



Staff Sgt. Adam Holen, 152nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, South Dakota Army National Guard, operates a rough-terrain container handler to move containers with guidance from two Soldiers from the Maryland Army National Guard's 1129th Transportation Company at Kandahar Airfield. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Theanne Tangen)

The Mobile Container Assessment Team

The U.S. Central Command Materiel Recovery Element used the mobile container assessment team to maintain container accountability.

■ By 1st Lt. Joseph Fumo

The mobile container assessment team (MCAT) mission was the Army's means of gaining accountability for all containers that were shipped into and out of Afghanistan. Most of the equipment brought to Afghanistan was shipped in 20-foot and 40-foot containers, which is the most cost-efficient way to move heavy or bulk equipment and materiel.

Once the containers entered the country and their contents were delivered, most units found alternate uses for them. Whether they were used as a secure way to store

equipment or modified to be offices or billets, all containers were, or should have been, tracked using the container number and geographic location.

Rented Containers

Containers are extremely valuable for many reasons. Some were originally rented through contracts from businesses located outside of Afghanistan. Some of these rented containers accrued detention charges, meaning the Army paid a monthly rate over many years to rent the container.

Some containers ended up costing the U.S. government as much as \$100,000 for a single 20-foot container that originally cost around \$3,000. A lot of containers were put into use in Afghanistan and never returned to their original owners. This could have been prevented if the military had bought the containers from the start or had ensured the rented containers were clearly marked with a return date.

Container Accountability

The U.S. Central Command

(CENTCOM) Materiel Recovery Element (CMRE) added MCAT enablers to its mission because units were not abiding by the CENTCOM container management policy letter of instruction. The letter directed units to provide properly trained personnel to maintain container accountability within the CENTCOM footprint.

A container control officer (CCO) was required to complete a monthly inventory and update the Integrated Booking System–Container Management Module (IBS–CMM), which was used to account for every container in Afghanistan. This system requires the user to complete an online certification and classroom instruction upon arrival in country. However, the appointed CCO really needed to go through more extensive training for IBS–CMM.

The appointed CCOs were nominated by the unit, base operations support integrator (BOS–I), or forward operating base (FOB) mayor. One regional container manager (RCM) for each region of Afghanistan was responsible for ensuring that the CCOs completed their monthly inventories and IBS–CMM updates.

The system in place would have been effective if there had been more emphasis on the importance of container accountability. The BOS–Is and FOB mayors were responsible for maintaining container accountability and holding units responsible for assigning CCOs for their respective areas. If everyone had been held accountable for their areas, there would have been no need for an MCAT mission at all.

Containers accrued a rental fee for each month the military did not return them. Many units in Afghanistan did not realize that the containers originally used to bring their equipment into theater and then put to use as offices were costing the government thousands of dollars each month. Bagram Airfield had over 13,000 containers at one point. The detention costs were extremely high

and in the future could be avoided altogether.

A way to avoid detention costs in future operations would be to mark rented containers so they do not enter the country. Once they arrive in Kuwait, the materiel or equipment would be taken out of the container and shipped into country by other means. The container would then be put back on the ship and returned to its owner.

This solution involves coordination with numerous personnel involved in shipping supplies into Afghanistan, which is landlocked, so it has a few potential points of failure. A better solution would be to not rent containers at all.

MCAT Lessons Learned

The MCAT mission was executed by teams of six civilian contractors overseen by three or four military personnel. This setup had positives and negatives. The most prominent positive result was continuity. Contractors stayed in country much longer than Soldiers who were on five-to-nine month deployments. This gave contractors better visibility of the FOBs, and they knew their FOB's history.

The downside to having contractors conduct the MCAT mission was that it was a relatively simple task that could easily have been conducted using a military squad-sized element with far less labor costs. The mission involved moving throughout the country to each FOB, counting containers on ground, and making sure each container was tracked by its container number in the IBS–CMM.

Another downside was that the contractors were not authorized to change any data in the IBS–CMM. On a few occasions, time and money were spent to conduct an MCAT mission on a given FOB, and the information was passed to a BOS–I or FOB mayor. Then it was passed to a CCO, who never entered it into the IBS–CMM. This could have been avoided if the team members had been able to update the system

themselves.

There are numerous ways to make the MCAT mission more efficient; however, fixing the problem at its source is the best way. The military needs to provide CCOs with more extensive training than just the online certificate currently required for the position.

The checks and balances system with which the BOS–Is and RCMs held the CCO accountable was insufficient. The MCAT could be a small military element that travels throughout the country to conduct inventories of each FOB. This could be done in monthly rotations during which the team either updates the system or verifies that the information in IBS–CMM is correct.

The tracking of containers throughout Afghanistan had many flaws. The tracking method that was used failed to verify that the numbers in the system were accurately reporting what was on ground. In the interest of saving the U.S. government money, and with the benefit of hindsight, I believe it would be better to buy containers instead of rent them. Units should have the option to keep the container and use it for another purpose or to put it back into circulation.

Despite needing some revisions to its processes, the MCAT gave BOS–Is, FOB mayors, CCOs, RCMs, garrison commanders, and U.S. Forces–Afghanistan a good understanding of how many containers were available to move equipment and materiel out of theater and how many were distributed throughout the combat zone.

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