

Logistics

By Sid Heal

There is an old ditty that goes:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
for want of a shoe the horse was lost,
for want of a horse the general was lost,
for want of a general the battle was lost,
for want of a battle the war was lost.*

It clearly identifies and emphasizes the importance of logistics. Nevertheless, in law enforcement tactical operations, logistics is frequently the underdog when compared with more glamorous functions like operations or intelligence. But without logistics, tactical operations as a deliberate and organized activity become impossible because logistics sets the limits on what is operationally feasible. In its most fundamental form, the logistics function involves all that is required to move and maintain forces. It provides the “service and support” function¹ for all operations. It establishes limits on what is operationally possible. What a force is capable of doing is determined in large part by how it is equipped, supplied and moved. It answers operational questions like, Who? What? How much? How far? How long?

Of all the functions in a tactical operation, logistics is the most scientific. In fact, logistics can easily be defined as an applied science because it uses scientific knowledge, principles, tools and techniques to solve practical problems. Precise calculation is not only possible in logistics, but absolutely necessary. Items must be counted, distances must be measured and formulas and algorithms must be computed to predict things like the time it takes to move a given distance, the amount of food and fuel that will be necessary and the number and types of equipment and weapons that must be available when needed. Consequently, the most valuable tools of logisticians are more likely to be spreadsheets, databases, status boards and checklists, rather than weapons.

Procurement

The logistical function can be divided into four general roles, each of which is necessary to achieve a satisfactory solution. The first is procurement.

Procurement identifies the need to obtain the essential equipment, weapons, supplies, consumables and personnel. This will require a detailed knowledge of both assets and resources,² where they are located and how to obtain them. Arguably, personnel is the most important and the most complex and labor intensive of any of the responsibilities. People are “high maintenance” items. They not only need to be fed, clothed, equipped and paid, but they need rest and relief, not to mention matching their individual skills and abilities to appropriate tasks and assignments. Furthermore, the assignment of some personnel is inherent with a request for equipment, for example, pilots with aircraft, paramedics with ambulances, bus drivers with buses, heavy equipment operators with bulldozers, and so forth. Procurement is almost always a strategic function because much equipment needed in tactical operations is specialized in nature. Likewise, the necessity to pre-identify facilities and the use of pre-arranged loans and contracts or the need to access reserve funds requires the efforts of personnel at the highest levels of the parent organization.

Distribution

The second logistical role is distribution. Having the right equipment and personnel is not enough. It must be at the right place and time to be of any use. Distribution involves the dispersing of equipment and personnel to where and when they are most needed. The distribution role is a diverse process that encompasses both strategic and tactical means since some equipment and supplies may require efforts at the highest level of the

parent organization yet will be issued and used at the lowest levels. For the same reason, distribution will often be centralized, such as the use of supply dumps, staging areas and issue points, as well as decentralized, as with individual issue of specialized equipment. Moreover, the distribution role competes with the recovery role at the end of an operation and mistakes, inaccuracies and oversights in this role are difficult to correct when recovery becomes the focus of effort.³

Sustainment

Sustainment is the third logistical role and ensures the maintenance, replenishment and/or replacement of equipment, consumables and personnel are accomplished. Sustainment has been understood as critical to success in tactical operations for nearly two millennia, and its importance has been stated most succinctly by the Roman poet, Aulus Persius Flaccus as “He conquers who endures.”⁴ Failures here are usually as a result of either ignorance or neglect and manifest themselves in innumerable ways. Some of the most common in law enforcement operations include personnel assignments without scheduled relief, food or water and vehicles with no refueling available. Sustainment is also nearly always a suspect’s critical vulnerability. (For more information on critical vulnerability, see “Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerability,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1997, p. 53). Sustainment is itself broken into four main areas:

1. Replenishment, such as consumables like fuel, food and ammunition.
2. Replacement, such as damaged or destroyed equipment or vehicles.
3. Relief of personnel.
4. Reconstitution of units when degraded by injuries, fatigue and so forth.

Recovery

The fourth logistical role, recovery, identifies those efforts focusing on the return of all equipment and personnel to their proper place and condition at the conclusion of the operation. This role will usually necessitate not only the efforts in collecting tools and equipment, but in repackaging, replenishing, replacing and/or restoring them to a place and condition so that they will be available for future operations. Mistakes made during distribution are manifested here and sometimes irreversible. For example, many emergency expenses are reimbursable from disaster funds, but failing to collect mileage from vehicles used in an operation may forever forfeit the ability to claim it. Likewise, extended operations with numerous personnel make it exceedingly difficult to recall and record individual hours and overtime expenses without earlier planning and efforts.

When effective, the logistics function is always a work in progress. Demand will nearly always exceed supply. And, even when personnel, supplies and equipment are available, circumstances are always changing and the means to distribute and recover them must be continually refined. Friction is omnipresent and turmoil is always looming. (For more information on the impact of friction, see "Fog and Friction," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1995, p. 76).

To maintain order in the logistics function, the virtues are economy, accountability, standardization and regularity.

While the logistics function may not be seen in the same light as the seemingly more majestic functions, this function provides the underpinnings of a successful tactical operation. In the words of one tactical expert, "Amateurs talk about tactics, but professionals study logistics." ⁵ ◀

Endnotes

1. The term "service and support" is used by the U.S. Army to identify the fourth component in a tactical plan. The U.S. Marine Corps identifies it as the "administrative and logistics" section. For more information see "Components of a Tactical Plan," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer, 2003, pp. 50-52.
2. "Assets" refers to equipment, tools and personnel that are owned by an organization, while "resources" identifies those that are available but not owned.
3. The term "focus of effort" describes the predominant activity or assignment that must be accomplished to achieve a successful resolution. It is dependent upon the time and circumstances of an operation and will change with the needs and objectives. For more information see "Focus of Effort and Main Effort," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1996, p. 75.
4. Aulus Persius Flaccus, 34-62 A.D.
5. Attributed to General Robert H. Barrow, 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps, circa 1980.

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