

~~Marching~~ Sailing to Victory

Strategic sealift reductions jeopardize the Army's ability to decisively defeat our future enemies.

■ By Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Lyons





The MV Endurance, a U.S. roll-on roll-off carrier vessel, receives military cargo at the Port of Corpus Christi, Texas, on Feb. 18, 2010. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Transportation Command)

FEATURES

The aging of the organic fleet, the dwindling supply of commercial ships, and the loss of crewmembers for both fleets pose great risk to our decisive land force.

A major strategic advantage of the United States is its ability to project and sustain forces anywhere and anytime on the globe. However, the Army's ability to decisively defeat our future enemies is at risk. Let me explain.

As a senior Army logistician, I know that most Army professionals are very familiar with the detailed planning required to get unit equipment and personnel from a fort to a port of embarkation. We are also familiar with reception, staging, onward movement, and integration efforts to get our Soldiers and gear from the port of debarkation to the foxhole and engaged in the fight.

But, as the U.S. Transportation Command deputy commander, I'd like to highlight a crucial segment of transport that occurs in the vast deep-blue space over which the lifeblood of any decisive U.S. combat power must travel. Although we don't often discuss it, as Army professionals we must recognize and advocate for the critical combat enabler known as our nation's strategic sealift.

Strategic Sealift

Our nation's strategic sealift capability comprises two distinct fleets. First is the gray-hulled organic fleet, consisting of continental United States-based vessels that are in a reduced operating status and pre-positioned vessels that are at strategic locations worldwide. This fleet assists an immediate wave of forces as we surge the Army to the fight.

The second fleet consists of U.S. flag, militarily useful, commercial vessels made available to us through the Maritime Security Program and the Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement. These commercial ships participate in both domestic and international commerce, but when mobilized, they are available to augment our organic fleets. Having these ships available ensures the United States retains a strategic sealift capability that is ready for war.

The fact that these commercial ships are U.S. flag is critical because there is no guarantee we can compel foreign-flag vessels to sail into potentially hostile areas on our behalf. During Operation Desert Shield, 13 foreign-flag vessels balked at entering the area of operations, and we experienced similar problems with foreign-flag ships during the Vietnam War.

Greater Capacity for the Warfighter

Some may counter that even without U.S. flag ships we could simply fly our equipment and personnel to the fight. Physics says otherwise. A single ship can carry approximately the same amount of cargo as 300 C-17 Globemaster III aircraft. Considering the number of sorties required to move a decisive combat force, we simply do not have the airlift capacity to move our warfighters on a time line that meets national security objectives.

In fact, 25 years ago, during the six-month buildup to Operation Desert Storm, we moved more than 2 million tons of equipment by sea. Over the course of that operation, 95 percent of all cargo went by sea. Only 5 percent went by our maxed-out airlift fleet.

During Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, U.S. commercial vessels moved 63 percent of all military cargo. To move a decisive force to the point and time of need, we must use strategic sealift.

Risks to Strategic Sealift

Several factors have combined to put our nation's strategic sealift capability at risk.

Fleet age. First, the organic fleet is aging. Our surge vessels are an average of 38 years old and will begin to reach their 50-year service life in the 2020s. The U.S. Transportation Command is forecasting that 4 million square feet of organic surge roll-on-roll-off capacity will be gone by 2030.

Less commercial availability. Of greater concern is the overall trend



The MV Cape Texas rides out a storm while transporting military vehicles. The vessel is a roll-on/roll-off ship with the Ready Reserve Force of the Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration. When activated, the ship becomes part of the Navy's Military Sealift Command. (Photo courtesy of the Military Sealift Command)

within the commercial U.S. flag fleet; there has been a long-term decline in the number of available ships. At its peak in the 1950s, more than 1,000 U.S. ships were engaged in international trade. Today only 78 ships are similarly engaged. Recent declines have been the most dramatic in the history of the program; the Army has lost access to one-fourth of the commercial fleet in the past three years.

Fewer mariners. Most are unaware that both the Navy's organic fleet and U.S. flag commercial vessels draw from the same pool of civilian mariners. When U.S. shipping companies shift their vessels under the flags of foreign nations that offer lower overall operating costs, jobs for U.S. mariners simply go away. And, with only 78 ships engaged in international trade, there are just enough jobs to main-

tain the minimum pool of mariners needed to move our Army in time of war.

The Army needs ships and mariners, and it is a need most of us do not readily recognize or appreciate. The aging of the organic fleet, the dwindling supply of commercial ships, and the loss of crewmembers for both fleets pose great risk to our decisive land force.

We must retain a decisive land force to counter the threats we will face in tomorrow's increasingly complex environment. Force 2025 and Beyond will provide the decisive land force of the future. But if we do not raise the discussion of ship recapitalization and manning, we may not be able to get to the fight.

There is no doubt that "boots on the ground" are the ultimate guarantor of victory. But without strate-

gic sealift, we join the ranks of most of the world's armies—relegated to an in-garrison force that is likely ineffective at deterring its enemies. The simple truth is that the Army must sail to the fight before it can march to victory.

Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Lyons is the deputy commander of the U.S. Transportation Command at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Lyons previously served as the commander of Combined Arms Support Command and as commanding general of the 8th Theater Sustainment Command. He holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from the Rochester Institute of Technology, a master's degree in national resource strategy from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and a master's degree in logistics management from the Naval Postgraduate School.