



Commanding an Army Field Support Battalion

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL MICHAEL T. WRIGHT

The 2d Battalion, 401st Army Field Support Brigade, supported the increase of forces in Afghanistan and the drawdown of forces in Iraq through Army pre-positioned stock management, direct theater support, and retrograde.

While assigned as the professor of military science at Gannon University, I received the call to command the 2d Battalion, 401st Army Field Support Brigade (AFSB), also known as the 2-401 Army Field Support Battalion (AFSBn), at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. I was informed that this unit was pivotal to the Army's success in supporting two theaters of operations, was a key strategic asset, and would be executing an integral role in support of two Presidential directives:

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Build I and II and the responsible drawdown of forces in Iraq.

Although leading and mentoring future Army leaders as a professor of military science was extremely rewarding, I could not turn down the opportunity to command a unit whose mission contributions would make history. Two years later, as I said good-bye to this exceptional unit and relinquished command, it seemed very appropriate to provide others with the knowledge I had gained



High-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles prepared and stored by the 2d Battalion, 401st Army Field Support Brigade, stand ready at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo by Galen Putnam, 402d AFSB Public Affairs)

for incoming 2–401 AFSBn Soldiers and DA civilians. As I began to understand the 2–401 AFSBn’s missions, it became increasingly clear why the battalion was tagged as the “Logistical Tip of the Spear.”

The AFSBn is many things, but its primary role is serving as the face of the Army Materiel Command in the Southwest Asia joint operations area. The unit synchronizes and integrates the activities and capabilities of program managers, life cycle management commands, and sustainment support organizations and places the entire Materiel Enterprise at the service of Soldiers. In short, it forms the wholesale logistics link to retail logistics systems for key classes of supply.

In my experience, most Army units are standardized, but few AFSBns are uniform in appearance and mission. The 2–401 AFSBn is no exception, since numerous unique and critical missions clearly set it apart. The 2–401 AFSBn supports the Army at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. This is evident in the battalion’s role in two Presidential directives at the operational and tactical levels that directly supported the Nation’s wartime missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The battalion executes as many as 35 supporting missions, but Army prepositioned stocks 5 (APS–5) management is the battalion’s enduring mission and direct theater support (DTS) and retrograde form the key missions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation New Dawn, and OEF.

APS–5. The battalion is responsible for the care, maintenance, and ready-for-issue status of APS–5, a key strategic asset in a strategically significant theater postured to engage in many potential missions. The battalion’s APS–5 mission is inextricably linked to the defense of Kuwait and contingencies that may arise in the joint operations area. APS–5 currently consists of the enduring heavy brigade combat team (HBCT) equipment set, an infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) set (an operational set), and motorized options for both.

The APS–5 mission also includes a mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle (MRAP) modernization program and the Watercraft Equipment Site–Kuwait at the Kuwait Naval Base, which has a full complement of Army boats and a causeway system. The materiel is forward-maintained and postured for hasty issue to a rapidly deploying unit in support of threats to Kuwait or other theater contingencies.

DTS. DTS is an ongoing mission that includes the sourcing, maintaining, and shipping of rolling and nonrolling stock. The mission largely supports tactical needs, but it also supports many operational needs. The

about AFSB missions, the challenges faced, the lessons learned, and the highlights experienced during this critical time in history.

2–401 AFSBn Missions

Many Soldiers and Department of the Army (DA) civilians are unfamiliar with AFSBn missions. I actually had to look up the definition of an AFSBn before taking command. I later found that was a common procedure



Soldiers from a receiving unit work with Soldiers and civilian employees of the 2d Battalion, 401st Army Field Support Brigade, to complete basic issue item inventories during Exercise Friendship II at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo by Galen Putnam, 402d AFSSB Public Affairs)

Phases III and IV saw a large surge of equipment. The vast majority of this equipment was retrograded directly back to a source of repair at the life cycle management commands' depots, such as Anniston Army Depot, Alabama; Sierra Army Depot, California; and Red River Army Depot, Texas, in support of the ARFORGEN effort. All of the equipment was linked to that effort through the battalion's inventory, tracking, and shipping systems.

Contract Support

To accomplish these missions, the battalion employs more than 4,500 contract personnel. Oversight of this contract activity is provided by 47 Government personnel (36 by table of distribution and allowances), including Soldiers and DA civilians, augmented by a small contract staff. This performance-based contract is valued at more than \$240 million, with a property book totaling more than \$5 billion of equipment maintained in the wholesale system.

As one can imagine, commanding a mission of this magnitude with a 98-percent contracted workforce and a 2-percent Government oversight workforce presented many challenges, but it also provided the opportunity to find inventive ways to achieve mission success.

One challenge the battalion experienced was a total change in the contract, which was announced in early 2009 but not finalized until February 2010, resulting in a contract transition during a peak in the operating tempo of all three of the battalion's missions. The incumbent contractor won the bid, but the contract was radically altered from the previous one.

The contract workforce presented the most serious problems because of a significant workforce reduction and change in composition. Although the missions had not changed, the workforce was reduced by two-thirds from the previous contract and the workforce composition was changed to a largely third-country-national workforce. Language barriers and cultural differences added to the challenges of the substantial overall personnel reduction and resulted in a significant struggle to maintain and manage missions.

As the mission demands and the operating tempo increased, the contract transitioned from having more than 3,200 contractors in April 2010 to having only 1,200 at the end of May. The reduction was compounded by a large workforce strike caused by pay and work-hour disputes and was followed by a severe shortage of transpor-

DTS mission provides equipment for multiple locations throughout the theater and beyond, including Bahrain, Sinai, Jordan, and Djibouti, to name a few. The bulk of the battalion's DTS activity is directed toward Iraq and Afghanistan.

Retrograde. Retrograde is a function that supports Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) at the strategic level, but it also supports the operational level as a key sourcing tool for DTS and APS. The retrograde mission consisted of five phases covering OIF and Operation New Dawn. Phases I and II saw a steady stream of retrograded equipment arriving from Iraq; this equipment went on to support a large portion of the first and second OEF troop increases.

Retrograde also supported many other theater requirements, including foreign military sales, the U.S. equipment transfer to Iraq, and the replacement of APS equipment issued or otherwise diverted from stocks. This retrograded equipment flowed through a number of repair efforts, such as the Theater-Provided Equipment Refurbishment Program, the Joint Program Office MRAP sustainment facility, and the battalion's theater maintenance facility.

tation personnel to move retrograde materiel and equipment. Soldiers were brought in to overcome the shortfall and maintain the mission timelines.

The Government's oversight mission was critical and ensured that solutions to mission concerns were identified. On numerous occasions, the contractor teamed up with its Government counterparts to develop and implement mutual solutions.

During this same period, we had trouble completing the APS maintenance mission because of a lack of contracted mechanics and a lack of Soldiers to fill in for those mechanics. The result was a significant effort of accountability to correct the shortfall and get the mission back on track.

Administrative Challenges

Competing demands were also a significant challenge for the battalion. The battalion struggled to meet information requirements, short suspenses, personnel turnover, and competing requirements from multiple chains of command.

The battalion is administratively controlled and has its formal chain of command under the 402d AFSB and the Army Sustainment Command. The battalion was initially under the 401st AFSB but was attached to the 402d in November 2009. The 402d AFSB has one headquarters, but during the deployment it was split between two locations: Iraq and Kuwait. The 2-401 AFsBn was also operationally controlled by U.S. Army Central and

tactically controlled by the 1st Sustainment Command (Theater).

Navigating through the multiple command associations and the resulting demands required tremendous efforts to balance mission requirements, ensure clear information flow, understand requirements, manage expectations, educate others about the battalion's processes, and maintain overall satisfaction of demands and missions.

Lessons Learned

Contractual issues can be mitigated in the early stages by receiving timely input from the people most directly affected. Applying on-scene maintenance, supply, and transportation expertise to the development and review of proposals will pay dividends. Strong Government oversight must be resourced during contract transitions and should be synchronized as closely as possible with the operating tempo.

Government personnel and contractors ultimately have to execute critical, time-sensitive, and Soldier-focused missions. Mission execution is best accomplished with a team effort between the Government and the contract team; an "us versus them" attitude significantly impairs mission accomplishment.

Multiple chains of command and competing demands require an adept balancing act, solid support from top military officers, and quality staffing from the immediate chain of command. A clear understanding of priorities, processes, and intent must be coupled with the confi-

A mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle rolls aboard a transport ship, ready for a new mission.





A Soldier inventories basic issue items before signing for a high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle from the 2d Battalion, 401st Army Field Support Brigade, during Exercise Friendship II at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo by Galen Putnam, 402d AFSB Public Affairs)

dence to execute and command within the commander's intent.

Highlights of the Command

During OEF Build I and II, the battalion repaired, processed, and provided more than 63,251 pieces of rolling and nonrolling stock in support of DTS and, ultimately, the Soldier. Of significant note was the sourcing, maintenance, and shipment of more than 6,000 vehicles—more than 50 percent of the class VII (major end items) rolling stock required—for OEF Build I and II, which increased troop strength by 30,000 and 20,000 Soldiers respectively. This was done in a very compressed 6-month timeframe and included building the equipment into combat systems with key enablers and the latest armor upgrades.

During the responsible drawdown and conclusion of OIF, 11 percent of the DTS equipment came from the retrograde process, including the sourcing of requirements in Kuwait, such as APS and local unit requirements. The remaining 152,980 pieces of equipment were processed from Phases II and III to the continental United States in support of ARFORGEN.

At the end of Phase III, through Phase IV, and into Phase V, retrograde rolling stock flowed at an average of 2,200 pieces a month as the equipment surged out of Iraq to meet the required 50,000-Soldier reduction in force by September 2010. Nonrolling stock totaled more than 126,827 pieces retrograded, and rolling stock totaled more than 44,702 pieces. More than 18,549 pieces of retrograded equipment were used in support of DTS requirements.

The HBCTs began a complete reconstitution starting in October 2008. By March 2010, nearly 100 percent of the equipment was processed and linked as combat systems in the HBCTs. In the meantime, new equipment destined for the HBCT and IBCT reconstitution was diverted to support OEF. Retrograde assets, including rolling and nonrolling stock, compensated for most of those diverted assets.

The shortfalls in both brigade combat team equipment sets resulting from OEF support were filled, and the sets had the required enablers and armor upgrades to meet theater requirements. Watercraft reached 100 percent of

its required fleet, complete with a number of boats issued to units. Finally, the entire APS fleet received MRAP vehicles. The MRAPs—more than 900 vehicles of every variant—came from an aggressive retrograde effort and support from Afghanistan.

Every mission has its own challenges, lessons learned, and highlights. Although the obstacles sometimes appeared insurmountable, I consider the opportunity and journey of commanding this exceptional battalion a professional gift that I will continue to draw from many years from now.

From the first day of command, the size and scope of the operation—spread across multiple sites in Kuwait, with a footprint encompassing 264 acres, 30 facilities, and a high of 4,700 personnel—was daunting. The historic significance of each mission and the subsequent weight of responsibility were immensely satisfying. The unique opportunity to be a pivotal component of both Nickel II, which was the largest logistics operation since World War II, and the massive short-term equipment push to meet the OEF build of forces, all while reconstituting a key strategic asset, was not only satisfying; it was an honor.

Although I was rarely able to interact with Soldiers directly, many stories of equipment that saved lives and the Soldiers' expressions of gratitude for the equipment's key role in their safe return home provided the greatest rewards. The 2-401 AFSBn's impact on our Army's Soldiers and historic missions made serving at the Logistical Tip of the Spear the richest, most valuable professional experience the Army has offered me thus far and one that I will never forget.

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