

Damaged Goods

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If you have ever had to manage logistics, you already know that every outbound flow is accompanied by a reverse flow - returns, refusals and damaged goods. LL Bean has to be able to manage the shipment of sweaters to customers, but they also need to enable customers to return the wrong size. They provide the ability for customers to ship back their Maine hunting shoes for factory renovation years after purchase.

In my long and checkered career with a local soap company, I was once given responsibility for product returns from retailers. As an example, if a carton of Citrus Hill orange juice goes past its use-by date in your refrigerator, you just pour it down the sink. If a retailer has multiple pallets of unsalable orange juice, the sewage district and the EPA forbid "just pouring it down the sink." Unbeknownst to my boss when he assigned this problem to me, I was already well experienced in the return logistics flows of damaged merchandise. During my time in the Army, I personally participated in such an operation: I was the damaged goods being returned.

Today, when a soldier is wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan he is medevaced almost immediately to a hospital in Germany or the US where state of the art treatment can be given. In fact, the UC Medical College runs a training facility where military medical personnel learn to save patients in what are really flying emergency rooms. During Viet Nam, the opposite theory held. No one was medevaced until they were very stable and presented minimal medical issues to the flight crews. They even hauled the wounded only one leg of the journey at a time.

Thus when I was wounded I stayed in the forward hospital in Chu Lai for three major surgeries over three weeks. Next I was flown to Clark AFB in the Philippines for a week of physical therapy. Then the real logistics system kicked in with full vigor. I flew to a hospital outside Tokyo where I spent three days. I use "hospital" rather loosely - it consisted of a series of old Quonset huts left over from the Korean War. There was no treatment administered - the sole purpose of this stay was logistical. The Air Force was simply consolidating loads to go back home. They didn't want to run a big C-141 Starlifter back to the US unless it was chuck-full of human backhaul.

Even though by now I could walk, the Army still declared me a "litter case" not "ambulatory." When the medic on my ward told me I would be flying back to the US the next day, I knew from my two previous flights what the drill was. They would take a standard Army canvas stretcher, lay a thin little mattress of foam rubber on it, then mummy wrap me in two standard Army blankets. For the shorter flights, this wasn't too bad, but I now faced a fourteen or fifteen hour flight to Scott AFB in southern Illinois. I thus knew that worse was coming.

Now in today's travel economy the airlines may have their little issues with cabin service. At least they do have people called "flight attendants" in the cabin. As medics hauled me out to the flight line on my stretcher, I knew I would then be turned over to the tender mercies of the US Air Force. While these medevac flights did have a flight nurse to handle all problems medical, the real boss in the Starlifter's cargo hold was a senior Air Force sergeant. Just in case anyone was laboring under the illusion that his job was the airlines' adage "we want to make your flight as comfortable as possible," he held the title of "Loadmaster." Yep - I was just a "load" as viewed by the Air Force.

The Loadmaster was well trained in ensuring stable loads. On the flight to Viet Nam, he might have been responsible for a plane full of explosives, trucks, bombs, artillery pieces. How do you make sure those loads get there safely? You tie them down as securely as possible. He put his experience to work at once. For each of us on a stretcher he pulled out cargo cinches, put them around the whole stretcher about every twelve or eighteen inches and pulled them tight. I was now well and truly a proper load by his exacting standards. If you had turned that stretcher upside down or stood it on end, I would not have shifted an inch. All that remained was to stack the stretchers on the rack running down the middle of the cabin and lock them in place. Any turbulence over the Pacific would not dislodge his load of damaged goods!

In the front of the cabin, there were some seats - facing backwards for safety as was the normal configuration of military transport. These seats went to a very different damaged population: those who failed their drug test when they were rotating home. They would also be sent to military hospitals in the US, de-toxed for a few days until they passed a drug test, then discharged. One might wonder if the brevity of their so-called "treatment" had something to do with elevated levels of drug abuse among Viet Nam veterans.

The Loadmaster announced that we were also making a stop in Okinawa to take on more patients to fill the plane before the long flight. If you look at a map of the Pacific, this doesn't really seem like a sensible plan geographically, but the cargo space must be filled. When we landed in Okinawa, they took all of us on stretchers off the plane and into a clinic near the flight line. There were beds, but the staff didn't plan to waste the effort of changing a bed because of us. They

laid the stretcher above the bed, with its handles on the headboard and footboard. The only concession they made to comfort was to loosen (but certainly not remove) the cargo cinches that held us in place.

Nurses came through, read our charts, took our vital signs and passed out any indicated meds. I spent a few hours in fitful sleep on my stretcher, suspended twelve inches above a real bed. Then back to our racks on the plane, where the Loadmaster grumbled as he had to pull all these cinches back to his version of tight. I spent the next hours very stably looking up at the bottom of the stretcher in the rack above me.

After about ten hours, they told us we would be landing for refueling at Elmendorf AFB in Anchorage. They said we would be taken off the plane and into the terminal, where the officers' wives Red Cross Chapter would give us hot chocolate and cookies. These ladies were doing their good deed, since it was the middle of the night in Alaska. We were less than appreciative of their efforts and were complaining, "Just throw in some gas and get back on the road!" You know how much weight our views carried.

The big Starlifter came to a stop on the tarmac and the door opened. In the case of a C-141 "the door" means the entire back end of the plane, which drops to form a ramp suitable for driving trucks into the cargo space. This occurred in late September - a blast of Arctic air blew into the plane. To make sure no one on the ground had to do extra work, the flight nurse had been reading our charts and deciding who in the stretchers was damn well fit enough to walk. She declared me thus fit, although to her credit she had the guy missing his lower legs carried in on his stretcher.

They backed a bus up to the plane's cargo ramp. The bus had been sitting in an outdoor motor pool and had reached an equilibrium temperature with the cold Alaska night. The Loadmaster grudgingly undid the cargo cinches holding me in place and said to go get on the bus. At this time, my body was very well acclimatized to the hundred plus degree heat of the jungle. Under the two wool Army blankets, I was wearing some thin, tropical weight cotton pajamas, a light seersucker bathrobe and some little disposable fiber slippers. After twenty hours or so of complete immobility in my cocoon, I stepped onto the steel floor of the plane and limped into the Alaska night and onto the freezing bus. By the time we reached the terminal, we all expressed extreme gratitude for the hot chocolate. The officers' wives were suitably rewarded for their good deed by our thanks. An economist could cite this as an example of supply creating its own demand.

As I left the terminal to return to the plane, the chill Alaska wind whipped and flapped my bathrobe around me. The cargo door had remained open during the entire refueling process, so the interior of the jet was now also the temperature of Alaska in the late fall. Even the blankets with which I was once again wrapped were frigid. I spent much of the flight to Scott AFB with my teeth chattering. If I could have moved in my load-stabilized configuration, I would have shivered too. Several hours later, I was hauled off the Starlifter in southern Illinois. Once in the US you were admitted to whatever military hospital was closest to your home of record, a modest concession to the wounded and their families. In the transient ward there I awaited my flight three days later which would take me to my final stay at Great Lakes Naval Hospital just north of Chicago.

Indeed, every outbound logistics flow produces a reverse flow of shipments, often involving the return of damaged merchandise. I found this out first hand. If you value your creature comforts, just try not to be the damaged goods being returned.



ILT Richard Lauf



C-141` Starlifter

