

Starting at the End When Planning for Base Closure

■ By Lt. Col. Michelle K. Donahue and Capt. Michael H. Bresette

With little more than 100 days until end of mission, the Soldiers and leaders of the regimental support squadron (RSS) of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment (3rd CR) faced a monumental task—closing the third largest tactical base (TB) in Afghanistan.

Tasked to operate TB Shank while retrograding all essential equipment and transferring non-mission-essential equipment, designated structures, and the TB itself to the Afghan National Security Forces, the RSS leaders focused on using decentralized mission command to meet the multiple conflicting lines of effort.

On initial assessment, leaders found more than 2,500 structures, 2,500 containers, and 900 vehicles that needed to be accounted for. They would have to determine the disposition of this equipment and take actions to remove it from the base or transfer it to Afghan control.

The day-to-day operations of the TB garrison enablers, including four regional command contracts and over 50 Logistics Civil Augmentation Program contracts, required continual refinement and management to meet the needs of a base in transition. Decentralized mission command allowed leaders at every level to execute day-to-day operations while maintaining a contiguous operational plan and was essential to the successful transfer of TB Shank.

Supported by a security element from the 2nd Squadron, 3rd CR, the RSS focused first on establishing security operations in order to set the conditions for a successful transition. However, as the plan developed, leaders quickly realized that the level of security required to maintain the

tactical presence and to project Afghan authority south of Kabul caused disruptions in the overall drawdown time line.

This article presents the lessons learned by 3rd CR as it transitioned TB Shank to Afghan authority.

Plan Toward a Predetermined End

To determine their security requirements, RSS leaders began by tasking the squadron S-2s to generate the enemy situational template and projections, focusing on the known and historical threat. Once they had the situational template, the leaders began planning based on what would be needed for the final security set. They had to ascertain the minimum equipment, security, and personnel needed to secure TB Shank while maintaining a reserve contingency force.

Working closely with the 2nd Squadron, 3rd CR, leaders from both squadrons used the enemy situational template to discuss the overall requirements, which included the final number of personnel and equipment and the required logistics support—vehicle maintenance, fuel for power generation, subsistence, and life support operations. These requirements served as the initial assumption in the military decision-making process.

This initial assumption allowed the leaders to plan backward, a critical piece of the closure process. If on the final day of operations there were too many Soldiers or too much equipment for the transportation assets, the overall logistics and security plans would be strained, and additional assets could be required to ensure the safety of U.S. equipment and

personnel.

By starting at the end, the RSS and the 2nd Squadron, 3rd CR, successfully planned the logistics and security requirements that allowed for effective transition operations, even during multiple changes to the time line and overall mission task and purpose. By focusing on the end, the leaders did not re-create a 100-day plan with each change; they adapted the speed of the drawdown based on the need to meet the final requirements.

Decentralize Command and Control

Putting a leader in charge of operations who focused on descoping and drawing down the TB ensured success.

The base operating support-integrator section, commonly referred to as the mayor cell, was the focal point of base sustainment. The mayor cell at TB Shank was responsible for personnel accountability, contract oversight and direction, disseminating information to base occupants, housing, military police, general supply, and ensuring all living conditions and amenities were to standard.

During the relief in place and transfer of authority with the 710th Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), RSS leaders decided to continue using a base mission command system that included both digital and face-to-face methods of communication. RSS used the “Shank All” email distribution list to share fragmentary-order-style messages with all personnel on the base, including contractors, to ensure that everyone was aware of drawdown requirements and could meet those

requirements on time.

This method proved critical as TB Shank approached its transfer date. This system allowed information such as manpower requirements (for the dining facility, latrine cleaning, and trash and ammunition disposal), closing dates (for laundry, Internet, and the dining facility), and other

parture. Nearly all of the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program contractors were, by contract, allotted several weeks to retrograde their personnel and equipment after they ceased operations.

This left a period where the RSS had to overcome shortfalls in critical functions that had been executed

the TB before the times of concern arrived, relieving some of the mayor cell and logistics strain. By realizing the importance and sometimes critical nature of specified contracts and including contractors at every planning stage, the RSS maintained contract support for generator fueling and maintenance until 13 days before base closure. On the final day of contractor service, the fuel requirement had reduced sufficiently for the support squadron's sustainment assets to meet the requirements.



The commander of the Regimental Support Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, receives the last American flag to fly over Tactical Base Shank, Afghanistan, on Oct. 23, 2014. This ceremony marked the official transfer of the base from the U.S. military to the 4th Brigade, 203rd Corps, Afghan National Army. (Photo by Capt. Eric Robles)

important information to be shared as early as possible and reinforced often.

RSS used “Shank All” on both the Nonsecure Internet Protocol Router Network, which was mainly used for National Guard Soldiers and contractors, and the Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange, which was used exclusively to share sensitive information. The mayor cell also used a weekly town hall meeting, where the RSS commander could share highlights of the past week and future plans and emphasize base standards to the key leaders in attendance.

Manage Contractors Effectively

Contractors were the logistics backbone of the TB, so a great deal of deliberate planning was required to minimize the impact of their de-

parture. These functions included purifying water, running the dining facility, providing laundry service, providing bus transportation, operating materials-handling equipment, disposing of trash, cleaning latrines and showers, servicing and fueling generators, and maintaining structures.

By starting from the end and using decision point tactics supported by a mission command style of command and control, RSS leaders identified the areas and days of concern. To address these concerns, they allocated internal assets or adapted contracts with the assistance of the Defense Contract Management Agency's administrative contracting officer.

With reverse planning, RSS leaders transitioned the required number of nonessential personnel off of

Transfer Property Early

An equally critical aspect of base closure that included the direct involvement and support of numerous contractors and agencies was the divestiture of foreign excess personal property (FEPP) and foreign excess real property (FERP) (infrastructure) at TB Shank. This effort required a collective focus in order to effectively transfer 12 years of accumulated property on the base to the Afghan National Security Forces.

The base closure assistance team played a crucial role in the overall planning, accountability, and completion of this process. The data gathered by the assessment team was used to populate most of the FEPP and FERP lists.

Working through U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, all units at TB Shank transferred their property to the FEPP unit identification code holder under one memorandum. This allowed the units' personnel and equipment to be moved off the base while the TB Shank mayor cell conducted the final disposal of FEPP equipment. Reallocating this equipment allowed the RSS leaders to plan the life support and sustainment requirements for the personnel needed to manage final operations.

Use Engineers Early

Engineer operations shaped the tempo of the overall base transfer. By involving engineer assets early, the RSS successfully set the conditions for closure. A delay in engineer assets

would have caused an overall delay in the drawdown and transition time line.

Engineers were required to demolish large camps within the TB and leave nothing but bare earth. This requirement needed daily oversight and accountability, so the RSS commander coordinated with the regimental staff to station the regiment's engineer planner at TB Shank to assist the garrison engineer with the demolition analysis and scope of work development.

Five construction platoons were assigned to support the garrison missions at Shank. Two horizontal construction platoons expanded the enduring footprint in a small area of the TB to support operations that would continue after base transfer, two horizontal construction platoons supported demolition, and one vertical construction platoon supported both mission sets.

These engineers provided tremendous support. In only 75 days, they completed a mission that had been initially estimated to take nine months to complete. Their ability to react to changing requirements and to support each other was critical to this achievement.

To ensure constant coordination, a synchronization meeting was held each day to discuss the previous 24 and next 48 hours of missions. If a shortfall was identified in labor or equipment, support was tasked for the next day. The ability of the engineer planners to dynamically task the platoons and to retask assets to decisive points of the engineer effort ensured that maximum output was gained for every available engineer man-hour, eliminating any potential downtime.

Ensure Lines of Communication

Ensuring lines of communication are properly planned and maintained, including for contingency operations, is critical on the battlefield. Between base defense, off-the-base operations, retrograde, and base sustainment, the communications network was essential.

TB Shank had a direct signal support team (DSST) whose operation filled a large structure with many locally hosted services and pieces of equipment. For this reason, the DSST's closure was scheduled for two weeks before the base closure date in order to provide the team with enough time to retrograde all equipment and services appropriately.

The RSS S-6 section implemented a tactical network when the DSST's strategic network began transition operations. To maintain communication, a secret Internet Protocol router/nonsecure Internet Protocol router (SIPR/NIPR) access point (SNAP) terminal was allocated from the 3rd CR to provide tactical services after the DSST shut down.

However, the SNAP terminal limited the number of computers that could access the networks. The speed of the SNAP terminal was significantly slower than the Internet that the DSST had provided.

By beginning the planning at the end and having only required personnel remain at this point of the process, RSS leaders effectively mitigated the risk of communication loss and maintained lines of communication to meet each line of effort.

Additional steps were taken to create more capability within the existing network to provide an augmented tactical network with greater speed that could support more users than the SNAP could alone.

Overall, the greatest lesson learned by the leaders and Soldiers of the RSS was to begin with the end in mind. By establishing the requirement for personnel, equipment, sustainment, life support, and communications, the RSS successfully completed the transition of TB Shank and the retrograde of thousands of personnel and pieces of equipment in less than 100 days.

By focusing on decentralized mission command and including

all agencies, units, and contractors in the overall planning process, the leaders successfully synchronized more than 20 units operating under multiple chains of command, each with a conflicting task and purpose.

The success of transition and closure operations relies on leader adaptability and the correct use of the military decisionmaking process to identify critical areas, assign leaders to effectively account for and complete tasks within those areas, and the involvement of all elements.

Successful transition operations do not happen behind the desk of a single planner or leader. They happen with junior leaders exercising mission command and effectively operating under a concise task and purpose, synchronized daily to identify and mitigate concerns through dynamic asset reallocation.

Lt. Col. Michelle K. Donahue is a student at the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy. She was the commander of Regimental Support Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, when this article was written. She holds a bachelor's degree from Duke University and a master's degree from Georgetown University in policy management. She is a graduate of the Quartermaster Officer Basic Course, the Combined Logistics Captains Career Course, and Intermediate Level Education.

Capt. Michael H. Bresette is the commander of G Forward Support Troop, Regimental Support Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Florida in business administration. He is a graduate of the Quartermaster Officer Basic Course and the Combined Logistics Captains Career Course.

The authors thank Maj. Joseph A. Grande, Capt. Eric G. Robles, Capt. Kevin M. Beasley, Capt. Edwin M. Martinez, and 1st Lt. Jimmy S. Benoit for their contributions to the article.