Requiem for a System

Determination succeeded in spite of obstacles
by MGySgt Thomas J. Campbell, USMC(Ret)

>*MGySgt Campbell retired from the Marine Corps in early 2001 after 30 years of service. He is currently working as a civil servant for the Logistics Capability Center, Marine Corps Logistics Command, Albany, GA, as a supply systems analyst.*

SASSY got the supplies to Marines at the point of the spear. (Photo by Cpl Cody M. Haas.)

Admit it, readers of the *Gazette* in the combat and combat support MOSs: you hate us "loggies," especially those with a supply MOS. It's ok. We understand. We have thick skins. Sometimes I don't blame you. I've seen supply clerks in brand new field jackets recovering some green rags that once was a field jacket and cringed when I saw that the reissue was only slightly better than the one recovered. It wasn't fair. So, speaking for the whole supply community, I hereby apologize.

My purpose here is twofold: to pay homage to a supply system that is rapidly nearing "lights out" and to record the deeds of some of the unsung survivors who toiled to design, enhance, and maintain a system that served our Corps for over 40 years. I'll dispense with defining a term before using its acronyms. My purpose is not a call-to-action or to introduce a new idea, and certainly this is not a polemic. Rather, this is an obituary for an old friend, now in hospice, and about to die. If a similar homage wasn't paid at the passing of the M1911A1 or the M-14, there should have been.

In the old *Marine Corps Order P4400.122*, it stated that SASSY (Supported Activities Supply System) was fielded in limited support of the Marines in Vietnam in 1969. We would call it a Beta test today. Full fielding of SASSY occurred in the early 1970s, and, one by one, each of the MAFs (Marine Amphibious Forces) was brought on board. Gradually, new functionality was added, additional interfaces incorporated, and enhancements were made. Old hands will recall the "job jar," a mythical repository containing propos-

als for enhancements. The job jar was mythical, but the results weren't. Fixes, new functionality, and improvements rolled out month after month, year after year.

I got into the business of systems maintenance in 1985, fresh from a tour on Okinawa and with zero experience in mechanized supply or data processing. When I protested that I felt like the proverbial square peg about to rammed into the round hole, I was assured by the installation chief that "you'll catch on." And so I did. And so did nearly every other Marine who joined the Central Design and Programming Activ-

ity. Bloom where planted was not only necessary, it was required. No formal school existed then (or now) to train the Marine analysts in their new job. You learned JCL and COBOL, two programming languages. In addition, systems analysis and mainframe functioning were all learned on the fly. It was learn-as-you-do. Training was accomplished while accomplishing the mission. We worked 12 hours a day on weekdays and half a day on Saturday. We then traveled to each major installation and installed the code. Temporary additional duty trips of 90 days were common. The MEF G-4s (logistics) and

the OICs of the SMUs (Supply Management Units) were our true bosses: when they called, we hauled.

> *"But the United States Congress sees the Marines as a frugal and altogether reliable investment, dedicated like nineteenth-century British general Sir John Moore, to 'fighting on the cheap.'"* [1]
> *–LtGen Victor H. Krulak*

Gen Krulak would be proud of SASSY. It was developed "on the cheap" using in-house resources. Some of the code was pirated from older systems. Lifecycle costs of SASSY were approximately 40 million dollars over 40+ years. The replacement system has already consumed 20 times that amount. Lifecycle costs of the new system will easily break a billion dollars. It is estimated that the upgrade to the latest version of the new software alone will cost about 50 million dollars.

SASSY was designed by Marines, for Marines. Annual production costs for SASSY/MIMMS (Marine Integrated Maintenance Management System) were just under $400,000 a year; production costs for the new system, roughly 6 million dollars per year. For the last 12 years, Marines assigned to Marine Corps Logistics Command in the grade of corporal and sergeant ran the system. They collected the input, checked it for technical flaws, monitored the jobs, and created reports. Marines in the fleet had their reports before they would secure that day. Two cycles were executed starting in 2003. The first supported CONUS Marines. The second supported OIF/OEF, and it ran 7 days a week, 365 days a year with

only a rare "bad day." I'll bet Walmart pays their production folks a whole lot more.

When these young hard chargers ran into a problem that they couldn't handle, they called the mainframe support center at Camp Pendleton, Sue Manry's crew of data processing professionals for help. They, too, were on call 7/365. Marines who served in OIF/OEF owe them a round of applause.

Written all through the computer code, you can see the emphasis, almost an obsession, with equipment readiness and auditability. Marines don't join our Corps to "count beans." They know that wars start when you least expect, and you must be ready to go on day one. If a person wants to count beans, he joins the Air Force; Marines thrive on action. They want the supply system that supports them to be as ready to go as they are. Supply is not science; it is art. Versatility and adaptability are essential to a supply system that will support Marines in an expeditionary mode. SASSY filled that bill. It was never static and was always changing to support the fleet. Considering how it worked when it was first fielded and what it can do today, SASSY was a masterpiece.

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Lots of people worked on SASSY, but I can't recall all of their names. My apologies to those whose names are lost to memory. I'm sure that they won't be offended. They know their work made a difference. The success of our Corps is sufficient reward.

So here's a salute to LtCol Bob Larson who, as a young captain, took a team to Okinawa in the early 1980s and promptly destroyed the serial number data. The team was comprised of Marines, so "day on, stay on" became the plan of the day. Before the exhausted team went home, the data was restored, the program repaired, and the MEF commander satisfied that the job was complete. Accomplish the mission, an

axiom common to all Marines, was always non-negotiable.

Here's to Maj Warren Muldrow who struggled for weeks with one of the most complex programs in the system. At one point, he actually had nightmares. He had become a transaction trying to work its way through the painfully complex logic in the COBOL program. SASSY could do that, challenge your sanity. Of course he succeeded, and rumor has it that SASSY left him no unhealed wounds.

When the forces in OIF demanded that the SASSY talk to the Army system, Mr. Mike Huston singlehandedly drafted the logic and worked with SASSY and Army programmers to develop a true interface. Requisitions that couldn't be filled from stocks in our intermediate accounts were passed to the Army's SARS system. When the gear was on hand at the army issue point, we simply picked it up. Many thousands of dollars in transportation dollars were thus saved. More importantly, the unit received the parts sooner. The broken gear was fixed in hours instead of days or weeks. Mike was prior Air Force but with a Marine's heart.

LtCol Dave Aldrich acted as ringmaster to our collection of analysts and programmers. Not only did he undoubtedly prevent some in-house violence—analysts and programmers always see things differently—but he ensured that our masters at HQMC were never allowed to forget the "Keep it simple, stupid" principle. He announced to the fleet: "You call; we haul." He meant it, and we did.

I recall Lt Dave Kuhn asleep at his terminal at 0200 in the morning after trying for more than 36 consecutive hours to fix a problem that defied his best efforts. When the security folks finally confessed that it was their file that was corrupted and beyond their scope to fix, Dave merely shrugged and waited for the new file. No blame game, no drama, get the system up and running—all else was irrelevant.

Some readers will recall the man I refer to as Saint Mike of Cochran, now deceased. Mike was probably the most intelligent man I ever met. He, too, left his indelible stamp on the system.
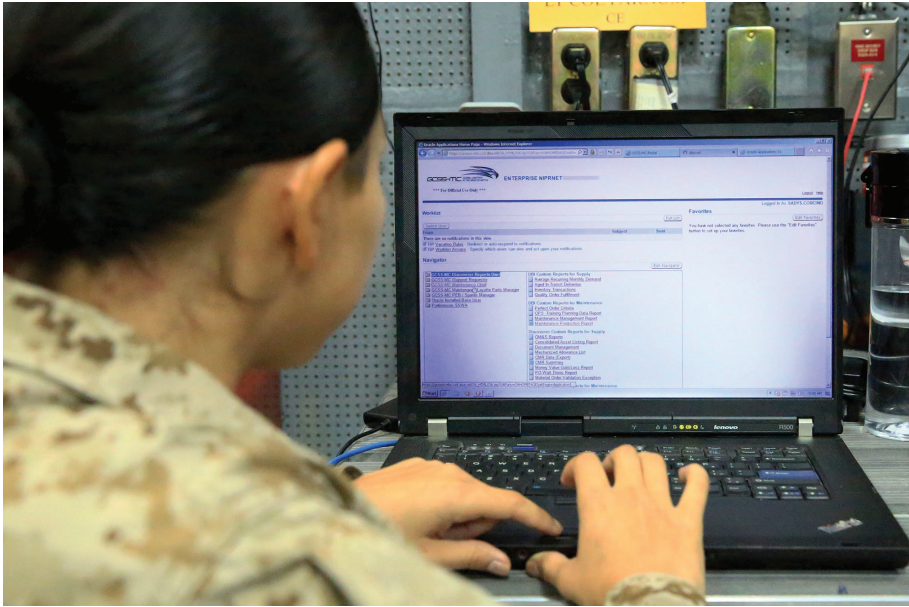
GCSS–MC will replace our old friend SASSY. (Photo by Sgt Jennifer Pirante.)

Marines who worked in a maintenance float know that Mike was one of the few individuals (along with Warren Muldrow) who understood the complicated programming logic that it takes to run one. He was a brilliant analyst, and I am honored that he called me his friend.

Capt Tim Wingard was one of those analysts who never showed the slightest angst. No matter how many times a program failed to perform, he would simply tear it apart, again and again. When he finally had it working, there was no fanfare; he would simply pull another project from the job jar and get back to work. Determination will succeed in spite of all the obstacles.

The genius of SASSY was that every line of code belonged to the Corps. When something broke or the fleet wanted a change, that tiny team of amateur professionals kicked in and got the job done. The staff supporting the system never exceeded a dozen Marines and civilians and was usually closer to five. Imagine that: five people supporting a critical system supporting Marines all across the planet. I'll bet Walmart couldn't accomplish so much with so little.

When the deployment to the first Gulf War commenced, II MEF was running on a new system (ATLASS IIP) designed to replace SASSY. The new system required a complex infrastructure to run and was difficult to deploy and sustain in an austere environment. The decision was made to revert all of II MEF back to SASSY. A team of four Marines from Marine Corps Logistics Command and Marine Corps Systems Command accomplished the conversion in a little over a week with a complete

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audit trail and a high level of accuracy. Similarly, when the decision was made to revert the propriety system in use at Blount Island Command back to SASSY, the same two organizations also accomplished that task in a little over a week. Quickly folding units in or out of SASSY was a hallmark and a point of pride.

At one time in the early 1990s, as many as 15 separate SASSY cycles might be executing on any given day. They ran in support of the recruit depots, the base property control offices, and of course the MEFs. SASSY was nothing if not adaptable. A new national stock number could be added to the tech data files on the same day the requisition was submitted. Getting gear was the important thing; crossing all of the "Ts" and dotting the "i's" would have to catch up later. When a parts number was all that the unit could find to fix a piece of gear, SASSY could requisition those, too.

Adaptable, malleable, and cost effective SASSY served our Corps well for an investment that can rightly be termed as "chump change." If a change was requested by one of the MEFs, the idea would be staffed to the other MEFs. If all concurred, then the changes were made. If conflicts arose, the bugs were fixed until everyone was satisfied. Each SMU unit could quickly see their ideas translated into code. The programs were always evolving, ever morphing, and continuously responding to the needs of the fleet.

So here's a salute to those Marines who worked incredibly long hours using tools that they taught themselves and with skills that were learned on the job. Those Marines paid the price, went where the Corps sent them, and did what was demanded of them. SASSY was a reflection of the people who worked on it, and they were either Marines or people imbued with the same core values of dedication, commitment, and persistence, and always focused on doing the very best job possible to support the Marines in the fleet. Unless I'm wrong, that's what being a Marine, regardless of MOS, is all about.

Note

1. LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984).

USMC