



Navigating Disruption:

SOF Logistics in Contested Environments



Special Operations Forces (SOF) are confronting a critical inflection point in logistics strategy, where traditional approaches no longer align with emerging geopolitical challenges. The shift from counterterrorism to near-peer competition with countries like China and Russia demands a reimagining of support capabilities in contested environments, where adversarial or inherent conditions threaten to disrupt continued operations.

In a recent interview with MeriTALK, Joe Blanton, director, strategic initiatives, General Dynamics Information Technology, and Jim Pasquarette, vice president, strategy and business development, General Dynamics Land Systems, unpacked what it takes to succeed in contested logistics, drawing upon a combined 64 years of military service, where both held leadership roles at every level.

MeriTALK: Let's start by defining our key terms. What does contested logistics mean?

Pasquarette: Contested logistics is an acknowledgement that the days of being able to sustain the force forward in an operating area without the adversary disrupting that effort are no longer. It is assumed that in the future, near-peer adversaries will have the means to monitor and disrupt strategic, operational, and tactical sustainment activities starting at the originating source of a deployment.

Blanton: I first heard the term contested logistics in 2021, midway through my last command, at U.S. Special Operations Command. That's when we started to shift away from what we had done in Iraq and Afghanistan for 20-plus years to look at other parts of the world. We started talking about contested environments. But every military operation and all supporting logistics have been contested in some form throughout history because of geography, weather, or other factors.

MeriTalk: What are contested logistics capabilities, and why are they so important to SOF today?

Pasquarette: The ability to sustain military forces in contested environments around the world requires secure supply chains, access to natural resources, a strong industrial base, and multiple modes of transportation to move people and supplies when and where they are needed.

These contested logistics capabilities are especially important today because advanced, ubiquitous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities have created a constant struggle for information advantage for SOF. From the fort in the United States to the port of deployment to the forward location, logistics activities are increasingly vulnerable to detection, interdiction, and disruption from our near-peer adversaries, across all domains.

From my perspective serving in the Army, that disruptive capability didn't exist until just recently. Logistics had always been an area in which we could move with impunity at the pace we wanted, get set in theater, and then push materials and capabilities forward when we needed them. Today, it is assumed that effort will be contested all along the way, so the Army and the Department of Defense (DoD) as a whole are working to establish the capabilities around the world that don't rely on reaching back to the United States to sustain the force forward in the fight.

MeriTalk: SOF and its mission partners are involved in a growing number of conflicts across varied and vast geographies. What challenges does this present to U.S. commanders?

Blanton: SOF are constantly deployed worldwide executing their mission. As a smaller organization, they're not going to have the large sustainment logistics tail of a conventional force. They must rely on an ecosystem of partner nations to secure basic supplies and pre-position resources near operational areas. To piggyback on Jim's point, if you're pushing capability to the point of need, you're not going to have a massive flow of supplies across vast geographies. And we're less likely to build up large stockpiles of material like we've done in the past.

Pasquarette: The United States' ability to leverage our partners and allies to shorten lines of communication and pre-position supplies is advantageous in a potential

conflict with a near-peer threat. Those countries will not have the same network of partners or allies.

MeriTalk: In response to the changing theaters of conflict, in what ways are SOF commanders and their partners rethinking their approaches to contested logistics – and the platforms needed to get materials to where they need to be?

Blanton: Predictive analytics is being implemented to optimize forward-positioned equipment and vehicles. By analyzing wear and tear, maintenance can be strategically planned, allowing for slimmer maintenance and repair packages and reduced logistics footprints. Instead of planning for all the known unknowns, as we historically have done in SOF operations, we're only supplying what is essential to the point of need.

Pasquarette: I agree – prognostic and predictive maintenance is a big push on our end and across industry. In my world, combat vehicles, we are on a path to solve that for the Army. Through billions of miles of data over decades, the data is there. General Dynamics Land Systems has developed software that can crunch that data, and through stochastic modeling, predict when vehicle components will fail.

We think robotics are also part of the solution. There is a lot of energy and thought going into robotics with autonomous capabilities to push sustainment capabilities



to the tactical edge, to lessen the burden through on-demand platforms that are reliable and don't put more soldiers in harm's way.

MeriTalk: Robotics and analytics – and all SOF operations – generate volumes of data. In the contested logistics arena, how can this data be put to work to improve capabilities and outcomes?

Blanton: Data analytics and artificial intelligence applied to large data sets can help identify trends and provide data points to leaders quickly, making decision-making more dynamic. The result is precise logistics – delivering the right supplies and equipment to the right location at the right time, in the most efficient way possible in contested environments.

Pasquarette: Data is the ammunition now and into the future. In addition to creating a more responsive and resilient supply chain, data analytics can reduce vulnerabilities by informing the defense industrial base, allowing manufacturers to understand the rate at which parts and equipment need to be replaced. Better and more timely data helps them get ahead of needs during a conflict.

MeriTalk: What are some of the steps that SOF and its partners are taking to ensure secure and resilient supply chains?

Blanton: The first step is acknowledging the significant risk to the SOF supply chain and to SOF operations if it is compromised – and then to take measures to secure it. It may seem simple, but acknowledging our vulnerabilities is a critical step in risk identification and mitigation.

A combination of targeted cybersecurity programs and close collaboration between the military and its industrial partners are important steps to building more secure and resilient supply chains.

Pasquarette: The DoD's Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification program is designed to address the cybersecurity issue in the supply chain by requiring the defense industrial base to meet DoD requirements for

data protection. But you're only as strong as your weakest link. It's much easier for the top-tier, large contractors to meet those requirements. Many second- and third-tier suppliers don't have the same resources to invest in cyber compliance – but in some cases they are sole suppliers of critical components. The Department is taking the cybersecurity gap seriously, and the largest suppliers are stepping forward to work with the DoD to help smaller suppliers become compliant so that we don't have weak links that make us all vulnerable.

MeriTalk: Speaking of partners – they are integral to the success of contested logistics. Over the next decade, what are some of the essential capabilities and qualities that are required of organizations partnering with SOF to improve contested logistics?

Blanton: Partnering across the DoD, other government agencies, and the industrial base – both domestically and abroad – will ensure the ability to produce the necessary materials to meet potential future demands. The industry's capabilities to meet surge demands is key to SOF, which extends to transporting and pre-staging material.

Collaboration is critical in the evolving contested logistics environment. To enable the agility SOF likely need to rapidly adjust logistics platforms and processes, partners need to have data management and analytics expertise, robust security measures, and a culture of innovation and continuous improvement.

Pasquarette: I think a key challenge is how we partner with the best in class to achieve this. At General Dynamics Land Systems, we have some really talented people solving problems, but we've come to realize how others are best suited to help us solve some mission challenges. So, we create partnerships to provide the best capabilities and products to meet the requirements of SOF. We have to work together to solve the contested logistics problem in concert with the DoD. If we work in isolation, we'll regret it, because everything will be at risk.

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