

SUPPORT THE CASTLE!

A Forward Support Company in Action

By Captain David L. Brewer



A truck driver from the FSC provides security while his platoon changes a tire on an M870 semitrailer.

In 2007, the United States Army Reserve completed its transformation to modularity. The impact on the Engineer Regiment was immediate. Companies, detachments, platoons, and even squads were now organized to serve as elements of a tailored force package, designed to complete a specific mission or task, rather than deploy with an organic engineer battalion. The direct impact on the engineer battalion headquarters was also instantaneous, eliminating the headquarters support company with its 200 or more Soldiers, and developing two separate support companies that together formed the battalion headquarters element. The battalion headquarters became a headquarters and headquarters company (HHC), designed to support the staff sections, and a forward support company (FSC), intended to conduct the sustainment functions needed to sustain an engineer battalion. In many battalion headquarters, the HHC quickly came into its own and began serving as the “staff company,” but the best employment of the FSC proved more elusive, and it has often been underutilized. It is the intent of this article to provide information on how an FSC is designed to work for an engineer battalion and how it worked for the 844th Engineer Battalion during the unit’s recent deployment to Baghdad, Iraq, supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Unlike any other company in the Regiment, the FSC is purely logistical, manned entirely by Quartermaster, Transportation, and Ordnance Branch Soldiers. In a modular engineer battalion, the FSC is responsible for providing food service, haul and transportation, Class III supplies, water distribution, and maintenance and recovery support. It is worth mentioning that not all FSCs are the same, and an FSC supporting an aviation or armor battalion looks slightly different from the FSC supporting an engineer battalion. This is linked to the overall intent of modularity, which places the right mix of sustainment elements into a battalion headquarters and attempts to eliminate the misallocation of sustainment assets and personnel. Furthermore, due to the logistical nature of engineering tasks, an FSC has a unique relationship with the battalion supply officer (S-4), who is a chief customer of the unit. The S-4 often serves as the materiel manager for much of the



An FSC Soldier services an M916 light equipment transporter at Camp Striker, Iraq.

supplies transported by the FSC and relies heavily on the FSC for the requisition and use of Class IX repair parts.

Theater Factors and Flexibility

In a nonpermissive environment such as Iraq, the FSC supporting an engineer battalion must be extremely versatile to achieve its overall mission of providing logistical support to the battalion headquarters and the modular engineer elements attached to it. The force mix for a modular engineer battalion can vary drastically, depending on the battalion's mission in-theater. During the 844th's deployment to Iraq, the battalion consisted of one survey design detachment, two horizontal companies, one vertical company, one bridge company, and one United States Air Force field engineer team (FET). The force structure therefore dictated the requirements of the FSC. For instance, the haul and transportation requirements for moving two horizontal companies were more than the FSC was designed to support, so adjustments were made internally at the company to fulfill this requirement. In addition, the maintenance support requirements were affected by the force structure, resulting in the maintenance platoon being organized into field maintenance teams that were able to support organic movements, fulfill emergency work orders, and complete scheduled services simultaneously.

A major factor determining which sustainment functions an FSC provides in-theater and how those functions are carried out is the location of the battalion. Located at Camp Striker on the Victory Base Complex in Baghdad, the 844th benefited from the massive dining facility, large Class III supply point, and water treatment facility on the

base. Access to these facilities impacted the FSC's mission and allowed the company to task-organize itself in a way different from the standard set by the unit's modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). Due to a lack of a food service support requirement on Victory Base Complex, the company was able to cross-train the majority of the company's field feeding section into a convoy security element to support the transportation operations of the distribution platoon. The same was done for the organic petroleum specialists and water treatment specialists assigned to that platoon. This allowed the company to provide its own security for the haul section and manage its own organic convoys, thus meeting the haul support requirements for moving two horizontal companies throughout the theater of operation. On occasion, the company also pulled Soldiers from its headquarters and maintenance platoons to support time-sensitive transportation operations, making it possible for the unit to support multiple movements simultaneously. This flexible use of company assets enabled the FSC to complete a variety of missions in Iraq and support a 1,000-Soldier engineer task force.

In addition to the location of the battalion, the equipment allocated to the FSC in-theater determines what sort of mission sets can be completed. The FSC's theater-provided equipment in Baghdad was significantly different from the MTOE equipment used at home station. The primary example of this was the equipment designated for the company's haul section. According to the MTOE, the main mover for the haul section is the heavy expanded-mobility tactical truck (HEMTT) with a palletized loading system. In Iraq, however, the company was only provided

one HEMTT for palletized loading and another equipped with the older load handling system. The equipment used most by the haul section in Iraq was the M916 light equipment transporter with the M870 low-bed semitrailer. The M916 and M870 combination was an essential transportation asset and could be used to haul both Class III and Class IV supplies effectively. Nevertheless, the shift from MTOE to theater-provided equipment forced the FSC to retrain the haul section's Soldiers on the M916 and M870 rather than operate the equipment it was familiar with at home station. Luckily, FSC leaders were aware of the equipment shift before mobilization, so the unit's pre-mobilization training focused on adapting to it. This allowed the company to become combat effective quickly once it arrived in-theater.

Perhaps the most important aspect determining the FSC's role in-theater is the battalion's mission. During its deployment, the 844th's primary mission was to support the responsible drawdown of forces as the corps construction engineer battalion. The mission required subordinate companies, platoons, and detachments to operate in all three U.S. divisional areas of responsibility in 14 of 18 Iraqi provinces. The battalion's subordinate engineer elements did everything from building staging yards for transporting supplies out of country to removing bridges that were no longer being used. Therefore, as the principal sustainment unit in the battalion, the FSC was required to provide simultaneous support to the multiple engineer elements operating in disparate locations throughout Iraq. Performing sustainment functions virtually everywhere at once forced the company to remain flexible. In addition to the

mission requirement of operating in a massive operational environment, the battalion and the FSC had to deal with movement restrictions imposed by the government of Iraq. These restrictions varied throughout the country and sometimes required unit convoys to move in conjunction with Iraqi Security Forces. Under these conditions, sustainment requirements often changed, and change became a way of life. Therefore, the FSC established the principle of being "actively reactive," which meant that the company anticipated possible changes and did whatever was possible to plan for likely contingencies. By building flexible plans and remaining actively reactive, the company succeeded in providing adequate logistical support throughout the theater of operation. However, versatility is not the only prerequisite for being a successful sustainment element in-theater.

Additional Best Practices

Along with being flexible, it is extremely important for an FSC to establish strong lines of communication with the modular elements within the battalion. During the 844th's deployment, the FSC conducted 70 organic missions and supported more than 60 missions with its available haul and transportation assets. The company also conducted numerous missions within the Victory Base Complex, moving Class III, Class IV, and Class IX equipment for multiple units. To coordinate these missions, the FSC designed a haul request form for units requesting transportation support. Units were able to request available assets directly from the FSC, which then notified the battalion plans and operations (S-3) section of the planned configuration of the company's transportation assets for



An FSC security team positions its gun trucks during a halt on a main supply route.

The FSC distribution platoon loads construction materials for base support missions throughout Iraq.



the next seven to ten days. The S-3 approved the allocation of transportation assets or, on special occasions, reprioritized requests based on battalion requirements. The direct lines of communication between the FSC and the modular engineer companies resulted in increased throughput and better velocity management of battalion transportation assets. A similar system was established for requesting maintenance and welding work orders, using the Standard Army Maintenance System—Enhanced, and resulted in the delivery of efficient maintenance support within the battalion headquarters and to the subordinate elements.

The most essential lesson learned by the FSC, 844th Engineer Battalion, from its time in-theater was the importance of fostering a positive vendor-customer relationship with subordinate units supported by the battalion. Tracking what each company was doing at any given time was an essential tactic for finding opportunities to support the battalion, while determining the best methods to do so. This also allowed the FSC to forecast future support requirements of the subordinate units. For example, if a company or platoon was moving from one location to another after completing a project, the opportunity existed to provide transportation assets to move the element and provide maintenance support while the element reset for a follow-on mission. Being proactive and finding these opportunities was only half the fight. The FSC also had to provide efficient and effective support on the modular company's terms and timeline. Most of the time this was as simple as staying in contact with the different companies throughout the stages of their projects and selling ideas where the FSC could help provide assistance, freeing up engineer assets to complete more projects. This often led to unique missions, such as providing meals at a jobsite, but it built a reputation for the FSC that would in turn create additional opportunities.

Summary

By remaining versatile, maintaining lines of communication, and providing great customer service, the FSC, 844th Engineer Battalion, built a solid reputation while in Iraq. The company became the premiere support element within the battalion and was called on to do everything from supporting the operational environment owner with welding wire mitigation kits for the mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles to running combat logistics patrols with Special Forces. The company even supported the battalion's Iraqi Army partnership efforts by providing food service and maintenance training to the Iraqi soldiers. During the unit's ten months in-theater, it hauled more than 500 loads, serviced more than 20 joint security stations and contingency operating bases throughout Iraq, and completed more than 400 maintenance work orders and 1,000 technical inspections during 10,000 man-hours—all while maintaining a rigorous service program that contributed to the battalion's 90 percent or better operational readiness rating. The example of this company was affected by the battalion's force structure, location in Iraq, mission, and the company's positive approach to providing sustainment support. No FSC will have a completely similar experience. However, the FSC did exactly what it was designed to do—support the engineer battalion and the modular companies by serving as a logistical lifeline, allowing engineers to do what they do best: build. 

Captain Brewer is the commander of Forward Support Company, 844th Engineer Battalion, in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has served as the battalion's engineer plans officer and as commander of the 739th Engineer Company (Multirole Bridge) in Granite City, Illinois. He holds a bachelor's from the University of Missouri—St. Louis and is a graduate of the Engineer Officer Basic Course.