

The cost-effective corps

The US Marine Corps is experienced in operating in austere fiscal environments, but in recent years even the most efficient branch of the US Armed Forces has had to rethink its logistical strategies. **Lieutenant General Frank A Panter, Jr**, tells Elly Earls how major changes in management policies and technological advances will make the corps lighter, leaner and, ultimately, more cost-effective.

The US Marine Corps (USMC) provides 31% of the US Armed Forces' ground operating forces, 12% of its fixed-wing tactical aircraft and 19% of its tactical helicopter forces with just 7.8% of the Department of Defense's budget. But despite the USMC's obvious efficacy, its logistics heads have recently implemented a number of efficiency initiatives to ensure that ever-decreasing budgets are spent as wisely as possible.

Last year the USMC conducted a comprehensive structure review, modifying the logistics combat element of the force to create a leaner, more effective structure to support warfighters' needs. "The challenging business of logistics is being met head on by every logistics department," says Lieutenant General Frank A Panter, Jr, deputy commandant, installations and logistics, USMC. "We are ensuring that we are doing what is best to support the warfighter while preparing for future demands."

Policy change can have a significant and immediate effect on how well soldiers are supported, and members of senior leadership in the USMC's logistics organisations are continually reviewing the force's approach to logistics. Solutions range from hiring field-

service representatives to perform repairs on critical weapon systems in theatre to establishing agreements with local businesses to mitigate and resolve logistical challenges.

“The writing of logistics policy is a deliberate process that incorporates efforts at all levels within the USMC,” Panter adds. “It can take time, but we maintain forward momentum by producing interim guidance via USMC bulletins and policy clarification letters.”

Transparency is key

Transparency and collaboration have become increasingly important to maintain the logistical standards that the US Armed Forces have come to expect from the USMC. “After nearly ten years of sustained combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the USMC is reprising its role as America’s expeditionary force in readiness,” Panter notes. “The conditions under which the marine expeditionary forces will be employed in the future constantly evolve so transparency in our strategic direction will keep all elements of the USMC moving forward together.”

The tough economic climate in which the USMC is now operating also calls for complete transparency. “Our ability to continue to provide the US with the USMC it expects will have to occur with fewer resources and less money, making collaboration among all elements of the force and the external organisations with which we interact absolutely critical,” Panter explains. “Each piece of the USMC’s logistics community must understand and embrace the strategic direction in which we are moving, and recognise its contribution to that progress with fewer resources to arrive at the objective.”

The USMC is reviewing how equipment is managed throughout its entire lifecycle. “We’re promoting increased cooperation and collaboration between all of the major actors responsible for developing, acquiring, sustaining, using, disposing of and replacing our systems,” says Panter. “The resulting improvements in processes and policies will make it possible for us to maximise available resources to ensure

Lieutenant General Frank A Panter, Jr

Lieutenant General Frank A Panter, Jr, is the deputy commandant, installations and logistics, at the US Marine Corps. Enlisting in 1968, Panter served in a variety of roles, including tours in Vietnam, the Western Pacific and Southern Europe. He was assigned to Marine Corps Headquarters in 2006.

that marines have what they need to succeed on the battlefield.”

Technological innovations

Policy change on its own is not enough; the most advanced IT tools available are also being used to enhance the efficiency of the USMC. Its new logistics IT backbone, Global Combat Support System – Marine Corps (GCSS-MC), has now been deployed across one-third of the USMC and is set to be fully operational in two years’ time. A single, web-based, state-of-the-art system, GCSS-MC will replace the

USMC’s current stovepiped, non-integrated legacy IT systems, meaning that marines will be able to conduct supply, maintenance and management transactions in near-real time, regardless of their location.

“We recently demonstrated the ability to integrate data from the GCSS-MC into other IT systems,” Panter remarks. “The ability to share data among multiple systems helps us reduce time and costs associated with future GCSS-MC capability development, while providing the operating forces with a more robust



Lieutenant General Frank A Panter, Jr:
“Collaboration is absolutely critical.”

and holistic capability today.” Many marines benefitted from the improvements offered by GCSS-MC during the earthquake and tsunami relief efforts in Japan. The system allowed the USMC to open repair orders and order parts, tracking supplies in real-time and therefore decreasing the duration of the repair cycle. GCSS-MC was also used to identify and track the lifecycle of equipment contaminated (and subsequently decontaminated) by radiation.

According to Panter, the strategic implications of this are immense: “The system can provide leadership with detailed views on equipment status from a sustainment, readiness and total ownership cost paradigm.”

“Cooperative acquisition strategies are already paying dividends, particularly with the procurement of personal protective equipment.”

RFID technology is also being used to improve the visibility of supplies moving through the logistics chain. One success story is the establishment of a worldwide network of fixed RFID readers, associated software, hardware, and communications capabilities. Typical RFID reader locations include key supply and transportation nodes such as depots, terminals, ports, and base and station gates.

Procurement strategies

Calls for more efficient defence procurement have also affected operations across the US Armed Forces, leading to the implementation of programmes such as the Pentagon’s Better Buying Power initiative in September 2010. With this scheme as its roadmap, the USMC is now adjusting its acquisition approach, tools and techniques in five major areas: affordability, rewarding productivity, promoting competition, improving tradecraft and reducing bureaucracy.

“This will enable us to get the most out of each dollar in the Department of Defense budget, and improve the delivery and efficiency of logistics services,” says Panter.

Panter has also been asked to ensure that his department’s business case analyses are improved; this will help to determine the most cost-effective means to provide system support. And as budgets continue to tighten, he feels that these analyses will come increasingly under the spotlight.

“The USMC will continue to use business case analyses to maximise the impact of every dollar through innovative contracting strategies and commercial partnering when advantageous,” he says.

Cooperative acquisition strategies are already paying dividends, particularly with the procurement of personal protective equipment, Panter is keen to emphasise. “We are working with the US Navy and US

Coastguard to implement a process making the USMC the single provider of ‘common’ Class II items [personal protective equipment] for naval and select coastguard forces,” he explains.

The force of the future

Over the past ten years, the USMC has faced untold challenges during Operation Enduring Freedom, the US Government’s official name for the war in Afghanistan. Mountainous terrain, lack of infrastructure and long communication lines have put tremendous strain on the force’s vehicles, accelerating wear by 600%. Moreover, the proliferation of IEDs has caused severe damage to mechanised equipment.

“Because Afghanistan is

landlocked, supplies and support must be moved into the country through one or more neighbouring countries,” Panter says. “Coordination and communication with other Department of Defense agencies and services has therefore been instrumental in ensuring a rapid response to our requirements.”

But with Operation Enduring Freedom reset actions likely to accelerate in 2012, in conjunction with the presidential directive to drawdown force levels in Afghanistan, changes are afoot for the USMC. Now, Panter believes, it is essential that the USMC takes the logistical lessons it has learnt from the difficult operating conditions in the Middle East on board.

“We must ensure the corrective actions identified in the Marine Corps 2010 Iraq Lessons Learned Symposium and the recent Government Accountability Office findings are implemented to the greatest extent possible,” he concludes. “We’re building a force looking to the future, which will do more with less and be light enough to get there quickly but heavy enough to carry the day upon arrival.” ■

