

# Last One Out Turns Off the Lights: Closing a Military Base During the Withdrawal of Troops From Iraq

By Capt. Mark A. Renteria

**D**uring Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Army spent millions of dollars building up operating bases all over the country. Although not all bases were created equal, they all were constantly being improved during the almost nine-year war. Toward the end of the war, many sites boasted Green Beans or Starbucks coffee shops, fast food joints common in the United States, million-dollar dining facilities, laundry services, and morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) facilities that improved as time went on. As a Soldier, I was happy to see these establishments added to my base, but removing everything at the end of mission was a logistics challenge.

## Setting the Scene

In 2003, my unit at the time, the 974th Quartermaster Company (Field Service), began a 16-month deployment to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. None of the Soldiers in my unit had ever experienced war firsthand, and we drew our expectations from what we had seen in the media. However, we quickly realized that the war we were in was vastly different from the war we watched from the comfort of our living rooms.

We arrived at Al Taqaddum Airbase, known as Forward Operating Base Ridgway at the time, and began to set up our shower and laundry services. Soldiers and Marines who had been part of the initial invasion had been eagerly awaiting our arrival because they wanted to take showers and clean their uniforms. On par with getting precious phone time to talk to family and loved ones, laundry was a key service that made these Soldiers and Marines smile and raised their morale.

We were served breakfast and dinner daily from a mobile kitchen trailer. For one month, a meal ready-to-eat (MRE), a plate of turkey, and a shotglass of Koolaid was our daily menu. These meager rations were commonplace at most bases in Iraq in 2003.

Looking around the base, I saw destroyed airplane hangars, bombed-out runways, displaced mortar rounds, and hollowed-out buildings. After the basic life support system was in place, the realization that we would be in Iraq for a while instigated contract after contract to improve the bases.

Months of base improvements resulted in the establish-

ment of a dining facility, an MWR center, a gym, a phone and Internet center, and other small pleasantries like air conditioning, windows, and doors. Recognizing that war is hell, the U.S. government used these upgrades to ensure that the morale of Soldiers was kept at the highest level possible. It was the start of our presence in Iraq, and our country made sure that Soldiers were taken care of by improving and building an infrastructure that could maintain units for many years.

## Enjoying Established Bases

By 2009, it was rare for a large military installation in Iraq not to have either a Green Beans coffee shop or a Starbucks within its perimeter. Markets run by local nationals sold rugs, flags, and other trinkets. Essentially, if a Soldier wanted something within the limits of General Order 1A, he could easily find it on the base.

Throughout Iraq, the U.S. military built an infrastructure in order to sustain Soldiers' morale and make them as comfortable as possible during year-long deployments in a country where mortars and improvised explosive devices were the daily enemies.

Arriving at a base in Iraq after 2005 was a lot like moving to a desert base such as Fort Bliss, Texas, or Fort Irwin, Calif., except that you lived in a containerized housing unit (CHU), passed sandbags and bunkers on your way to work, carried a weapon on you at all times, and occasionally sought cover because of indirect fire hitting the base.

## Closing COS Kalsu

In October 2011, President Barack Obama announced that all U.S. forces would leave the country by the end of the year. At that point, my unit, the 115th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), received the mission to close down the contingency operating station (COS) for which I was mayor, COS Kalsu. The task was logistically challenging because the COS had expanded its infrastructure tremendously since 2003 and was home to more than 4,000 service members, contractors, and civilians. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that we were required to close the COS within three months.

COS Kalsu was located in Iskandariya, Iraq, about 20

miles south of Baghdad. More than 3,000 CHUs were spread throughout the base, and the heart of the base consisted of a large dining facility, Green Beans coffee shop, Pizza Hut trailer, AT&T call center, barber shop, beauty salon, rug shop, gym, MWR facility, local-national market, and small post exchange (PX). After eight years of base improvements, my battalion was charged with playing a major role in closing down COS Kalsu by handing over equipment and preparing the base for final turn over to the Government of Iraq (GOI).

### **The Convoy Support Center Mission**

When President Obama announced the end of the mission in Iraq, many units stationed north of COS Kalsu immediately began executing redeployment operations. These units needed to transport all of their equipment to Kuwait, and COS Kalsu was in a prime location to serve as a convoy support center (CSC) for these convoys. It was located along the primary route used for the draw-down and still had all vital assets on hand to support units moving south.

Running the CSC became one of the priorities for the 115th BSB during the last 60 days of Operation New Dawn. On a typical day, 180 transient personnel were at COS Kalsu, and on days when battalion-sized units arrived, this number easily spiked to more than 600. To accommodate this many people, we expanded our transient living areas by rearranging some of our permanent party residents and blocking off a large section of CHUs. These actions effectively tripled the size of the transient living space.

We also had transient tents that could be used as overflow spaces at times when our resources were strained beyond capacity. These additional living spaces proved crucial when we received a 660-Soldier convoy in November. The pledge that the 115th BSB made to transient units was for every Soldier to have a cot, a shower, and a hot meal before getting back on the road. Our battalion also provided fuel, maintenance, and medical services to every convoy.

The 115th BSB established a flow for incoming convoys to ensure that the CSC was efficient and beneficial to the transient personnel. When a convoy entered the Ironhorse Brigade's area of operations, the 115th BSB would send out a platoon to secure the highway and ensure that the entrance was clear and safe. As the convoys came onto the base, they were escorted to the weapons clearing barrels and then through two fuel points. They were then led to the staging area for accountability of equipment and personnel.

The 115th BSB ensured this area was stocked with cold water, and MREs were available for those passing through just for fuel. Units that stayed at Kalsu were given a short safety and orientation briefing to provide basic information about COS Kalsu, including hours of operation and locations for the base's amenities. After

the briefing, they were escorted to their quarters and then released to eat, sleep, shower, and relax.

The 115th BSB kept in communication with the convoy leaders and checked on them throughout the night to ensure they had everything they needed. The next morning, the battalion S-2 section gave a detailed intelligence brief to convoys about the current hot spots and historic trends on routes south of COS Kalsu as they prepared for their final push. Within two months, the CSC successfully facilitated the movement of more than 15,000 personnel to Kuwait.

### **All Services Must Go**

The immediate questions we had when we first arrived at COS Kalsu were, "What needs to go?" and "When does it need to be gone?" The unit in control of COS Kalsu before us had conducted some of the preplanning. They had established a useful glide path that provided a realistic timeframe of base closure activities.

The contracting officer for 115th BSB was responsible for generating the memorandums required to close services at the COS. She quickly became well-versed in how to articulate whether we wanted to downgrade, eliminate, or transition a service to maintain basic life support.

Base Operating Support-Integrator (BOS-I) also played a key role in the closure of COS Kalsu. BOS-I assisted us in our monthly population counts, which played a vital role in preparing our exit flights and convoys during the final month of operations. These accurate counts helped us to identify groups of tenants who lived on the base but had no real purpose. As we began scrubbing this list, we were able to start removing these tenants, expediting the closure of the COS, and ensuring that there were enough flights and ground convoys to transport all personnel off the COS.

### **Dude, Where's Your NTV?**

In addition to maintaining accurate population counts, one of BOS-I's biggest tasks was to transfer equipment and property to the GOI. The main goal for BOS-I was accounting for all of the nontactical vehicles (NTVs) at the COS and either turning them over to the GOI or removing them from COS Kalsu. The deadline for this task was mid-November, before the joint inventory between the base closure team and the receiving unit from the GOI. Some NTVs were sent to Kuwait for redistribution throughout the theater, while others were shipped back to the United States by their contracting company. Most, however, were kept at COS Kalsu to be transferred to the GOI as part of the base turnover.

Since arriving at COS Kalsu, the mayor cell's clerk had accounted for more than 400 NTVs at the COS. To ensure that every NTV was accounted for, I required that all NTVs be registered with the mayor cell. Vehicles that were not registered were not allowed to draw fuel from



*Sgt. 1st Class Leon Johnson briefs the concept of operations for the convoy support center (CSC) mission to Command Sgt. Maj. Earl Rice. The CSC mission was one of the most important missions the 115th Brigade Support Battalion ran in support of the theater-wide drawdown.*

the COS fuel point and were eventually towed away to a secure NTV parking lot. Although this requirement frustrated some tenants, it was a critical step toward preparing equipment for turn-in or transfer to the GOI.

### **Goodbye Green Beans**

The Green Beans coffee shop at COS Kalsu offered Soldiers an oasis in which to escape from their daily routine. Closing down such an important part of the community was difficult for Soldiers. They traded their cups of freshly brewed house blend coffee for the less popular dining facility version. The closure of Green Beans and accompanying shops marked a milestone in the downsizing and turnover of the base.

Fortunately, the logistics behind closing these shops was not difficult because the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) executed the closure internally. However, the 115th BSB had the task of removing the trailers that housed these businesses after they closed. AAFES identified a local buyer for the trailers, so the tasks were removing the barriers, coordinating lift support, and cordoning off the area around the trailers within a short window of time. After the trailers were removed, all that remained were a few wooden picnic tables and trash cans.

The small PX at the COS posed another challenge for Soldiers as the drawdown of services continued. The PX was a wooden building connected to the COS post office and finance office, and although it was not very large, the shelves were constantly stocked with all the necessities.

But as the deadline for its closure drew nearer, AAFES

stopped ordering merchandise and eventually started to run out of the more popular items. Then, to expedite selling leftover merchandise, the entire store became a discount bin. Everything from video games to potato chips to shirts was on sale. It was truly an “everything must go” event that lasted for about two weeks.

Finally, with the cessation of services came the closing of the MWR center and gym. At the MWR, Soldiers could play pool, ping pong, board games, and video games 24 hours a day. During football season, it was common to see the couches and chairs completely packed in the middle of the night as tenants got together to watch their favorite teams play on one of two big-screen TVs.

The gym was also a highly visited area at COS Kalsu. Many Soldiers used the deployment as an opportunity to focus on physical fitness, and they quickly became regulars at the gym. Closing those facilities was not easy on the Soldiers.

### **Leave It Better Than You Found It**

Two of the mayor cell’s final duties were ensuring that all of the buildings were clear of any sensitive information and military equipment and documenting the structural condition of each building. We photographed every square inch of the base as it stood before we departed. This mitigated the risk of U.S. forces being accused of leaving the base in an unfavorable condition.

Taking pictures of every building was a team effort, and our entire mayor cell took part in it. Walking through



*Lt. Col. Jason A. Carrico and Command Sgt. Maj. Natividad Lopez, Jr., lower and fold the 115th Brigade Support Battalion colors for the last time before the unit's final convoy leaves Contingency Operating Station Kalsu.*

buildings to clear and certify them was a long process. We even went to the point of spray painting over anything that was marked on the walls and barriers. As I was spray painting over several paintings that displayed units' crests and their dates on Kalsu, I felt like I was erasing history, but it was important to turn over the base clear of any markings or unit insignias.

One thing that was never fully closed out at the COS was the civilian Internet services. Internet services were a huge moneymaker at the COS. Even though we had Internet in our offices to send emails to our families and could use the Internet café for free, most Soldiers were willing to pay \$90 a month to have service in the privacy of their CHUs.

Internet services were provided by two contractors: Tigrisnet and GNC. The main provider, Tigrisnet, was responsible for more than 70 percent of the Internet at the COS. Tigrisnet was contracted through AAFES and was the more reliable of the two services. Tigrisnet outlets were installed in every CHU, and the speed was consistent and fast.

When Tigrisnet shut down services 45 days before the closure of the COS, GNC was the only provider available. GNC started to sell their wireless cards to tenants as they acquired the Internet monopoly on base and quadrupled their customers. However, GNC could not

keep enough Internet cards on hand to meet the demand and also could not provide the advertised speed because of the spike in customers.

Almost immediately, Soldier after Soldier walked into the mayor cell to complain about the GNC Internet services. It got to the point that I had to have a mayor cell representative located at the Internet office nightly to help prevent any major issues from arising. Eventually, the Internet service provider was tired of the customer complaints so he opened up the service to the entire COS for free until our departure. Despite the trouble, his service was the sole reason that Soldiers were able to communicate online with their families up until base closure.

### **Can You Keep a Secret?**

One of the hardest things to do during the transition was keep the official base closure date secret. Because the COS would be at its most vulnerable on its closure date, we could not reveal the date to anyone. Even KBR contractors could not be in the room when the date was mentioned. Although the date changed several times, we knew roughly when we would be saying goodbye to COS Kalsu for good.

Finally, it was decided that COS Kalsu's closure date would be Dec. 12, 2011. With a confirmed date, we were able to implement an aggressive deception plan to cloud

any chance of someone piecing together information to discover the closure date. We advertised that an awards ceremony would be held on Dec. 15 and a soccer tournament would be held on Dec. 19. Soccer uniforms and a trophy were even purchased for the soccer tournament from a vendor at the local-national market.

The deception plan appeared to have worked because no significant enemy activities occurred at COS Kalsu before we left. Other bases nearing their known closure dates were attacked and suffered U.S. and Iraqi casualties. The safeguarding of our final date may have been one of the most vital successes of the base closure.

## Final Departure

In the end, a base that had been continually improved and upgraded for more than eight years was gone within three months. What was once a base populated with more than 4,000 Soldiers and contractors had dwindled to a population of nearly 500 Soldiers, with more and more leaving every day.

Maj. William Navarro and a member of the GOI signed

the transfer paperwork just before the last members of 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, closed COS Kalsu on Dec. 12. It was the fourth-to-last base closed in Iraq. Four days later, Contingency Operating Base Adder closed and the mission in Iraq came to an official end.

The events that took place at COS Kalsu are just one story of many that came out of the responsible drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq. In the words of T.S. Eliot, it ended “not with a bang but a whimper,” and everyone on Kalsu could not have asked for anything more.

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*Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, stop for a short halt to stretch their legs after hours of driving on their way to Kuwait from Contingency Operating Station Kalsu, Iraq. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Thomas Morin)*

