



**THE**

**58 BILLION**

**DOLLAR MAN**

Dennis Via (far right), commanding general of Army Materiel Command (AMC), briefs a November gathering of foreign military attachés—US allies and potential customers for military hardware—at AMC headquarters.



**IF A SOLDIER IN ANY BRANCH OF THE MILITARY SHOOTS IT, DRIVES IT, FLIES IT, WEARS IT, EATS IT, OR COMMUNICATES WITH IT, ARMY MATERIEL COMMAND PROVIDES IT**

**BY SUSAN SELIGSON / PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER T. MARTIN**

— IT'S A GREAT American story. Born in 1958, the son of a housepainter and a homemaker in Martinsville, Va., in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, **Dennis Via** never missed a day of school in 12 years, played high school football, and worked at a local textile mill to help with family expenses. He was learning brick masonry in



Via greets wounded veterans arriving at Huntsville International Airport last November during Heroes Week, an annual event sponsored by the local task force *Semper Fi*.

preparation for what he believed would be a satisfying, dependable career. But Edward Fontaine, his high school shop instructor, saw in his student a broader potential and encouraged him to enroll at Virginia State University. Once there, Via, on little more than a whim, joined Army ROTC.

Four decades later the men remain close, and on August 7, 2012, Via (MET'88) flew the elderly Fontaine and his wife to Huntsville, Ala., to look on as Linda Via, Via's wife of 31 years, pinned a fourth star on his shoulder strap. He is now one of just 14 active-duty four-star generals in the US Army and the first Signal Corps officer in history to earn the four-star rank, the military's highest. (The last of the five-star generals, who include Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Omar Bradley, was pinned in 1950.)

Via (rhymes with "why") is the 18th person to head the global Army Materiel Command (AMC). Promoted two years ago from deputy commanding general, he oversees a \$58 billion budget and activity in 144 nations. AMC, a massive and indispensable, if the least sexy, command ("They don't make war movies about us," says an AMC colonel), has a stated mission: "to develop and deliver global readiness solutions to sustain unified land operations, anytime, anywhere." Or, as anyone in AMC is fond of putting it for the rest of us: if a soldier in any branch



American soil or established military bases overseas. In fact, materiel command's largest, most complex logistical operation since World War II has been the ongoing, \$23 billion retrograde operation to significantly reduce US military presence in landlocked Afghanistan, where the United States spent 13 years, and fly out millions of pieces of equipment from harsh, dangerous terrain.

AMC does the intellectual heavy lifting, too: Army research and development, with 11,000 scientists and engineers, fall under Via's

command. And AMC also choreographs America's swift responses to humanitarian crises, such as Operation United Assistance to help combat the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa. Closer to home, it was AMC that provided pumping equipment to keep New York City's Lincoln and Brooklyn-Battery Tunnels from flooding in the wake of Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

It's enough to turn anyone into a compulsive workaholic at best, a gnarly, unforgiving taskmaster at worst. But by all accounts, Via—known on his home turf as the CG—is neither. The adjectives his subordinates (and when you're a four-star that's pretty much everyone) use most often to describe the man are selfless, caring, and upstanding. He never raises his voice. Via is a nice guy.

An hour after addressing a middle school Veterans Day assembly, the seemingly guileless general concludes an AMC bimonthly real-time global briefing—giant screens crackling with satellite images, sober updates from US Central and Africa Commands—with, word for word, the same entreaty he'd given the children, to "please, when you see a veteran, thank him or her for their service." On the first day of the 2013 federal government shutdown, it was Via himself who stood at the door of headquarters to shake employees' hands and tell them, "I'll see you back here soon." Via's predecessor, Ret. General Ann E. Dunwoody, describes his leadership style as one that "brings out the best in everyone."

## ARMY MATERIEL COMMAND ALSO CHOREOGRAPHS SWIFT RESPONSES TO HUMANITARIAN CRISES, SUCH AS HELPING TO COMBAT THE SPREAD OF EBOLA AND KEEPING NEW YORK CITY'S TUNNELS DRY IN THE WAKE OF HURRICANE SANDY.

of the military shoots it, drives it, flies it, wears it, eats it, or communicates with it, AMC provides it. When a photo on the front page of the *New York Times* depicts US infantry—what AMC people call "the killing army"—decamping to some far-flung locale, it is AMC that puts in place the infrastructure that awaits them, from kitchens to laundries to latrines to security fencing to laptops.

"If it involves soldiers, it's going to involve AMC," says Via, one of just four African Americans with a four-star rank. "I think sometimes our work can be taken for granted, but without logistics, without communications, the military can't accomplish its missions," he says. "We don't know where we'll go tomorrow morning, but we do know there will always be another contingency."

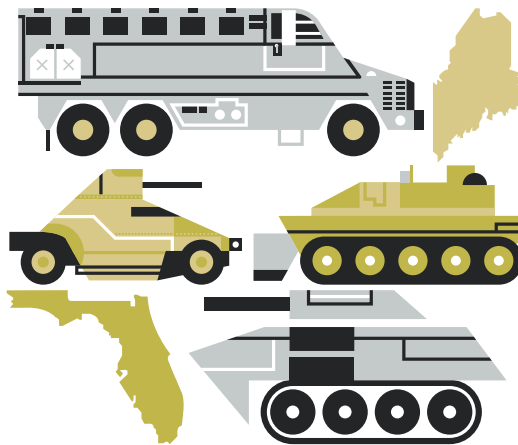
"If you pay attention to what senior generals throughout every military campaign in history say, it's 'We won because of logistics,'" says John B. Neger, Via's executive deputy.

Presiding over a combined military and civilian staff of more than 65,000 professionals and legions of subcontractors, Via is the logistics czar of the world's biggest road show, and he is forever refining the script, casting, props, and budget so things will run as smoothly as possible in less benign theaters, from the most rugged high desert to the densest equatorial jungle.

Once a mission is over, Via is also the guy in charge of getting the Humvees and helicopters—all of it—back to

# THE MATERIEL WORLD

The United States has spent in excess of \$600 billion on Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, launched 13 years ago in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. A significant amount of that money paid for materiel and its transportation to the mountainous landlocked war zone. Now, as US troops withdraw from Afghanistan, Army Materiel Command (AMC) is charged with removing, at an estimated cost of \$6 billion, all of that equipment. To get stuff out—to other US bases, to be decommissioned, or to be repaired for reuse or sale—the options are few: brave the perilous 10-day, 1,100-mile-long journey overland from the Pakistani port of Karachi or through Turkey, or conduct a succession of airlifts. Concerned over potential losses on the ground, AMC Commanding General Dennis Via (MET'88) has opted for airlifts wherever possible. Many of the actual numbers are classified—the United States still has personnel at risk there—but AMC offered a sense of what it has moved out as of December 2014.

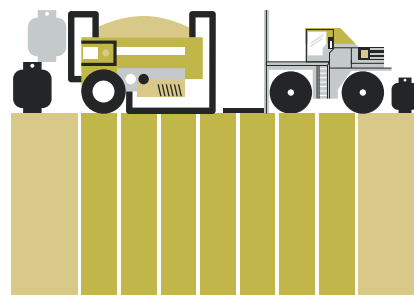


## 24,023 ARMORED AND WHEELED VEHICLES

Lined up in a convoy, these would stretch 1,365 miles—the distance from Portland, Maine, to Miami, Fla.

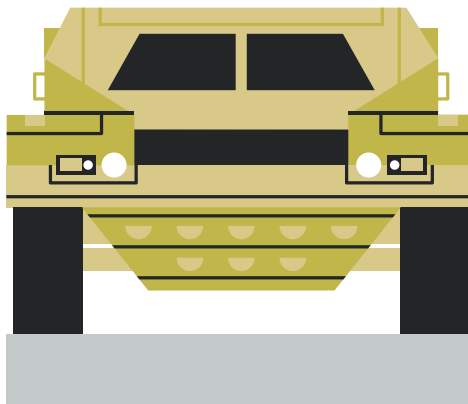
## 849 HELICOPTERS AND OTHER AIRCRAFT

By comparison, to conduct its world-wide shipping business, FedEx employs 656 aircraft. UPS possesses just 237.



## MORE THAN 2 MILLION PIECES OF EQUIPMENT, INCLUDING GENERATORS, FORKLIFTS, AND FUEL TANKS

These would blanket the equivalent of 183 football fields.



## 7,340 MINE-RESISTANT AMBUSH-PROTECTED (MRAP) VEHICLES

Altogether, these armored anti-IED behemoths would weigh about 132,000 tons and cost nearly \$9.5 billion.

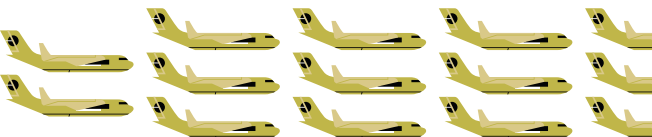
## LUMBER, CONCRETE, SHINGLES, WIRE, SANDBAGS, FIXTURES, ETC.

AMC estimates that these materials could build a city of single-story structures covering 732 times the area of Boston University's Charles River Campus.



## 14 DAILY AIRCRAFT SORTIES

Each C-17 sortie moves 250,600 pounds of freight daily from Afghanistan alone.



As unflappable as he appears, Via is clear about what he will and will not abide. “You run into people who are toxic, and that’s one thing I don’t tolerate,” he says. “I don’t tolerate toxic leaders. I don’t tolerate micromanagement. I don’t tolerate those who do not create a healthy command climate. And I don’t tolerate people who don’t treat folks with dignity and respect. And I hold people accountable for that.” Via wants his subordinates to feel comfortable admitting their mistakes and sharing their difficulties. He says he learned long ago from his first sergeant that if soldiers stop coming to you with their problems—“and soldiers have all types of problems”—it’s because “they don’t think you’ll be able to do anything about it, or they think you don’t care.”

“He likes people,” says Nerger. “In his case, he’s what you see. But no one wants to disappoint him.”

Via’s base is Huntsville’s Redstone Arsenal, a gated eight-square-mile sprawl of Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency office blocks, research labs, and testing grounds that drive the local economy to the tune of nearly \$11.5 billion, according to a report released in 2012 by the Huntsville-Madison County Chamber of Commerce. Though civilians far outnumber soldiers among its nearly 33,500 personnel, Redstone, originally a chemical weapons

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manufacturing facility for World War II, is synonymous with the military-industrial complex.

The highly decorated Via (his honors include the Defense Distinguished Service Medal and Legion of Merit) is not just a logistician. He is also a pitchman. As the specter of sequestration looms, AMC is still reeling from a major financial overhaul, and Via devotes a considerable amount of his time to drumming up partnerships with private industry and academia (AMC has more than 1,000 academic research partnerships, from research consortia to internships) or networking with military attachés from the scores of nations in the market for US-manufactured nonlethal equipment, as well as weapons. Via is a familiar face at R&D centers like the Natick Labs in Massachusetts or the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., his attention equally riveted by the latest in IED-proof Humvees and MRE (Meals, Ready-to-Eat), which, for the first time, include actual sandwiches that can withstand brutal extremes of heat, cold, and moisture. In a briefing of the CEOs gathered at Redstone, Via outlined a program called EAGLE (Enhanced Army Global Logistics Enterprise). It’s an opportunity to streamline military contracts with industries offering maintenance and supply operations as well as transportation services, which can range from railhead operations to hazmat shipping.

Via “is particularly good at sustaining relationships with industry,” says Nerger. “He recognizes that even in light of

this command, with its vast resources stretching around the globe, we can’t do anything solely by ourselves. He knows that the time to work on a relationship isn’t when there’s a problem. You work on the relationship first, and when there’s an issue you have a framework in which to deal with it. And he is masterful at it. Relationships have always mattered, and we just happen to have a commander who is finely attuned to their significance.”

“I’ve learned over time what I need to focus on,” says Via. “I try to stay steps ahead because in the business of logistics and sustainment we can never afford to fall behind. And I’m clearly very focused on the men and women we have in harm’s way. We never want to deploy our soldiers to an uneven fight. We always want them to have the technological advantage. But what truly makes this command such a phenomenal organization is that our mission is so diverse, we can’t fall into complacency. In Afghanistan, for example, we’re still losing soldiers and marines. We’re still having improvised explosive devices. And then there’s the mission in West Africa, where we’re supporting our soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines. And we have the business side, which is every day because we have a global supply chain.”

It’s the start of Alabama’s Veterans’ Week, culminating in Veterans Day, and American flags have sprouted all over Huntsville like the poppies of Flanders Field. Via is just back from an inspection visit to Afghanistan, and he is nursing a cold. Dressed in civilian clothes with an AMC logo pin on the lapel of his sports jacket, he and Linda welcome a parade of visiting defense contractor CEOs to their “quarters” deep inside the arsenal’s guarded perimeter, a well-appointed tudor-style home peppered with keepsakes from the couple’s world travels. Wine and conversation flow, business cards are exchanged, and Via, cold and all, is outwardly pleased to witness the seeds of new AMC–corporate collaborations.

In the next two days, his voice increasingly ground to a hoarse whisper, he will keep on the move, brief the CEOs, draw a standing ovation at a middle school, preside over a formal reception for a contingent of foreign military attachés, greet wounded veterans arriving at Huntsville airport from around the United States for “Heroes Week,” and host a formal dinner for the attachés, who represent allies such as Brazil, Canada, Israel, Kuwait, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and Uganda.

Via, a Distinguished Military Graduate, was commissioned in the Signal Corps in May 1980. From there, his assignments included commands with the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, N.C., the III Armored Corps in Fort Hood, Tex., as well as signal and communications commands in Manheim, Germany, Fort Monmouth, N.J., and various posts in Washington, D.C. In the 1980s and 1990s, Metropolitan College offered a series of programs to soldiers stationed in Europe, and Via did his graduate work there—“one of the best professional investments I



On a mid-November day, just back from a sweep through Afghanistan, Via went from addressing a middle school to briefing defense contractors to greeting wounded veterans at the airport.



ever made,” he says—earning a master’s degree in human resource management.

It was an assignment as aide-de-camp to Chief of Staff Earl Davis of the Allied Joint Forces Command Naples, in Italy, that changed his life, says Via, who confesses being so awed by his boss that there were times, while attending to Davis’ uniform, Via would run his fingers over those three hallowed stars. Within a month of being promoted to lieutenant general, Davis was diagnosed with a brain tumor. “He was medically retired and eight months later he passed away,” says Via. “I recall that soon after his departure, they were discussing who would take his place. And that’s when I learned that no one is irreplaceable.” It’s also when Via learned to balance service and his private life, “a defining moment when I knew I would never be infatuated with ranking again,” he says. “I made sure I cared for the people who worked with me or for me, and I realized that it can all be taken away from you very quickly.”

Linda Via, a civilian who met her husband the first week she arrived at Virginia State, had a high-level government career in human services before giving herself over full time to the demands—from entertainment to military family

support—of being the CG’s wife. Linda is the only one who can get her husband to stop working and come home. “She just has to call me and say, ‘It’s time,’” says Via. The couple has two grown sons.

Via, who his wife says signed up for ROTC after Virginia State campus recruiters impressed him as being “pretty spiffy,” is one of only 206 four-star generals in US history. If it weren’t for an alert teacher, he would likely be among the estimated 306,000 stone and brick masons in America. But sometimes Via will drive past a mason at work and he and Linda will stop to have a look. It occurs to Via that one of the most important lessons of his life, even after his long climb to commanding general, was one he learned in that brick masonry class in high school.

“The most important part of any building or organization is the foundation,” says Via. “The business we’re in is inherently dangerous, but when adversity comes—and it will come—with a strong foundation, you can withstand it. And a foundation has to be built on trust and integrity. Those organizations that work as a team, that don’t worry about who gets the credit, it’s phenomenal what they can accomplish.” ■