



The 1st TSC has reduced the vehicle and equipment fleet by more than 13,000 pieces, reduced the ammunition in theater by more than 2,500 tons, and scheduled more than 1,000 flights and 40,000 trucks to move equipment around and out of Afghanistan. (Photo by Spc. Aaron Ellerman)

Retrograde Operations Planning and Execution

This article offers suggestions for how to organize and conduct retrograde operations.

■ By Maj. James J. Smith

The year before my battalion's deployment to Afghanistan was the first time our brigade was afforded the opportunity to execute a 12-month training cycle. This allowed team- through brigade-level formations to plan, prepare, execute, and assess their capabilities and limitations. The training cycle allowed the brigade to prepare for every possible scenario it could face.

However, the one mission the battalion did not train for was retrograde

operations. Now that the Army faces a time of extreme fiscal constraints, limited resources, and equipment shortages, this particular operation has become exponentially important.

During my tenure as a battalion executive officer (XO) in Afghanistan, I gained an unexpected appreciation for the transition and retrograde of U.S. forces.

Before we deployed to eastern Afghanistan, the battalion commander made it clear that one of our lines

of effort would involve the transfer of base and life support to the Afghan National Army. This would include our own camp and one combat outpost (COP) that was assigned to one of the battalion's companies. Although I knew this would be difficult, I did not understand the true magnitude of retrograde operations.

Doctrine served as the initial point of research. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, describes ret-

rograde as “a defensive task that involves organized movement away from the enemy. The enemy may force these operations, or a commander may execute them voluntarily. The higher commander of the force executing the retrograde must approve the retrograde operation before its initiation in either case. The retrograde is a transitional operation; it is not conducted in isolation. It is part of a larger scheme of maneuver designed to regain the initiative and defeat the enemy.”

Although retrograde is defined in doctrine, the type of retrograde operations taking place in Afghanistan are not described in field manuals or practiced during predeployment training cycles. The closest event to a practical exercise is conducted during the redeployment phase of a combat training center when units are feverishly attempting to clean and turn-in equipment that was assigned for the rotation.

Nevertheless, retrograde operations are critical. I believe that all officers should have the opportunity to understand and prepare their units for when they are required to reduce and transfer their respective areas of operation before they redeploy.

The purpose of this article is to provide a modern perspective of retrograde operations while using personal experience at the battalion level to serve as a prescriptive case study. The article describes the challenges of retrograde and provides recommendations through a list of topics and questions that our unit attempted to understand and solve through a combination of discovery, trial and error, and common sense.

Where Does All This Stuff Go?

Massing and synchronizing the resources needed to reduce our footprint was critical to the success of our retrograde mission since the unit replacing us was designed to train indigenous forces, not remove massive quantities of materiel. The battalion's long-range plan allowed the staff to analyze retrograde operations in de-

tail in order to provide greater clarity of how to achieve the commander's objective.

The retrograde focus included removing equipment no longer necessary that had accumulated over the previous years because of tactical necessity. Before this equipment was loaded and shipped to various locations, we had to separate it into the following categories: scrap metal, defense reutilization and marketing office (DRMO), and retro-sort equipment.

Scrap metal. The large quantities of scrap metal that accumulated over 10 years of combat operations challenged units in their efforts to reduce their footprints. How do you get rid of all this scrap metal? Logistics planners have identified the need for special mobile teams to assist units in identifying and removing scrap metal.

For example, the expeditionary disposal remediation team is composed of Navy seamen and civilian contractors who travel to COPs and forward operating bases (FOBs). They coordinate with local contractors for the efficient sale and removal of scrap metal.

In one case, the expeditionary disposal remediation team disposed of more than 200,000 pounds of scrap metal while teaching our Soldiers how to remove scrap and providing the local contractor with points of contacts. This allowed for decentralization and the safe and expeditious removal of a major point of retrograde friction.

DRMO. Unusable equipment that could not be repaired or reintegrated to the Army supply system was designated for the DRMO. These items spanned across all classes of supply but were primarily class II (general supplies, mostly consisting of printers, computer monitors, and desk furniture), class VII (major end items such as vehicles), and class IX (repair parts). This also included a large amount of life-support items, such as air conditioning units, electrical units, and water heaters that had reached or exceeded their oper-

ational lifespan.

Retro-sort equipment. This was the most important category, consisting of materiel that could be reintegrated into the Army supply system. Items in this category included vehicles, vehicle parts, office equipment, weapons, weapon parts, communications equipment, office supplies, and morale, welfare, and recreation equipment.

This equipment must be reintegrated for future training in garrison environments, especially during a period of fiscal austerity. The process for transferring the items back into the Army's supply system is basic; however, the outcome is crucial.

The initial stage of this process is simple. Conduct a reconnaissance of the area of responsibility. Become intimately familiar with storage locations on COPs and FOBs. Inspect every container and workspace. To help discover lost items, ask leaders questions about their areas of responsibility. Storage containers accumulate over time and may end up not being passed between rotational units. Failing to pass the storage containers between rotating units causes a surfeit of equipment in theater.

Leader Roles in Retrograde Operations

Leader involvement is most critical for ensuring a clear understanding of retrograde operations.

Retrograde operations are most efficient when unit leaders are familiar with the many duties of effective retrograde operations. One method to accomplish this is to designate the battalion XO to lead retrograde efforts. This allows the battalion commander and battalion operations officer to focus primarily on security and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) development line of operation.

Tactical and logistics synchronization is essential, though. Every night (except Sunday) the operations officer (S-3) synchronized retrograde operations in conjunction with night operations during the battalion operational synchronization meeting. The

logistics officer (S-4) and an assistant operations planner synchronized the planning and assessment of retrograde operations to ensure that logistics operations were nested with the commander's decisive operation of ANSF development.

This allowed for the simultaneous and successful execution of each of the commander's lines of operation. The overall goal was to continue retrograde operations without negatively influencing the battalion's main effort of developing ANSF capabilities.

Battalion-Level Responsibilities

At the battalion level, we divided leader responsibilities among the XO, the S-4, and an assistant planner from the S-3.

Battalion XO. The battalion XO

should approach retrograde as he would a tactical operation. The XO's most important task is to understand the operation's end state first and then develop a problem statement by answering this question: how can you feasibly achieve your outcomes given the resources available? This begins on day one by developing a detailed understanding during relief-in-place operations.

Conducting a thorough reconnaissance provides the XO with an understanding of the problem and allows him to develop realistic outcomes for his team. Again, the operation must support the battalion commander's tactical objectives first. It is critical for the XO to understand the complexity of the problem statement in order to effectively communicate the out-

comes to the staff. This helps the staff develop courses of action that are nested with the battalion commander's objectives.

Figure 1 is an example of how we approached the battalion commander's objectives and then further refined the outcomes for our battalion. We divided our nine-month deployment into three 90-day blocks and developed outcomes at the battalion level. These outcomes were further refined by each company XO and then briefed weekly during our battalion logistics synchronization meeting.

Battalion S-4. The S-4 is similar to the chief of operations in a tactical sense. He maintains the status of day-to-day retrograde operations. He tracks the progress, coordinates assets within his section, communi-

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	End State
Operation Clean Sweep	Identify non-mission essential TPE/ excess non-property book items.	Turn in all excess class I, V, and VIII.	Turn in excess combat vehicles.	Equipment is task organized for brigade and squadron adviser and SECFOR teams.
	Nominate TPE items for turn-in, add to TPE planner, disposition orders, turn-in to RPAT.			
Container Consolidation	Identify excess containers, not on PB.	25% Reduction of Fluor services.	All excess containers removed from Camp Clark.	Excess troop equipment is turned into the BAF and FOB Salerno RPAT yard, SSA, and FSR.
	Empty class IX out of containers and turn in.			
	Monthly container inspection by SQND XO, troop XO, and SQDN UMO.			
DRMO, Retro-Sort, Scrap	Request EDRT team.	Complete removal of DRMO, retro-sort and scrap metal.		Retrograde conditions are set for follow-on unit and ready to transfer the FOB to ANA forces NLT Nov. 30, 2013.
	Clear Camp Clark junk yard.	Category "V" cable clean-up (Internet cable).		
	Request TMRs for non-property book, DRMO, and retro-sort for turn in.			
<p>Legend</p> <p>ANA = Afghan National Army BAF = Bagram Airfield DRMO = Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office EDRT = Expeditionary disposal remediation team FOB = Forward operating base FSR = Field service representative NLT = No later than PB = Property book</p> <p>RPAT = Redistribution property accountability team SECFOR = Security force SSA = Supply support activity SQDN = Squadron TPE = Theater-provided equipment TMR = Transportation movement release UMO = Unit movement officer XO = Executive officer</p>				

Figure 1. A battalion's planning outcomes over a nine-month period.

cates with other logistics officers, and keeps the brigade logistics officer informed of the battalion's progress. He also serves as an adviser to the company XO's by coordinating necessary resources for the reduction of their equipment.

Battalion S-3 assistant planner. An assistant planner from the battalion S-3 was critical in synchronizing retrograde operations with the operations schedule. The assistant planner also served as an adviser in planning future logistics operations. A Captains Career Course graduate is preferable because of his understanding of the military decisionmaking process.

Company-Level Responsibilities

At the company level, we divided the responsibilities among the XO, supply sergeant, battalion liaison, distribution platoon, maintenance control officer, and headquarters company leaders.

Company XO. Each company XO is a key player in ensuring retrograde operations are planned and executed. The company XO should work with personnel in supply, maintenance, and mayoral cells in order to provide accurate feedback to the battalion XO and the battalion logistics officer.

Company supply sergeant. The supply sergeant is key to ensuring concepts become reality and are executed. He coordinates with the company XO, the battalion logistics officer, and the brigade property book officer. He assists in identifying excess equipment and inputting it into the Theater Provided Equipment Planner, which is used to reallocate excess property that units need to retrograde from their COPs or FOBs.

The supply sergeant also builds packets for each item that he identifies for turn-in to the redistribution property accountability team (RPAT). Finally, he is required to turn in the property to the RPAT yard. The job becomes increasingly difficult if the RPAT yard is located at a different FOB and requires a logistics convoy for the removal of materiel.

Battalion liaison. The battalion liaison to higher headquarters serves a critical role in retrograde operations for two reasons. First, the liaison assists in gaining situational awareness of how retrograde priorities adjust throughout the deployment. For example, the focus of the deployment might start on container organization and then shift to the turn-in of rolling stock. The liaison serves as the eyes and ears of the subordinate unit, so he remains nested with the higher headquarters.

Second, the unit's liaison assists in reducing friction points with other organizations. The liaison should be, at a minimum, a seasoned noncommissioned officer or company-grade officer with the personality and maturity level to function independently and interact with different civilian and military personalities. Maintaining relationships is critical to the sustainment of retrograde progress.

Distribution platoon. This platoon serves as the catalyst for the actual removal of materiel. This is particularly important when large bulk items must be removed from an outlying COP or FOB. During my battalion's deployment to Afghanistan, the distribution platoon conducted two to three logistics convoys a week. They were instrumental in supporting the reduction of excess property.

Maintenance control officer (MCO). The MCO manages the motor pool and class IX. Although this seems routine, the tasks are overwhelming when reintegrating vehicle parts that have accumulated over many years. The MCO is responsible for the massive amount of parts that need to be inventoried, accounted for, tagged, reported, and coordinated for turn-in. Turning in the parts requires weekly coordination with the distribution platoon and the brigade supply support activity.

Headquarters company. The headquarters company leaders have the difficult job of maintaining all mayoral and base defense responsibilities. This team cultivates relationships with various organizations, including civil-

ian contractors, military units, and local nationals employed on the COP.

Contracting local laborers can assist immensely with a FOB's retrograde operation, especially when units are tailored for security force assistance team operations. Often the unsung heroes, local laborers will assist with the operation of heavy equipment, such as cranes, flatbed trucks, front-end loaders, and steamrollers. Hiring local laborers allows for the repositioning of large items such as 20-foot-equivalent units (TEUs), kicker boxes filled with equipment, and piles of scrap metal.

Roles at the Brigade Level and Higher

Multiple entities at the brigade and higher levels are vital to executing battalion retrograde operations. Such individuals who are external to the battalion include the deputy brigade commander, brigade executive officer, brigade S-4, and brigade logistics support team chief. Civilian contractors are also heavily involved in the process.

The Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) manages all major camp contracts, such as the contract with Fluor, a civilian contractor that provides local logistics life support. Fluor also plays a role in the retrograde process. Its logistics footprint requires a large number of TEUs for storing items such as cold food, dry food, water, and housing repair parts.

The regional contracting center provides contracting support for short-term contracts that require renewal. Examples include contracted local labor, building construction or refurbishment, and trash removal. The most notable difference is that regional contracting center contracts often require semiannual renewal while DCMA contracts remain in place throughout the existence of the COP or FOB. These contracts are crucial to the retrograde mission because they provide the funds for local laborers and heavy equipment, without which retrograde operations would practically halt.

Tracking Retrograde Operations

Tracking and updating the progress of retrograde operations ensures the unit meets its stated outcomes. Units track this progress using systems designed by the battalion XO.

At a minimum, formal internal meetings with subordinate leaders serve as a litmus test for progress. These meetings also generate a plan among the battalion XO, the battalion S-4, and the company XOs for outcomes for the next week. During the meetings, the battalion XO provides updated guidance to the staff and company XOs for reallocating and prioritizing retrograde assets.

Examples include prioritizing heavy equipment, determining the company task requirements in relation to the unit's operational schedule, and determining the type of loads that the distribution platoon will move on its next logistics convoy. Weekly battalion synchronization meetings not only provide a status on movements, but also a forum for discussing lessons learned from the previous week.

One method we used was for each company XO to provide one after-action review comment each week. Often the comments applied to all of the companies. This allowed us to discover problems early on and address them across the battalion. Although simple in nature, over time the company XO's comments provided a historical log that we passed on to the following unit. Even though not all of the comments were relevant, this technique assisted with providing feedback that related to the many different phases of the deployment.

I suggest that frequent discussions with company XOs occur throughout the week in order to eliminate friction points that arise on a daily basis. Informal visits to the companies by the battalion XO normally serve as opportunities to gain an honest assessment of company-level progress while also determining what resources are needed that are not accessible at the company level.

Providing the higher headquarters

with feedback and progress assists with the efficiency and effectiveness of retrograde operations. Discussions with headquarters staffs ensure battalion operations are synchronized with the brigade and effectively communicated to the companies. Weekly feedback to the brigade XO and S-4 provides them with the situational awareness needed when operations slow down, such as when civilian contractors change positions, take leaves of absence, or relocate to a different operating base.

This communication will be directed by the brigade XO or logistics officer and will allow the battalions to reprioritize tasks to maintain efficiency. The deputy brigade commander may have oversight of the brigade's retrograde and should understand the magnitude of the operation. Occasional discussions can effectively ensure operations are nested with the brigade's long-range plan. This also provides the deputy brigade commander with a real-time snapshot of retrograde operations at the battalion level.

Synchronization meetings with higher headquarters allow for visibility of the status of nonmilitary entities that are also required to reduce their footprint. For example, a brigade bimonthly meeting known as the area facilities utilization board allowed our command to track both subordinate units and the integrated civilian entities needed to reduce the footprint of camps and outposts.

Fluor reduced its footprint in concert with the military's reduction in size. Although units worked laterally with Fluor, the contractor received its orders through DCMA, a third-party higher headquarters. Coordinating contractor reduction was the responsibility of the company or battalion that was located with it. Maintaining an open line of communication, the higher headquarters allowed for an efficient response concerning how to adjust the size of Fluor.

Battalion liaisons at distribution hubs are the connective tissue be-

tween battalions and their higher headquarters. Liaisons are vital to equipment turn-in to distribution hubs that are geographically separated from downsizing locations.

A collective effort is essential in preparing a unit for the decline in personnel and materiel that occurs during redeployment while the unit is still supporting tactical lines of effort. Understand what you are trying to accomplish, and follow these suggestions.

Determine the magnitude of the problem. Define what retrograde means to you and your unit. Determine your problem statement and communicate these findings early on, and then revisit the problem statement throughout the deployment. Incorporate your staff and company executive officers. Gain their input and you will have their support.

Update your assessment of retrograde operations when you arrive at your area of operations. Determine the military and civilian organizations and key players involved in the process. Contact them and remain connected. Ensure you maintain weekly, if not daily, assessments. Synchronize retrograde with your unit's operational schedule. Include the logistics officer in situational updates to your higher headquarters even if not required. Lastly, approach this mission like any other operation that requires planning, preparation, execution, and continued assessments.

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