internal processes.

Even an SSA not slated to deploy should move toward a more mobile storage system. The SSA leaders must build a rapid deployment standard operating procedure (SOP) and then rigorously train on it. The SOP should identify the quantity of containers needed to comfortably fit bulk stock and SSA equipment and create a plan for loading and inventorying.

An SSA scheduled to deploy should coordinate early with the supporting sustainment brigade to start supplying the rear detachment as soon as practical. This will give the SSA additional time to prepare and prevent a backlog.

Perform reconnaissance

Reconnaissance and coordination are part of any military operation, but deploying to an area where there is no unit to replace involves some extra considerations. First, the accountable officer or noncommissioned officer-in-charge needs to be present early. With no one on the other side to give guidance and recommendations, it is up to the SSA subject matter experts to identify issues, make plans to overcome them, and advise the command team. The biggest oversights will be the things normally taken for granted. Something as simple as missing electrical outlets could result in weeks of downtime.

Identifying problems early makes it possible to coordinate in advance to minimize the impact on the mission. Consider this example. The 3rd ABCT's SSA knew that computer connectivity would not be available on arrival, so the team arranged to have their satellite and computers arrive by airplane at the same time. Unfortunately, the equipment did not arrive for weeks because of flight delays. As a contingency, the advance team coordinated with U.S. Army Europe to resource equipment from the nearest unit in Germany to establish operations long before their supplies reached them. This strategy was a success. All units should coordinate for backup equipment support prior to a deployment.

Long before an SSA arrives in a new area, the leadership should identify what nearby resources are available for support. Communicate with these resource providers early on, find out what they can provide and their limitations. That way an SSA can plan for at least some support in an area that seems to have none.

The lesson learned is that even though there may be no local support structure, there should still be regional support.

Make inventories a priority

Do not compromise on performing inventories. During the first five days after hitting the ground, an SSA should conduct a 100 percent inventory of its entire stock to make sure everything is in order. It may be difficult to express to those outside the warehouse the importance of this process. It just does not brief well that units cannot get vehicle repair parts for nearly a week because Soldiers have to count washers and widgets. However, an inventory is so much more than that. It corrects issues that may have occurred in transit; those issues could slow down the operation later. Performing an inventory also familiarizes troops with the stock, thereby speeding up efficiency. Giving into this pressure and putting off inventories for the sake of the backlog, almost guarantees a clog in the system. The SSA may find this even harder to explain

The ball will already be in motion, operating tempo will be at its fastest, and the SSA will always be playing catch-up because there simply is no time to shut down operations and perform a full inventory. Leaders at all levels need to set the expectation that the SSA will not boot up all sections at once (stock control, storage, receiving, issue, and turn-in). Even a computer boots up one system at a time before going full force.

For an SSA, stock control and storage should do a full inventory first. It is reasonable, to dedicate a light detail to processing parts and preparing them for shipment during this time, but this should not be the primary focus. Only high-priority repair parts should be processed and shipped out during this time. Allow the other pieces of the logistics chain to accomplish their mission. Once the inventory is complete, dedicate a strong element to work through any backlog accumulated in transit. Then as the demand increases, open the turn-in section. Once through the backlog, the SSA can return to a normal battle rhythm.

Training

Although this sequence may not align perfectly with each situation, leaders need to plan for how to bring the SSA up to full strength once at the destination. The key component will always be effective cross-training of skills and exercising procedures prior to deployment.

The entire process will slow down and the SSA will not produce the desired results if troops must train while deployed. Hence, do not let Soldiers become worker drones that can only operate in one section of the warehouse. Train early, train often, and train as you will fight so that anyone can inventory, anyone can process, and anyone can turn in.

Use an objective rally point (ORP)

In basic tactics, a unit stops short of an objective to make final preparations before jumping into action. This location is an ORP. It allows troops to prepare their equipment, review the battle plan, and conduct last-minute reconnaissance to get a current update on their objective. The same concept is applied when deploying an SSA to an area without any support. Deploy first to an established area that can provide a full spectrum of support, get organized, and then jump forward into action. This was one strategy the 3rd ABCT's SSA was not able to implement, but it would have enhanced the team's mobility, reconnaissance, coordination, and inventories.

Summary

When the 3rd ABCT's SSA arrived in Poland, it faced all of these challenges and found ways to overcome them, but if the SSA had to do it all over again, it would have done things a little differently. The SSA would have arrived in Germany at least 30 days before the maneuver units and used the resources of the military bases there to expedite inventories and process backlogs. This would have allowed the SSA to use pre-established equipment and communication systems to sustain it until its delivery arrived. Then, when things were all set, the SSA would have been able to jump right into Poland and provide seamless support.

The success of the 3rd ABCT's SSA mission was based largely on getting back to the fundamentals of an expeditionary SSA. Many capabilities that are normally taken for granted were not available. To succeed in such an environment, leaders must diligently go down the checklist and get back to the basics of a mobile SSA focused on the brigade support area.

Leaders need to inform their higher commands about the needs of the SSA and the challenges to success. They should coordinate with their nearest support elements and understand what they can use to help them accomplish the mission. Most of all, they need to start early and practice, even before it becomes a requirement.

For the 3rd ABCT's SSA, this was the first time in 10 years that an entire SSA deployed to an unestablished area. Without a doubt, it will not be another 10 years before the next SSA follows in its footsteps. Start preparing now, and the only result will be excellence.