

Theater Logistics Seminars

A nice-to-have or mandatory for operational success?

by Maj Antonio Cillo

Marine Corps Logistics Operations Group (MCLOG) is the institutional caretaker of the Logistics Tactics, Training, and Education Program for the Marine Corps.¹ Within the Logistics Tactics, Training, and Education Program continuum, MCLOG leads numerous individual and collective training and education events. The Theater Logistics Seminar (TLS), formerly known as the Expeditionary Logistics Seminar, is an advanced collective training event prepared for Amphibious Ready Group (ARG/MEU) logistics staffs roughly 90 days before deployment.² Similarly, Naval Surface Forces Atlantic and Pacific facilitate a Supply and Logistics Pre-Deployment Conference for each ARG and carrier strike group during pre-deployment training. The Navy's conference is widely considered mandatory for ship supply departments, which attracts many of the blue-side participants desired by MCLOG for TLSs. In contrast, the TLS is not considered a formal training exercise and employment plan (TEEP) event.³ Event schedules between TLS and the Supply and Logistics Conference largely mirror one another, sometimes offering the same classes by the same instructors. To eliminate duplicative efforts across the two Services and to facilitate early integration between ARG/MEU staffs, these two events should be combined as a formal TEEP event titled Naval Logistics Conference (NLC) and should be required for all ARG/MEU logisticians at the onset of pre-deployment training.

The Commandant emphasized in his planning guidance, "Marine Corps integration into the Fleet via composite

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warfare will be a prerequisite to the successful execution of amphibious operations."⁴ Combining these nearly identical events into a single conference is a step toward integrating Marine Corps and naval logistics. With the MEF in the lead, a combined effort with the Surface Forces, Expeditionary Operations Training Group (EOTG), Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Atlantic

efforts, as well as force design initiatives, into future NLCs. Integrating early and communicating often ultimately creates an environment from which to develop lessons learned and after-action processes to better prepare ARG/MEU staff for deployment.

Focusing on the functions of logistics yields an inherently scalable conference, capable of offering a unique schedule for each ARG/MEU based on their mission, theater security cooperation exercise schedule, assigned theater of operations, and anticipated contingency operations.⁵ An east coast ARG/MEU logistics staff will naturally focus more on the support structures of 6th Fleet and Naval Forces Europe-Africa (NAVEUR), whereas west coast ARG/

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and Pacific, and MCLOG would enable each logistics stakeholder to represent their interests during a Course Curriculum Review Board (CCRB). Likewise, bringing Navy Air Systems Command into the CCRB process would also facilitate inclusion of the Navy's Readiness Review Conference at the start of the NLC. Such a collective planning effort among Marine and Naval logistics entities is essential to synchronize efforts, share ideas, and reduce redundancy within the naval logistics community. This also offers an expanded opportunity to incorporate logistics modernization and innovation

MEU teams will show more interest in 7th Fleet and Pacific Fleet. A significant part of integrated planning, therefore, would be to assign leads for each conference. For example, Naval Surface Forces Atlantic would lead the planning effort and schedule development for a carrier strike group conference, while the MEF would take the lead for an ARG/MEU conference. Assigning an organizational lead for each conference allows subject matter experts to compile an appropriate schedule of topics, classes, and instructors from within the joint logistics enterprise. In the end, the conference schedule should flow from

topic to topic, building from tactical- to operational-level logistics, in order to facilitate the development of the unit's sourcing logic and overarching concept of logistics support.

Conference timing is another important factor when planning a NLC. Conducting the NLC early in pre-deployment training would benefit the

A carefully designed DFC would stress the rapid response planning process of an integrated ARG/MEU team while initiating the development of internal problem-solving tactics, techniques, and procedures. DFCs are opportunities for MEU and ARG logisticians to synchronize tactical- and operational-logistics functions to

of requiring a NLC for all ARG/MEU logisticians at the beginning of pre-deployment training, include networking opportunities, enhanced awareness of global logistics enablers, and increased opportunities to exercise creativity and critical thinking when solving complex logistics challenges. The compilation of these benefits undoubtedly marks the NLC as a valuable requirement for all Navy and Marine Corps logisticians at the onset of pre-deployment training and meets the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* on integration with the Navy.

The TLS is presently an event for which appropriate MEU logisticians are encouraged to attend as their schedules permit.⁶ Second order effects, therefore, are that learner participation rates are sometimes low, and there is very little integration with naval logisticians. The effectiveness of such an advanced collective training event, designed to facilitate participant-centered learning and interaction, is reduced when subject matter experts are not present. Codifying the NLC as a required training event for all ARG/MEU logisticians would help facilitate integration between Navy and Marine Corps logisticians, ensure lessons learned from DFCs are widely understood, and aid learning among the entire logistics community.

This position is not immune to counterarguments. First, building an

ARG/MEU staff on many levels. First, it would serve as an initial opportunity to bring together logistics planners from all Navy and Marine Corps elements to build cohesion, learn leadership and planning styles, and better understand individual strengths and weaknesses. This would help primary staff officers employ their forces to the best of their abilities while exposing gaps in training and education to be pursued throughout the training cycle. Second, the NLC is designed to increase understanding of theater- and operational-level logistics support capabilities. Exposing ARG/MEU logisticians to that type of information early would arm them with the tools necessary to develop relevant logistics support plans as they break into operational planning teams during their training events. Moreover, a recent addition to the seminars is the introduction of decision forcing cases (DFC) designed to pit the learning audience against historical, complicated military logistics vignettes—many developed out of lessons learned from previous ARG/MEU deployments within the same theater of operations as the target audience. DFCs conclude with a synopsis of the historical, creative logistics solution applied to the problem within the vignette. Working as an integrated ARG/MEU logistics team to solve DFCs is yet another benefit of prioritizing the NLC early in pre-deployment training.

build situational awareness of theater support capabilities. Likewise, DFCs would allow logistics teams to rapidly incorporate NLC training into their planning efforts, thus providing a foundation for future at-sea training periods. DFCs also aid the development and refinement of a sourcing logic, initial Distribution Liaison Cell force lay down for theater security cooperation exercises and their deployed theater of operations, time-space analyses for operational-level logistics, and a concept of logistics support for the ARG/MEU deployment. Additional benefits



ARG/MEU Combat Cargo Platoons operate as integrated Navy and Marine Corps teams. (Photo: DVIDS.)

appropriate conference schedule will require coordination and communication up-and-out. A combined Navy and Marine Corps event is inherently difficult because conference planning is not a single Service responsibility. The two Services will need to clearly delineate responsibilities between MEFs and the surface forces to prevent further duplicative efforts. Second, the foundational documents for a NLC exist only in the Marine Corps for the current TLS.⁷ The Surface Forces Supply and Logistics Pre-Deployment Conference is not a formal event guided by naval orders or directives, so the two Services will need to synchronize efforts to develop an overarching document to guide planning and execution of future NLC iterations.

A second counterargument includes challenges surrounding the mandatory nature of an NLC. The Services will need to detail who attends based on rank or rate, billet, department, and functional responsibilities. This requires a clear understanding of all supply and logistics billet descriptions within the ARG and MEU to develop a detailed list of required attendees, expected value of those personnel in supporting participant-centered learning during the NLC, and potentially training and learning objectives. Some may view this administrative undertaking as inappropriate for a traditionally optional seminar. Third, the CCRB process is an administratively burdensome task levied on Navy and Marine Corps organizations. While necessary to ensure a successful NLC, that presents operationally relevant information with an appropriately planned DFC; some may argue that a formal or even informal CCRB is too extensive for a voluntary event. This naturally leads to an argument about whether to evaluate Sailors and Marines throughout the NLC.

Introducing evaluations to the NLC would require additional layers for the CCRB, evaluation criteria, more funding and personnel resources, and evaluator training programs. This is no small endeavor for a shrinking Navy facing likely budget cuts as the Global War on Terror comes to an end. One solution could be to facilitate evaluations



ARG/MEU Replenishments-at-Sea require close integration between Navy and Marine logisticians. (Photo: DVIDS.)

through a standing unit (i.e. MEF, EOTG, EWTG, or amphibious squadron). If MEF, EOTG, EWTG, and amphibious squadron cannot support, then MCLOG and the surface forces would require even more resources to train and certify internal evaluators. Another consideration is identify-

a voluntary event offered to available MEU logisticians.

I offer the following recommendations to capitalize on opportunities for logistics integration to benefit the naval force. First, MCLOG and the surface forces should integrate planning efforts to develop a scalable, relevant, forward-

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ing which NLC attendees need to be evaluated. Deputy Commandant for Installations and Logistics, Training and Education Command, and the Commanding General for MAGTF Training Center would all have roles in the CCRB, evaluations criteria development, and evaluator certification process for Marines. The Navy's equivalent headquarters would need to develop evaluation standards for Sailors based on their individual rates and positions, unless the Services join efforts to develop a standardized evaluation for all participants from all Services. Thus, some may argue that the NLC should not involve evaluations at all and that it should continue as the TLS as

focused NLC to better prepare ARG/MEU teams to compete with peer adversaries around the globe. Combining the TLS and the Navy's conference will indisputably reduce redundancy while adhering to the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* and force design initiatives. The Navy Air Systems Command's Readiness Review Conference is typically hosted around the ARG/MEU composite date as well, which offers yet another opportunity to integrate the two Services, reduce redundancy, and facilitate a cohesive naval logistics team. Second, MCLOG should relinquish planning and execution responsibilities for NLCs to the MEFs. MEFs are supported and resourced by the Marine

Forces to provide formal and informal evaluations and assessments of MEUs and to provide “resident expertise on all MEU specialized skills training and operational concerns.”⁸ Thus, MEFs have a direct interest in the training, education, and operational performance of MEU logisticians. Lastly, it is imperative that MEFs add the NLC as a required TEEP event for all MEUs as close to their composite date as possible. Early integration would arm Sailors and Marines with the logistics knowledge and training necessary to be successful during at-sea and ashore training periods.

The desire to develop adaptable, critically thinking logisticians is widespread throughout both the Navy and Marine Corps.⁹ It is incumbent upon each Service to create opportunities to stimulate logistics unit innovation and resilience, and the NLC concept is one way both Services can refine existing efforts to create disproportionate ben-

efits.¹⁰ These recommendations seek to inspire a culture of learning and a culture of integration across the naval logistics community.¹¹ Defeating a peer competitor, either in open blue water or on land, will require naval logisticians to develop creative ways to sustain the force. Making small, integrated course corrections now has the potential to tip the scales in our favor, but we must not be afraid or uncomfortable working together as a Navy-Marine Corps logistics force.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 3502.8A, Marine Corps Logistics Tactics, Training, and Education Program*, (Washington, DC: June 2020.)
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 3502.3C, Marine Expeditionary Unit Pre-Deployment Training Program*, (Washington, DC: September 2019).

3. Ibid.

4. General David Berger, *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 4-11, Tactical-Level Logistics*, (Washington, DC: June 2000).

6. *MCO 3502.3C*; and *MCO 3502.8A*.

7. Ibid.

8. *MCO 3502.3C*.

9. Col Angell, Commanding Officer, *Marine Corps Logistics Operations Group, Initial Commander's Guidance*, (Twentynine Palms, CA: July 2020).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.



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