

Who Ordered the Anchor?

A retired Army supply officer explains how a single key stroke error by a supply clerk can cost the Army thousands of dollars and cause a lot of confusion.

By Colonel Neal H. Bralley, USA (Ret.)

In 1985, I was sitting at my desk in the materiel office of the 704th Maintenance Battalion, 4th Infantry Division, at Fort Carson, Colorado, eating my lunch, when the main class IX (repair parts) warehouse supply technician approached me and said, “Sir, you need to come look at this.”

“Chief, I’m eating my lunch; I’ll be out in a minute,” I replied.

“No sir, you need to come out now and see this,” he insisted. So, trying to be a more responsive young captain, I dutifully got up and followed the chief outside. We rounded the corner to find a commercial tractor-trailer parked by our receiving dock. A tractor-trailer being parked at this location was not particularly unusual. What was unusual was the one and only item it was hauling on its flatbed trailer: a rusty, 14,500-pound ship anchor.

Accepting the Shipment

“Chief, where did that anchor come from? What is it doing here? Who ordered it? We don’t have any water or ships around here.” I had lots of questions, and the chief, as excellent as he was, did not have all the answers—yet.

Thinking quickly, I turned to the driver and told him to standby; I was going to get him a transportation order to take that anchor back whence it came.

We had no such luck. He told us that he needed to be in Denver within 3 hours to pick up another load, and we needed to unload his truck now so that he could be on his way.

Removing a 14,500-pound anchor is not an easy task. Within our maintenance battalion we could lift some fairly heavy items, but our largest forklift truck could manage only 10,000 pounds. In order to receive the shipment, we had to have the driver back his trailer into one of our maintenance bays where, using a 10-ton overhead crane, we lifted the anchor off of the trailer and lowered it gently to the shop floor.

With both the anchor and the Department of Defense Form 1348-1, Single Line Item Release/Receipt Document, in hand, we had all the information we needed to determine who ordered the item, when it was ordered, its price, its shipping costs, and from exactly which Army supply depot it had come. Although I certainly cannot re-

call all of the minor details of the event or the item, I do clearly remember its cost—more than \$28,000 dollars.

Returning the Merchandise

We did not want the ordering unit to pick up the anchor and carry it home only to have to return it to our supply activity. Instead, we called and asked them to bring us a “D6Z” turn-in document, and we would turn in the anchor to the supply division of the Fort Carson Directorate of Logistics (DOL). Once there, DOL could hold the anchor in their supply yard and return it to the Army’s wholesale supply system. Once in the system, the anchor would again be available for issue to any Army unit.

The commander of the division support command (DISCOM), our higher headquarters, had a policy that all Soldiers were to inform him immediately of any unusual items of command interest by delivering a written 3-by-5-inch index card to him as soon as possible. I got the card written and into his hand immediately. The DISCOM commander read the note, understood our actions, and knew where we were sending the anchor and why. He basically laughed it off, saying words to the effect that someone knew he was at Fort Carson and had sent that anchor to him as a joke. (The DISCOM commander was a Transportation Corps officer and had been an Army watercraft commander during several assignments.)

How Did This Happen?

It turned out that the anchor was not sent to Fort Carson as a joke. This incident occurred when a prescribed load list (PLL) clerk for an armor company tried to order a \$6 incandescent lightbulb for a vehicle and inadvertently keyed in the wrong national item identification number (NIIN) and instead ended up with a \$28,000 anchor. Reportedly, this was a single digit keystroke error.

One might ask if management controls were in the supply system to preclude this type of event from happening. The short answer is yes.

First, the ordering unit’s motor sergeant, motor officer, and company commander should have been reviewing the document register. But in his defense, the clerk thought he was ordering an inexpensive lightbulb. At the time of this transaction, the 4th Infantry Division was

using IBM System 36 computers that enabled each company to remotely order parts using “dumb” terminals. Company PLL clerks ordered repair parts without having to manually fill out computer punch cards. The system was designed to have an on-screen pre-edit feature to ensure fewer errors, but if the offending PLL clerk looked at his screen to see what the part’s corresponding NIIN number and its price, he did not notice his \$28,000 error.

Second, the class IX section of the division materiel management center should have had its Decentralized Automated Service Support System computer (operating the Direct Support Unit Standard Supply System) set to review requests with an extended cost of more than \$5,000 to “error out” for manager review. Had this pre-edit feature been active, a supply manager would have reviewed the supply request, verified that it was correct and accurate, and if all was well, re-entered the request for continued processing.

Likewise, managers at DOL’s class IX supply branch were supposed to review any extended price requests over \$15,000. At both the division materiel management center and DOL, managers had turned off the system parameters that caused high-cost supply requests to error out of the system. Consequently, this part request slid right on through the division and the installation supply systems and into the Army’s wholesale supply system to be filled.

How Was the Request Filled?

Once the supply request left Fort Carson, it moved electronically at the speed of light. Eventually, the supply request arrived at what was then known as Sharpe Army Depot in Lathrop, California. By that time, the supply request had become a materiel release order, meaning that the depot was to retrieve one anchor and ship it to Fort Carson for eventual delivery to the unit that had submitted the order. The anchor would come first to the 704th Maintenance Battalion’s materiel office, where the ordering unit could pick it up and take it to its motor pool.

It was late in the afternoon at Sharpe Army Depot, quite possibly on a Friday, when that materiel release

order arrived for action. A perceptive warehouse supply clerk recognized that the storage location for the item was off of the main Sharpe Army Depot. Being a mission-oriented supply person, the clerk called the remote location and had a driver, known to be at the location, pick up the item corresponding to the NIIN number and storage location and return to Sharpe Army Depot.

The driver did as asked, and upon return to Sharpe, the

anchor was matched with the shipping document. Transportation was arranged, and a commercial flatbed truck picked up the load and headed for Fort Carson. No one at Sharpe Army Depot ever really noticed the disparity between the requested item’s nomenclature of “anchor, marine fluke” and its final destination of an M-60A3 tank company at Fort Carson, which sits high and dry at the base of the Rocky Mountains. The division had only a few small boats within the bridge company of its engineer battalion; it had no large watercraft

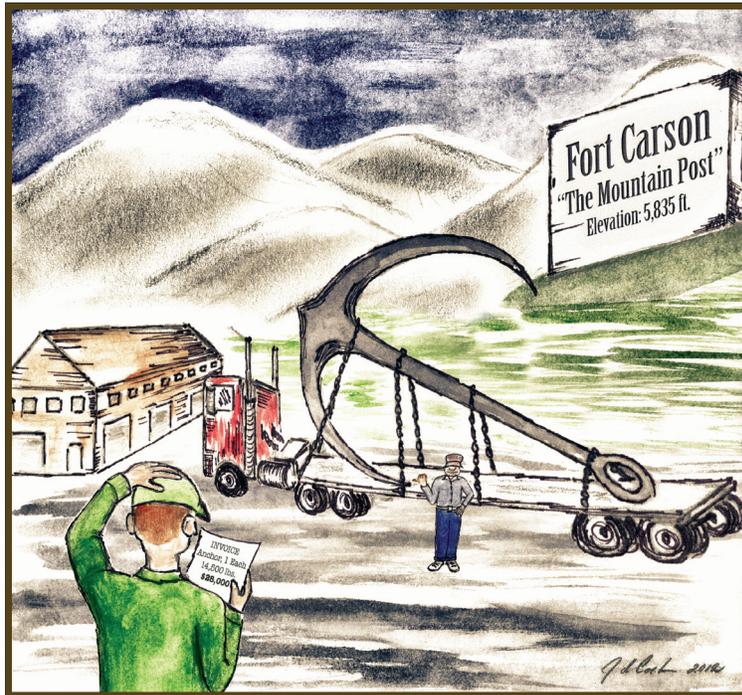
at all, certainly not any boats that could even float with a 14,500-pound anchor aboard.

Questions About an Anchor at Fort Carson

The anchor arrived with a splash in the local community when *The Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, now known as *The Gazette*, ran a story in its morning edition about the arrival of a large ship anchor at Fort Carson. However, the article did not make even a ripple on the tranquil events going on within the 4th Infantry Division.

For 2 weeks, life was good within the 704th Maintenance Battalion. Then, early one Monday morning, the phone rang. A colonel from the office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-4, was calling. He wanted to know how a 14,500-pound ship anchor had arrived at Fort Carson, a post easily 1,000 miles from the nearest ocean.

When news of this call was relayed, on a second 3- by 5-inch card to the 4th DISCOM commander, things were not so funny. He was more than a bit perturbed that I had not forwarded the call from the Army G-4’s office directly to him so that he could speak directly with the



Artwork courtesy of James D. Cochran

colonel on the matter. My battalion commander had referred the call to me, I answered the colonel's questions, and that was the last I heard from the Army G-4 office.

However, media interactions were not over. During a subsequent interview, the commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division assured a reporter that he would have *The Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph* notified when the anchor left Fort Carson. But a couple of days later, under cover of darkness, the anchor surreptitiously moved from Fort Carson to Pueblo Army Depot, about 40 miles south.

Properly, the Army Materiel Command left the anchor right where it was at Pueblo Army Depot where it was still clearly visible within the Army's wholesale stock record accounts to await any supply request for just such an Army-owned anchor. A couple of months later, another supply request for a 14,500-pound anchor landed on a supply clerk's desk—this time at Pueblo Army Depot. The Navy in Norfolk, Virginia, needed an anchor of just that size for one of its frigates, and off it went.

So now, if you ever hear supply Soldiers talk of an anchor that went to an Army mechanized infantry division, you can know it to be a true event. And you also know some of the unintended consequences of trying to

outsmart the Army's supply system.

The system basically worked as intended. The problems began when human fingers and hands were involved in the transaction. The same is true today. Leaders at all levels need to know what happens with their units' supply transactions. They need to know who is manipulating the operating systems supporting their supply systems and understand the second- and third-order effects of those changes. Otherwise, a leader may become the proud owner of a brand new, but ever so rusty, anchor.

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LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Cargo Unmanned Aircraft Systems

I just read "The Case Against a Cargo Unmanned Aircraft System," which was published in the November–December 2012 issue of *Army Sustainment* and written by Captain Andrew P. Betson, course director of the Defense and Strategic Studies Program at the United States Military Academy.

I understand his point of view but disagree with the intent of the article. The way Captain Betson argues his point is interesting, and he does present some negative aspects of going forward with the concept of a cargo unmanned aircraft system (UAS).

But I believe that the Army, and all military services, must consider moving military personnel—enlisted or officer—out of harm's way. Well-developed and engineered robotic or unmanned systems will provide that capability. Sure, early plans point to a cargo UAS that can carry only

60 pounds, but what can we do to increase the capability?

We must learn to engineer UASs with minimal electronic systems and only low-cost cameras or global positioning systems (GPS), such as an unsophisticated GPS that you can buy in any discount department store or even a smartphone application, to provide rear-area pilot-controllers with the capability to fly the UAS to a destination. These systems must provide the pilot-controller with a simple capability using servo-actuated flight controls to maneuver the UAS. Keep all of the costly associated systems on the ground, in the rear, or in satellites. Think beyond current capabilities. Find a way to get there.

—Harry W. Huyler
Logistics Management Specialist
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