
Cooperative Logistics Role for National Codification Bureau Stressed in Local Training Course

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Defense Logistics Information Service is a major field activity of the Defense Logistics Agency. It creates, obtains, manages and integrates data from several sources. It shares this data through user-friendly products and services that support logistics operations throughout the Defense Department, other federal agencies and elements of the private sector. DLIS' expertise in cataloging and information management makes it an important contributor to electronic commerce between the US government and its many suppliers. DLIS manages the Federal Catalog System (FCS) and serves as the National Codification Bureau (NCB) for the United States. It is also an important facilitator for international cooperation in military/government logistics, educating foreign logisticians about the importance of NCBs in modern logistics.

The role of National Codification Bureaus is little known in logistics circles, less so outside of logistics. Yet the NCBs provide a foundation for international cooperation in military and government logistics; furthermore, they now play a role in commercial logistics. That is why the Defense Logistics Information Service (DLIS) located in Battle Creek, Michigan, is educating foreign logisticians about such bureaus and their place in modern logistics.

"Cataloging or as it is referred to internationally, 'codification' is a small field compared to the rest of logistics. It is the DNA of the Department of Defense (DoD) supply chain, and increasingly used both commercially and in international logistics. Yet, its impact is immense," said Marine Colonel Joseph D. Cassel Jr., DLIS commander. "This logistics data underlies the lifecycle support of all major weapons systems and most military sustainability efforts. It is critical to mission success." Cassel explained that the bureaus rely upon the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Codification System (NCS) for the data interoperability, the data/systems integration, and the data integrity that underpins coalition and joint logistics.

"For a relatively small investment, cataloging provides a big return, a return that keeps on giving." Cassel said.

Catalogers compile data for the supply systems of participating countries in the NCS, where each distinct item only needs to be cataloged and assigned a National Stock Number once. That one number is shared by participating countries and provides the basis for both sharing item information and sharing items themselves. The NATO Group of National Directors on Codification (Allied Committee 135, or AC/135) manages the system.

By agreement, each country that uses the system must have a single office that serves as point of contact for every other country. That office is responsible for linking its national catalog system with those of other governments. Normally the office chosen is part of the national cataloging organization. Since DLIS already manages the Federal Catalog System, it logically serves as the NCB for the United States.

Because the international logistics field is rather specialized, until recent years there was little available training that addressed the management of a catalog system and protocols for exchange of data between countries. Four years ago, DLIS filled the need by establishing an annual training program titled, "Logistics Information Management Course for International Logisticians" better known as "The NCB College."

Forty-seven officers and civilians from twenty-three different countries have been trained by DLIS during the past four years. They are taught the role of cataloging in logistics and how to implement and run a cataloging system in their government.

Many NCB College students are from countries that are either new NATO members or nations seeking to join NATO. These nations are anxious to meet NATO standards in this area. Other students are from countries with well-established cataloging systems (e.g., Malaysia, South Korea and the United Kingdom) or countries seeking to better understand the NCS (e.g., Ecuador, Mexico,).

While cataloging may be a small field in terms of the number of catalogers, it is very large in terms of the number of countries that subscribe to the NCS. From the beginning NATO allowed non-NATO countries to participate (e.g., Australia). In recent years, there has been a seeming rush to join. Currently, nearly fifty countries are formally associated with the NCS and maintain an NCB. In addition, NCS data and techniques are used in other countries (e.g., Japan) while not formally aligning themselves with the system.

According to Chris Yoder, chief of DLIS' International Division, there are two big reasons for recent growth in the system. First, there are the efficiencies that the NCS brings to logistics; and, second, there is a plus or a minus depending on the nation. For example, for Japan the association with NATO could pose some political issues and that might serve as an obstacle to formal membership. On the other hand, for Bulgaria, the NATO association is a driving force.

“On the US side” Yoder continues, “the widespread use of the NCS helps foreign military sales, which supports our defense industrial base.” He explained that the work of the US NCB directly facilitates sales of US goods to participating nations. “We establish the catalog data, including the National Stock Number (NSN), which allows the goods to become a regular part of other countries' supply systems. Every year we process 30,000 - 40,000 requests from allied nations to catalog additional US products into the system!”

In the commercial sector there is a similar need to standardize the language of catalogs. This need supports efforts to make the language of the NCS a commercial standard as well. Working closely with AC/135, an electronic commerce standards organization has developed an open use “catalog builder” application and a repository of open standards based on those used within the NCS. Available for less than a year, many companies are preparing to adopt the standard.

If successful, the commercial system will build a bridge between the language of suppliers and the language of the governments of participating countries. “We imagine the day when the descriptions of US products introduced into the military supply system will be downloaded directly into federal as well as NATO catalogs and freely exchanged between companies which are both buyers and sellers of products. We will have a “common international language of logistics” in the public and private sectors, serving the same role as the NCS has served between national Defense Departments, “Yoder said.

Students at the most recent NCB College were focused on helping their countries succeed in this field. The Bulgarian officer noted in his out brief that he was particularly interested in learning both the theory and practical matters of applying this discipline to their supply system.

Logisticians have similar challenges around the world. Captain Snezana Marinkovic Olevska, a graduating officer from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia said, “I can say that the logistics fundamentals — acquisition, distribution, sustainment, and disposition — are very similar with those used in our military. Therefore, the uses and interface of codification data in the logistics life cycle is very important and useful.” She added that “the implementation of NCS is an important contribution to logistics interoperability between allies, and it also gains financial benefits.”

The most recent NCB College course included four Polish logistics officers. Captain Janusz Blaszczyk noted that their objectives are to “obtain more experience in cataloging, develop better and more comprehensive procedures and guarantee the highest possible quality of codification data.”

All of the graduates were pleased with the information program and social events associated with the course. As Olevska said, “This course was my first experience with the American society.” During the course, students had the opportunity to meet representatives of federal, state and local government institutions, the judicial system, private industry and the media.

Additionally, DLIS employees arranged for dinners in their homes, trips to baseball games, weekly volleyball games, fishing trips and other activities. The interaction between employees and students was beneficial to all. “Our business can be a bit impersonal because of the great distances between us and our colleagues; it is great to make human contact and know that we will hear from many of these folks again as they advance in the logistics field” Yoder said.

The NCB College is taught once per year, and additional information is available at http://www.dlis.dla.mil/nato/ncbc_home.asp on the World Wide Web.