

CMVRE

Mission Command of Retrograde Enablers in Afghanistan

■ By Lt. Col. Michelle M.T. Letcher



Lt. Col. Michelle Letcher, commander of the 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, discusses disposition of materiel with Lt. Gen. Raymond Mason, Army Deputy Chief of Staff G-4, at the Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, retrograde sort yard. (Photo by 1st Lt. Henry Chan)

The 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion assumed tactical and operational control over several enablers that worked diligently to push excess materiel out of Afghanistan.

In June 2012, the 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) deployed in support of a presidential directive to reduce the force manning levels in Afghanistan. In conjunction with the 62nd Engineer Battalion, the CSSB served as half of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Materiel Retrograde Element (CMRE), which focused on redistribution, disposal, and retrograde of excess materiel in Afghanistan.

The 18th CSSB, an active component unit out of Grafenwoehr, Germany, assumed mission command of a non-doctrinal mission to reposition the operational footprint, assist with achieving the directed force-manning

levels, reduce excess, and descope contracts. This mission was accomplished through various command relationships with tactical and strategic support units. The battalion provided mission command and began the tough work of meeting the strategic partner agreement that was signed by President Barack Obama in May 2012.

The Commands

When the 18th CSSB arrived in Afghanistan, most of its subordinate elements had already arrived and were tactically controlled by a sustainment brigade. The 18th CSSB assumed tactical and operational control of 350 personnel across 25 locations.

It was important from the outset for the CMRE to focus its efforts on informing and influencing audiences at all levels across Afghanistan—from companies and battalions on remote combat outposts to the regional commands and policymaking levels.

The CMRE hosted more than 30 distinguished visitors to discuss effective and efficient methods for redistributing excess materiel in the Combined Joint Operational Area-Afghanistan (CJOA-A).

The 18th CSSB had a direct mission command relationship with several commands.

The 1st Theater Sustainment Command. The 1st Theater Sustainment Command (TSC) maintained op-

erational control over all CMRE elements. The TSC maintained a forward presence in Afghanistan specifically to support the retrograde mission and ensure a common operational picture for sustainment leaders regarding theater retrograde.

The Joint Sustainment Command–Afghanistan. The 3rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) from Fort Knox, Ky., acted as the Joint Sustainment Command–Afghanistan and maintained logistics mission command over all sustainment units in Afghanistan until January 2013.

The 593rd Sustainment Brigade. The 593rd Sustainment Brigade arrived in Kabul, Afghanistan, on June 17, 2012, and was the key component in bringing the 1st TSC headquarters to full operating capability. It assumed single logistics mission command in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, which included the newly conceived CMRE.

The 593rd Sustainment Brigade CMRE was then re-missioned to Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, to assume mission command of all CMRE elements in Afghanistan on Aug. 9, 2012, 50 days after arriving in theater.

By the time the 593rd Sustainment Brigade left Afghanistan in March 2013, the CMRE consisted of a joint brigade headquarters and three joint subordinate battalions (two engineer battalions and one CSSB). It had grown to more than 4,400 Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Department of Defense contractors and civilians in direct support of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command.

The 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. The 18th CSSB provided tailored, multifunctional, multicomponent, joint-enabled, and contractor-supported mission command task organized to execute redeployment assistance, redistribution, retrograde, and disposal of materiel and equipment across the CJOA–A.

The 62nd Engineer Battalion. An Active component engineer battalion headquarters, the 62nd Engineer

Battalion planned, coordinated, and directed engineer activities in support of base closures and transfers.

The Enablers

Several smaller units and teams under the mission command of the 18th CSSB were critical to the retrograde mission.

Base closure assistance teams. Base closure assistance teams (BCATs) began as a military-resourced solution to assist the regional commands with base transfers and closures. BCATs provided direct property support to units tasked with closing or transferring a base.

The teams assisted, assessed, and advised units on real and personal property. They also assisted with de-scoping contracts, providing information technology, and coordinating transportation for the retrograde of non-mission-essential items. Each team included three military personnel and six contractors.

Retrograde sort yards. Retrograde sort yards (RSYs) received, sorted, and identified materiel and ensured that its accompanying documentation was correct. RSYs brought to record excess non-mission-essential equipment and materiel and provided disposition instructions for redistribution, retrograde, or disposal.

Materiel redistribution teams. Materiel redistribution teams provided onsite support. These teams sorted through containers and identified, segregated, processed, and brought to record excess non-mission-essential equipment and materiel. These teams were originally all military but eventually had two military members and 10 contractors. The teams served in RSYs or materiel redistribution yards when they were not on mobile missions.

Customs and agricultural inspection teams. Customs and agricultural inspection teams ensured materiel met U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Department of Agriculture standards. These teams operated in conjunction with the redistribution property assistance teams and

RSYs. The inspection teams were joint and included Army and Navy customs border clearance agents.

Environmental response and clean up teams. Environmental response and clean up teams were designed to provide environmental expertise in managing deconstruction activities for projected base closures and transfers. These contracted teams also reviewed site closure surveys.

Expeditionary disposal remediation technicians. Expeditionary disposal remediation technicians were part of a Defense Logistics Agency element that provided technical expertise and assistance in demilitarization, disposal, and disposition of unserviceable materiel, equipment, and scrap.

Mobile container accountability and assistance teams. Mobile container accountability and assistance teams conducted periodic site audits of container control officers (CCOs) in order to validate container management processes and procedures. CCOs, appointed by a base commander (or appropriate authority), established and maintained control and accountability of all containers in their designated areas. Being a CCO was a primary duty and included performing container inventories and ensuring the proper in-gating and out-gating of containers.

The CMRE Common Operational Picture

The initial force array dispersed teams across 25 locations throughout six regional commands. Retrograde support worked in reverse, from “spoke to hub” and then to the strategic bases.

Originally, the retrograde plan included pushing directly from the outlying bases to the three strategic hubs. However, it became apparent within the first 60 days that the task forces were accumulating excess at their operational hubs. In response to the needs of the regional commands and task forces, the CMRE developed forward retrograde elements (FREs).

In Iraq, excess materiel sort yards were collection points for onward

movement to Kuwait, where the RSYs were located. Unfortunately, the geographic isolation of Afghanistan made it impossible to mirror the sustainment base method used in Iraq and Kuwait.

In order to provide retrograde support, CENTCOM established three main strategic hubs: Kandahar Airfield, Bagram Airfield, and Mazar-e-Sharif. The level of maturity required of an RSY in Afghanistan had to be on par with the mature process in Kuwait because no further sorting would be done once the excess left Afghanistan.

Most of the excess received at the RSYs remained in country for redistribution or disposal. Approximately seven percent of what exited Afghanistan went to Kuwait, and about nine percent was shipped back to the United States. This required an efficient method of receiving, storing, and processing for shipment large quantities of military and government-owned contractor-managed excess.

Once the RSY matured and gained momentum, it was clear that the systems shaping and feeding the RSY also needed maturing. Following the forward logistics element model, the 18th CSSB developed the FRE concept. The FRE nested all the enabler teams and provided green-tab leadership at the platoon level to coordinate with the task force commanders and base mayors.

The FRE allowed logisticians to anticipate requirements and coordinate efforts with the strategic support elements in Afghanistan, Europe, and the United States. Retrograde operations shifted into a deliberate planning and operations effort across the CJOA-A.

Once the commander gained an understanding of the scope of the problem and recognized the locations where the requirements were exceeding the capability, the battalion reorganized and surged resources at the operational hubs. The forward operating bases (FOBs) that needed those resources met the following criteria:



Soldiers from the 427th Brigade Support Battalion and 1462nd Transportation Company pack oxygen cylinders into bundles for transportation at the Bagram Airfield retrograde sort yard. (Photo by 1st Lt. Henry Chan)

- The FOB served as a geographical hub for retrograde, where task force logisticians conducted normal supply distribution and transfer and where convoys rested overnight.
- The FOB served as a mission command center, where maneuver units resided as a task force headquarters at the brigade level and where an associated brigade support battalion and combat engineer unit were located.
- The FOB could support a FRE with facilities and land.
- The FOB and the associated task force served as a CJOA-A main-effort location for the International Security Assistance Forces Joint Command, the 1st TSC, the 593rd Sustainment Brigade, or within the regional command.

Using these criteria, the 18th CSSB created and developed seven FRE locations with the flexibility to create an additional two.

The Army resourced a mission command headquarters, the 18th CSSB, to lead reposturing efforts in the CJOA-A and reduce materiel excess across the theater. With the support of several commands and enablers, the headquarters effectively planned and operated a multicomponent, joint-enabled, and contractor-supported solution to theater closing.

Lt. Col. Michelle M.T. Letcher is the deputy support operations officer for the 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary). She was previously the commander of the 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. She holds a bachelor's degree from Illinois State University and master's degrees from the State University of New York-Oswego, the School of Advanced Military Studies, and Kansas State University. She is a graduate of the Air Defense Artillery Officer Basic Course, the Ordnance Corps Officer Transition Course, the Combined Logistics Captains Career Course, and the Army Command and General Staff College.