

Marine with Bravo Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, prepares to board CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter for mission in Helmand Province to disrupt enemy insurgents while retrograde operations take place nearby, August 16, 2014 (U.S. Marine Corps/Joseph Scanlan)



# Joint Force Observations of Retrograde Operations from Afghanistan

By Aundre F. Piggee, Matthew Bain, David Carlson, Richard Lliteras, Christopher Ostrander, Lawrence Pleis, Willie Rios, and Dennis Wilson

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Major General Aundre F. Piggee, USA, is Director of Logistics and Engineering (CCJ4) at U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM). Major Matthew Bain, USMC, is a Logistics Strategist in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Lieutenant Colonel David Carlson, USAF, is an Engineer Plans Officer in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Colonel Richard Lliteras, USA (Ret.), is Deputy Chief of the Strategy and Programs Office in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Major Christopher Ostrander, USAF (Ret.), is Senior Procurement Analyst in the Resource Integration Division in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Colonel Lawrence Pleis, USMC (Ret.), heads the Strategy and Programs Office in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Colonel Willie Rios, USA, is Plans Division Chief in the USCENTCOM CCJ4. Master Sergeant Dennis Wilson, USMC (Ret.), is Deputy Battle Captain for the Operations Division of the USCENTCOM CCJ4.

Numerous articles have highlighted the monumental and complex efforts by U.S. and coalition forces to draw down the force, close operating bases, and remove the equipment and supplies that accumulated throughout Afghanistan during 13 years of combat operations. The signing of the bilateral security

agreement (BSA) late in 2014 with the Afghanistan government had a profound impact on our ability to close the retrograde mission by December 2014. Prior to the signing of the agreement, there was a legitimate concern that we would have to rapidly accelerate throughput across all available means and modes if conditions in the BSA were unfavorable to our forces and coalition partners. Anticipating this situation, the responsible force drawdown, materiel retrograde, and base closure and transfer missions were collectively the top priority for the commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) throughout 2014.

The commander directed the *responsible retrograde* of all U.S. equipment and materiel from Afghanistan in support of President Barack Obama's guidance on the long-term U.S. force-manning levels to support the enduring North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission and the Service reset strategies. Responsible retrograde was collectively characterized by:

- property accountability
- positive turnover from deployed forces back to Service control
- disposition of hazardous material and unexploded ordnance
- intent to clean up and close bases in better condition than found
- transition of bases at a pace that the Afghan government could manage
- optimization of the most efficient routes and modes of transportation considering all the variables
- conduct of retrograde in a manner that would not imply abandonment of the Afghan National Security Forces or jeopardize the conclusion of the BSA
- seamless sustainment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander's ongoing operational campaign.

From 2012 until December 2014, the Joint Logistics Enterprise (JLEnt) ensured sustainment was provided to our forces in Afghanistan. The JLEnt simultaneously planned and executed a massive retrograde of U.S. combat and

combat-enabling equipment and supported the materiel retrograde and force redeployments of many of our coalition partners. The following observations, which are by no means all inclusive, are an attempt to highlight those efforts from joint force and combatant command perspectives.

### Unity of Effort

Regarding retrograde objectives and campaign support, the USCENTCOM vision was one and the same with that of the ISAF commander. It was our responsibility at the combatant command level to pull the JLEnt together to focus support at the tactical level, to include stewardship of resources, while maintaining an operational-level focus to meet the guidance of the President and Secretary of Defense. The USCENTCOM commander was provided weekly updates on the status of retrograde and redeployment operations. During these updates, the commander provided guidance on the retrograde mission, priorities, and critical tasks to sustain the ISAF commander's campaign plan.

Extensive and frequent interaction with our national logistics providers and Service logistics directors was the greatest factor that contributed to retrograde mission success. Early on, we acknowledged the criticality of complete integration of efforts across the JLEnt. The collaborative effort and anticipatory planning by our national partners throughout the entire drawdown phase kept adjustments of industrial magnitude transparent to the operating forces and on track with the overall drawdown plan. Close cooperation and constant contact between USCENTCOM, ISAF, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), Army Materiel Command, and senior Service logistics directors were critical to ensuring the force was fully supported while conducting simultaneous large-scale retrograde operations.

The USCENTCOM staff facilitated daily stakeholder interaction to maintain

the free flow of information and focus on the commanders' goals. A monthly general/flag officer-level meeting also provided a venue to expedite decisions and synchronize efforts. Additionally, we were fortunate to have liaison officers from each of the national providers and several key coalition partners embedded into our staff.

### Leveraging Lessons Learned with the Retrograde Plan

The JLEnt implemented literally hundreds of process improvements over more than a decade of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, setting the stage for success. The geographical location of Afghanistan and the conditions in-country did require a unique approach that was far more complex than retrograde operations in Iraq. In Afghanistan, we had specific guidance on the timing to complete retrograde operations, and we dealt with a far different situation than moving equipment and materiel to an intermediate staging base in Kuwait for further disposition. Everything in Afghanistan had to either transit a border nation by ground transport or be moved via strategic airlift.

Nonetheless, when USCENTCOM received Joint Staff guidance to accelerate the drawdown of forces and commence large-scale materiel retrograde and base closures, we were well postured to execute. We used a series of rehearsal of concept (ROC) drills for each stage of the drawdown to validate enterprise ability and capacity to accelerate throughput as directed. One ROC drill was specifically conducted to address, coordinate, and communicate the actions necessary from across the enterprise to meet compressed timelines, as well as to test our ability to deal with several other potential limitations and restrictions. These ROC drills proved critical to preparing the joint and coalition forces for a rapid, responsible drawdown and for mission transition with NATO and the Afghan security forces.

### Simultaneous Sustainment of the ISAF Campaign Plan

By early 2014, mission requirements in Afghanistan were decreasing, yet

planning efforts to sustain the force increased. It was crucial for the JLEnt to ensure that the flow of support to the warfighter did not decrease. Adjustments were made to the assignment and use of transportation assets to maximize available resources to support both retrograde and ongoing operations. This plan worked effectively, as troops have received support for all classes of supplies.

Balancing the closure of critical supply nodes (supply activities, munitions storage sites, subsistence supply points, and bulk fuel points) to ensure we kept up with the closure of forward operating bases became a daily coordination function across all commands. The drawdown of subsistence, fuel, and munitions in Afghanistan occurred through the following actions:

- Weekly meetings were conducted with ISAF Joint Command and USFOR-A to discuss the force reduction and ensure that these commodities were decreased commensurately.
- Bulk fuel consumption factors and stockage objectives were reviewed monthly and reduced as appropriate to meet mission requirements while decreasing stockage levels across Afghanistan.
- USCENTCOM, in coordination with DLA and USCENTCOM Joint Theater Support Contracting Command, worked closely with contracted vendors to ensure that the strategic supply chain was reduced in conjunction with the decreasing force footprint.
- Supplies were redistributed across USCENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR) to support other mission requirements.
- Munitions were retrograded to the theater storage area in Kuwait to be used in support of future mission requirements.

### **Establishing and Maintaining Distribution Options**

Movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan has always been subject to environmental, political, and security conditions.

Distribution operations are challenging, considering the ongoing Afghan combat mission, a landlocked operations area, reliance on regional neighbors with varying degrees of access, cooperation, and corruption, and a simultaneous reduction of coalition forces and contractors. From a distribution perspective, risk to the ISAF campaign while meeting retrograde objectives was mitigated by establishing and maintaining robust and redundant lines of communications, a series of multimodal locations and intermediate staging bases throughout the USCENTCOM and U.S. European Command AORs, and robust global and intratheater transportation plans.

The distribution network was effective and flexible in meeting all requirements as U.S. forces reduced posture in Afghanistan. The system was flexible enough to change routings as required, increase use of the multimodal modes and nodes, and adjust channel flights to increase cargo velocity as we executed the drawdown. USCENTCOM materiel reduction goals were consistently met. No military organizations exist worldwide that can plan, design, implement, and execute this complex system as effectively or efficiently as U.S. Air Forces Central (USAFCENT), U.S. Army Central (USARCENT), and USTRANSCOM with its major subordinate commands: Air Mobility Command, Military Sealift Command, and Surface Deployment and Distribution Command.

We also gained increased flexibility through partnering with commercial partners via a commercial multimodal contract that allowed the airlift system to increase the overall capacity available to the theater. Use of the multimodals continued to increase during the drawdown, especially with the increased permissions for throughput at Kuwait. The addition of Kuwait as an intermediate staging base (ISB) and multimodal location allowed for expedited movement of cargo out of Afghanistan, with final processing and cleaning of the cargo occurring in Kuwait. The Kuwait ISB was another of many significant supporting efforts of U.S. forces in the region by the government of Kuwait.

Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan was used as a passenger transit point for transfer between commercial airlift and organic transport aircraft for movement into and out of Afghanistan. Loss of this capability in July 2014 had a negligible effect thanks to a nearly seamless transition of the transit hub to Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base in Romania and of tanker mission relocation to split locations in Afghanistan and the Arabian Gulf region.

The ground route through Pakistan (Pakistan ground lines of communication, or PAK GLOC) was the most economical means out of Afghanistan and was critical to the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. It was important to maintain, and thus we always pushed to maximize the use of this route. However, due to the ambiguity of the signing of the BSA, it required us to keep equipment in Afghanistan longer than we would have liked. This in turn made it necessary to use our multimodal sites more than we preferred (due to higher cost) to meet the commander's timeline. The security situation on the ground in the vicinity of the Torkham Gate border crossing point into Pakistan, as well as the unpredictable situation (rioting, new transit fees, delayed border crossing permissions, disruption along the PAK GLOC, and so forth) that followed a number of leadership changes in Pakistan, also drove us to push retrograde across a series of alternate routes.

The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that comprised several routes through the Central Asian republics was another effective component in our distribution network for moving non-critical, nonsensitive cargo into and out of Afghanistan. We established monthly shipping guidance minimums (25–50 containers) for the varying routes to keep them viable, exercise the agreements, and maintain good diplomatic relationships with the countries that hosted portions of the NDN. Use of the network allowed USCENTCOM to continue to build relationships with the Central Asian states that will lead to continued partnerships in varying ways (exercises, counterterrorism interoperability, counternarcotics cooperation, and





Aerial porters from 19<sup>th</sup> Movement Control Team prep shipping container for 774<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Airlift Squadron C-130 Hercules cargo plane at Forward Operating Base Salerno, Khost Province, Afghanistan, September 22, 2013 (U.S. Air Force/Ben Bloker)

so forth). Overall use of the NDN has slowed significantly, and we no longer have published shipping minimums due to the limited number of cargo shipment requests. In addition to U.S. use of the NDN for both retrograde and inbound sustainment cargo shipment, several coalition partners retrograded to Europe exclusively across the NDN. NATO continues to use it to support its continuing Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan. We plan to maintain NDN permissions for continued flexibility in the region. Although there is not currently a robust requirement, continued development of the modern Silk Road is an important key to Afghanistan's economic future and regional connectivity. During the last 90 days (September–December 2014) of Operation *Drumbeat*, 42 percent of outbound retrograde cargo was moved via multimodal routes; 29 percent went via direct air; 24 percent moved along

the PAK GLOC; and 5 percent moved via the NDN.

### Dedicated Enablers

The contribution of our USCENTCOM Deployment and Distribution Operations Center postured forward in Kuwait was a critical enabler throughout retrograde operations. The center bridges the tactical and strategic levels and is the USCENTCOM hands-on organization that validates our Service component, joint task force, coalition partner, and interagency movement requirements, and then coordinates support for those requirements via the various providers. The center also troubleshoots emerging issues and ensures that stakeholders with equities are kept informed before those issues become significant problems.

Assigning the Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Theater Sustainment Command forward

was critical, as it orchestrated the flow and tempo of logistics based on USCENTCOM priorities. The command was the perfect fit for this task; its primary mission is to provide single sustainment mission command to Army, joint, and multinational forces in support of USCENTCOM unified ground operations, which enables the combatant commander's ability to achieve missions.

The USCENTCOM Materiel Response Element (CMRE) was established as a functional task force to provide a dedicated headquarters focused exclusively on the retrograde of supplies and equipment from the theater. In the past, the retrograde effort was an additional duty for units that were forced to juggle several missions. The simultaneous execution of a number of missions divided attention and resources, resulting in less than optimal attention to retrograde. The CMRE construct proved that a

singular focus facilitated the effective and efficient retrograde of materiel. Materiel accountability with Service headquarters increased substantially with the support of the CMRE, and the retrograde mission concluded on time with no negative impact on the ISAF campaign. The CMRE also played a critical role in the base transition process. Engineers assigned to the CMRE completed the bulk of the base descoping and deconstruction efforts to enable on-time base transitions.

USFOR-A's creation of the Operational Contract Support Drawdown Cell in August 2012 greatly enabled the responsible management of contractor personnel and equipment in the Combined Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan. Its mission was to manage the drawdown of contracts, the contractor workforce, and associated equipment, and it enabled USFOR-A leadership to review and validate requirements and weigh the benefits versus the impacts of retaining contracted support. The efforts of the drawdown cell were extremely successful and will improve our ability to effectively and efficiently employ contracted support in future large-scale contingencies.

DLA's ability to rapidly establish expeditionary worldwide disposition services on an industrial level was remarkable and proved a major enabler for the Services to divest of equipment deemed not cost-efficient to transport out of Afghanistan and back to home stations. Historically, DLA provided a suite of disposition services (usable goods sales or scrap metal services) for at least 30 percent of the equipment designated for divestiture. The remaining materiel would be inducted into the Foreign Excess Personnel Property Program, which supports the transfer of serviceable materiel to a qualified foreign government agency. DLA initiative and disposition efforts in the AOR yielded millions of dollars through transportation cost avoidance by processing as much materiel on site as possible.

The Joint Operational Planning and Execution System (JOPES), primarily used for deployment and redeployment, was the system of record used for

retrograde. Directing JOPES use for retrograde was a paradigm shift that took the enterprise some time to adjust to because we had never used it for the entire joint force for such operations. Implementation of JOPES across the joint force was challenging and largely facilitated with support from USTRANSCOM. Through the use of JOPES, USTRANSCOM was able to achieve a holistic view of all equipment requiring transportation. We were able to use already established theater logistics hubs in Kuwait as an ISB, which enabled us to reduce cost by shortening the air leg prior to shipping the cargo for redeployment.

### Syncing Retrograde

Base transitions were a key component of and intrinsically tied to the retrograde effort. During the July 2012–April 2014 time frame, approximately 320 U.S. and coalition bases closed or were transferred to the Afghan government. The engineer community did a world-class job of planning and executing the massive base closure and transition mission with all of the stakeholders. This was particularly commendable considering the limited ability of the Afghan security forces and other Afghan governmental organizations to accept the number of locations we had to turn over each month to remain on our directed timeline.

Closing and transferring bases was an important forcing function to get people and equipment out of the country. Throughout the process, we had to contend with force manning level (FML) management and keeping enough engineer assets in-country. As the engineer FML decreased in 2014, we relied on over-the-horizon engineer support from USARCENT and USAFCENT to assist with base descoping and deconstruction requirements. In addition, we relied on contract solutions such as a multiple award task order contract to complete base descoping and deconstruction efforts. With the limited FML we now have in Afghanistan, we rely almost exclusively on the task order contract and other contract efforts to descop and deconstruct bases to enable base transitions.

We included base closures and transitions in every facet of our overall redeployment and retrograde planning, to include a series of ROC drills. This became especially critical toward the end of our transition effort, when several large bases were closed or transitioned.

To help minimize the quantity of supplies that needed to be disposed of, USFOR-A developed a five-step process:

- consume: use stocks in place to the maximum extent possible
- redistribute: send to another unit that needs the materiel
- transfer or donate: using various legal authorities, provide the materiel to coalition partners and the Afghan government
- retrograde: ship the materiel to military units that need it or to depots for future use
- dispose: send to DLA disposition services, which sells nonmilitary materiel as usable goods or cuts military items into pieces and sells it as scrap.

There were several challenging issues related to base transitions. First was the balance of maintaining operations and combat capability out of a base as long as possible and yet still transitioning it on time. A related issue was the balance of providing security and force protection as long as possible up until the date of the base transition. We were able to work through these balances successfully.

Second was the balance of transferring too many bases and too much infrastructure to the Afghan government. Under President Hamid Karzai, the government wanted all bases and all infrastructure transferred to them. Over time, we realized that the government could not afford to maintain everything we were giving them, and they were becoming overburdened by infrastructure. To address this, the Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan is assisting the government to develop an Afghanistan divestment strategy through which they will divest the excess bases and infrastructure they accumulated from us over the years. This divestment strategy is important to ensure that former

U.S. and coalition bases and infrastructure are properly divested of and do not fall into the hands of our enemies.

A third issue related to base transitions has to deal with how much construction and buildup we undertake at our contingency basing locations. Experience has shown USCENTCOM that there needs to be a balance between building facilities similar to what we would have in the United States versus facilities that are adequate to last a few years during a contingency operation. In addition, we have realized that facilities and infrastructure turned over to the Afghans must be sustained and operated by them. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to build a facility that the Afghans will be able to afford and have the knowledge to operate and maintain in the long term.

Aside from the sheer number of sites that required closing or transition (to include all the associated subfunctions such as environmental cleanup, ordnance sweeps, and the like), the responsible reduction of contractors and equipment also proved a base closure challenge. Although planning efforts called for the reduction of contracted support, frequent changes to the base closure/transfer timelines led contractors to evaluate the risks associated with reducing personnel and equipment too soon. Many contractors opted to retain personnel and equipment until just before the scheduled closure to minimize risk. In many instances, this reluctance to reduce personnel and equipment actually benefited USFOR-A. Due to the prohibitive cost of retrograding equipment used by contractors, USFOR-A, in conjunction with contractors, determined that most equipment would be disposed of in Afghanistan. DLA planned accordingly and ensured that sufficient capacity was available to perform this task. In the end, the retention of equipment did not delay base closures or transfers.

## Key Takeaways

As with any large operation, there were many lessons learned throughout retrograde operations in Afghanistan that will serve the joint force well in



U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter operated by Soldiers with Texas and Oklahoma Army National Guard units carries sling-loaded shipping container during retrograde operations and base closures in Wardak Province, Afghanistan, October 26, 2013 (U.S. Army/Peter Smedberg)

the future. The following areas were particularly significant at the combatant command level.

*Theater posture is critical to future success.* We have to ensure that the right sustainment is in the right place to support operations. A failure to use joint logistics processes to correctly set the theater to meet emerging requirements will create unnecessary stress on U.S. Servicemembers and ultimately will jeopardize our ability to meet combatant commander requirements.

An area related to redeployment and retrograde that illustrates the success we achieved involved the *amount of commodities retrograded and returned to the supply enterprise system.* Our ability to analyze and plan a deliberate drawdown ensured that critical sustainment stocks were returned to the continental United States; this not only positively impacts home-station readiness, but also achieves cost avoidance to the Services, and ultimately to DOD, by using already purchased commodities.

An implication that senior logistics leaders should always consider when entering an operation is our *exit strategy*; it is never too early to start planning and implementing redeployment and retrograde processes. Our operations over the

past 2 to 3 years have focused on redeployment and retrograde operations, and this has consumed a majority of our efforts as we right-size our force structure.

*Property accountability* throughout an operation cannot be overemphasized, particularly when the determination is made to establish equipment pools in the AOR and rotate units into that equipment over a period of several years. Accounting for everything after the fact is an excruciating and inefficient process.

*Coalition partners* each bring unique capabilities to the table, and it is in our best interest to always consider them and be as inclusive as possible. There are many examples of coalition leadership that were instrumental to the success of retrograde operations across each sector in Afghanistan, along the NDN, in shaping support access and capabilities en route between the AOR and home stations, and in developing flexible planning options with ISAF, USFOR-A, USCENTCOM, and national provider staffs to keep things on track.

*Treating retrograde as an operation* and not an administrative or logistics-only function comes to mind. Another would be the USCENTCOM and ISAF commanders' daily emphasis placed on the logistics and sustainment community.





Marine Corps and Royal Air Force helicopters fly in formation after departing Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, October 27, 2014 (U.S. Marine Corps/John Jackson)

Those two commanders put our efforts on par with the Soldier and Marine mission on the ground. It was clear to all levels of leadership that we had to do both at the same time and do them well. Contractor accountability and the many lessons learned that were applied throughout Operation *Enduring Freedom* is an area that continues to mature. And although USCENTCOM had the lead for operations in Afghanistan, the entire joint logistics enterprise collectively demonstrated that it is postured to support globally integrated operations, along compressed timelines, with minimal risk to our commanders, the force, or the mission, regardless of how large or how rapidly the situation presents itself. This is a tribute to every stakeholder across DOD and the interagency community that supported the operation. Success was a product of the entire joint logistics enterprise and required the steadfast commitment of every member of the team. Throughout the entire retrograde operation, everyone remained “all in!”

*Close partnership* among all stakeholders—the combatant command, the Services, and our national partners with the joint task force command in the AOR—and keeping the enterprise focus on the priorities of the joint force commander led to success in Afghanistan and will remain critical in the future. Unity of effort at the general and flag officer level among all stakeholders permeated our organizations and cannot be over-emphasized. In that regard, the same goes for building and maintaining similar strong partnerships with our coalition and host nation counterparts throughout the AOR. These relationships also set the logistics enterprise up for rapid contingency responses in the future, regardless of where they occur.

U.S. Central Command and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan, with the support of U.S. Transportation Command, the Defense Logistics Agency, the Services, and all of our logistics partners, successfully accomplished a significant task in retrograding materiel and equipment

from Afghanistan. That country’s geography and climate, combined with the security environment and limited transportation infrastructure, presented one of the greatest logistics challenges encountered in the modern era of warfare. Never before has so much been moved, over so long a time, by so many methods (air, land, and sea). Our collective joint logistics enterprise moved people, equipment, and supplies over oceans and continents, numerous landlocked countries, into and out of one of the most remote regions in the world. The recently completed Operation *Drumbeat*, the last milestone of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, was not only successful in setting conditions for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s enduring Resolute Support mission, but also has been critical to the Service reset strategies, U.S. Central Command’s theater reposturing, and the global reposture of the Department of Defense. JFQ