

Combat Service Support

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The benchmark of the Marine Corps and what makes it the greatest fighting force in the world is how it task organizes. It prides itself on bringing the right amount of force to the right place at the right time. With that said, the Marine Corps fails to provide combat service support (CSS) efficiently when transitioning from a garrison environment to a deployed environment. To meet today's high deployment schedule, CSS must be reconfigured. To ensure Combat Service Support Units provide a more effective service to supported units, the Force Service Support Group (FSSG) must adopt permanent multifunctional battalions ensuring unit cohesion and speed of deployment.

Background

The FSSG is the Marine expeditionary force's (MEF) combat service support element. The FSSG is comprised of functional battalions that provide the six functions of CSS: transportation, engineering, medical, maintenance, supply and services.

When the MEF is operating in a garrison environment the FSSG's battalions are not multifunctional. Each battalion has a specific job tailored to its CSS function. An example is Transportation Support Battalion (TSB)

providing an infantry battalion transportation lift to an exercise. TSB does not have the capability to provide any other CSS function.

When deployments occur the FSSG is tasked with tailoring a CSS unit to meet the Marine air ground task force's (MAGTF) needs. Each functional battalion provides personnel and equipment to construct a task organized multi-functional CSS organization. This ability to task organize has been described as "the greatest strength of the FSSG."¹ Although the ability to task organize is a significant attribute, it is this same garrison structure that poses the most significant problem when deploying.

The FSSG garrison structure of functionally aligned battalions maximizes garrison efficiency, but required significant adjustment and reallocation of personnel and equipment in order to configure the 1st FSSG into its war-time organization for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF).²

Levels of War

The different priorities that the Marines Corps focuses logistically on the levels of war complicate the difficulty when transitioning from a garrison environment to a deployed environment. The three levels of war are

¹ LtGen James A. Brabham, USMC (Retired) EFCAT IOR August 2003

² EFCAT IOR August 2003

strategic, operational, and tactical. All three levels interrelate to each other to support the strategic goals. MCDP1 defines the strategic level as, "The level of war at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational security objectives and guidance, and develops and uses national resources to accomplish these objectives."³ MCDP1 describes the operational level of war as, " The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or areas of operations."⁴

At the strategic and operational level, the FSSG's emphasis is placed on efficiency. In other words, CSS and logistics are run like commercial businesses. The bottom line is how cheap can the Marine Corps get its products. This efficiency mindset works well in a garrison environment, but produces problems when the FSSG transitions to a deployed environment such as what supply items and how many to bring on the IX Block when deploying.

MCDP 1 describes the tactical level of war as

"the level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces. Activities at this level focus on the ordered arrangement and

³ MCDP 1, 100

⁴ MCDP1, pg 101

maneuver of combat elements in relations to each other and to the enemy to achieve combat objectives.”⁵

At the tactical level of war, the Marine Corps focuses CSS and logistics on the basis of effectiveness. Money is not a major consideration; the emphasis is on getting the correct amount of support in the correct amount of time at the correct location.

Since the Marine Corps is designed to fight the nation's battles, the CSS world should be designed to fight battles. The Marine Corps needs to organize its CSS units to operate effectively in a wartime environment and not focus so much on efficiency.

Unit Cohesion

Unit cohesion is very important for any organization to function properly particularly in a deployed environment. The way the Marine Corps currently organizes its CSS units does not foster unit cohesion. CSS units are usually organized about two months before they deploy. Marines are taken from many different battalions throughout the FSSG and more often than not, have never worked with each other.

Ground combat units and aviation units do not face the problem of unit cohesion like the CSS community. These

⁵ MCDP1, 101

units are already established organizations well before they deploy. They normally have standard operating procedures (SOP) and have conducted exercises/operations in the past together.

When the leaders of the CSS community get ready for deployments, they spend most of their time self-organizing instead of training and working on unit SOPs. This needs to occur because self-organizing is like reinventing the wheel. Most of the staff of the CSS unit have never worked together and have never supported the unit they are tasked to provide service to.

Many times CSS units go on back-to-back deployments with little time for organizing in between. Often CSS units release all equipment and personnel back to the functional battalion after deployment, only to have the FSSG source all new equipment and personnel for the next deployment instead of using the same CSS unit. The unit cohesion developed from the first deployment is ruined and the new CSS unit has to start from ground zero again. The following example is taken from an after action report from Warrant Officer Matt Williams attached to Combat Logistics Battalion 70 during a deployment called Cobra Gold 2004:

"TOPIC 1: Inadequate Time to Stand Up as a Battalion

DISCUSSION: We were a skeleton crew of SNCOs and Officers with no clerk to support the 100 plus important tasks that needed to be accomplished. Planning and managing was almost impossible because we were doing all of the legwork, which encompassed all of our time. We were on deck for almost 3 weeks before we saw the first T/O sourcing message. Even then, it wound up changing several times."⁶

The above example shows the difficulties WO Williams faced when organizing his CSS unit for a deployment and how his staff had little chance to develop their subordinates and develop unit cohesion.

The garrison mentality of the FSSG does not allow for CSS units to train as a cohesive unit before deployment. Since the personnel and equipment are sourced from many different functional battalions just prior to deploying, CSS units do not get the proper time to train and develop unit cohesiveness.

"It is difficult, therefore, for the FSSG to train as it fights. Combat service support operations center (CSSOC) actions at the CSS detachment level and the FSSG level do not get rehearsed. Standing operating procedures do not get developed, and validated and critical items of information for successful CSS to the MEF do not get identified. The results of this situation

⁶ CWO Matt Williams, After Action report, Combat Logistics Battalion-70, August 2004

are manifested in FSSG and subordinate CSS units crossing the line of departure untested and untrained. Due to its functional organization the FSSG learns as it goes in combat."⁷

Speed of Deployment

The FSSG's garrison structure of functionality does not facilitate speedy deployments as well. Battalions require a significant amount of restructuring and reallocation of personnel and equipment to provide a deployed CSS organization to support the MEF and smaller MAGTFs.

Many different military occupation specialties (MOS) are needed to provide a unit with appropriate combat service support. These different MOS's are taken from many battalions throughout the FSSG which accounts for the length of time it takes to form a multifunctional CSS unit. On average, it takes about seventy different MOS's of a two hundred Marine CSS company to support a regiment.⁸

As illustrated in the previous example of a CSS company, it takes many different Marine MOSs to form a

⁷ Major James A Vohr, USMC, interview with Col Greg R. Dunlap, G-3, 1st FSSG and BGen Usher in An Numaniyah, March 2003, EFCAT IOR August 2003

⁸ Combat Logistic Battalions table of organization for Cobra Gold 2004.

CSS unit. This process of sourcing individuals to form a CSS unit takes significant effort and time.

"The Commanding General of 1st FSSG, BGen Edward G. Usher suggested that 80 percent of an FSSG operations officer's time on a day to day basis was spent related to issues surrounding the establishment and maintenance of multi-functional CSS units." ⁹

Below is an example of how much time it took 1st FSSG to organize itself into multi-functional battalions to support 1 MEF properly during Operations Iraqi Freedom.

"The redistribution of assets from functional battalions to multi-functional units was incomplete even as combat operations commenced in mid-March 2003, five months after the decision to organize and deploy as multifunctional units."¹⁰

Five months to form a CSS unit is much too long.

There might be a time in the near future when the Marine Corps does not have five months to form a CSS unit.

Solution

The Marine Corps needs to move from functional battalions to multifunctional battalions within the FSSG. The efficiencies the FSSG provides are not

⁹ Major James A. Vohr USMC, interview with Bgen Edward G. Usher, GC, 1st FSSG, 12 March 2003, EFCAT IOR August 2003.

¹⁰ Major James A. Vohr USMC, interview with Major Nancy Isner, FACT member and G-4 action officer, 1st FSSG, 8 May 2003, EFCAT August 2003.

adequate justifications to deal with the friction of the loss of unit cohesion and inadequate speed of deployment due to reorganizing upon every deployment.

A training battalion within the FSSG should also be formed along with the multifunctional battalions. The sole purpose of this battalion would be to train and make sure Marines throughout the FSSG retain MOS credibility. This training battalion will also ensure Marines at the Lance Corporal level will always have senior mentors and teachers from the same MOS to seek guidance on complex MOS specific type questions and problems.

Conclusion

FSSGs and their Marines provide an invaluable service to the Marine Corps. Without FSSGs, the Marine Corps would not be able to function as a fighting force. With that said, the FSSGs need to develop better ways to improve their support for the Marine air ground task force. The best way to provide this service is by reorganizing into multi-functional battalions.

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