The Quartermaster Corps in the Mediterranean: A Motorized Logistics System

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We have confidence in our trucks and drivers. When you tell a driver “Get these rations to such and such a place – they’ve got only enough for breakfast”, you know he will get it there, come Hell, high water or Nazis. It’s his job and he’s proud of it.

Major General Frank Ross of the U.S. Army’s Office of the Quartermaster General justly praised the men carrying out the difficult job of keeping American forces in the Mediterranean supplied. What he did not mention in this 1943 after-dinner speech to a Teamster gathering, however, were those key elements that linked the trucks and drivers together and determined their success or failure when confronted with the realities of the battlefield – doctrine, organization and training. Although matters of little interest to Ross’ lay audience, these issues were very much at the forefront of both his and his professional colleagues’ minds in the years leading up to American involvement in the Second World War. Drawing on their experiences with motorized transportation in the First World War, the men of the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps (QMC) spent the interwar years developing doctrine for motorized logistics, creating organizations to carry out that doctrine and designing training programs that could turn civilians into truckers. Whilst these three factors received severe tests in the Mediterranean theater during the Second World War, the QMC showed that their interwar thinking, generally speaking, proved successful in supporting American combat operations which, in turn, contributed significantly to Allied victory.

Pre-war QMC doctrine strongly emphasized the merits of preventative maintenance based on the understanding that trucks forced out of action by neglect or mistreatment would be just as crippled as those damaged by enemy action. The doctrine also emphasized the need to control nearly all trucks at the highest level of command possible so as to ensure their efficient use and to prevent such assets being squandered by local commanders determined to keep control of as many transportation resources as they could, thereby denying their use to others with urgent needs. The operational conditions experienced in the Mediterranean during the Second World War sometimes forced the temporary abandonment, or modification, of such central QMC tenets, especially in the area of preventive maintenance. Ultimately, however, this chapter will illustrate how the QMC remained true to their interwar thinking on doctrine.

In the immediate wake of American mobilization, QMC leaders struggled to develop organizations that could carry out their pre-war doctrine; it took a great effort to move from overly rigid structures, fit only for paper planning, to a somewhat more flexible and practical forms. When American troops landed in North Africa, the QMC’s organizational structure remained in flux and, as lessons came in from the field, the focus shifted towards the company formation as the critical operational unit. As regards training, meanwhile, the professional officers and enlisted men of the tiny interwar U.S. Army were doing their best to cope with the flood of recruits that had washed into their training camps in 1941 and 1942. Although the QMC had much to learn in the field, their efforts made during the interwar period would at least ensure that motor operations remained possible, if not perfect. At the same time that the QMC worked to adapt itself to motor vehicles it also faced the challenge of making the best use of men, white and black, in a segregated U.S. Army, where prejudiced perceptions of racially-linked physical and mental traits affected both training and assignments. Looking at the interwar QMC and comparing it to the more integrated system that emerged after combat experience in the Mediterranean shows that the QMC evolved, helping to point the way toward the postwar desegregation of the Army. This chapter will highlight that, in spite of the pressures of combat and high tempo operations, the operational experience of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations during the Second World War essentially validated the doctrine, organization and training that had been developed by the QMC before 1941.