

Some Bold Thoughts on a SOC of the Future

In this article, the author takes a look at the mission of the sustainment operations center, questions if it should be considered deployable, and makes a case for including resident enduring enablers.

By Capt. Wendi McBride-Rentschler

It has been almost three years since the sustainment operations center (SOC) concept was codified in the Forces Command (FORSCOM) modular force command and control executive order on July 30, 2010. Today, 13 centers exist; some are operational while others are in the planning stage.

The intent of FORSCOM's SOC concept is to use synergy and collaboration to capitalize on lessons learned about sustainment enabler integration, enhanced leader development, collective training, and readiness tracking. FORSCOM's SOC objectives are to—

- Provide centralized materiel management.
- Leverage multiechelon sustainment capabilities.
- Enable logistics decisionmaking for sustainment commanders.
- Replicate operational sustainment during garrison employment.

The SOC concept seeks to achieve both a common operational picture and the synchronization of sustainment activities throughout continental United States (CONUS)-based geographic regions. At Fort Bragg, N.C., where the core of the SOC replicates the way the sustainment brigade does business in an operational setting, limiting the SOC only to home station installation support is too restrictive. Fort Bragg SOC leaders consider a SOC deployable. We consider the SOC a joint capability. And, we believe enablers common across all SOCs should be formalized in policy.

The SOC Experience at Fort Bragg

The SOC at Fort Bragg began partial operations soon after the announcement of FORSCOM's SOC initiative. Initial manning for the center came from the merger of the 82nd Sustainment Brigade's S-3 and support operations sections. Soon thereafter, the installation defined and included the SOC in initial drafts of the installation support plan where existing coordinating relationships with potential future members were defined.

Since then, the center has taken significant strides to

become the activity that synchronizes all sustainment functions throughout the region assigned to Fort Bragg. The SOC has become a focal point for addressing sustainment issues at the tactical, installation, and strategic levels by managing the distribution network and marshaling strategic and regional enablers, including the Army field support battalion and the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). It bridges the gap left in the absence of the legacy materiel management centers and leverages the logistics information systems resident in the sustainment brigade support operations section as well as those of outside enablers.

During expeditionary operations, the brigade operates a sustainment mission command center in the deployed, joint environment. The Fort Bragg SOC receives augmentation from the Army field support battalion, contracting command, and DLA during high operating tempo periods.

Fort Bragg Considers Its SOC Deployable

The Fort Bragg SOC manages a problem set that delves into operational and tactical logistics as the brigade fulfills both defined and implied roles in support of the global response force. This translates into an increased focus on expeditionary sustainment in support of joint forces establishing lodgments or conducting noncombatant evacuation operations or defense chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosive response force operations.

As a result of these missions, the Fort Bragg SOC has leaned toward being the same while deployed and in garrison. The Fort Bragg SOC has made strides in replicating operational sustainment in garrison and seeks to manage with the same template while deployed.

Emerging SOC theory has yet to consider the SOC a deployable entity. If an objective of the SOC is to “replicate operational sustainment during garrison employment,” should we not consider the SOC deployable? Aren't deployable sustainment brigades applying

considerable effort toward synchronizing strategic and operational lines of support? An analysis of a deployed sustainment brigade's battle rhythm will typically yield many missions involving the Army field support brigade.

Aren't deployed sustainment brigades expending time and energy synchronizing contracted installation support at forward operating bases? A review of contracted sustainment functions in the deployed environment will prove this to be true. Indeed, an analysis of the SOC mission in garrison yields many similarities in mission, purpose, and perhaps even challenges.

Interestingly, one could argue that implementing a SOC stands a greater chance of success in a deployed setting since expeditionary operations tend to provide the crisis moments needed to unify strategic enablers and thereby gain benefit from proximity. No CONUS-based SOC has benefited yet from working in the proximity of enduring resident enablers, such as an Army field support battalion, DLA, or a contracting command, because none of these SOCs have enduring enablers physically resident within them.

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The Fort Bragg SOC is no different and has found that only crisis moments and high operating tempo periods result in a willingness by most enablers to provide an enduring presence in the SOC. The deployed environment might one day be the very first example where the sustainment community can truly say a successful SOC operation has occurred. Of course success during times of crises is the kind of synchronization that occurs most often from proximity of enablers and not just a "coordinating and supporting" relationship.

Building Joint Relationships

A SOC must be prepared to leverage sustainment capabilities resident in joint and coalition organizations because both disaster and expeditionary operations are joint responses. Therefore, it must continue to build joint relationships and seek out joint, interoperable training opportunities while in garrison. Such training opportunities often involve joint organizations training throughout a SOC's geographically assigned region and therefore require sustainment support.

The mission to provide logistics support to a global response force joint task force that is prepared to both seize nonpermissive terrain and conduct civil response operations has given the Fort Bragg SOC a joint mindset. This SOC cannot successfully sustain its assigned region or joint task force without joint and interagency enablers, including the 43rd Airlift Group (U.S. Air Force), DLA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the 2nd Marine Logistics Group, expeditionary strike groups of the U.S. Navy, and the Department of State.

The Fort Bragg SOC has realized the benefits gained from enduring relationships with other Army SOCs. It is now beginning to seek out efficiencies from enduring joint and interagency relationships.

The Importance of Proximity

Articles written about SOCs from around CONUS have advertised them as one-stop synchronizers of sustainment activities. Leaders in the sustainment community have added that if a SOC does not have someone on site to help, it will act as a liaison in contacting the needed enabler. However, according to emerging SOC theory, contacting the right agency should be made easier by proximity. The agencies the SOC routinely contacts to manage the needs of supported units are potentially the best candidates for enduring membership in the SOC.

The Fort Bragg SOC has no enduring enablers resident in its ranks. It maintains solid working relationships with "potential" enablers, including DLA, an Army field support brigade, a contracting command, the directorate of logistics, a mission support element and corps G-4, G-7, and G-8, division-level general staffs, regional Army National Guard and Army Reserve sustainment units, and the 43rd Airlift Group (U.S. Air Force). The Fort Bragg SOC resides in a state-of-the-art facility with modern office space and room for enablers, yet there are none.

Very few SOCs throughout CONUS have colocated enablers like a regionally supporting Army field support battalion. If other SOCs are like the one at Fort Bragg, four dynamics are likely in play:

- The SOC maintains a good rapport with potential enablers and seeks the least disruptive way of achieving a physical presence in the SOC.
- Potential enablers are not structured or manned in a

way that fosters their ability to be enduring enablers in the SOC.

- Some enablers consider their proper place to be within the expeditionary sustainment command rather than in the SOC. (We should consider the validity of this argument.)
- Agency autonomy and turf continue to weigh as a factor.

The members of the Fort Bragg SOC believe that proximity means something. Therefore, the Fort Bragg SOC will continue to maintain, build, and establish relationships leading to enduring enablers.

It is not enough to settle for “coordinating and supporting” relationships that do not yield benefits that could be gained from proximity. A SOC must be bold and consider what structure will best support its assigned region and then seek out enablers and build relationships with them. The greater sustainment community can help gather enablers by identifying the common enablers needed across all SOCs and then documenting relationships with these organizations in emerging SOC policy.

Bold thinking makes us better. The SOC concept seeks to reform doctrine by considering lessons we have learned from deployments. Success of the concept depends on the

ability of SOCs to coordinate laterally among each other. This is best achieved by thinking hard about what agencies should be enablers, including joint and interagency enablers, and achieving synchronization through proximity.

As the Army enters a time of constrained resources, sustainers are exploring ways to be more efficient while retaining joint sustainment capabilities in an expeditionary environment. The sustainment community owes the combatant commander a manned and equipped force, but it should be one that is prepared to employ its full sustainment capabilities in the joint environment.

Thinking of the SOC as a deployable and joint entity, while also capturing SOC membership in policy and practice, will help us achieve these effects.

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This chart depicts the location of the sustainment operations centers throughout the United States.

