

Rail Operations on the Rise

Training, mission accomplishment,
and cost savings for the Marine Corps

by 1stLt Christina M. Rapp



There are limitless opportunities to employ rail operations. (Photo by Cindy McIntyre.)

Freight/passenger transportation and port/terminal operations, both subfunctions of transportation and logistics, consist of several diverse and systematic methods of throughput. Landing Support Platoon under Landing Support Company, 1st Transportation Support Battalion, executes all of these throughput methods with various levels of scope, limited opportunities, and limited resources. The 0481s—or landing support specialists—make up the bulk of the landing support community. Their individual training events include conducting the following: helicopter support team (HST) operations, rail operations, port operations, beach operations, and arrival airfield control group/departure airfield control group (A/DACG) operations. However, several 0481s in the Marine Corps lack

experience and training for the individual event of conducting rail operations. Recently, 26 Marines participated in rail operations, and only one had prior experience. Many Marines have gone their whole career up to the rank of staff sergeant without any type of planning or execution of rail operations. This can be detrimental to their career path with the rail operation training event having a 12-month sustainment interval. Some may attempt to identify this as a leadership failure; however, the logistics community as a whole has not taken

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advantage of the limitless opportunities rail operations offer the Marine Corps. This article will encompass the benefits of rail operations including the evolution of rail operations, training opportunities for the 04XX logistics community, logistical efficiency, and immense cost savings for the Marine Corps.

Critical points in rail history can be traced back to the North China Operation, January 1947, in which Marines from Headquarters Battalion, 1st Engineer Battalion, and 1st Motor Transport Battalion guarded the rail lines against communist attacks. The outbreak of civil war during the operation posed a serious threat and disruption to the main line of transportation between North and Central China. Marines guarding the Peiping-Mukden railroad enabled the transportation of coal to

the cities of Peiping, Tientsin, Tsingtao, Shanghai, and Nanking. Without the coal, the cities would have gone without light, heat, power, sanitation, and water.¹ Although the Marines filled a different role during the North China operation than a landing support specialist would today, this root in rail operation history highlights its impact for the transportation of critical supplies. Looking into more recent history, prior to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, movements by rail were highly utilized by the Marine Corps. However, with the increase in funding for the war, commanders began using tractor trailers as the main method of transportation. Rail operations became almost nonexistent in the shadow of unlimited funds and tractor trailer transportation during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. With recent budget cuts and lack of funds in the Marine Corps, rail operations are beginning to surface again with their logistical effectiveness in moving large amounts of equipment at low costs.² As stated in the MCLB Barstow article by Maj Donato S. Powell, Ms. Karen L. Gray, and Mr. Chad Hildebrandt, “Units are exploring methods to overcome challenging ways to maintain their readiness while reducing costs simultaneously.”³

Presently, the Marine Corps’ main involvement with rail operations resides at Marine Corps Logistics Base (MCLB) Barstow. The largest throughput node for rail operations, MCLB Barstow also offers outstanding training opportunities for the 04XX logistics community. Landing support specialists participate in an 80-hour rail operations training course, which is Marine Corps Training and Information Management System- and Training and Education Command-approved, in which they receive classroom instruction, on-the-job training instruction, and railroad operations training. 0431s—embarkers—can also participate in this training to learn how to build load plans. The first day consists of classroom instruction followed by another day of on-the-job training. Day two also includes load planning/building which greatly increases understanding of the embarkation

process—another important part of an 0481s career as well as the integration of other 04XX MOSs. The Marines spend the remainder of the training executing the throughput process of rail operations. This includes the spanning of rail cars, uploading/downloading pieces of equipment, and supervising several operations within the rail yard. Unfortunately, as of now, the Marine Corps’ involvement and training in rail operations has been limited to—but not bounded by—the 12-day rail operations course for landing support specialists. The necessity for more training in rail operations has also been recognized by MCLOG in the development of SNCOs and officers “in order to enable the integration of logistics and support training that will benefit the MAGTF’s mission.”⁴ Currently, a training curriculum is being developed for the students at MCLOG to participate in training operations aboard MCLB Barstow.⁵ Rail operations provide essential Marine Corps logistical effectiveness and crucial training for our 0481’s MOS responsibilities.

Each training rotation at MCLB Barstow, facilitated by Mr. Chad Hildebrandt, the rail operations supervisor, conducts the movement of roughly 2,500 pieces of equipment. However, this large number of assets is predominately Army equipment in transit to/from the National Training Center

(NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. In February 2015, a detachment of 11 Marines from Landing Support Company conducted the movement of 2,599 pieces of equipment totaling 78,307,760 pounds. The Marines supported this movement of Army units from Fort Wainwright, AK; Fort Carson, CO; and Fort Bliss and Fort Hood, TX.⁶ In March 2015, a detachment of 15 Marines conducted the movement of 2,386 pieces of equipment totaling 84,460,120 pounds of equipment.⁷ For the movement of an entire regimental combat team consisting of (14) M1A1 Tanks, (27) LAV25s, (20) MTRVs, (48) AAVs, (6) M-777s, and (50) HMMWVs, truck cost would total \$1,739,750 versus rail cost of \$688,935. The potential cost savings between each movement totals \$1,050,815.⁸ The following numbers display the potential cost savings rail operations offer the Marine Corps. Of the 26 Marines who conducted rail operations in February and March, 25 of them had no prior experience. As proven by the data above, rail operations provide opportunities for huge cost savings utilizing low numbers of personnel and moving large amounts of equipment.

Within Camp Pendleton, many individuals have the misconception of rail operations being more expensive than movements with tractor trailers. However, this misconception comes from the sole fact that only one rail company pro-



Barstow is the largest throughput mode for Marine Corps rail operations. (Photo by Cindy McIntyre.)

vides service to Camp Pendleton. The rail company increases the cost due to the lack of competitors servicing Camp Pendleton. In order to mitigate this cost increase, the Rail Operations Team in Barstow can aid during the planning of unit exercises and training to provide coordination with the rail company. The Rail Operations Team from Barstow also provides a cost analysis for rail versus tractor trailer benefitting the planning process and supplying commanders with options; this cost comparison is created based off of the unit's equipment density list for the movement. Rail operations require more time to plan as the transit time can be days long instead of same-day transit; however, the cost benefits and efficiency outweigh the time for planning.

The Marine Corps, specifically I MEF, could expand its involvement with rail operations by assigning a 10–15 Marine detachment of 0481s, 0431s, 1345s, and possibly 0402s to MCLB Barstow on temporary duty for a 1- to 2-month rotation. The Marines aboard MCLB Barstow would significantly benefit from this continuous training opportunity and also ensure a well-rounded MOS career path. 0481s and 0431s would have the opportunity to gain much embark/debark experience as well. As rail operations are not compatible with the Integrated Computerized Deployment System, this would be highly beneficial training for load planning and building while ensuring our 04XX logistics community is properly integrated, challenged, and trained in embarkation/debarkation operations.

Camp Pendleton possesses the potential for immense growth in rail operations. Lemon Grove and Fallbrook each have a rail yard where uploading and downloading could be facilitated. However, each location lacks the personnel to span, chain, and supervise the railcars without paying thousands of dollars to contractors for accessorial services. Locating a subject matter expert aboard Camp Pendleton in order to kick-start the rail operations would greatly benefit this transition to rail operations. With the proper training and growth of knowledge among the 04XX community, rail operations aboard



There are potential savings of millions of dollars using rail transportation. (Photo by Cindy McIntyre.)

Camp Pendleton could be seamlessly conducted, saving the Marine Corps millions of dollars in the future.

How are rail operations relevant to training exercises and present-day operations? Several units under I MEF conduct training in Twentynine Palms, CA and Yuma, AZ and spend thousands of dollars to transport tracked vehicles and heavy equipment. Expanding the rail operations' nodes would provide another avenue of transportation for movements to Twentynine Palms, the National Training Center, or even Yuma without the heavy cost of utilizing a tractor trailer. Rail operations can also greatly reduce the costs of special purpose MAGTF and MAGTF missions when traveling outside the continental United States from ports outside of the local area as well as receiving gear from in theater. This would sufficiently decrease costs in contracting tractor trailers for large exercise movements, support well-rounded career paths for the 04XX logistics community, and provide overall logistical efficiency for the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps possesses a highly efficient, underutilized, and inexpensive method of transportation. The Marine Corps must pull from the cost effective and available resources in order to provide thorough, efficient, and systematic push logistics to all supported

units. Why not take the advantage of rail operations in order to accomplish this?

Notes

1. Robert A. Churley, "The North China Operation," *Marine Corps Gazette* (Quantico, VA: November 1947) archives, accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.
2. Donato Powell, Karen L. Gray, and Chad Hildebrandt, "MCLB Barstow: Logistics capability and training," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: January 2015), accessed at <https://www.mca-marines.org>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Chad Hildebrandt, "After-Action Report – MCLB Barstow Rail Operations Training Class 15-05," Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow, (Barstow, CA: 2005).
7. Chad Hildebrandt, "After Action Report – MCLB Barstow Rail Operations Training Class 15-06," Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow, (Barstow, CA: 2006).
8. Chad Hildebrandt, "Rail Operations – Cost Savings," Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow training pamphlet, (Barstow, CA: January 2015).

