

A Qualitative Review of the Contribution of Military Leadership to the Humanitarian Supply Chain Operations

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Abstract

The humanitarian operations arena and the Humanitarian Supply Chain (HSC) in response to crises or disasters are times where the need for leadership is paramount. Similar challenges to those of the HSC are encountered by the military in operations, this familiarity combined with a great emphasis on leadership of individuals, teams, and organisations make the military leader a significant asset to any HSC and humanitarian operation. This study assesses the contribution of the military to the HSC via a qualitative review of the experience and actions of those involved in humanitarian sphere. The findings grouped into themes support the view that engagement of the military in the HSC or in support of humanitarian operations has a positive effect overall, but specifically on leadership of the HSC.

Key words: Military Leadership, humanitarian operations, SCM

Introduction

The business of the military is leadership; however, this is not the only quality setting the military apart, coordination, capacity, readiness and broad ability to respond are some other factors. Structured and trained to succeed on the battlefield, these skills and capabilities translate almost seamlessly into humanitarian operations, disaster response, famine relief and the provision of security. This is underpinned by familiarity with austere operating environments, and the inherent supply chain challenges, fragility, congestion, capacity issues and far bank control (the bridgehead or airport in country) and distribution; although the attributes are positive, paradoxically perhaps the presence and the influence of the military may not be considered so; this is supported by Le Riche (2004), in his review of the co-option of humanitarian aid in conflict zones.

The use of military assets to provide assistance is a tempting proposition when seeking solutions to distant problems, however as Smith (2008) points out frequently and in detail, there are limitations to ‘the utility of force’, and where the military is seen as an option careful consideration is necessary. These insights and those that follow,

serve to highlight the consideration necessary prior to committing any military force be it for humanitarian purposes, peacekeeping or warfighting, the urge to do something must be resisted, if necessary.

Notwithstanding the warnings from history, deployment of the military as part of the humanitarian supply chain (HSC) and humanitarian operations remains a current option for Governments and the UN alike; it is the added value the military and their support network brings to the humanitarian space through their leadership which is the subject of this study. There appears to be a paucity of papers focussing on leadership, a literature search and review of the last 10 years revealed very few specific papers specifically exploring the impact of leadership on outcomes and efficiencies.

The literature review indicates something of a ‘blind spot’ towards the military contribution to the HSC, although a significant contributor to the HSC and Humanitarian Operations.

Interview responses revealed a desire among NGO’s to keep separate from other NGO’s and organisations where possible, this also applied also to working with the military.

This study highlights the potential positive impact of leadership and military leadership as they underpin key functional attributes of the HSC. These attributes, communication, diplomacy, coordination training and collaboration are linked to leadership through the experience and responses of the interviewees. These themes reinforce the importance of leadership in the HSC. Government spending is under increasing scrutiny, but the desire to influence globally is undimmed, where strategic power projection, influence and leadership can be achieved through swift and positive responses to humanitarian crisis it is increasingly likely the military supply chain will form part of any response.

This study proposes to examine the leadership effect on the HSC and humanitarian operations supply chain. We focus upon a discrete cohort of supply chain specialist’s military and civilian and clinicians to interpret leadership impact on the HSC with following research objectives to investigate:

Research Objectives	Questionnaire Questions	Key supporting references
Research Objective 1 Narrative: Leadership contribution to movement, training and preparation	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 14	(Antonakis, Avolio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003) (Ashdown, 2011) (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) (Greenleaf, 1977) (Moran & Brightman, 2000) (Adair 1973)
Research Objective 2 Narrative: Coordination/resistance to support	4, 8,	(Dubey, Singh & Gupta, 2015) (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2016), (Fritz Institute, 2005) UN, (Oloruntoba & Gray, 2006)
Research Objective 3 Narrative: Force/Push, protection vs supply	12, 13, 16	Weiss (2004)
Research Objective 4 Narrative: Diplomacy at all levels, strategic and the relief distribution interface	9, 10, 15	(Berridge & James, 2003), (Kovacs et al. 2018)

Table 1 – Research Objectives

Literature Review

The literature review is segmented to reflect the key areas of focus of this study. In turn the focus will shift from leadership and military leadership, diplomacy, supply chain management and finally key stakeholders and humanitarian aid in general.

Military Leadership

Leadership in the military is the ‘sine qua non’ of success in war and on other operations, from Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) in the UK to delivering much needed humanitarian support to inaccessible areas of Nepal during an earthquake to policing actions anywhere on the globe either as a stand-alone deployment or as part of a coalition. Much has been written on leadership (Antonakis, Avolio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Pendleton & Furnham, 2016) and military leadership, the enduring popularity of (Harari, 1997; Lyman 2004; Thompson, 1985).

Each military author in turn has elaborated on leadership and command in war and in periods of preparation. Later authors such as Powell (1995) and Smith (2008) have gone further and on occasion questioned the utility of the military in situations where the political and strategic outcome are not clear at the time of proposed commitment.

There are two key areas where the deployment of military forces can be considered:

- Peace Keeping Operations
- Peace Enforcement Operations

Supply Chain Management

The supply chain is a key component of a business, on humanitarian operations, the supply chain is the business. Van Wassenhove, 2006 assesses that up to 80% NGO expenditure could be classified under the supply chain banner. This is significant, as a proportion outweighing clinical expenditure, perhaps unsurprising as a poorly established HSC will not support any meaningful intervention.

Since 2014, a DfID financed group in the UK – Ready to Respond (www.redruk.org) with a focus on training and skills development for individuals and organisations in the humanitarian and disaster relief space. The very nature of the HSC and preponderance of logistic investment mean some of these savings and efficiencies will influence the HSC and its operation.

Stakeholders

As described through the review of leadership, diplomacy and organisation it is evident that there is a matrix of stakeholders, potentially different for each crisis, determined by nature of event, location, historical ties, reach of organisations, availability of logistic specialists and platforms and the prevailing security conditions.

HSC Stakeholder Concentrations

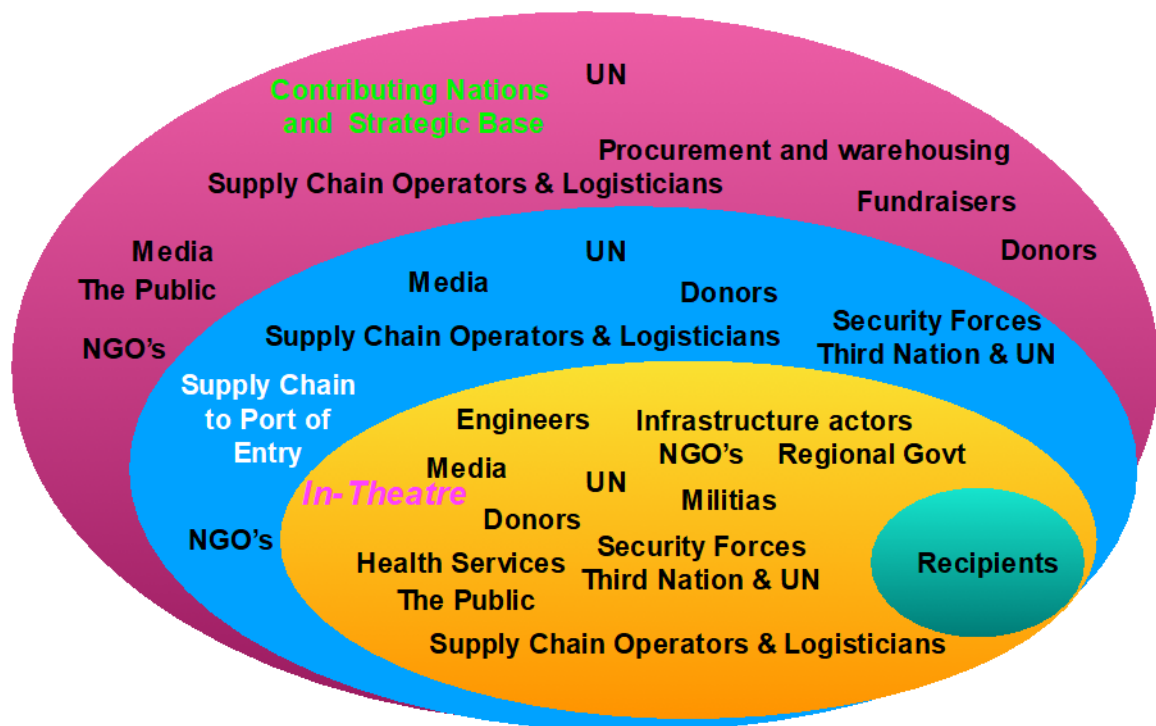


Figure 1 – HSC Stakeholder Concentration

Fig 1 is an illustration of the potential number of stakeholders within the HSC envelope, the figure also captures the flow of some stakeholders through the HSC from the home base to the distribution interface, the UN are present throughout; further it shows the increasingly congested space. HSC stakeholders are broadly motivated by the same outcomes, to improve conditions in the immediate and longer term for those affected by the event. The continued financial independence of some NGO's as Governments may choose to use NGO's to distribute foreign aid, thus supporting a nominally independent body.

In summary while leadership is the subject of volumes of literature, remarkably little has been written to establish the centrality of leadership to the success of humanitarian operations and in particular the supply chain, without which no humanitarian activities can be sustained. As described by (Van Wassenhove, 2006) up to 80% of investment for humanitarian operations is now in the supply chain. An orientation of the study towards military supply chain operators, is intended to expose their understanding and experience of leadership in the humanitarian supply chain and their contribution to it. The supply chain literature focuses on quantitative data, volumes and transit times, the culture more akin to the machine than the organism, (Mantere, 2013; Moran & Brightman, 2000). The 'soft skills' associated with some leadership models (Gardner et al., 2005; Avolio et al., 2004) are not easily translated into the technical elements of the HSC, analysis and control appear to be favoured over, influence, diplomacy and motivation. The literature review has shown that while leadership and the HSC are considered in detail separately there is little reviewing them together. The contribution of military supply chain operators has very little supporting literature.

Methodology

The research design for this study was an instrument consisting of open questions around leadership. The instrument enabled a semi-structured approach.

The instrument focussed on the views, experiences and assessment of the importance of leadership related to other humanitarian and HSC criteria. The qualitative approach was chosen to allow exploration of sequential and related criteria through discourse. The interview consisted of 17 questions, which were grouped into four key areas corresponding to the underlying research objectives, as at Table 1. The questions were adapted at times to elicit the most from each interview. The approach allowed for reflection and wider observation of the HSC in accordance with the qualitative review methodology set out by (Easterby-Smith et al 2008) and (Bryman & Bell 2015). The responses were recorded, or detailed notes were taken and anonymised then aggregated into themes related to the research objectives and related to the literature review.

Population, Demographics and Selection

The target population for this study was mainly military supply chain operators, with humanitarian operations or HSC experience. The population were senior and middle ranking logistics officers from the UK armed forces a military reservist working for an NGO, a 3PL logistician specialising in emergency response and a UK civil servant supply chain specialist. The demographic breakdown of the sample is at Table 2.

Serial	Profession	Service	Age	Grade /NATO Grade	Gender M/F
1	Logistician	Royal Navy	45	OF4	M
2	Medical / Nursing	Army / STC	55	OF4	M
3	Logistician	Civil Servant	50	UK Civil Service Level 4	F
4	Logistician	Army	49	OF4	F
5	Logistician	3PL	60	Civilian	M
6	Medical / Nursing	Royal Navy	43	OR9	M
7	Logistician	Army	45	OF4	M

Table 2 - Demographic details of sample

Findings and Results

Leadership and its impact on areas of the HSC is considered in relation to themes drawn together from the interviews. The views span the supply chain from the depot and procurement, the strategic coupling bridge, arrival into theatre and forward distribution. The distribution and direct interface with the recipients are also reviewed, along with the cultural impact of aid.

Leadership, Organisation and Structure (hierarchy)

'The military the military approach to leadership allowed the deployed logistics HQ to adapt to the situation and work to set the conditions for success'

Military planner on the West Africa Ebola crisis 2014

'The impact of the military is positive! They are good at planning and I believe there are similarities in the way approach HSC'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

Organisations have a structure, to enable business outputs and support staff with guidance and direction (Nadler & Tushman, 1980). This hierarchy is designed to give clarity and speed on operations, enabling swift decision making to overcome the enemy or situation.

'We considered Ebola the enemy, as we would have in a counterinsurgency operation and applied the same principles of isolation and suppression'.

Military planner on the West Africa Ebola crisis 2014

This quote from the 2014 humanitarian relief operation in Sierra Leone indicates, how the military were able to assess and analyse the situation and map the challenge across to an operational approach. This allowed the leadership to retain well-understood roles and processes and begin operations without a major re-organisation. This resulted in decreased 'time to effect', i.e. the military were able to generate positive results more quickly than other organisations already in theatre.

'Every night at 2100 the Commanders update brief (CUB) was held in the military operations room. This quickly morphed into a brief for all organisations operating in Sierra Leone, so quickly all operators had a common picture and understanding of the ground and threat'.

Military planner on the West Africa Ebola crisis 2014

Attendees benefitted from access to up to date briefings, essential to advise ministers, and inform the media. It also provided a common operating picture with all available leaders briefed at the same time, informing decision making and ensuring that subsequent briefings were coherent.

'It was telling that the military were the only organisation able to provide this 'structure', and that NGO's and OGD were content to accept leadership in this area from the military'.

Military planner on the West Africa Ebola crisis 2014

The presence of OGD's and the nature of the operation were carefully considered, and adjustments made to the nature of the activities. This was described as a softening, an adjustment; rather than referring to 'intelligence' in briefings the staff used 'understand and engage'.

'They all had mobile phones, and anyone could call up to the minister direct if they wished'.

Military planner on the West Africa Ebola crisis 2014

This degree of access was an anathema to the military, multiple open channels means multiple versions of events, and no ready baseline, the tempo or operational narrative could be set by the quickest person to the phone.

Training and Preparation

'We are very deliberate approach, 50% of my effort is directed internally to set the conditions for success, people need to understand this does not just happen. The general planning in support of the HSC must take place in advance'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

'We balance model vs environment. 80% of our modality is basic and repeatable, 20% is specialised relating to the event'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

The literature indicates the training and preparation cycles for NGO's are influenced and by events, in a period where there are no crises funding and donations are reduced. The response from the commercial emergency logician gives an indication of how much effort goes into the preparation of teams and individuals for HSC operations.

'We already know how, we just need to work out the what'.

Multiple respondents.

This answer was based on the leadership inherent in the military but also the familiarity within established organisations.

'I had to develop training programmes for locally recruited people, this meant we had to train as we delivered care and managed receipt of our stores'.

Senior NGO clinician Liberia 2014

The interviewee was full of praise for the courage and willingness to learn of the locals recruited into the ETU, nevertheless having to train and deliver real time care must affect outputs. This experience appears to be a familiar one, significantly impacting on the ability to learn from experience.

Learning and Leadership

'I spoke to the team and we discussed what had happened, mistakes do happen in spite of our best efforts, the key message was to learn from the experience and put this behind us'.

Civil Servant Supply Chain Specialist

Lessons are recorded and disseminated widely across the MOD. This process supports continual development of systems and practice; sustaining experience mix and ensuring corporate memory endures. The interviewees identified embedded learning as a contributor to success in the humanitarian supply chain and operations, as issues were identified previous lessons were implemented as well as new ones. An example is the changes implemented in the Depot as the 2014 Ebola crisis evolved; lessons were shared via 3-hour briefing rhythm to keep team members up to speed.

'Over the first three weeks charter flights arrived into theatre half empty, at €860k each it was a significant cost. We chartered two aircraft and ran flights into theatre every second day. We had sixteen different customers using the service, costs were reduced fivefold'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

The response indicates the leadership which may be applied to the HSC where operators collaborate, the insistence of a separate supply chain for each organisation was having a detrimental effect overall. The intervention of the 3PL, streamlined the HSC and reduced costs. Had other organisations had a learning culture this congestion could have been avoided.

Reach and Depth

'We were able to reach all the way back to the depot and influence packing, prioritisation and routing if needs be'

Military logistician West Africa 2014

'We understood what was needed forward and spoke the same language, and had shared experiences'

Military Logistician depot 2014

The military respondents agreed on the importance reach back into the strategic base; this is routine on operations and the supply chain operated in the same manner for HSC. The long experience of military supply chain operators and strategic base specialists was identified as key to success in the HSC. Experience meant operators were able to provide leadership in order to meet the requirements of the military logisticians and clinicians during the Ebola crisis of 2014.

'I controlled the situation and led the people'

Civil Servant, Supply Chain

This respondent also practised the servant leadership model, emphasising the development and empowerment of team members.

Agility and Response

'We were able to change, circumvent and ignore process if it decreased response times, suppliers were very understanding, one that was never compromised was safety'

Civil Servant, Supply Chain

While NGO's and the UN can respond quickly at times, as demonstrated in the Caribbean in 2016 on occasion it can take time to marshal funding, staff and mandate to intervene. The interviews revealed a quick response time within the military logistics community, although not the lead, the military were able to organise and tailor an existing formation to deploy swiftly and in sufficient numbers to make a difference.

'We sent logisticians, engineers, and medics to help displaced persons, they were extremely busy, and some were affected by what they saw. Those who did not redeploy remained at readiness in Macedonia 'just in case'.

Military clinician Macedonia 1999

This is an example of how and unplanned HSC can be generated from a generic template to respond to an emerging need. This was also evident in the responses of the civil servant responding to crises through innovation and acceptance of risk much greater than normally delegated

'My letter of financial delegation came through in days not weeks, the MOD can do anything if it decides to.'

Civil Servant Supply Chain Specialist

This quote in many respects sums up the capacity and ability to respond and sustain the HSC and wider humanitarian operations in support of the UK, or other organisations.

Communication

'Communication was by far the most important aspect of our relationships in the HSC'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

'In a commercial supply chain a mistake may mean the loss of a 1000 kroner TV, in the HSC a mistake, could lose or delay a vaccination costing lives, it is completely different'.

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

Leadership has many descriptions and contributory factors, one component of successful leadership which is common to all models is communication, effective communication. All interviewees cited clear communication as a key factor in HSC, in the preparation, delivery and recovery phases.

'Where we communicated directly(with the military), it worked well, when we had to work through intermediaries, it caused problems.'

Senior Emergency Relief Logician from a 3PL

Diplomacy and Tact

'As we were not the lead organisation, it required a mixture of leadership and diplomacy to advise OGD's and NGO's to review their methodology'

Military logistician West Africa 2014

'I used tact and diplomacy to ensure other NGO's delivered the right support to my facility; when we had difficulties the 'country lead' was a great asset, a communicator. Other NGO's and local leaders were happy to listen'

Senior NGO clinician Liberia 2014

Protection vs Push

The interviewees, despite service from the Balkans in the 1990's to West Africa and the Caribbean in 2014 and 2016 had never had to choose between force protection or the conduct of humanitarian operations. This was unexpected, based on the age and experience of the sample. However as a finding it is valid and illustrates the rare occasions where HSC operators resort to force to achieve their aims.

Discussion and Conclusions

A limitation of this study is the military background of the majority of the interviewees, their deep understanding and experience of supply chains and the HSC made their responses valid and insightful. A balance was struck with the inclusion of a 3-PL provider, civil servant and an NGO clinician, with equal experience and understanding.

This study has shown that leadership is understood to have a positive impact on HSC operations, it may not be expressed explicitly, but implied through other aspects of the HSC, communication, diplomacy, co-ordination, but it is always there, a central plank of the military approach to any and all operations. It is the incorporation into other aspects of the HSC which may explain the paucity of discrete papers devoted to leadership in the HSC. The pursuit an early acceptance of the military presence and the inherent capability within their organisation would enable NGO's and OGD's to concentrate on discrete aspects of their operations, identifying the population at risk and opportunities for longer term projects while allowing their supply chain specialists to benefit from the capacity and experience of military logisticians.

Military leadership and presence may not always be welcomed in the HSC or on humanitarian operations, it is however frequently relied upon to enable and empower the actions of other HSC stakeholders, it is testament to the leadership qualities of the armed forces that they have been able to lead and support without side-lining, enable without alienating and guide without directing disparate organisations and maintain relations with them throughout critical situations, rewards come in many forms, for the military leading in the HSC it is the knowledge of a job well done.

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Biographies

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