

2020 LtGen Barnard E. “Mick” Trainor Military Writing Award: Winner

Sleeper Cell Logistics

Sustaining new warfighting concepts

by Capt Michael Sweeney

Sean Westley paused for a moment to study his features in the bathroom mirror. If only his Marine buddies back home could see him now. He displayed none of the clean-cut disciplined characteristics instilled upon him by his instructors at Officer Candidate School. As he finished getting ready for the day, the reminiscing quickly led to a memory trail of how he arrived in his small South Landian apartment. It was almost five years earlier, and he was just finishing Logistics Officers Course. He had orders to an infantry unit on the East Coast and was busy finding a place to live and contemplating how to make a good first impression at his new unit when he was called into the commanding officer's office. Not knowing what to expect, he was surprised to find another senior officer there who had never addressed the class before.

The new officer introduced himself as Col Scott. True to his serious manner, Col Scott did not waste any time explaining why he was there.

Col Scott: “Lt Westley, as you are aware, for the past twenty years, the Corps has focused on and excelled in providing combat service support in desert countries against an enemy who proved capable but ultimately could not match our fire power. However, a year ago several key members of the logistics community hypothesized that our logistical doctrine and methods have become dependent on air superiority and are not suited for a peer-to-peer conflict. To fix this, we have started a specialized logistical unit. Taking lessons learned from the Viet Minh during the First Indochina War, this new unit was developed to drastically increase the flexibility and redundancy in our supply chain. We operate a series of semi-covert caches hidden inside engagement areas.

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Distributed operations require more than simply moving the “iron mountain” of supplies.
(Photo by LCpl Keenan Zelazoski.)

When activated, we provide the MAGTF with an initial supply of critical gear.”

2ndLt Westley: “I don’t understand. On what doctrine are these caches based?”

Col Scott: “We’ve developed our own operating system that is entirely independent from all Marine Corps doctrine. This operating system allows us to cut through red tape and utilize unconventional logistical methods.”

2ndLt Westley, looking visibly confused: “I’m sorry sir, but I still don’t know who you are.”

Col Scott: “We are Sleeper CELL.”

The future fight will be different than the one fought for the past twenty years. It will require the Marine Corps to exercise its amphibious and expeditionary nature. All six warfighting functions will need to improve and adapt to support new warfighting concepts. Logistics will require changing more than just the physical location of the “iron mountain.” Instead, the new form of logistics will require innovative solutions to increase redundancy and flexibility

in the supply chain while decreasing the targetability and physical footprint of supply lines. This can be accomplished by dispersing the iron mountain across a series of unconventional and semi-covert caches.

As Westley ate his breakfast, he continued reminiscing on his life changing encounter with Col Scott.

Col Scott: "A Sleeper CELL spot has opened up, and I'm offering it to you. Yes or no?"

2ndLt Westley: "I'm in."

Col Scott: "Good, pack your stuff. You're going back to school."

Westley skipped his Logistics Officers Course graduation and moved into temporary housing near Washington, DC, the next day. He would spend the next ten months at Defense Language Institute learning a language by day and being indoctrinated into Sleeper CELL by night. As a member, Westley would be considered his own Cache, Expeditionary Logistics Location, or CELL. Each CELL was strategically placed in a certain region of the world, chosen by its vicinity to certain geopolitical hotspots. Once in location, CELLS would blend into society, posing as students or young adults seeking work opportunities while discreetly overseeing the stockpiling of supplies. It was on location that the independent command and control nature of this specialized unit excelled. Unlike traditional Marine Corps logistics operations, CELLS were free to develop a storage and distribution system that best suited their location. These systems were not beholden to the cumbersome DOD supply chain. Instead, CELLS were free to buy local commercial products and encouraged to utilize local distribution networks to develop their stockpiles, sending reports back to Col Scott in Washington each month on the supplies that they had available. Col Scott updated the priority lists as necessary and the CELLS would adjust their caches accordingly, creating a fluid and evolving stockpile dependent on the concerns of Washington's policy makers.

The main thing all CELLS had in common was their mark. Each mark was an individual who was picked out by a certain intelligence agency based on the mark's ability to help influence the locals and procure certain items. Westley's

mark was Mr. Smith. He was raised in a poor farming village but was motivated to make more of himself. He started a fabrication shop, and it slowly grew, thanks in part to the money and influence the United States gave him for the support.

In addition to language training, Westley also received specialized training to ensure his success as a CELL. This training included traditional military training like SERE school and combat hunter courses, but he also attended craftsman and trade courses. He was trained on basic mechanics, fuel storage and additization, explosives handling, and commercial purchasing. This training was all focused on making him a self-sufficient, adaptable, and survivable asset.

The First Indochina War's outcome was heavily influenced by each side's logistical plan. The terrain and climate of Indochina did not favor large scale military operations. Characterized by steep mountains, dense forest, high temperatures, high humidity, and little infrastructure, everything about Indochina seemed to hamper logistical operations.¹ At this point in history, the French logistical organization was a combination of a doctrine and gear developed in both world wars, relying in part on a World War I-era centralized system that could support from the rear through protected lines of communication and in part on a World War II-era mobile, unit-oriented support system.² The Viet Minh, meanwhile, developed a highly unconventional and more mobile approach to the logistical problem. They utilized every transportation means available to them, relied on captured supplies or locally sourced material, and stored supplies in numerous, well-dispersed caches hidden along several different routes.³ In the end, the Viet Minh's ability to adapt to the physical and operational environment despite a technological disadvantage allowed it to defeat a more developed and conventional power.

The noise from the street snapped Westley back to reality. As he walked his usual route through the metropolis toward the outskirts of the city, he was reminded of how much South Landia had become home to him over the past five years. The country was not his first choice

of locations, but an important one all the same. South Landia was located in the Western Hemisphere and was officially part of INDOPACOM's Area of Operations. Once a war-torn country dominated by communist tendencies, South Landia had become a vibrant democracy in stark contradiction to its neighbor to the north. While South Landian citizens enjoy all the freedoms expected of a 21st century democracy, North Landia is a communist country controlled by an increasingly unstable dictatorship. A majority of its citizens live below the poverty line and do not have access to running water or electricity. A nuclear program in its infancy has made North Landia a country of interest, though, and has made the alliance between the United States and South Landia even more important.

Just then, Westley arrived at his "day job." The U.S. Government had decided that hiding in plain site was the best way to conceal each CELL, so Westley was officially the floor manager of a small fabrication shop. The shop was a large warehouse with offices and heavy machinery surrounded by a large fenced-in yard with scrap metal on one end, a small fleet of trucks on the other, and some sheds in between. The company fabricated small parts for car manufacturers. It shipped parts all around the world so there was a steady stream of trucks coming and going, providing perfect cover for the CELL's true operations. While Westley was never given details on the other CELLS for security reasons, he knew that each had a similar set up. Each was centered around a business that provided an availability to certain resources. For example, during his training, Westley was told of one CELL that worked with local fishermen. This CELL was reportedly able to mobilize over 25 local fishing vessels to deliver goods and equipment to various local ports with significantly less suspicion than any military vessel, perfectly concealing Marine Corps logistical movements and drastically reducing targetability.

Westley spent his morning preparing the monthly report he owed Col Scott back in Washington. He was proud of the plan he had put together over the past five years. The plan all revolved around a major road that connected the city Westley lived in and a seaport utilized by fishers and



Sustaining new operating concepts will require creative problem solving and every available means of distribution. (Photo by LCpl Claudia Palacios.)

medium size commercial vessels. This road then turned north and led to the border between North and South Landia only six miles later. Westley referred to this road and its subsidiaries simply as “the trail.” Along the trail Westley utilized Mr. Smith’s existing buildings plus local vendors with whom he had cultivated relationships. In total, Westley had over 22 locations along the trail that provided redundancy and flexibility to his plan. Each stop was marked on a tourist map that he sent back to Col Scott with a code name assigned to each stop. Ground force commanders could simply be told to go to “Arby’s” to find a food stockpile or “Shell” to locate fuel. Locations were dispersed, so if one became compromised, the others were still operable. Supplies were then classified into categories of perishable and non-perishable. Westley had slowly built a stockpile of non-perishable items according to Col Scott’s instructions. Inside most of Mr. Smith’s buildings, he had hidden various small arms ammunition cleverly disguised in ordinary shipping boxes. These boxes were sealed to protect against humidity and had a shelf life of close to a decade and were numerous enough to keep a battalion fighting for ten days. For perishable items, Westley could leverage the contacts he had made to create a rapid and flexible response. When given the order, trusted local vendors would provide

fresh produce and drinkable water. Sheds and warehouses would hide fuel bladders specifically designed to fit on Mr. Smith’s trucks, and they could be filled and moved within hours. Once an initial fight subsided and follow-on actions were necessary, Westley could tap into a list of contacts around the country for fresh supplies. Although they were not located on the trail and thus could take longer to procure, the supply chain was still significantly faster and cheaper than shipping from the States.

The Viet Minh needed a way to safeguard supplies from French air attacks. In order to accomplish this, the Viet Minh leadership ordered the creation of several small arsenals and workshops dispersed around Viet Minh-controlled territory. These ranged from small, highly mobile units to larger captured French facilities.⁴ They also developed effective alert systems that allowed supplies to be evacuated in a short period of time.⁵ In order to support the army on the move, small rice caches were hidden along the trail.⁶

Westley’s transportation plan was a simple one: the small fleet of trucks that Mr. Smith owned would be put to use hauling larger supplies, but most supplies would be hand carried. Infantry battalions could offload at the pier in the middle of the night and walk the six miles to the

border, making multiple stops en route along the trail to pick up whatever supplies they needed.

The Viet Minh resupply routes were a set of roads, paths, trails, and camps that would eventually become the Ho Chi Minh Trail. To transport supplies, the Viet Minh utilized the “porter system.” In 1949, the Viet Minh leadership mobilized the civilian population by making military service mandatory for three months every year. A porter would use a bicycle with no pedals or chains to push 50 pounds of supplies roughly 15 miles every day. Porters typically moved at night to avoid detection. Legs of the journey became well established and a porter would typically find a facility at the end of a travel leg where they could cook and keep concealed.⁷

Westley finished reviewing his monthly report. It looked like a standard accounting document filled with assets and liabilities. He logged on to a secure web-based storage site and dropped it into a folder, hidden among years of tax forms and accounting documents. Col Scott then had access to it at any time and from anywhere. Before logging off and doing fabrication work to keep up his appearance, Westley browsed a neighborhood trading site and clicked through the wanted ads. His heart skipped a beat as he read one simply titled “helping hands.” His floor manager duties would have to wait—his sleeper CELL had just been activated.

Notes

1. Charles Shrader, *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945–1954*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

