

DESERT STORM Essay Contest (Field Grade) Second Place

# Supply and Maintenance Discipline: A Gulf War Problem That Cannot Be Ignored

by Col William H. Harris

*One of the lessons from the Gulf War that every command should heed is the importance of supply and maintenance discipline. Our forebears understood this subject well and stressed it; to neglect it is costly folly.*

In DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM the Marine Corps demonstrated that it has the capability to move equipment and personnel rapidly from home bases to the area of conflict rapidly and with great efficiency. It demonstrated its readiness to task organize for combat, collect equipment and supplies, move to designated ports of embarkation, get everything aboard Navy amphibious ships, and sail away to war. It demonstrated its ability to furnish a forcible entry capability on short notice and that the forward-thinking Maritime Pre-Positioning Ships (MPS) Program worked to perfection. As a result of these things, the Corps was able to introduce into the area of operations, very early in the deployment, the first creditable force capable of sustaining itself in combat. When Marines arrived they had with them or picked up from MPS-delivered assets some of the best equipment available anywhere. Almost immediately, sustainment was flowing from the Marine Corps Logistics Bases in Albany and Barstow along with shiploads of assets from II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF). The Marine forces committed to the war in Southwest Asia (SWA) were the best equipped ever, and almost everything was in superior condition.

Although this short war was a great victory, it is evident that the Marine Corps also lost something. It lost supply and maintenance discipline. Marines lost the sense of responsibility for assets provided to them. They lost pride in owning and taking care of their piece of gear, and to someone looking in, it was almost as though the

Marine Corps had developed a throw away mentality. Marines have a well-earned reputation for being very austere, making a buck go farther than any other Service, making their gear last longer, and taking great pains to ensure Marines' gear is the best maintained. What happened in SWA tarnished that reputation.

What saddens me the most is the impression we must have left on Marines of all ranks, particularly the young and inexperienced. We created and condoned the perception that this is how the Marine Corps fights a war: you draw some gear and when it breaks, get some more, and when you are done just leave it because someone will follow behind you to pick it up. If we do not correct this perception now, we will cease to exist in a few years, as this loss of responsibility and supply and maintenance discipline will eat away at the very fiber of our Corps. Discipline is discipline no matter what functional area it addresses.

I know you do not want to hear this, but it has got to be said, and, even more important, it has got to be corrected immediately.

The conclusion that we have lost responsibility and supply and maintenance discipline was easily reached. All it required was looking at the equipment and supplies recovered for maritime pre-positioning forces (MPFs) and pre-positioned war reserves (PWR) as the units rotated back to the United States. Those of us who were left in SWA to redeploy units and reconstitute MPF and PWR got a firsthand view of this conclusion, and the emotions evoked by that experience ranged



from being damned mad to being damned ashamed. I would love to tell someone that it was another Service, but it was not. It was our Corps, and we have got to get this corrected.

Some of the incidents that drove me to my conclusions are very poignant, but I think it would be better to outline these problems down at a personal level, then I believe you will understand what needs to be corrected. Let's start with individual and unit responsibility for equipment issued:

**MAGTF Level.** Imagine yourself as the commanding general of a Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB) that has just completed a major exercise. Everything went well, and you achieved all the MEB objectives. Then, as your unit returned and began embarking its equipment and supplies, you decided to conduct a final reconnaissance of the exercise area. You found a tank left along the side of the road, some supplies in a dump not retrieved, tents left standing where people had just walked away, and an abandoned container holding communications gear. When you investigated to find the responsible person you were unable to learn either who had operated the equipment or who had responsibility for the cleanup. What would your reaction be to this? Do you think the scenario is far-fetched? It happened in SWA.

**Artillery.** Suppose you are the commander of an artillery regiment. Suppose also that you loaned a battery—a complete battery of your M198s—to a unit going on a training exercise with all of the associated equipment and with the guns in pristine condition. What would you do if they were later returned to you with sights missing on half the guns, some tubes not even punched after firing, 1st and 2d echelon maintenance obviously ignored, and many of the gun books missing? Would there be anyone left with his current rank when you got done?

**Motor Transport.** Suppose you command a motor transport unit. What would you do if you received your trucks back without 1st and 2d echelon

lon maintenance accomplished, SL-3 components missing, and a nice round figure of, say, 10 trucks that you could not even find? Granted, it is difficult to lose trucks, and they are somewhere; but the point is they were not accounted for by the unit to whom they were issued. Would you have any reservations about what corrective action you would take?

**Assault Amphibious Vehicles.** Finally, suppose you command an AAV battalion and find in one of your subordinate units that some assault amphibian (AAV7s) had hand rails cut off, little to no maintenance (some not even oil changes), communications equipment missing, and similar discrepancies. I imagine you would take some decisive action. Unfortunately, looking across the spectrum of equipment in SWA, I do not believe any unit was immune to this type of criticism.

There were some bright spots; some equipment was turned in just like it was received with maybe a few thousand more miles on it and maybe a windshield missing here and there. Instances such as these—instances of hard use but by people who cared—were few and far between. There have

been containers located at various spots from Kuwait to Jubail that were full of unwanted supplies and just left for someone to pick up; at least two were found containing expensive communications equipment. Some unit once had this communications gear. They were charged with the responsibility to take care of it. What happened? When the Corps' three MPFs arrived in SWA they had 13 ships loaded full of equipment and supplies, which were packed in over 6,100 containers. These containers are worth more than \$36 million empty. When we reloaded the ships, we found that more than 1,600 of these containers had migrated to the States. A small point, as these containers can be recovered; but units were prohibited from taking containers out of SWA, and they did it anyway.

Additionally, the Marine Corps had to invest in new containers just to have enough to load out MPF, a totally unnecessary cost. Anyone ever think you could lose a RTCH (rough terrain cargo handler). We have, at least for the moment, but again someone took assets that were not assigned to him, and others in positions of responsibility

looked the other way.

If ever there was a lesson to be learned in this war it is that we cannot accept the loss of any kind of discipline anywhere in our Corps. If we allow this to happen, we are going to be in big, big trouble in a very few years. We must again emphasize responsibility, supply discipline, and maintenance discipline at every level of command. It must be institutionalized, taught as a basic course in every formal school we have. We must issue gear to individuals and hold them accountable. If we develop and instill the concept of accountability at the individual Marine level, we will have it in the Marine Corps.

This is not a call for a massive investigation. It really does not matter who or what unit did these things. The problem was too widespread—it was Marines who did it; it was their officers and staff noncommissioned officers who allowed it to happen. We have a problem that needs to be fixed, a problem of concern to every unit in the Corps.

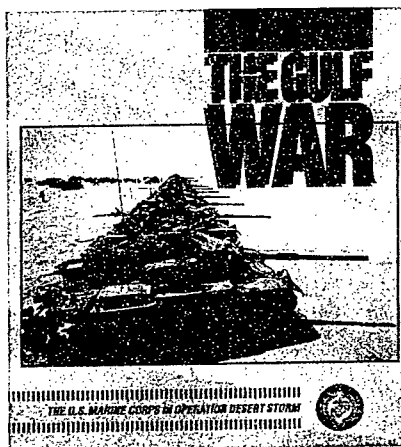
USMC

>Col Harris is the CO of the Blount Island Command, Jacksonville, FL.

“ . . . a fine addition to the growing collection of publications about the Gulf War.”

—Tom Neven, *Marine Corps Gazette* Book Review

## REMEMBERING THE GULF WAR



“This book is about the U.S. Marines who served in Operation DESERT STORM. In all, more than 96,000 spent months in the harsh, alien environment, enduring the loneliness of a long separation from home, the desolation and bitter climatic extremes of the desert and the endless tedium that always precedes combat.”

—Keith F. Girard, author

Now in stock! Includes 112 color photographs of Marines in the Gulf during Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM. To order, send check or money order for \$24.95 hardcover or \$46.95 leatherbound to MCA Bookservice; P. O. Box 1775; Quantico, VA 2214. Add \$5.00 for shipping and handling per book. For fast credit card service call 1-800-336-0291.



**MARINE CORPS  
ASSOCIATION**