

Base Closure Assistance Team: A Valuable Resource for Closing FOBs

The base closure assistance team helped forward operating base leaders determine the disposition of equipment and real property as they prepared to leave Afghanistan.

■ By 1st Lt. Joseph Fumo

As the war in Afghanistan drew to a close, few people were aware of the long planning process and considerable effort that went into leaving. The United States had maintained military operations there since 2001, so substantial amounts of equipment, infrastructure, and personnel had been invested in the war effort.

Closing down U.S. operations and setting the Afghan government up for success was an extremely difficult and delicate mission. This article will discuss the first steps in closing down the numerous forward operating bases (FOBs) that the U.S. military had established and expanded during the war. Safely withdrawing the U.S. military's footprint presented some significant planning considerations.

FOB Disposition

The first step in closing a FOB was the initial assessment phase during which the U.S. Forces–Afghanistan leaders determined which FOBs would close and which would be transferred to Afghanistan's government. Next, the leaders notified each FOB of its closure or transfer date, which allowed the FOB mayor, base operations support integrator (BOS-I), or officer-in-charge for a geographic location to start the backward planning process.

Often, the most cost-efficient choice was to transfer demilitarized equipment to the Afghan government instead of paying to ship equipment back to the United States from the landlocked country.

It was more cost-effective to leave infrastructure in place than to tear it up and remove it.

Reducing an entire FOB “down to the dirt” required engineer assets and a much larger transportation element. This process put transitioning Soldiers and equipment at risk of enemy attack and required more time and money to accomplish the task. If the Afghan citizen who owned the land agreed to take what the U.S. military was willing to leave, the Army saved a tremendous amount of time, money, and risk to Soldiers' lives.

BCAT

A base closure assistance team (BCAT)—a group of qualified contractors and military personnel—visited FOBs to assist them in reducing their footprints in the safest, most cost-effective way. Most BCAT contractors were prior military with a background in supply or engineering and had spent years as contractors in either Iraq or Afghanistan, some for as long as a decade.

These highly qualified individuals were assigned to a unit working under the U.S. Central Command Materiel Recovery Element (CMRE). The 17th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) served as the CMRE during the transition to Operation Resolute Support.

The military unit to which the BCAT was assigned acted as a conduit to the military chain of command. The 17th CSSB used a quality

assurance surveillance program to provide oversight of the BCAT and ensure that it was providing the agreed-upon services.

The CSSB also processed missions, evaluating when the bases requesting assistance would be ready for the BCAT. The support operations section ensured that all mission and life support requirements were met before sending the BCAT to a FOB.

The BCAT provided the FOB mayor with a detailed assessment on which enabler teams would further assist in deconstructing the base and suggested what property and infrastructure to leave behind for the Afghans. [The FOB mayor is responsible for managing the daily operations of the base, including facility maintenance, contractor oversight, billeting, and supplies.]

Equipment Disposal

When a base was ordered to close completely, no infrastructure could be left behind. Many FOBs had a sewage system in place, power lines buried in the ground, roads paved with asphalt, a number of concrete pads poured, and hard standing buildings. All of these needed to be removed with engineer assets and hauled to a landfill, another base, or a central hub.

The BCAT provided the FOB mayor with guidance on the order of tasks for reducing its footprint. Non-essential assets were removed first and reductions continued until only essential force protection and life support remained. The BCAT provided guid-

ance and input on how other FOBs had managed these processes.

Real Property Transfer

When a decision was made to transfer something to the landowner or the Afghan government, a few challenges sometimes arose. First and foremost, it was often difficult to de-

termine who owned the land before the U.S. military occupied the area. When the name of the landowner was not clear, it had to be discussed in depth with the Afghan government and the local tribal officials. Once identified, the owner was consulted on what could be left behind and what needed to be taken down and hauled off with the military unit.

make the FEPP process confusing. For instance, several hard standing structures that could have been left for the Afghan National Army, other government agencies, or coalition partners still in the area came with air-conditioning units and other appliances that required a power source. Military generators were available that could have been demilitarized and gifted in order to run the air-conditioning units and appliances. However, often even though the generators were available, the recipient would not have been able to obtain enough fuel to keep the generators running.

The transfer of infrastructure was conducted using the foreign excess real property (FERP) process. FERP includes items that cannot be picked up and moved, such as buildings, roads, and underground utilities. A tent could be picked up and moved and therefore is considered foreign excess personal property (FEPP), but the concrete pad poured for the tent to stand on is considered FERP.

If the owner used the land as farmland in the past and wants it returned to its natural state, any infrastructure in place would have to be removed. When a FOB was in a town or a densely populated area, it could be donated to the Afghan government or Afghan locals through the FERP process.

Equipment Transfer

The Army could not simply leave property behind for the Afghans. Equipment was gifted through the FEPP process. FEPP included any United States-owned equipment that the Army had been authorized to give to the Afghan government.

Mixing politics and logistics could

able that could have been demilitarized and gifted in order to run the air-conditioning units and appliances. However, often even though the generators were available, the recipient would not have been able to obtain enough fuel to keep the generators running.

The BCAT was responsible for providing the FOB mayor with assessments that determined the feasibility of the Afghans using gifted items. In the end, it was about setting the Afghans up for success and not giving them equipment that they could not maintain or operate.

Assisting Command Decisions

The FOB mayor had a plethora of issues to worry about, such as security, units occupying the FOB, property accountability, and contracts. The BCAT could handle all the minor details of deconstructing a base; however, all the major decisions were still made by the FOB mayor.

After the BCAT completed its assessment and briefed the leaders on the courses of action available, other enabler teams, including military or civilian engineer assets, the materiel redistribution team, and the forward retrograde element, began conducting the deconstruction process chosen by the leaders. The materiel redistribution team was responsible for disposing of or organizing any equipment or materiel to be shipped back to a central hub.

Shortly after the FOB mayor or BOS-I received initial guidance and had the follow-on enabler teams start deconstruction, additional questions about the best way forward were raised. The BCATs became very busy and did not have enough time to revisit each site to conduct a reassessment as soon as it was needed.

This was mitigated by establishing the forward closure assistance team concept. This team consisted of a single officer designated as the FOB mayor's or BOS-I's assistant for anything regarding deconstruction and retrograde of the FOB and any enablers that could assist with the process.

This was an effective concept; it consolidated all efforts and decisions into one office instead of having up to five different enabler teams working independently based on guidance from a CMRE unit located outside the FOB. The forward closure assistance team could also provide the FOB mayor or BOS-I with the overall status of the descope mission and continue to coordinate all CMRE enabler capabilities required to meet the base closure or transfer timeline.

During the five-month deployment, the 17th CSSB BCAT section executed more than 37 missions to over 30 different locations. The teams assisted in documenting and accounting for over \$95.5 million in FEPP and \$327.5 million in FERP that was transferred to the government of Afghanistan. The BCAT completed the transfer and closure packets for more than 25 different locations that were transferred to the Afghan National Army or permanently closed.

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