



# SPO Transportation's Support of Retrograde Operations

The support operations transportation section was critical in moving retrograded equipment from Afghanistan.

■ By 1st Lt. Rory A. Santos-Mitchell

The Soldiers of the 17th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) assumed the mission of the U.S. Central Command Materiel Recovery Element (CMRE) from the 1103rd CSSB on July 1, 2014. The 17th CSSB's support operations (SPO) transportation section played an integral role in the CMRE mission. It coordinated intratheater and intertheater support missions with various agencies, using both air and ground modes of transportation to deliver mission-critical supplies and equipment across six regional commands (RCs) in the Combined Joint Operations Area–Afghanistan (CJOA–A).

## Materiel Retrograde Concept

The SPO transportation section provided integrated support and management for the movement of personnel, equipment, and retrograde materiel around the battlefield. To facilitate operations of subordinate units and staff sections in the battalion, it provided subject matter experts in all areas of movement and retrograde operations.

Through the CMRE, the Army established a way ahead for removing excess and unaccounted for equipment and materiel from the CJOA–A. The SPO transportation section assisted in moving enabler teams and provided the transportation support required to move excess retrograde materiel.

The battalion's transportation section supported the removal of mate-

riel from the point of origin to the appropriate outlet for disposal or retrograde. The transportation section shipped a variety of cargo, including materials-handling equipment, maintenance parts, and tricons.

The responsibilities of the transportation section included assisting the headquarters and headquarters company, all enabler teams, companies and their subordinates assigned to the battalion, and all operational control units. The SPO transportation section was responsible for coordinating with the brigade for surface and air movement of retrograde equipment.

## CMRE Common Operational Picture

The CMRE in Afghanistan was a historic logistics accomplishment. The country's lack of a modern road network and the fact that it is landlocked provided challenges to the CMRE's success. As the retrograde sort yards (RSYs) processed and determined the disposition of equipment and identified materiel for recovery and retrograde out of theater, the SPO transportation section coordinated with the brigade to move and retrograde the supplies out of theater.

The battalion's transportation office and the movement control team (MCT) coordinated surface and air assets. The MCT supported the CMRE mission with reception, staging, onward movement, and retrograde of personnel, equipment, and supplies.

Under the supervision of the 49th Movement Control Battalion, the MCT used the Transportation Coordinators' Automated Information Movement System (TC–AIMS) to coordinate critical transportation support using host-nation and contractor trucks and short take-off and landing aircraft. The MCT tracked the movement of equipment by submission date, logistics movement request number, ready-to-load load date, required delivery date, origin, destination, and description of cargo.

Subordinate units within the 17th CSSB requesting movement of equipment in CJOA–A filled out and submitted logistics movement requests through the SPO transportation section to the servicing MCT. The transportation section verified and confirmed the status of the transportation movement releases through the 49th Movement Control Battalion daily.

## MCT Support to the CMRE

The MCTs at strategic hubs used TC–AIMS to provide tracking and in-transit visibility. The system's capabilities allowed the MCT to produce unit deployment lists, transportation control and movement documents, radio frequency identification tags, and military shipping labels, which were all part of the unit line number packets needed for intratheater movement.

Challenges arose at some RSYs and forward retrograde elements

when their transportation coordinators redeployed, which required a change to the paperwork process for retrograding materiel. Without transportation coordinators, retrograde sites did not have anyone with the military occupational specialty needed to produce shipping documents. At those sites, the automated logistical specialists served as transportation coordinators after learning how to process the needed documents through TC-AIMS.

### Improving the Retrograde Process

The 17th CSSB SPO transportation section played a critical role in improving the quality of life for Soldiers, supporting the Afghan National Army, and supporting International Security Assistance Force base closures within Afghanistan. After assuming the CMRE mission, the 17th CSSB's SPO transportation section created a more efficient way of maintaining intratheater visibility.

The transportation section provided units with timely and accurate information on the location, movement, and status of equipment and materiel by creating an easily accessible online tracker. The tracker provided the quantity and condition of incoming materiel in order to optimize inventory and minimize unnecessary asset procurement.

In another situation, the RC West RSY experienced a backlog of ManTech parts that needed to be shipped to the United States. The process of shipping unit line number equipment from the RC West RSY was taking an average of 31 days.

The noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the 17th CSSB's Kandahar SPO transportation cell, who was the liaison and subject matter expert for the MCT and the RSY, was sent to the RSY to assess and improve the processes. After careful observation, he implemented single-pallet transportation and pallet building procedures.

His innovative way of shipping using 463L pallets resulted in 85

pallets of ManTech parts being retrograded to the continental United States. This change of procedures significantly improved the efficiency of transportation by decreasing the shipping time from 31 to 7 days.

### Intertheater Movement

The retrograded equipment and materiel were moved out of theater over various land routes, such as the Pakistan ground lines of communication, or flown to a multimodal site directed by U.S. Transportation Command.

The intertheater movement portion of the CMRE mission included shipping equipment and materiel out Afghanistan by air to various seaports for movement back to the United States. The strategic RSY hubs in RCs East, South, and West shipped equipment to Tobyhanna Army Depot, Pennsylvania, Sierra Army Depot, California, and other locations for redistribution.

### Shipping Containers and Pallets

The use of 20-foot equivalent units and 463L pallets has revolutionized the movement of retrograde for the CMRE mission in Afghanistan. The 17th CSSB SPO transportation section moved more than 125 20-foot equivalent units of retrograde materiel to the United States. When troops began using 463L pallets to transport retrograde materiel to the United States, the shipping time decreased significantly. The 463L pallet not only improved the efficiency of transportation; it also assisted in reducing the backlog of containerized cargo.

In the past, retrograde materiel was moved by convoys through the Pakistan ground lines of communication and the Northern Distribution Network. After the RC North's RSY closed, movement procedures shifted to meet the CMRE mission deadline of the end of 2014.

Instead of waiting for a location to accumulate enough outbound cargo for a convoy, Soldiers scheduled regular air movements for containers and palletized cargo.

### Lessons Learned

The support from servicing MCTs was pivotal to the success of transporting materials-handling equipment and retrograde materiel. Having a dedicated MCT for the sole purpose of retrograde is recommended for future operations.

It is important to consider the operational environment when planning policies for the shipment of retrograde materiel. For example, using the 463L pallet is very efficient. However, the MCT had one set of standards for proper pallet configuration, and the airfield departure and control group had a completely different set.

Another issue of inconsistent policies was the shipment of Air Force expeditionary airfield aluminum matting. The transportation control and movement documents needed for shipping the matting were different for the MCT and the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command.

Between July and November 2014, the 17th CSSB SPO transportation section played an integral role in the CMRE mission by coordinating and supervising the shipment of more than 4,177 pieces of equipment valued at over \$98 million. By having an MCT dedicated solely to retrograde, improving intratheater visibility, and implementing single-pallet transportation and pallet-building procedures, the section greatly improved the transportation for retrograde materiel in Afghanistan.

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