



Picture by Australian Army

### **By David Beaumont**

*'In war, mistakes and normal; errors are usual; information is seldom complete, often inaccurate, and frequently misleading. Success is won, not by personnel and materiel in prime condition, but by the debris of an organisation worn by the strain of campaign and shaken by the shock of battle. The objective is attained, in war, under conditions which often impose extreme disadvantages'*

From *Sound Military Decision*, US Naval War College, USA, 1942, p 198

Decisive action is won not only through combat power, but through the logistics that sustains it or gives combat forces the potential to fight. Logistics is the arm throwing the spear, and it must be effective for the spear to find its mark. However, there is a lot commanders, leaders, and teams of both combat forces and logistics elements can do to make themselves prepared for the shock of combat operations. This post will look at decisive action through a 'logistical lens' by describing two areas leaders and commanders should address in preparing their team for combat. Firstly, it will suggest that there are three factors essential in effective logistics which are set well before combat operations. Secondly, and when it comes to the decisive action itself, the post will outline the basic questions that any commander and supporting logistician must ask themselves before they take their men and women into combat.

Effective operational logistics is a consequence of many activities units undertake through routine preparedness procedures. 'Shakeout's of unit equipment; drills, rehearsals and exercises; and reviews of tactical procedures are all great ways of ensuring that the combat forces, and the logistic elements that support them, are ready for combat operations. However, you have to 'train as you fight'. This is because at the root of effective logistics is consistency - habits that begin in the barracks, and expectations that are set between commanders, the combat forces they lead, and those logisticians whose purpose is to ensure the 'warfighter' can complete the mission. These habits and expectations translate onto the battlefield, and are essential in those environments when each group must depend upon one another to survive.

For effective sustainment to be available to support decisive action, 'logistics' must be characterised by three key factors:

- Trust between commanders, combat forces and logisticians must be explicit. A lack of trust in logistics forces or in the supply chain reflects in wasteful activities, the hoarding of the limited resources that are available and in risk aversion. Of course, the trust must be earned and this requires effective discourse, effort and training before combat. *This is a topic that deserves a post in its own right!*
- Aligned to the principle of 'trust', commanders and combat forces must be disciplined in their use of supplies. Waste means resources that may be required to support other missions may not be available. Furthermore, there is no guarantee of resupply - ever - despite the best efforts of logistics forces. Efficient use of resources and logistics capabilities is essential for teams and units to survive in austere operational environments.
- *Risk acceptance*. Commanders and leaders must understand logistic constraints and restrictions that may affect them given the scenario they find themselves in. Doing so enables them to make sound decisions about the limited resources they have been allocated; who to prioritise logistic support to, and how much support to allocate. Logistic risk cannot ever be entirely eliminated, though it can certainly be planned for.

These factors are decided upon in preparations, and are key to navigating the multitude of logistic problems that history suggests will be encountered all forms of battle. Indeed, you might read the venerated German strategist, Clausewitz, whose description of friction in war recites a whole variety of logistical challenges (On War, Book 1, Ch 7). Even if these problems were logistical problems, overcoming extreme disadvantages in combat requires a collective effort and the keen insight of the commander. Applying the three factors *trust, discipline, and risk acceptance* is essential for commanders and leaders; even if they only want to tread lightly into the world of logistics.

Beyond the team environment, and considering the battle itself, there is a basic art to logistics when it comes to executing decisive action. This art is defined by four questions that commanders and logisticians must solve together in preparing for any form of decisive action, whether it be for a platoon patrol, an infantry brigade in a delaying defence or a mechanised division in the advance. It is well worth noting them in your own 'green notebook' as they are based on historical experience, echoed to varying extents in the doctrine of most Western militaries. Only once these logistical challenges are answered should you start on taking the tactical or operational plan to detailed timings, tasks and activities.

- What logistics resources do I require to prepare and maintain the forces I am going to employ?
- What resources do I require to sustain their operations?
- When, how and where do I access these resources?
- How do I distribute these resources amongst my sub-units so that they can complete their own missions with the maximum possible combat effectiveness?

These aren't necessarily logisticians questions - although logistics personnel and staff are best able to answer them. They are, in fact, part of a commander's appreciation process; once concluded into a plan they form the basics of a logistic system that will support the decisive action. If ignored, or 'glossed over', the risk that a team might culminate, fail to reach their objectives, or suffer in battle is greatly increased. Alternatively, if considered seriously and in detail, a commander soon learns how far they can push the force with the resources he or she has available. Coupled with the three factors mentioned earlier, the application of the basic art of logistics in planning goes a long way towards achieving success in subsequent combat operations.

Effective logistics in war requires effective logistics in peace-time. The foundations set by the latter define what the commander will be able to do, and the resources that he or she may have. Trust, discipline and risk acceptance are vital when establishing those foundations, as are the basics of the art of logistics to successfully sustaining decisive action in combat. If you think you can leave logistics to the last minute, as you skim across the ocean in an MV-22, you are in for a rough awakening. The time to establish trust amongst the entire force you might lead or participate in, to inculcate a sense of logistic discipline that promotes efficiency in war, and to establish a culture where acceptable risks can be taken and the limits of sustainability exploited, is now. Take the opportunity. It is the only way in which 'extreme disadvantages' might be overcome later.

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