



The Mitchell Forum

Failure is not an Option: Changing the Paradigm on Air Force Logistics

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About the Forum

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Abstract

Air Force sustainment operations have been successful in the past, but the current Air Force logistics design is not ready to support a multi-domain fight from a near-peer adversary. The Air Force must adjust logistics training, planning and policies to prepare for, and win, a fight in today's highly defended warfighting environment.

This problem set is not new or unfamiliar. Deficiencies associated with Air Force logistics are widely known and even identified across the logistics community. That knowledge is a good starting point for reform. However, the Air Force currently lacks tangible solutions and the road map to achieve them.

Logistics should not be a pick-up game during conflict in contested environments. The paradigm of logistics as a long build-up of robust facilities at a time and place favorable to U.S. forces must shift to one of lean, adaptable, and resilient sustainment networks. Status quo and failure are not an option.

Alexander the Great was known for saying, “My logisticians are a humorous lot—they know if my campaign fails, they are the first ones I will slay.” He was able to defeat his enemies and expand his kingdom due in part to the inclusion of logistics in the strategic planning of all his operations. Centuries ago, he demonstrated that effective logistics planning and execution could be utilized as a weapon.

The Air Force is America’s “halt force,” but without fail-safe, comprehensive logistics, the halt force may not get off the ground where and when needed. The best-designed operational concepts will fail if we don’t provide Airmen the resources needed to win in a contested environment. After days and months of conflict against highly defended enemy forces, survivable logistics will be the key enabler underpinning all U.S. military power. The U.S. Air Force must treat logistics as an essential foundation of its operations and strategy. Surprisingly, there is no overarching definition of Air Force logistics found in any of its publications, only sub-disciplines. The core Air Force logistics sub-disciplines are deployment and distribution, supply, aircraft and vehicle maintenance, contingency planning, and fuels. In the joint community, logistics also includes operational contract support (OCS), engineering, and joint health services.

Air Force leaders must evolve beyond the Air Force culture that treats logistics as “aircraft parts,” fully recognize, and plan for what it takes to support and sustain the force in its entirety. The service must view logistics in the same way as its joint and coalition partners, as not just aircraft parts and base supply, but all classes of supply. Leaders must view logistics as “Big L,” to include anything and everything the force needs to fight. This includes lodging, fuel, transportation, ordinance, integrated

base defense, and dispersal plans among other necessities for mission success. Civilian models, including just-in-time and on-demand logistics can inform new approaches as supplementary or in place of traditional stockpiling alone—concepts that emphasize getting the job done and doing so as quickly as possible as part of a culture of modern logistics mentality and the mindset of “whatever it takes” that is needed in the Air Force for the future.

In the civilian sector and in the comfort of permissive operations, efficiency is paramount. Profits and reducing overhead are essential to surviving in corporate structures, just as is maximizing the taxpayer’s dollars are in the military for efficiency. Air Force planners aim to maximize aircraft and shiploads for efficiency, but in a contested multi-domain fight, effectiveness will win. Special operations forces execute effective operations but strive for efficiency where possible. Too much centralization and efficiency will prevent us from being effective in the next fight. In his book, *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal illustrated why and how his task force had to evolve: “We built an ‘awesome machine’—an efficient military assembly line—but it was too slow, too static, and too specialized—too efficient. It was incapable of swift, effective responses to the unexpected.”¹ General McChrystal understood that his task force faced a new threat unlike any our Nation had encountered in history and that status quo would not win the next war. “To win—we had to change.” Air Force logistics must change as well to win the next fight.

Logistics is the foundation for operations, but I have experienced firsthand the lack of value placed on logistics by other career fields throughout the military. We never know when the next war or global crisis will devastate our way of life, just like COVID abruptly swept

across the global landscape this year. Status quo could leave our Air Force ill-prepared for a high-end fight.

In World War II, General Eisenhower applied the lessons learned during the Mediterranean campaign to the planning and execution of the Normandy invasion. During Operation Torch, logistics failed to keep pace with its operational forces, and, in some cases, this caused operational pauses and limits to combat. These failures could have been avoided—if planned for and executed accordingly. Torch was the turning point to prioritize sustainment and the inclusion of services and supply personnel in the initial assault for future operations.²

General Eisenhower understood that adaptable, scalable logistics played a pivotal role in the success of air and ground forces: “You will not find it difficult to prove that battles, campaigns, and even wars have been won or lost primarily because of logistics.”³ This is the same logistics outlook and culture needed today. The 24th Secretary of the Air Force, Dr. Heather Wilson described the “Air Force we Need” to fight and win future wars, but she also noted, “Failing at logistics can bring down the mighty; logistics and maintenance win wars.”⁴ Just as Alexander and General Eisenhower understood its importance, so must logistics be a forethought of today’s senior leaders and drive operations.

In the last century of warfighting, Air Force logistics in permissive environments were relatively predictable, reliable, and uncontested—an underappreciated and unglamorous strength. That will not be the case in highly contested environments.

The Air Force is accustomed to operating in predominantly uncontested linear fights overseas using established, city-like bases with robust supply chains, scheduled re-supply flights, reoccurring

force-flow conferences, and what amounts to a breezy logistics “normalcy.” This is the basis for the current Air Force logistics model. The status quo has a certain momentum to it, and it is easy to fall back on what we know. U.S. geo-political posture has not changed much for the last century, and the military’s strategic planning and logistics models have also remained relatively stagnant for the past 20 years. Current Air Force logistics operations are designed to prepare for and defeat non-nuclear middleweights, not near-peer adversaries. The Air Force has become reliant, and perhaps comfortable, with the logistics system required to fight ISIL and Al-Qaeda, not Russia or China.

The paradigm for 21st century warfighting must adapt, just as General Eisenhower adapted during the Second World War. The Department of Defense should assume that the homeland will no longer be a sanctuary, nor will cyberspace or global positioning technologies be able to provide real-time visibility of the entire battlespace. The National Defense Strategy is clear in that if we do not change the way we operate—including logistics—the United States as a global military power may become irrelevant in the 21st century.⁵ This is the new threat faced as a military and a nation. Yet, the Air Force as an institution is not moving at the speed of relevancy to adapt its logistics models to be able to execute operations in a realistic worst-case scenario.

It is an entirely feasible scenario that the Air Force may face a fight with little warning where it must establish a bare base in proximity to a peer adversary’s forces. These units must bring enough supplies to sustain their own force, defend the base from enemy attacks, receive follow-on forces, establish command and control, and then fight the base in a contested environment while taking losses,

cut off from higher headquarters. More importantly, they must maintain a resilient sustainment network with the agility to move to a new location when necessary.

This is the future fight the Air Force must prepare for. Expeditionary wing commanders will rely on logisticians to ensure each wing is lean and agile with the ability to move, but the current design is not prepared for this new way of fighting. During a deployment supporting special operations aircraft missions, I experienced first-hand that our logistics model was not adaptable to combat operations. It took Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) nearly 23 months to establish an accounting code for two sites without a traditional Air Force logistics warehouse. That is, it took two years to establish a steady supply chain while combat operations were ongoing. These locations were not dirt landing strips in the middle of nowhere. They were established military bases with regular in/outbound flights, and they were considered “enduring” by the combatant commander.

To expand further, AFSOC aircraft forward deploy to locations in support of broader U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) missions. The Air Force provides the parts and supply for the aircraft. Problems arise today because many of the SOCOM missions rely on airfields without established Air Force logistics warehouses.

Logisticians cannot currently ship parts directly to these forward airfields because the Air Force supply system is not designed to do so. In order for the Air Force to ship directly to a base, the location must have a stock record account number (SRAN) identifier assigned to it, which operates much like a zip code. Instead, the Air Force ships parts to the nearest logistics squadron with a SRAN, where

the shipment terminates and often sits idle until further coordination takes place to the “last tactical mile.” Established practice views this as efficient, but it is not effective for combat. AFSOC will continue to go where the fight is, whether an Air Force wing or logistics warehouse is there or not; and Air Force logistics networks must adapt to the future threat.

In another example I experienced as squadron commander for a Logistics unit, I was tasked by my higher headquarters command to finalize the logistics plans for an operational plan in a specific area of responsibility (AOR). I was provided the same assumptions the military currently uses in a counter-violent extremist (C-VEO) conflict, and the entire plan was dependent upon the ability to establish logistics supply chains in a permissive environment. Yet the scenario was for a high-end fight. Additionally, there was no mention of how Air Force or joint units were going to collaborate with Homeland Security and apply integrated base defense to industry partners in the United States, who ultimately enable the sustainment process today. The Air Force should not expect the homeland to be a sanctuary in all domains. Although industry security is not the Air Force’s mission, it will affect Air Force sustainment, given how many parts are sole-sourced.

Our nation cannot afford to wait until the high-end fight drives the Air Force to adjust its supply and sustainment methods or governing instructions. Anything other than action toward preparation could lead to effectively restricting the Air Force’s operations in an area, if not preclude them entirely. Global disasters from the past decade serve as a harsh reminder how ignoring long-standing problems in supply chains force nations and companies into the hard reality of fixing their problems

after disaster strikes and can, in some cases, come too late. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed that many supply chains are not resilient and that the same lessons from previous disasters had to be learned again.⁶ Service leaders and logisticians must apply not only the best practices of logistics in military operations but also those of the commercial sector while there is still a luxury of a permissive environment.

During joint assignments and deployments, I saw differences worth noting between Army and Air Force Logistics. More than the “what” the Air Force supplied its forces was the method of sustainment during operations—especially in combat. The biggest difference is the Army must sustain their force on the move. When their operators design a scheme of maneuver, it is imperative to understand where the brigade support area (BSA) must be established and when to move it based on the pace of operations. In simple terms, the BSA provides all forms of support for maneuver forces (e.g., food, ammunition, vehicles). Their operations are developed at the beginning of the planning process and rehearsed to ensure operational success. The Army plans and rehearses their logistics scheme of maneuver and concept of support for the BSA to underpin successful operations. The Air Force could adopt this practice immediately. It represents the way the Air Force must fight—agile and adaptive. The Air Force can utilize the BSA example as a starting point, but then refine the concept to adapt from a linear advancing ground force to that of an asymmetric mobile land-based aerial force in a contested environment.

In a near-peer fight, the joint force may not have the assurance of a 4–6-month buildup to stage resources and move forces into the area of responsibility. Again, think and plan for the worst-case scenario. Every logistics readiness squadron at every base must have a “Ready today, Fight tonight”

mentality—not just Kunsan Air Base in South Korea.

Planners must also anticipate that there will not be the same historical levels of base support in the new way of fighting, especially in proximity to the most contested environments. In one likely scenario, the Air Force could be the first force in theater and act as lead for a joint task force required to support other U.S. and coalition forces. First, there should be no expectation for vendors to establish contracts up-front during a live conflict. Vendors’ businesses could be destroyed or otherwise driven from the area of operation entirely. Worse yet, they could unwittingly support the adversary or be vulnerable to information attacks and manipulation or coercion. The Air Force must posture to self-sustain its forces and partners and cannot solely rely on unlimited Air Force aircraft to do so. In any wartime scenario, mobility assets will be in the highest demands.

An encouraging, and hopeful, exercise took place in 2019 in Europe: Operation Rapid Forge.⁷ It was a U.S. Air Force-led exercise meant to test the service’s ability to rapidly deploy to partner nation bases. At its core, it forced the service to get back to its expeditionary roots and learn how to be agile and adaptive and serves as a positive step in the right direction to prepare for the future fight. More importantly, Col Donn Yates the commander of the 4th Fighter Wing, which led and organized Operation Rapid Forge, said the exercise was more important in terms of stressing the Air Force’s logistics enterprise: “The key to all operations is logistics.”⁸

Currently, the Air Force employs “static logistics.” Its forces remain in-place while its weapons systems take off from and land at the same location after conducting operations. Historically, the Air Force is



U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Airman Marcel Williams

Airmen from Cannon Air Force Base's 27th Special Operations Logistics Readiness Squadron forward area refueling point team prepare to refuel two F-22 Raptor aircraft from an MC-130J Commando II aircraft during exercise Emerald Warrior at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, January 29, 2020. This training marked the first time FARP capabilities were tested in an arctic environment.

a land-based force operating from well-protected sanctuaries designed to provide airpower to the joint fight. Light, lean, and mobile/adaptive basing is not the Air Force construct. However, “static logistics” will not win in a conflict with great power competition. Wartime commanders cannot rely on large and well-established operating locations, such as Al Udeid or Bagram, to sustain forces for a high-end fight in another AOR.

This is not to suggest that the Air Force should completely eliminate every centralized, robust logistics facility, but senior leaders must be willing to acclimate the entire logistics network to support operations for the high-end fight in austere, remote, and contested locations. The Air Force must transition from solely relying on those large, centralized, hardened logistics facilities and incorporate smaller, dispersed, agile, and resilient logistics chains able to adapt to sustaining forces on the move in an expeditionary manner. An example appropriate for this requirement comes from a SOCOM capability that has been executing this concept for decades. Born

out of the ashes from the failed mission of the Iranian hostage rescue in 1980, Operation Eagle Claw, SOCOM identified the requirement to refuel aircraft in austere locations for secret operations where no established bases with fuel or aerial refueling capability was available.⁹ This capability formalized in AFSOC as Forward Area Refueling Capability (FARP). FARP allows units to land in austere and remote sites in order to refuel and re-arm fixed and rotary wing aircraft to execute highly sensitive missions. Implementing FARP operations enables lean and agile operations to move equipment and troops, or in recent cases, refuel 5th generation fighter aircraft. FARP is an example how the rest of the Air Force must think outside-the-box and adapt to be lean and agile, let alone incorporate this capability into all Air Force logistics units, not just AFSOC.

Air Force logistics planners should also explore dispersal operations, to include more sites with smaller footprints closer to the edge of the battlefield. Lawmakers have recently recognized the same concept for our military writ large. Rep. Mike Gallagher, a retired Marine Corps captain who served in

the Middle East, understands this concept: “Fixed U.S. bases are vulnerable—sitting ducks prime for attack.”¹⁰ He further elaborated how to dissuade the enemy faster in, for example, a China scenario, explaining: “We can accomplish this with small teams forward deployed, dispersed, and constantly moving throughout the island chain.”¹¹

Fortunately, similar to the Rapid Forge exercise, Pacific Air Command has been testing and exercising this very complex problem through agile combat employment, which might well be the future of Air Force expeditionary warfare. The recent commander and now 22nd Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General CQ Brown Jr., recognizes this new vision and is leading the change: “We have to be able to disperse. We can’t all be sitting on big bases and being big targets. The ability to move around—and have the flexibility to pick up and move fairly quickly—I think is important.”¹²

A key component to agile combat employment is leveraging pre-positioned stocks, which are likely in desperate need of a refresh in many forward operating areas, to include what they contain, the process of drawing from them, and then replenishing them at a steady rate. This also includes ships afloat. By leveraging pre-positioned stocks spread throughout a theater during a campaign, it would provide the commander the flexibility to draw from multiple resupply sources, making it difficult for the enemy to disrupt the logistics chain with no single point of failure.

The Air Force does not emphasize or incorporate pre-positioned stocks into current exercises, unlike the Army who held an exercise specifically to focus on pre-positioned stock operations. DEFENDER-Europe 2020 focused on “the issue, use, and turn-in of Army prepositioned stock

(APS) equipment as part of exercising dynamic force employment of a combat-credible force.”¹³ The Air Force needs to adapt similar concepts of exercises like the Army’s innovative practices. To remain agile and adaptable, the Air Force should exercise operations to draw and distribute supplies from pre-positioned stocks with a goal of meeting hours or days from request to fulfillment. The next step is to incorporate these operations into multi-lateral exercises to practice with allies and partners—which would afford the ultimate advantage in future wars. There are also creative solutions that have come out in simulations, war games, and tabletop exercises the Air Force can explore.

To succeed in future conflict, there must first be a shift in mindset at all levels to make logistics more operationally focused, but then logisticians must also be trained for multi-domain operations under attack. The Air Force doesn’t have this capability or expertise at all levels of the logistics community today, and it cannot be done overnight or even in days or months. Senior leaders must commit to developing logisticians for future warfare. A first step would be to have the Air Force define logistics, similar to other joint publications. Doctrine is the foundation to provide a frame of reference for operations and campaigns, yet the Air Force is missing a critical piece and should update existing logistics doctrine for future conflict. Then, it should arrive at a firm understanding of and define what the Air Force requires in logisticians for future warfare. Air Force leadership needs move with a purpose to begin developing what the Air Force needs in logisticians from the tactical to the strategic level. The joint chiefs recognized the importance of developing joint officers for tomorrow’s ways of war. Specifically, they “require leaders at all levels who can

achieve intellectual overmatch against adversaries.”¹⁴ The Chairman and all the joint chiefs realized the importance of developing strategic leaders educated, trained, and ready for future conflict against peer adversaries. The Air Force must take this same approach with developing logisticians in the same manner.

To ensure future success in a contested campaign, logistics can no longer be executed in silos. Logistics must be a consolidated team effort from logisticians, operators, engineers, and aircraft maintenance officers, among others. In order to do this effectively, all logisticians must think jointly and operationally. Logistics is instrumental in providing the operational commander the mission flexibility needed to achieve operational and campaign goals. Therefore, logistics and operations should be developed concurrently within strategy and within operational mission planning.

Senior leaders must continue to embrace the future of Air Force logistics: logistics that must be flexible, adaptable, and results-oriented. Outside-the-box thinking to deliver supplies and equipment in a contested environment will be paramount. At all levels, a bureaucratic mindset should be discouraged; identifying the 15 ways to say no, referencing doctrine or governing regulations, or shirking responsibilities because they are not strictly defined only contribute to the problem. The Air Force needs planners, operators, and leaders who are dedicated to finding the solutions. Rather than put constraints on the innovative ideas that will evolve the network, the force should welcome and harness them. Leaders need to not be afraid to fail, and moreover, need to be eager to “fail forward.” As Gen Goldfein (Ret.) has said, “Being bold and challenging the status quo is in our blood as Airmen.”

None of the ideas and concepts raised here are new. In fact, many have been discussed and debated. Now is the time to transition from a “depot” mentality to a “warfighter” mentality, from bureaucracy to effects. Now is the time to focus on how the service must adapt logistics to support the next fight. Pacific Air Command and European Command are embracing this mentality with AFSOC. They are testing new ways to be lean and adaptive through agile combat employment, but the Air Force must have the ability to employ this new way of warfare in every region in the world, not just the Pacific or Europe.

There are five “SOF truths” that SOCOM established to provide guidelines for all members in special operations to follow. Most applicable to this discussion is the guidance that “SOF forces cannot be created after an emergency.” In the same way, adaptable logistics systems cannot be created after the onset of conflict in contested environments. It’s time to appreciate what the 21st century high-end fight looks like when it comes to supplying and sustaining multi-domain operations in contested environments, because it will likely make the difference in the success or failure of future operations, and our nation can’t afford to get it wrong.

In a recent strategic approach released by General Brown, he explained:

Our Air Force must accelerate change to control and exploit the air domain to the standard the nation expects and requires from us. If we don’t change—if we fail to adapt—we risk losing the certainty with which we have defended our national interests for decades. We risk losing the high-end fight. We must move with a purpose—we must accelerate change or lose.¹⁵

Our previous Chief, Gen Goldfein also stated in many of his speeches, “We have from now until the fight starts to get ready. And we must treat every day of peace as a blessing.”¹⁶ We must absorb the lessons of Alexander, General Eisenhower, and COVID because the Air Force cannot afford another Operation Torch against

a peer competitor. The results would be devastating to our nation and way of life. If not now, when? If not you, who? Now is the opportunity to commit and invest for tomorrow’s fight. It is time to drive the change and the Air Force must refuse to accept failure and status quo. ★

Endnotes

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