



Closing the Gap

Army Aviation and the Sustainment Warfighting Function

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At a U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) Monthly Aviation Readiness Review (MARR) in the fall of 2023, various combat aviation brigade (CAB) commanders and division and corps deputy commanding generals-support (DCG-Ss) briefed the FORSCOM DCG, Lt. Gen. Paul Calvert, on the status of a list of NMC-100s. NMC-100s are helicopters that are undergoing maintenance for 100 calendar days. At the conclusion of the meeting, the DCG-S directed division and corps G-4s to do more to help with aviation maintenance.

This is a simple directive, but as career aviation officers (one of us is an aviation support battalion commander), it made us wonder why there is a lack of emphasis on aviation logistics at the division and corps levels. The FORSCOM MARR takes place monthly, so clearly this provides a degree of leadership emphasis. However, this pales in comparison to the emphasis given to other pacing items such as Abrams, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Strykers, and Paladins.

It is common practice for a division-level maintenance meeting to take place two or more times per month, where brigade combat team (BCT) executive officers painstakingly brief their DCG-S on their pacing items and other critical items based on their equipment status reports. The authors have observed that helicopters are absent from these meetings and do not receive the same level of emphasis, even though helicopters are pacing items. This monthly touchpoint is simply not enough to address challenges in readiness for Army aviation. (Pacing items are major weapon systems, aircraft, and other equipment items that are central to an organization's ability to perform its designated mission.)

Another example of this is that the III Armored Corps sustainment assessment does not include any helicopters on the critical fleet readiness common operating picture (COP). In addition, the extended estimated ship date actions COP does not include any Class IX air parts for combat aviation brigades.

Finally, also based on the authors' experiences, division and corps G-4s are not regular attendees

at the division, corps, or the FORSCOM MARR. In many cases, this is the only venue where aviation readiness is discussed in any level of detail above the CAB. Therefore, this creates a lack of emphasis between these critical echelons and makes it difficult to address aviation readiness challenges.

The Distance Between Army Aviation and the Greater Sustainment Warfighting Function

There are, of course, other factors affecting this observation. For starters, there are significant gaps within the greater sustainment warfighting function in understanding Army aviation maintenance. Naturally, at the division and corps level, G-4s are career logistics officers with an absolute wealth of knowledge and experience. However, unless they have been assigned as support operations officers in a CAB, they are very likely unfamiliar with aviation maintenance. This lack of experience, combined with the separate process of how aviation readiness is addressed through the FORSCOM MARR, greatly contributes to this problem. To help close this gap, division and corps G-4 officers should prioritize attending the FORSCOM MARR or send a trusted agent, such as their division aviation maintenance technician (AMT), to attend in their absence and receive a back brief.

A lack of shared understanding and communication between critical systems exacerbates this problem. Until very recently, Army aviation operated exclusively on the Aircraft Notebook (ACN) system. ACN replaced the outdated Unit Level Logistics System-Aviation system for tracking aviation maintenance, processing work orders, reporting statuses, and ordering parts in fiscal year 2017, around the same time the rest of the Army fielded the Global Combat Support System-Army (GCSS-Army). When implemented, these systems were not designed to communicate with each other, missing an opportunity to create shared understanding and visibility between Army aviation and the rest of Army sustainment.

The Army is resolving this problem through the fielding of the GCSS-Army Enterprise Aviation (EAVN) system to CABs. As reported by Erika Christ

of the Strategic Communication Directorate in October 2021, according to Lt. Col. Bill Reker, product manager for GCSS-Army, at the start of fielding, GCSS-Army EAVN was “the Commanding General of the Army Materiel Command’s ‘number one GCSS-Army priority.’” Ms. Christ added that “EAVN connects the Aircraft Notebook (ACN) to the Army’s tactical logistics ERP system in order to standardize business processes, move ACN data from the flight line to GCSS-Army’s enterprise systems, provide a single logistics data center for aviation data, and provide senior leaders and combatant commanders with ‘near-real-time views’ of Army aviation assets.”

This ongoing fielding is a massive step forward for how the Army can better integrate Army aviation sustainment into the rest of the sustainment w a r f i g h t i n g function. However, GCSS-Army EAVN is not without typical fielding friction points. For example, ACN is still the interface for data entry on the flight line. ACN transfers data to the aviation integration services system (a sort of middle man), which recodes data into a format that is understandable by GCSS-Army. This data transfer

through the aviation integration service serves as a choke point and causes up to a four-hour delay from requisition in ACN to processing in GCSS-Army on a typical day.

Since the FORSCOM DCG-S directed division and corps G-4s to do more to help Army aviation maintenance, Army aviation also bears some of the responsibility for this problem. With Army aviation operating separately through ACN, aviation maintenance personnel and leaders have not done enough to bridge this gap, effectively bypassing division and corps G-4 offices to solve problems.

Each CAB’s highly dedicated aviation maintenance test pilots and AMTs have a wealth of experience and work tirelessly to overcome parts-flow issues. They and logistics assistance representatives (LARs) from the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command (AMCOM) connect

daily with item managers, Defense Logistics Agency customer support specialists, warehouse managers, other support operations officers, and many other parts of the supply chain to resource parts. This work is done every day with extremely limited visibility at the division and corps levels. For as long as the authors

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have been in Army aviation, this has been an effective process, but recent scarcity issues with the supply chain have caused significant increases in non-mission-capable supply time. To overcome these challenges, aviation maintainers must communicate problems and challenges in readiness to sustainment professionals at the division and corps echelons to provide leadership emphasis and improve aviation readiness.

Recommendations

Fortunately, there are simple solutions to help close this knowledge gap between division and corps G-4s and aviation maintenance. AMTs (151A) are the subject matter experts (SMEs) who are perfectly positioned to help solve this problem. They exist in the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) at battalion and division level, at FORSCOM, and at Headquarters, Department of the Army, G-4. They are the experts with the knowledge and skill sets readily available to advise division and corps G-4 officers on all the nuances of Army aviation maintenance. At the division level especially, they are the critical link from the CAB to the division and corps staff. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-04.7, Army Aviation Maintenance, defines AMTs as “technical experts and managers responsible for directing daily aircraft system maintenance, component repair, technical and property supply, and armament operations for their assigned units.” Their duties are quite extensive in any CAB, but more importantly, “aviation maintenance technicians serve as key aviation maintenance advisors to the commander from the maintenance company/troop, support company, and serve in key maintenance positions such as assistant support company PC officer, Division G-4, Corps G-4, FORSCOM G-4, HQDA G-4 ...” Although specified by ATP 3-04.7, the Army recently changed the MTOE for corps headquarters, eliminating AMTs from this critical position and echelon. The significance of this decision will become more apparent later in this article.

Despite the importance of this position, ATP 3-04.7 does not go into sufficient detail as to how these experts can help division and corps G-4s be better engaged and do more to help aviation maintenance. To improve in this area, the authors propose that division G-4 AMTs should do the following:

- Attend all division, corps, and FORSCOM MARRs.
- Attend weekly and/or monthly brigade aviation maintenance meetings and command aviation maintenance meetings.
- Receive a copy of the CAB’s daily status report.
- Communicate regularly with the CAB support operations (SPO) aviation officer and be fully aware of all long-lead-time parts issues in the CAB.
- Communicate regularly with the corps G-4 to raise parts flow and readiness issues.
- Engage with item managers, AMCOM, and other stakeholders in the supply chain on behalf of the CAB.
- Prioritize parts requests and readiness challenges from division to corps and FORSCOM.
- Monitor the CAB’s flight hour program and flying hour projections.
- Regularly visit CAB production control meetings to maintain good relationships and help work through friction.
- Have access to GCSS-Army to maintain visibility on CAB maintenance and operations.
- Serve as SMEs and advisors for the execution of contract aviation maintenance.
- Coordinate directly with the division sustainment brigade (DSB) SPO cell. There are currently no aviation SMEs assigned to the DSB SPO cell. Absent a decision to resource the DSB SPO cell with an AMT, division G-4 AMTs must bridge this knowledge gap in the sustainment warfighting function between these critical echelons.

Furthermore, there is currently no clear and easily understood system in place to prioritize scarce parts across all of Army aviation. Facing scarcity of critical parts, FORSCOM and corps commanders must establish clear priorities to rapidly drive decisions and generate aviation readiness at echelon. Each division has only one CAB; therefore, division G-4s cannot use tools like GCSS-Army directly within their own division to prioritize parts and generate readiness, similar to BCTs in the same division. The lowest echelon that can prioritize Class IX air parts flow is the corps

headquarters, where multiple CABs are competing for parts. The decision to remove AMTs from the corps G-4 also removes the only aviation maintenance SMEs to advise the corps G-4 on these matters. The authors believe this is a mistake, due to the exceptionally technical nature of aviation maintenance.

In the absence of clear priorities, aviation maintenance managers across the Army and their LARs work feverishly to generate readiness by contacting personnel at every part of the supply chain to resource parts. Some are more effective in these endeavors than others through the use of well-developed networks. This type of lateral coordination is a credit to the initiative of aviation maintenance managers, but it is not a substitute for making decisions within the framework of a clearly defined list of priorities or the commander's intent to maximize readiness in Army aviation where it is most critical.

A recent incident helps illustrate this problem. The 4th CAB recently needed an aft fuel cell for an AH-64D Apache as part of a 500-hour phase maintenance inspection. This is an incredibly scarce part. It was not available at Fort Carson, Colorado, but there was one available in the technical supply warehouse for the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Air Cavalry Brigade (1ACB), at Fort Cavazos, Texas. After lateral communication between SPO aviation officers for each CAB, 1ACB graciously shipped the fuel cell to the 4th CAB. Regrettably, in a matter of a week, 1ACB then needed their own aft fuel cell and experienced delays in completing their own maintenance.

The purpose of this vignette is not to say that 1ACB made the wrong decision to send the aft fuel cell to the 4th CAB. The purpose is to highlight the daily lateral coordination between aviation maintenance managers trying to generate readiness in the absence of clear guidance. In this case, since both CABs are in the III Armored Corps, a clear list of priorities may have generated a different outcome that would have helped mitigate risk for the corps. The same concept applies between the Army corps, FORSCOM, and AMCOM to prioritize the release of parts and more

rapidly generate readiness for the Army where it is needed most. This is where division- and corps-level G-4 AMTs can help advise the development of clear priorities to best generate readiness at the division, corps, and Army levels.

Conclusion

Leaders at all echelons should make every effort to help generate readiness for Army aviation. Over recent years, Army aviation maintenance functioned in a very isolated manner from the rest of the Army. EAVN provides the visibility and shared understanding necessary for division and corps G-4s to better understand aviation maintenance, and to help address these challenges at their respective echelons. AMTs at all echelons are the SMEs who can easily help solve this issue and create a shared understanding of aviation maintenance. Together with clear priorities to address scarce-parts issues and drive rapid decisions, it is possible to achieve Lt. Gen. Calvert's directive for division and corps G-4 teams to do more to better generate aviation readiness.

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Feature Photos

Staff Sgt. Luther Snell, with Delta Company, 2-104th General Support Aviation Battalion, 28th Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigade, and Staff Sgt. Derek Arroyo, with the Eastern Army National Guard Aviation Training Site, perform maintenance on helicopters at Muir Army Helipoint at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, Aug. 1, 2023. (Photo by 1st Lt. Samantha Gabriel)