

*Soldiers from the 109th Transportation Company transport
ammunition containers from the Port of Valdez
to Fort Wainwright, Alaska.*



Operation Midnight Sun: Multifunctional Logistics in the Last Frontier

The 17th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion worked with several Department of Defense organizations to transport ammunition across Alaska and deliver it to Army ammunition supply points.

By Major Timothy J. Barrett

Twice a year, an ammunition barge arrives at the Port of Valdez to resupply all Department of Defense forces stationed in Alaska, including the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). The first arrives in early spring, the second in early fall. The spring ammunition barge is typically the smaller of the two. This has traditionally been a “port-to-door” contracted move from the contiguous United States (what Alaskans call “the lower 48”) to the ammunition supply points (ASPs) in Fort Wainwright, Alaska (FWA), and the Fort Richardson side of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska (JBER).

The 17th CSSB’s Mission

The commander of my unit, the 17th Combat Sustain-

ment Support Battalion (CSSB), believed that taking on this mission would be a great training opportunity and would engage multiple capabilities within the battalion. As time would show, this event also provided a great opportunity for the CSSB to work with multiple DOD entities, including the U.S. Air Force, Alaska Army National Guard, and USCG.

Because of the 17th CSSB’s many deployments in recent years, the battalion headquarters and the 109th Transportation Company (established in Alaska in 2006 and 2009 respectively) had never before been available at the same time to conduct this mission. This operation included the recently formed 205th Ordnance Platoon to support ASP operations.

Because of our location, we conducted our coordina-



tion and planning through the U.S. Army Alaska (US-ARAK) G-4 rather than through the battalion's nominal headquarters, the 45th Sustainment Brigade.

We realized early in the planning process that the mission included a requirement to retrograde ammunition from FWA and JBER to the Port of Valdez (in addition to delivering the ammunition). We were eager to take on this portion of the mission, but the USARAK G-4 gave us some sage advice: It was preferable to get our foot in the door and do the small things well, build our reputation as a premiere support battalion, and then increase missions in the future. The point was well taken.

Reconnaissance

The reconnaissance for this operation was conducted in February. The reconnaissance team included the support operations officer (SPO) and members of the 109th Transportation Company. Before our departure, we contacted the Surface Deployment and Distribution Center-Alaska (SDDC-AK) commander to plan our itinerary. Our first stop was to the Alaska Army National Guard's armory in Valdez, where we would stage and conduct our operations.

We made a few quick observations. First, the snowfall in Alaska that year broke records. More than 8 feet of snow had accumulated throughout the city and at the Port of Valdez. This would affect the execution of our operations in May. We also observed a significant lack of space within the armory to support both a sleeping area and a maintenance area. Another venue to support maintenance operations had to be found.

We later met with the director of the Port of Valdez, who gave us a tour of the port and an overview of how it

operated. During our reconnaissance, we noted a Coast Guard maintenance bay just east of the port director's office. We then met with the Coast Guard warrant officer, who directed us to his colleague's motor shop on the far side of Valdez. The USCG kindly offered not only its maintenance bay for backup support but also its galley to feed the permanent party.

Preparing for the Mission

When we returned to JBER, we continued with the planning process. Since the consolidation of Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson into JBER in the summer of 2010, JBER has been an Air Force-led installation. The 17th CSSB used this as an opportunity to continue building our relationship with our Air Force counterpart, the 773d Logistics Readiness Squadron (LRS). We invited representatives from the 773d LRS to our battalion field training exercise in March 2011. They actively participated in convoy training, convoy operations, and staff planning for the operation, which would be called Operation Midnight Sun (OMS).

The staff followed a deliberate planning process. The SPO presented the facts, planning factors, and support requirements, and the 773d LRS offered to provide support, including assets from their transportation motor pool. Over time, additional in-progress reviews were conducted to discuss topics such as communication requirements, quality assurance specialist-ammunition surveillance (QASAS) requirements, and physical security, including armed escorts.

According to USARAK Regulation 190-1, Military Police Physical Security, two forms of communication are required on all convoys moving ammunition throughout

Port workers load an ammunition container onto a flatbed trailer at the Port of Valdez.





Sergeant Jose Barada, 109th Transportation Company, uses a hammer to lock the mechanism that holds the container to the trailer at the Port of Valdez. (Photo by SSG Brian Ferguson)

Alaska. We met this requirement using Government-issued cellphones and the Alaska Land Mobile Radio System (ALMRS). ALMRS is an excellent communication option that is very useful in the vast open space of Alaska.

During the in-progress reviews, three stages of QASAS were planned for the execution of this mission. The first stage would be conducted at JBER before the 109th Transportation Company's departure. The last two would be conducted at the Port of Valdez. The results of the last two QASAS stages were executed without major incident.

We planned the armed escort requirements according to USARAK Regulation 190-1, Appendix G. One Soldier carrying force protection ammunition was required to be present during the transport of ammunition. The US-ARAK commander confirmed the additional requirement that each Soldier who would be handling force protection ammunition would receive a briefing from the USARAK legal office about the rules of engagement.

We also used this event as an opportunity to integrate the 205th Ordnance Platoon with the civilians that run the FWA and JBER ASPs. While continuing to work with the civilians at JBER, the 205th Ordnance Platoon sent a detachment to FWA to bolster the ongoing working relationship. This relationship would be critical in preparing for the increased workload required during the fall ammunition barge operation.

Another critical piece that came into effect before the execution of OMS was the use of fuel purchase cards. Three weeks before mission execution, the SPO section

received six fuel cards to divide between the 109th and 539th Transportation Companies. The cards were for purchasing civilian-rated fuel and reducing the support footprint both for this operation and for Operation Polar Express, the weekly supply mission between FWA and JBER.

One week before the execution of OMS, the 17th CSSB conducted a battalion rehearsal of concept drill. During the briefing, it was noted that the representatives from the SDDC-AK, civilians from the ASPs at FWA and JBER, and the QASAS office should have had a more active role. This was corrected before the fall barge operation.

Mission Execution

The operation was executed upon notification of the barge's arrival on 27 April. Two convoys consisting of 32 vehicles in 8 serials departed JBER and headed to Valdez. Although plenty of snow covered the treacherous Thompson Pass into Valdez, the movement to the port proceeded without incident. Our original plan to stage all of our vehicles at the National Guard armory had to change because the ground was still covered in more than 4 feet of snow.

After a joint briefing among the USCG, SDDC-AK, and 17th CSSB, we coordinated with the SDDC-AK to walk through the port and identify a space for the entire convoy. With SDDC-AK's help, we were able to stage every M915 line-haul tractor with trailer at the port without incident.

The second and third stages of the QASAS inspection



Soldiers from the 109th Transportation Company receive a safety briefing before departing the Port of Valdez for Fort Wainwright. (Photo by SSG Brian Ferguson)

were executed smoothly, as 14 containers were loaded and sent to FWA and 13 containers were sent to JBER. Because of the hauling capacity of the M915s, only one container was loaded on each flatbed.

More than 317 tons of ammunition were moved, traveling a combined total of 38,000 miles. The US-ARAK G-4's initial guidance to focus on just hauling ammunition to the ASPs was prudent, since we were also responsible for returning the empty containers to Valdez. Our 205th Ordnance Platoon supported both the packing and unpacking of containers at both the JBER and FWA ASPs.

Lessons Learned

After the operation was complete, we conducted an after-action review. One critical problem that was identified concerned the creation of proper travel orders through the Defense Travel System. Since this was a training exercise, there was no "single" solution because multiple elements moved through various areas. In the future, time and energy will be saved by creating a travel orders roll-up for each of the five distinct groups of Soldiers that support the operation. These groups include the advance party, the two original convoy groups that haul ammunition from Valdez, and the two consolidated groups that return the empty containers from FWA and JBER to Valdez.

We also identified problems with the feeding plan. It was our original intent for all personnel to eat at the USCG galley. We later realized that the galley could support only the advance party and not the personnel from the main body. This resulted in an increased cost of the

operation because each Soldier received per diem meal rates for the town of Valdez.

In preparation for the fall barge, we brought a mobile kitchen trailer to the National Guard's armory in Valdez to feed the Soldiers supporting the operation. This reduced costs and increased the mission's training value, especially for our food service specialist Soldiers.

Through OMS, the 17th CSSB established its reputation as a premiere support battalion in Alaska. Later in the year, we offered our available transportation assets to prepare for the fall barge. These assets included the 486th Movement Control Team and the 539th Transportation Company, both of which had recently returned from deployments.

Since OMS, we have increased the integration of the 205th Ordnance Platoon with the FWA and JBER ASPs. The 17th CSSB has also taken steps, in conjunction with USARAK G-4, to expand the involvement of the 773d LRS and the Alaska Army National Guard in the planning process. This effort included the formation of a joint movement control board that serves as a forum to effectively identify all Department of Defense movement requirements throughout Alaska.

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