

1992 Chase Prize Essay Contest Entry

Supplying the Point of the Spear

by **Sgt John R. Murphy**

Although the Corps does quite well resupplying its frontline units, performance could be enhanced if a different mindset prevailed.

There has always been a division of sorts between combat arms and those in a supporting role. Some of this is the result of the psychology of the combat Marine, who risks his life daily and endures much more hardship than most others. Couple this reality with what the infantryman sees on the rare occasion when he is in the rear area—dining and recreational facilities, clean utilities, cots, and other forms of largess that are unheard of where he serves. By and large, the infantryman understands this. Such amenities are not practical where he performs his duties. But there are some things he doesn't understand, such as why is it that everyone in the rear area has new boots, while his squad is using duct tape and nylon cord to keep their boots together? Why do the rear area Marines stand guard with new shotguns, when his company can't get any shotguns to perform trench clearing operations? He sees support Marines with camouflage parkas, the latest rations, Goretex jackets, and new packs, while he and his friends make do without. Such sights, understandably, reaffirm his belief that the rear echelons are all about supporting themselves.

Although it is not fair to generalize, I believe that there exists a fairly widespread mentality of "us first" among support organizations that places their comfort ahead of providing the frontline Marine with the equipment and clothing he rates. This is certainly not a new situation. Bill Mauldin, the cartoonist who created "Willie and Joe," wrote in 1945 about the Italian campaign that:

Months after the new combat boots and jackets arrived in Italy many frontline soldiers still wore soaked leggings and flimsy field jackets. The new clothing was being shortstopped by some of the rear echelon soldiers who wanted to look like the combat men they saw in magazines. . . . I suppose that these fellows in the rear just looked at the mountainous heap of warm combat jackets piled in a supply dump and didn't see anything wrong with swiping a few for themselves. . . . Because of this rear echelon pilfering, thousands of dogfaces at the

front shivered in the mud and the rain while guys at the rear wore the combat clothes in warm offices.

Stephen Ambrose, author of the recent *Band of Brothers: E Company 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* reports:

The 101st had seldom been in a rear area. What the men saw there made them wonder how any supplies ever reached the front line. Twice . . . they had received a beer ration. . . . The cigarettes they got were Chelseas or Raleights, much despised. No soap, an occasional package of gum, once some toothpaste—except for C and K rations and ammunition, that was all that reached the frontlines. Being near a supply depot in the rear, the men learned why. The port battalions unloading the ships coming from America got their cut, the railroad battalions helped themselves to Milky Way candy bars and cases of Schlitz beer, chalking it up to "breakage," the truck drivers took the cartons of Lucky Strikes (by far the favorite brand), and by the time division quartermaster and regimental and battalion S-4 skimmed off the best of what was left, the riflemen on the frontline were fortunate to get C rations and Raleigh cigarettes.

My first experience with this phenomenon occurred during an exercise in Norway. After deplaning, we were herded into an unheated tent in the brigade service support group (BSSG) area. Looking around, we saw a large, heated beer tent that was stocked with a remarkable assortment of European and American beers, as well as pay telephones and porta-potties. (We also noticed that all of the BSSG Marines were wearing the white extreme-cold weather boot, which provides protection to 60 degrees below zero. Most of us were wearing the black version of this footwear, rated to only 20 below.) After freezing for 3 hours, we were bussed further north of the Arctic Circle in the dead of winter, complete with subzero weather alternating with freezing rain. When we reached our first bivouac site, high on the list of priorities was to start ingesting hot liquids. There was no fuel for the squad stoves. Beer was available in the BSSG area, but there was nothing hot to be had where the infantry was. Obvi-

ously, there were some seriously misdirected priorities. The effort that went into that beer tent should have been directed toward supporting the combat Marine, training in one of the harshest environments on earth.

I'm sure that examples of this sort of "support" can be found as far back as the Roman Legions, and as recently as our involvement in Southwest Asia. I think that what we are dealing with here is failure; failure of rear echelon leaders to put into proper perspective their role, which is not to just provide support within the minimum requirement but to fulfill the spirit and intent of supplying forward. The leader's instinct to improve the living standards of his own unit and the human tendency to improve one's own lot must be subjugated to pushing forward the materiel that will ease some of the burden carried by the fighting Marine. Those living in relative comfort, sleeping in tents, and eating frequent hot meals, do not need the best cold weather gear available. Those guarding motorpools 50 miles from the shooting do not need shotguns as badly as the infantry company moving to clear a trench line. The supply focus must be forward. Critical items must be placed into the hands of the men who will use them to shelter themselves against the elements and enhance their strength.

In general, American forces are well supported. Clearly we are doing lots of things the right way. But that is not really enough. What we must have is credibility throughout the support system. We must have selfless leaders able to place priorities on items that enhance the individual combat Marine's ability to fight and survive. We'll know that we're doing everything right when an infantry Marine can move through the rear, and the uniforms and individual equipment he sees are the same as what he's wearing. Until that day though, the combat Marine will feel he's at the short, sharp end of the spear in more ways than one.



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