

The Last Tactical

11 MILLION MILES

A look at the unique challenge of providing logistics in Africa.

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Synchronizing logistics to advanced special operations forces objectives across Africa is an intricate patchwork of specialized know-how, creative thinking and a whole lot of elbow grease.

The Special Operations Command Africa J-4 (Logistics) out of Stuttgart, Germany, coordinates everything from contracts, movement, supply, maintenance, sustainment and even property and equipment management across the vast African continent.

It's on this varied and often hostile environment, SOCAFRICA conducts some of the largest air deliveries in the Department of Defense in support of SOF's most challenging and unique mission sets. In addition, the J-4 team provides over-land logistical support, contracting and oversight of myriad operations and exercises requiring SOF-specific equipment and supplies.

It is in these uncertain and undefined areas, otherwise known as the Gray Zone, where logisticians have to truly develop novel and unconventional approaches to solve some of their most trying problems. Operationally speaking, the Gray Zone is that area between peace and war; the logistical Gray Zone is that area between supply hubs and the actual locations SOF operate.

Solutions are not always clear when traversing across triple canopy jungle, through the desert, up mountains and over swamps, but it is

this creative approach to supporting SOF that keeps SOCAFRICA Logistics a no-fail mission.

"So we have to have a back-up plan and then a back-up plan to the back-up plan," said U.S. Marine Corps Col. Archibald McLellan, the SOCAFRICA J-4, citing the SOCAFRICA Logistics team as one of two missions deemed infallible by the SOCAFRICA commander. (*The other "no-fail" mission for SOF in Africa, according to the SOCAFRICA commander is communications.*)

The movement of forces and equipment via airlift can be complex and cumbersome, according to members of the SOF Mobility and Sustainment Cell, which conducts all air planning for the command, to include the deployment and redeployment of forces and the movement of resupply cargo. According to Maj. Mieke Bruins, Chief, SOF Movement and Sustainment Cell, "We consistently face issues because we operate in a low volume, low frequency capacity with airframes that are meant either for large volume or extremely low volume."

One of the greatest challenges for air planners is getting airlift support outside of the several C-130J military transport aircraft dedicated solely to the continent. This is especially true when mission-critical missions do not meet the larger carrying capacity standard of these aircraft. According to Air Force Capt. Cynthia Rodriguez, the Joint

Operation Planning and Execution System and air planning for SOCAFRICA, resupply missions and time-sensitive deliveries remain a struggle for logistics. For example, the assigned C130s require either 5.6 short tons or 25 passengers per request, but quite often in the SOF world the requirement is only for two passengers or two short tons.

The SMSC coordinates with other directorates to attempt to meet the AFRICOM requirements, but often times it means delaying the mission. Alternately, the Non-Standard Aviation assets can only transport up to 3,000 pounds of cargo and passengers and no pallets, meaning if there are vehicles or larger capacity loads the NSAv cannot provide support. The management of these limited assets for inter and intra-theater lift can be difficult.

This is where the back-up plans enter the scene. Often times, these smaller deliveries are best suited for smaller, NSAv aircraft. These are cost-effective for the command, but limited by the total number of flying hours committed to the handful of pilots — as such, these solutions can't be leaned on to accomplish every mission.

"That's where we have to get creative," said U.S. Army Maj. Gerardo Pulido, East/Central Branch Chief J43. "The equipment must arrive on time....food, fuel and munitions must arrive on time....we spend a lot of time coming up with

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Senegal
Commandos
move through
the countryside
during Flintlock
2016. The rugged
and vast African
terrain is just one
of the many
challenges facing
logisticians who
supply military
forces operating
in the continent.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO
COURTESY OF 3RD
SFG(A) PAO



ways to get items to remote areas using non-standard means.”

Plus, the challenge of moving equipment to the final destination can prove difficult considering the limited infrastructure in most locations and the high risk associated with moving equipment into instable locations that could lead to theft or damage.

Amidst all the various challenges to the movement of forces and equipment throughout Africa, the air planners do all they can to ensure success by using every resource available.

One such success story came out of the Special Operations Command Forward – Central Africa area of operation when they were faced with the challenge of extending their operational reach for logistics where no airfield existed. To do that, they created bundles of food, water and fuel and established a logistical hub in direct support of operations in the countries of Central Africa including Uganda, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the

Congo. Approximately 300 cases of MREs, 1,200 cases of water and more than 140 55-gallon barrels of jet fuel were bundled and air delivered, making a win for air supply and a win for those working on the ground.

Further successes across the land comes with even more creative thinking, according to leadership. The use of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement promotes interoperability, readiness and effectiveness of both U.S. and partner-nation military forces.

During Flintlock 2016, the ACSA allowed the Senegalese Army to plan and execute logistics support for forces at five different training sites during the exercise and even empowered them to provide additional top-notch service.

The Senegalese were able to step up to the plate and deliver their own resources and methods, even going beyond the normal scope and bringing a little morale booster during the exercise. While inspecting the mess hall, the Senegalese cooks saw that they could provide a mobile



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bakery to prepare and deliver fresh bread daily to the participants. Though not a requirement, just the smell of fresh baked bread was a welcome addition to the daily rations.

These types of successes come with creating and maintaining solid relationships with partner-nation counterparts. Relationships can really be the difference between success and failure when it comes to providing critical logistics support on the continent.

“It’s really about relationships,” said Army Maj. Marcus L. Jordan, who worked during this year’s Flintlock Exercise as the Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration Officer in Charge. One of the hurdles Jordan faced was adapting to the way the host-nation logisticians operate. His ability to form meaningful relationships, and overcome cultural differences allowed him to develop solutions to unique challenges that he faced during the exercise.

In addition, Jordan was able to expose the host-nation’s logisticians



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to the way SOCAFRICA conducts logistics creating a learning environment that was mutually beneficial.

“A cultural difference is what we struggle with every time we go to Africa,” explained Jordan, who is with the 528th Sustainment Brigade (SO) (A), a six-man Army SOF Liaison Element embedded in SOCAFRICA. “We make things more difficult for ourselves when we approach it with a Western point of view where a contract means everything. On the Continent, we’ve got to slow down, socialize more, drink chai and acknowledge the legitimate authority of individuals on a face-to-face basis.”

This “relationship first” aspect is what got SOCAFRICA members streamlined entry into the country during Flintlock. Basically with a handshake and a nod, service members were routed around customs and were allowed to be picked up planeside.

Jordan said they’re already preparing for Flintlock 2017 in Chad, as the more austere environment will come with its own logistical challenges.

Some of those challenges will come with contracting for the exercise. Contracting is often times the primary logistics solution for SOCAFRICA operations. This is largely due to country team limita-

tions on the Continent, no assigned forces for the command and a lack of forward SOF basing.

“Contracting in Africa is hard,” said Air Force Lt. Col. Dax Presuto, the SOCAFRICA contracting officer, “but contracting for SOF in Africa is *really* hard.”

Challenges include the “tyranny of distance.” It is the second largest continent with a size of about 11.7 million square miles; the United States, China, India, Europe and Japan can all easily fit inside the continent of Africa.

Language barriers and a lack of U.S. military linguists to support efforts to find vendors and negotiate contracts remains a constant battle. Often there is a lack of skilled labor, tribal and cultural boundaries, a lack of Internet access (and resultant inability to reach/find many vendors), and an inability for vendors to accept credit cards for payment. Something as common as being able to make a credit card transaction can increase the difficulty of providing sustainment support.

This is when novel thinking and back up plans become king and those relationship-building skills are most sought after to create the leverage and equity needed to get the job done to support the mission on the ground.

“These distributed, decentralized SOF are supported by expeditionary, scalable, flexible logistics and contracting,” said McLellan. “Our ability to operate in the logistics Gray Zone supports the speed, flexibility and effectiveness of SOF.”

The SOF-minded logistician of air and land operations is further supported by liaison elements that improve interoperability and Seabee support that improves construction needs throughout the SOCAFRICA area of operation.

It takes a total team effort to provide logistical support in Africa, according to leadership. Logisticians at the Special Operations Command Forwards, SOCAFRICA and United States Special Operations Command all provide world-class support that enables SOF operators to conduct special operations.

Every day they take on the challenge and provide logistical solutions that are adaptive, responsive, attainable and sustainable for SOF operations that are often emergent and continuous at the same time. These logisticians live up to the mantra of the fifth SOF truth: “Most special operations require non-SOF support,” and they ensure special operations missions will always have the logistical support needed to ensure mission success. 

Sgt. 1st Class Jessica Espinosa contributed to this report.

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U.S. Army Riggers and Air Force personnel load aerial resupply bundles for distribution to a forward area in Cameroon during a joint training exercise.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JUSTIN P. MORELLI

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An aerial resupply bundle touches down on the plains of Senegal, Africa, during Flintlock 2016.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY OF 3RD SFG(A) PAO