

# Supporting a Special Operations Task Force During the Withdrawal From Iraq

BY MAJOR THOMAS B. CRAIG

During the Responsible Drawdown of Forces, Special Operations Task Force—Central ensured that its units and outstations had sufficient supplies and equipment to maintain pressure on the enemy.

**D**uring the spring and summer of 2010, U.S. Forces—Iraq worked hard to reduce the number of troops in Iraq to below 50,000 by 1 September. During this massive and well-orchestrated drawdown, Special Operations Task Force—Central (SOTF—C) maintained its force level and repositioned operational detachments to continue to conduct combined lethal operations and target enemy networks seeking to destabilize the Government of Iraq.

The reduction in forces throughout the theater began to change the operational environment; no longer were forward operating bases (FOBs) and patrol bases always within easy reach of Army Special Forces operational detachments alpha (ODAs) and Navy sea, air, and land team (SEAL) platoons. U.S. forces made a more deliberate effort to keep off the major roads during daylight hours, whenever possible, to avoid Iraqi perceptions of U.S. involvement during the important

*Logisticians remove property from an operational detachment alpha's location in preparation for redeployment.*





*Army Special Forces logisticians remove excess property from a closing forward operating base in central Iraq.*

Iraqi election period and the formation of the new government.

These changes made the operations that the task force's ODAs and SEAL platoon conducted every day all the more important, both in maintaining the Iraqi Government's pressure on enemy networks and in painting a clear picture of enemy activity as battalions and brigades departed the theater.

### **ODA Independence**

As U.S. forces drew down, SOTF-C continued to ensure that its outstations maintained a level of support that allowed them to stay focused on their mission. SOTF-C accomplished this goal by focusing on two parallel actions: providing ODAs the tools they needed to sustain themselves independently of thinning U.S. forces and reducing their requirements to become more expeditionary. SOTF-C recognized five key requirements to sustain ODA independence from departing conventional forces:

- Independent over-the-horizon communications that were separate from conventional networks, which were going away.
- Increased force protection measures as U.S. forces departed.
- Larger bulk food and water storage facilities as the length of time between resupply increased for outstations. (As U.S. forces grew smaller, outstations needed to be able to sustain themselves with less frequent resupply missions.)
- More reliable power-generation options for outstations far from conventional U.S. support. (Each location had to stand alone and be self-supporting.)

- Materials-handling equipment (like forklifts and cranes) to replace the departing equipment belonging to redeploying units.

These requirements were filled by transferring equipment from departing Army units elsewhere in the theater. SOTF-C was able to link an emerging requirement in one task force location with excess resources at a conventional base by staying closely tied in with the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula (CJSOTF-AP) headquarters and the U.S. divisions as they thinned their lines. U.S. forces recognized that special operations forces in Iraq were still engaged in the fight, partnered with key Iraqi Special Operations Forces units and other internal security elements, and gave them the logistics priority needed to maintain pressure on the enemy.

### **Property Turn-In**

At the same time, SOTF-C recognized its own need to be lighter and more agile. After 7 years in Iraq, some outstations had grown beyond their mission-essential needs and wanted to shed excess materiel so they could reposition quickly to other areas of Iraq when needed. SOTF-C launched a massive excess property turn-in program designed to pare the outstations down to the materials and resources they used and needed daily and to remove the excess property that could slow down relocation and the eventual withdrawal and base returns.

From April to August 2010, SOTF-C turned in over 1,600 excess property items worth more than \$29 million. Commanders at every level took a hard look at their true mission requirements and shed unneeded equipment to "lighten the rucksack" at every base,





*Soldiers load property to relocate it to another forward operating base in central Iraq.*



*Army Special Forces Soldiers transfer a potable water tank to the Iraqi military as part of the base closure process.*

large and small. As the task force consolidated and relocated ODAs, targeted turnover of excess property to partner forces during the SOTF-C base returns was also a valuable and efficient means to reduce excess and support partner units at the same time.

### **Mobility Packages**

As the operational environment in Iraq changed, so did the mobility requirements for each ODA and SEAL platoon in the sector. An ODA may have conducted a partnered combat operation using painted M1151 high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles one day, and the next day it may have transitioned to low-visibility movements in up-armored nonstandard tactical vehicles. The ODAs also maintained their requirement for RG-33 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles and continued the logistics support to keep those platforms in the fight.

Fielding a diverse mobility package that fit into each ODA and SEAL platoon's unique operational environment was a major goal for the logisticians at the SOTF-C headquarters. Each detachment had unique needs for up-armored vehicles, and SOTF-C procured the right color and style of vehicle for each

area through continued close coordination with the withdrawing U.S. divisions, which continued to offer their priority of support to CJSOTF-AP. The SOTF-C painted and modified vehicles when necessary to produce the right platform for the right location and then moved them to points of need.

SOTF-C forces continued to mitigate the operational impact of the drawdown by coordinating with adjacent units as they thinned and consolidated their lines and by becoming more expeditionary and reducing their logistics footprint to be more agile. Special operations forces support units in Iraq remained focused on sustainment operations that allowed ODAs to stay closely linked with their key Iraqi partners into the Operation New Dawn era.

**MAJOR THOMAS B. CRAIG IS A SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER, THE COMMANDER OF THE SPECIAL FORCES QUALIFICATION COURSE PHASE IV, AND AN INSTRUCTOR FOR MILITARY OCCUPATIONAL SPECIALTY 18A (SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER) AT THE JOHN F. KENNEDY SPECIAL WARFARE CENTER AND SCHOOL AT FORT BRAGG, NORTH CAROLINA. HE HOLDS A BACHELOR'S DEGREE FROM VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE.**