Joint Maritime Distribution

Reflections of the Pacific Theater During World War II *By Maj. Dan Burkholder*



ven within the vast maritime environment, control of land remains decisive in conflict. J. C. Wylie asserted the Soldier on the scene in control is a main component of strategic planning. In a maritime conflict, Soldiers can fulfill this role. Yet, Soldiers cannot control the scene on their own. They need the integrated joint effort to place them on the scene, and a sustainment network to support their ability to control the scene and win.

Historically, the Army played a critical role in the maritime environment, and Army logistics were vital during World War II. Today, the Army still has an important but less-practiced role in conducting maritime operations as the foundational joint enabler. However, the modern maritime environment creates unfamiliar obstacles for joint distribution. Building an understanding of these inherent obstacles through past reflections offers insight to approach the current logistical challenges in a contested maritime environment. The analysis of these reflections assists in constructing an adaptive joint distribution framework that is integrated and synchronized to extend operational reach in a largescale conflict. This article explores the Army's support of the joint maritime theater distribution network during World War II and offers implications for future conflicts.

"The great problem of warfare in the Pacific is to move forces into contact and maintain them. ... Victory is dependent upon the solution of the logistics problem." — Douglas MacArthur, as quoted in *Maurice Matloff, Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare*

Allied Early Distribution System and First Joint Operations (1941-1942)

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Arcadia Conference shifted the prioritization of resources particularly troops, supplies, and shipping—toward Europe and away from the Pacific. However, as Japanese forces advanced across the Pacific, the security of the Allied sea lines of communication (SLOCs) became the acute strategic priority. Forced to improvise and accelerate their defensive plans, the War Department adjusted its strategy and scrambled to balance air and ground forces to reinforce the SLOCs and counter the Japanese attempt to isolate Australia.

The Pacific was divided into the South West Pacific Area (SWPA), under the command of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and the Pacific Ocean Area (POA), under the command of Adm. Chester Nimitz. Within each area, the Allied distribution system was further divided between the Army and the Navy. The Navy controlled and supplied islands and bases garrisoned by the Marines, while the War Department or the Hawaiian Department directly supplied islands with predominately Army forces.

The Allies built advanced bases deeper into the Pacific to extend their operational reach, but the Army, Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marines each had their own separate supply systems and procedures. Lt. Gen. Brehon B. Somervell, the commander of the Army Service Forces (ASF), argued against the joint supply concept. He felt the Army needed to control the supply of the Army's forces and did not trust the Navy's logistical organization to control the joint enterprise.

Eventually, the Army and Navy compromised and worked out a joint logistical plan in July 1942 that more clearly defined the Services' roles. The Navy assumed responsibility for providing all petroleum requirements and supplying all items available from local procurement through the Joint Purchasing Board, while the Army supplied shore-based personnel in the South Pacific bases. Each Service still requested any needs beyond the locally procured supplies through their respective Service channels.

For the Guadalcanal campaign, there was no resupply plan for the 1st Marine Division beyond their initial 60-day supply, and no Army units were integrated into follow-on operations or prepared to relieve or resupply the division. On August 9, 1942, two days after the initial landings, the Japanese destroyed one of Rear Adm. Richmond Turner's transport ships, and he decided to withdraw with half of the Marines' supplies remaining on his cargo vessels. This severely limited the Marines' options, and resupply proved to be challenging because supply depots at Nouméa, New Caledonia, and Espiritu Santo were underdeveloped and not under the division's control. Because the supply consumption rates fluctuated at each base, the reserve stocks varied greatly, and there was no system to quickly respond to the massive, unexpected demands that Guadalcanal required. Army forces at Nouméa fulfilled some of the Marines' emergency requirements, but this depleted the reserve stocks in New Caledonia, and the Army was unable to support other combat operations elsewhere in the theater.

This shortsighted planning nearly prevented an Allied victory at Guadalcanal. The campaign unveiled and compounded issues related to the absence of a coherent joint logistics system and Army logistics integration into planning and operations. The emergency priority shift toward the Allied effort on Guadalcanal strained the whole distribution network. The developing ports could not keep up with the massive influx of troops and supplies. The few ships they did have were often delayed at ports because each Service unloaded their supplies separately and only as needed without coordination or management of the harbor. The inadequate number of port troops along with insufficient storage and discharge facilities intensified the situation. These conditions created such a long, costly backlog that by November 1942, 91 ships were waiting to be unloaded in the Nouméa harbor and could not be used elsewhere in the theater.

Evolution of Allied Distribution Systems and Shipping Crises (1943-1945)

The growing distribution problem motivated Somervell to send the ASF director of operations,

Maj. Gen. LeRoy Lutes, to investigate the challenges and develop recommendations. Lutes recognized that the lack of inter-service cooperation between the Army and the Navy intensified the congestion at the port. He recommended a joint logistical staff to determine and manage South Pacific's the requirements, priorities, and unloading. The port congestion gradually subsided by May 1943, but the issue only moved forward in the supply chain as the Allies expanded their operations.

Lutes's recommendations reopened the unified logistics debate. The Navy stood firm with

its decentralized logistical system that accommodated its mobile sea-based logistical support groups. Conversely, the ASF wanted to consolidate and control resources at advanced land bases through the Army's centralized logistical system. Based on these findings, the Joint Chiefs of Staff adopted the Basic Logistical Plan in March 1943. The Basic Logistical Plan charged

"The ultimate determinate in war is the man on the scene with the gun. This man is the final power in war. He is in control. He determines who wins."

J.C. Wylie, *Military Strategy:* A General Theory of Power Control

each joint area commander with full responsibility for all logistical services and directed them to organize suitable unified logistical supply staffs and to submit priorities for troops and supplies.

Nimitz established the Joint Logistics Board in April 1943, which continued the Army-Navy independence in shipping. Disliking this approach, Somervell sent his subordinate, Brig. Gen. Edmond Leavey, to tour the POA supply facilities. Leavey found the POA did not adopt the Basic Logistical Plan directives and reported there was no staff officer with overall authority

> over logistics and supply. Nimitz abolished the Joint Logistics Board on September 6, 1943, formed a joint staff, and designated Leavey as the J-4 to manage the responsibility of the logistics division and integrated logistical planning.

In the SWPA, MacArthur's approach toward logistical coordination did not come from the Basic Logistical Plan but through his combined staff and centralized planning. He allowed the various Service national and components to manage their supplies separately and exercised control through prioritization and

dictation. Without any organization or consolidation of his amphibious forces, MacArthur relied on the War Department to meet all of his landing craft requirements and competed heavily for port facilities and transportation assets. This led the SWPA toward a tendency to retain as many vessels as possible from the War Department. In the fall of 1943 and again in the middle of 1944, the increased requirements for the Central Pacific offensive, combined with the SWPA's increased offensive operations, created a shipping crisis. The increased demand and heavy congestion in the Atlantic and Pacific began to take a toll on the Allied efforts. The crisis forced all theater commanders to make cutbacks in their fall and winter 1944-1945 requisitions, and they had to operate with less shipping capacity. As a result of the global crisis, President Franklin Roosevelt published a directive forbidding the use of vessels for storage, stopping selective discharge, and penalizing theaters for retaining vessels. The directive inspired change and reduced the emergency, but operations were delayed and drastically reduced.

In April 1945, the Joint Security Council (JSC) appointed MacArthur as Commander in Chief of Army Forces in the Pacific and Nimitz as the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet to command all Pacific Naval resources while the JSC would be the unified command. Although this new plan allowed for a gradual transition, it voided the Basic Logistics Plan. Within the new command structure, each Service developed divergent proposals for managing common supplies and services to prioritize demands. Adm. King proposed a joint shipping agency, but MacArthur rejected it, wanting more control over Army resources. The war ended before a new revised method of separated logistical systems and direct shipments to assault areas was thoroughly tested.

Analysis

The Army attempted to integrate joint distribution in the Pacific. However, each Service and theater's logistical systems were complex and drastically different, leading to more logistical complications that delayed tempo and limited operational reach. The Basic Logistics Plan was a step toward integration, yet the directive did not establish one standard for Pacific logistical integration and was later dissolved.

To overcome the immense challenge of scale and sheer distances between sustainment nodes within the Pacific theater, the Allies built a chain of advanced bases to push air, land, and sea power closer to Japan. Although this allowed for deeper combat projection and decreased the movement time for supplies, it depended on the throughput capacity of ill-equipped ports. Farther down the distribution chain, transportation distances decreased, but the capabilities of each port also diminished. This seemingly inverse correlation between distance and throughput was most evident in Leyte and Nouméa where a tremendous backlog of ships hindered the build-up for future operations and forced action from Washington. Although closer is typically better, the throughput of each port sometimes delayed supplies longer than if they were shipped directly from San Francisco. Thus, the Allies experimented with a direct shipping method toward the end of the war.

Both the Navy and Army wanted control over segments of the distribution network. This inclination for control, combined with the differences in each Service's logistical system, created significant friction challenges within the network. The Navy's decentralized automatic pushbased resupply logistical network focused on the fleet, whereas the Army's centralized demand and pull-based system focused on ground forces and bases. The struggle for control, combined with differing systems and lack of visibility, generated multiple inefficiencies. Moreover, the absence of a theater-based unified element that controlled the prioritization and management of distribution created more strain between each sub-theater to compete for limited logistical resources, such as vessels and common user supplies or equipment. This increased scarcity forced commanders in each theater to reduce their pace and downsize operations.

Relevance for Future Conflicts

Limited Resources. In a large-scale maritime conflict, limited lighterage and sealift assets at the tactical and operational levels hinder flexibility, tempo, and operational reach. Spreading these capabilities across each level is a traditional approach, but it decreases the adaptability of the force to change with the evolving battlefield conditions. Pooling joint sealift and protection capabilities similar to the Marine Corps idea of compressing the levels of logistics may alleviate this inevitable shortfall. Furthermore, adding the ability to dynamically shift between a more conventional model to a compressed arrangement generates additional joint flexibility. It allows the joint force to converge capabilities for emerging operational requirements and to shift back to a more diverged state that provides stability and tactical flexibility.

Integration. The modern U.S. military has made significant progress toward a joint mindset since World War II. However, Service parochialism and segregation still exist and must be overcome to synchronize joint force capabilities and requirements more holistically and efficiently. The Services have different approaches to confronting contested logistics, but a unified and agreedupon framework to merge different services and levels of capabilities before a conflict occurs mitigates the risk of initial logistical struggles. Otherwise, each Service will only look inwardly to extend its operational reach, creating inefficiencies and generating additional scarcity in a resource-constrained environment, which will hinder all operations.

Dispersion/Concentration. Electronic warfare, long-range fires, and low-cost drones will continuously threaten key logistics nodes such as ports and lines of communication (LOCs). To mitigate these threats, dispersing and extending LOCs are necessary to reinforce the distribution network. However, greater dispersion and less concentration require not only more synchronization to orchestrate the additional nodes but also support and protection capabilities at each location. Thus, a balance must be made between using several dispersed nodes with limited protection capabilities and fewer larger nodes with higher levels of protection. A dynamic logistical hub-and-spoke model, where nodes can diverge and converge based on the changing requirements and evolving environmental conditions, may offer a solution to balance this tension.

Control/Flexibility. Centrally controlling logistical resources and capabilities at the operational or strategic level hinders the flexibility of tactical organizations to rapidly adapt to changed combat conditions. Conversely, decentralization with added flexibility to the tactical levels hampers the ability of operational and strategic levels to manage, prioritize, and converge toward emerging requirements. Under certain circumstances,

merging tactical assets to support another higherpriority operation is required, and once that high-priority requirement is filled, the capabilities can shift back to support more decentralized tactical requirements.

Conclusion

In conclusion, land is a foundational element of all activities in other domains, and the ability to control it will be decisive. The Army has a vested interest in not only controlling the land in the maritime environment but also in sustaining the Soldiers who control it. Sustaining the Soldiers requires the integration and synchronization of the joint force. Although the Allies overcame a lack of integration with informal coordination and mass production to sustain their forces, in a future conflict, the U.S. probably will not have the same luxury. Thus, the Army has an opportunity to create shared understanding across the Services. Doing so merges the Services' different concepts of operating in a contested environment to adaptively balance the tensions between control and flexibility and between dispersion and concentration. Flexibility in shifting these scales, especially in the complex Pacific environment, is a significant challenge. Yet, if the Army integrates and synchronizes the joint distribution network, it cannot only function in the complex environment but also harness complexity to its advantage while adapting to the changing variables of the operational environment.

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Featured Photos

Left: Aerial view of the Allied invasion fleet at Leyte in Seeadler Harbor, October 1944. (San Diego Air and Space Museum Archive) Right: Unloading supplies and ammunition in Nouméa Harbor, New Caledonia, January 1943. (National Archives photo no. 80-G-34552)