In the military, missions are ubiquitous. They come in all sizes. Every branch, department, colonel and clerk has missions to fulfill. Each accomplishment brings the overall goal, whatever it happens to be, that much closer.

The United States Department of Defense runs a program called Defense Medical Logistics Standard Support. (Also ubiquitous in the military are acronyms. The program is known as DMLSS, pronounced “dimmels.”) DMLSS’ mission essentially is twofold: make medical logistics support more effective and lower its costs. DMLSS is designed to be the standard system to support all military medical activities for medical supply, equipment and facility management functions.

Several words could well describe the legacy computer systems once used for medical logistics support by the U.S. military’s four branches. Sundry is one. Aging is another. In all, the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps were operating on 13 different medical logistics systems worldwide. Sharing information between branches was difficult, if not impossible. Smaller computer programs within each branch system further entangled communication.

“Primarily, we used Intermec as a source to help bring cutting-edge technology to the field and streamline our business processes,” said Garry Duvall, DMLSS deployment manager. “Intermec’s is a system that’s allowing us to be more efficient doing receipt processing and conducting inventories. Bringing radio-frequency capability allows us to electronically transmit those processes very quickly, saving time and manpower.”

The change within DMLSS has helped save the military $6 for every $1 it invests in medical logistics information technology. It has allowed medical staff to spend more time caring for patients and less time restocking supplies.

“It is very difficult to work in a joint mission when each of the service medical logisticians has been trained on and is used to using different systems,” said Col. Cathy Erickson, DMLSS program manager.

Clearly, what would most benefit the military would be one standard system, one efficient, cost-effective, secure and easy-to-use system. To that end, when the DoD built its new system, it included major functions supported by a wireless mobile computer from Intermec Technologies.

U.S. military lowers drug costs by $389 million with Intermec mobile computing

At a glance

Industry: Government

Applications: Work Order Management, Inventory Management, Distribution Management
Now in its third deployment phase, the system has been installed in about 102 of 110 military medical facilities worldwide. Unlike Veterans Affairs medical centers, they serve only active military personnel.

Depending on the hospital size, from 30 to 50 Intermec 750 mobile computers constitute the system’s front end. Using a Windows 2000 platform, the computers run custom software written by EDS and supplemented by IBM.

During routine ordering, hospital workers scan the bar codes on medical supplies and equipment, using the 750’s integrated scanner. The coded information, traveling by radio frequency, relays to and from each hospital’s host computer via an Intermec WA21 or WA22 access point. From there it routes to the main office and on to the appropriate vendor.

Within 24 hours, the ordered supplies arrive at the hospital, where a worker scans the bar codes on the boxes for receipt processing. “We instantly get that information on the mobile computer screens,” Duvall said. “It tells us who this item is going to. Instead of putting it into bulk storage, we immediately send it to be delivered throughout the hospital. It only takes about three hours, depending on the quantity of supplies ordered for that day.”

Boxes of supplies are delivered to their respective wards, clinics or pharmacies.

That afternoon, or perhaps every second or third day in smaller hospitals, workers take inventory by again scanning the bar codes on the individual supply boxes. The DMLSS software keeps records of desired supply levels and compares inventory against them. Conducting an inventory takes three or four hours to complete.

“With the old system, we usually inventoried the shelves once a week. We had tremendous amounts of inventory tied up in dollars sitting on the shelf to make sure we had sufficient quantity on hand. Going to just-in-time inventory processing has reduced the amount of space, the number of people and the amount of time it takes to order,” Duvall said.

“The ability to return clinical professionals to caring for patients instead of managing the supplies improves the healthcare delivery system for everyone,” said Col. Erickson.

How much reduction? Enough to help the DMLSS program win ten commercial and government “best practice” awards in the last three years.

Order-to-receipt time was cut from 20 days to less than 24 hours. Because vendors keep fresh supplies coming within a day of every order, military hospitals have reduced the medical inventory on their shelves by 81 percent. This change has helped save the military $389 million in pharmaceutical costs alone. As the system is fully implemented, continued cost benefits are expected.

The three main DoD supply depots, strategically located across the United States, once had to store up to a year’s worth of military hospital supplies to fill orders. The new system has slashed their inventories by 98 percent. “That probably helped bring about the biggest savings,” Duvall said. “The inventory in those depots basically has all gone away. What we keep in there now is mainly for contingency purposes.”

Something else has all but gone away: Duvall’s need to supervise the ongoing system installations. “I don’t normally go out to the sites anymore,” he said. “I used to when we first started, just to see that it was done appropriately and meeting our requirements. But I saw that the Intermec people were very knowledgeable. I have a lot of trust and confidence in Intermec representatives. I don’t need to go out there and oversee them.”

After the system rollout is complete in brick-and-mortar hospitals, the next step for the military will be to implement the technology in mobile medical units. Ground forces will be able to take advantage of the efficiencies and cost savings of one standardized computer system.

The military isn’t the only one with missions, of course. Smart businesses have them too, and one of the prime objectives must be to keep customers happy. For Intermec, no matter how well it is accomplished each day, it is a mission that never ends.

“It’s been a good partnership with us and Intermec,” Duvall said. “They’ve worked very well with us, and we appreciate their support. Intermec is a multiplier; they help us do better because of our partnership with them.”