

Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton

Martin van Creveld

Reviewed by George Yacoub

Martin Van Creveld, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is the author of numerous books on military history and strategy. In this book, first published in 1977, Van Creveld studies an area that had until then been largely ignored by military historians, the influence of logistics on military campaigns. He undertakes a number of case studies of land-based campaigns commencing in the 1560–1660 period and concluding with a review of the 1944 campaign in Western Europe. For this second edition Van Creveld has also provided a useful postscript of what has changed since he originally wrote the book some thirty years ago.

Each of the eight chapters is well researched and presented. The early chapters are particularly instructive as they provide a chronology of the impact of logistics on the changing nature of warfare. We see in this period, for example, the development of reserve stocks and block scales outlining the expected consumption requirements of each element.

During the 17th century, Europe's large standing armies met their logistic needs during mobile operations primarily through living off the land (supplemented by limited horse-drawn or riverine resupply). They kept moving because they could not otherwise gather supplies. Ammunition requirements were low and could accompany the troops. This period also saw the development of magazines designed for storing basic essentials that could not be met through foraging, especially those needed to mount sieges. Napoleon's campaigns in the early 18th century depended on dispersed (but still continual) movement of large forces, but were backed up after a fashion by a formal and organised system of supply reliant on a line of communication and the establishment of logistic reserves. Where the weather or an adversary interdicted his line of communications, this had a profound effect on his campaign objectives.

The rapid demographic, economic and industrial expansion that occurred in Europe between 1871 and 1914 changed forever the logistical complexity of warfare. Armies now needed greater stores, particularly ammunition (and later fuel), and the daily consumption requirements significantly increased. While railways could carry large holdings they could not store them and were often in the wrong place or vulnerable to enemy interdiction and technical failure. Van Creveld provides the reader with a rare insight into such developments. His review of the Schlieffen Plan is a timely reminder for those who currently advocate the reduction of organic third-line military logistic resources in favour of the use of contracted civilian transport assets.

Van Creveld's study of Germany's campaigns in Russia in 1941 and in the Middle East 1941–44 further illustrate the nexus between strategic and campaign planning and their underlying logistic considerations. The German

campaign in Russia predominately failed due to the inability to supply forces at critical junctures because the planners had placed excessive reliance on invalid assumptions about captured stocks and Russian rail transport networks. Similarly the campaign in the Middle East failed because Rommel, in his endeavours for a quick and decisive victory, ignored the advice of his logistic planners and extended his lines of communications beyond the capacity of his logistics system. While enough supplies could usually be shipped to the few axis-controlled ports with sufficient capacity to handle them, these were well behind his front lines (and further away as he advanced), and insufficient organic transport or other means existed to move the supplies forward.

Rommel's predicament in the Middle East provides a reverse echo of the challenges faced by the ADF in East Timor. Deploying initially at light scales, the force concentrated around Dili before pursuing further operations across the territory. The ADF did not swiftly experience large supply shortages only because minimal combat was involved and only limited consumption of consumables such as ammunition, fuel and medical stores was required. In addition, the close proximity of Dili to Darwin (an unusual advantage unlikely to be repeated in future), the relatively small distances involved in supporting the troops in-country, and the (again unusual) unhindered use of air and sea transport, allowed the ADF logistic shoestring to eventually meet most operational demands.

The chapter on operations in Western Europe in 1944 and the level of meticulous logistics planning conducted is particularly instructive. Van Creveld asserts that had allied operational planners effectively reacted to the information they received from the battlefield, instead of sticking to an orchestrated plan, the campaign may have ended by the end of 1944.

In the Postscript, written some 30 years after the first edition, Van Creveld highlights the changes that have occurred since this book was first published. Key amongst these is that warfare has become more complex and that the logistics support requirements of modern weapon systems have become more demanding. In this regard Van Creveld provides a useful but short analysis of the 1991 Gulf War and the role that logistics played in its success. This remains a book well worth reading, especially for those involved in force structuring and policy development. ♦

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