Finance Detachment Operations During Operation New Dawn

A financial management detachment faced unusual challenges as they provided services to Soldiers in Iraq and prepared for troop withdrawal from the country.

By Captain Jeremy R. Eckel

On 18 November 2011, 21 finance Soldiers carrying tuff boxes filled with money boarded a C–130 Hercules airplane. The Soldiers' unit, A Detachment, 9th Financial Management Company (A/9th FMD), 593d Special Troops Battalion, 593d Sustainment Brigade, from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, was among the last financial management units in Iraq. The detachment successfully closed three fixed finance offices, disbursed Iraqi dinar, and turned in 10 years worth of accumulated equipment.

A/9th FMD provided finance support for 3 major forward operating bases (FOBs), 3 combat outposts, and more than 18,000 personnel while deployed to Iraq. The detachment occupied preestablished buildings on Al Asad Air Base, FOB Ramadi, and FOB Taji. Al Asad Air Base and FOB Taji contained vaults that each held up to $4 million in currency. Because of geographical separation of the FOBs, the finance Soldiers were divided among the bases and key leaders were assigned responsibility for maintaining the two vaults containing currency.

Dinar Disbursement

One of A/9th FMD's major goals was to reduce U.S. currency and disburse Iraqi dinar. The use of U.S. dollars in Iraq can devalue the local Iraqi currency. Disbursing Iraqi dinar increases the legitimacy of the Iraqi Government and can have a positive impact on the local economy. Policies were implemented that limited the disbursement of U.S. currency, and finance Soldiers encouraged troops to make purchases using EagleCash cards (ECCs), prepaid debit cards connected to Soldiers' bank accounts.

A/9th FMD was responsible for disbursing currency to FOB foreign vendors. It issued point-of-sale devices to vendors so that they could accept ECCs as payment. The local vendors went to the finance office twice a week and received Iraqi dinar for the ECC transaction amount recorded on their point-of-sale devices. Detachment Soldiers also disbursed Iraqi dinar to U.S. Soldiers during mobile support missions to smaller bases. A/9th FMD disbursed more than $1.5 million worth of Iraqi currency in less than 7 months.

Equipment Turn-In

When it arrived in Iraq, A/9th FMD replaced another detachment and enjoyed the amenities of a mature deployed environment. The buildings, with an abundance of computer workstations and reliable Internet connectivity, were more than adequate for conducting deployed finance operations. Military units had occupied these buildings for up to 10 years, and redeploying Soldiers had generously left behind furniture, televisions, and other appliances. However, entire rooms also were filled with broken and unserviceable equipment ranging from machinegun mounts to 800-pound safes.

In October 2011, the detachment received orders to account for and turn in all equipment and to prepare for departure to Kuwait. The military established sites on each FOB for units to turn in equipment. In addition to executing finance support operations, A/9th FMD Soldiers inventoried, documented, and transported a significant amount of equipment to the turn-in sites on their FOBs. It was a grueling process that took careful planning and several weeks to complete.

Challenges Caused by the Drawdown

Several challenges were associated with the drawdown of military equipment, such as degraded communications and Internet connectivity. Military finance operations typically require Internet connectivity to process transactions and to maintain fiscal accountability. A/9th FMD was responsible for supporting an area of operations but did not have a higher headquarters located nearby, so the FMD commander needed to use secure emails and phone calls to communicate with his higher headquarters. FOBs across Iraq were reducing their communication capabilities, and each FOB had a different timeline for equipment turn in and base closure.

By November 2011, A/9th FMD Soldiers were operating with limited equipment and could not effectively communicate with their higher headquarters. To complete the mission, the Soldiers printed and prepared finance documents and recorded all transactions manually. The detachment relied on transportation and support from the bases where they were assigned. A/9th FMD Soldiers built relationships with their host FOB leaders and ensured that they were integrated into FOB closure planning.

Moving Soldiers, equipment, and currency during a period of mass exodus was difficult. The money was counted, documented, and locked into several tuff boxes. Certain tuff boxes were reserved for coins and weighed more than 200 pounds. To protect the money, Soldiers guarded the tuff boxes.

As each FOB closed out, the A/9th FMD elements attached to the FOB departed and headed for Kuwait. The movements from the closed FOBs to Kuwait proved challenging because FMD elements moved independently of each other. After arriving in Kuwait, all FMD elements consolidated under the detachment headquarters and pulled consolidated guard duty on the money. The 9th Finance Company's headquarters transported the detachment disbursing agents to another base in Kuwait to account for and turn in their funds. During this time, tens of thousands of U.S. troops were funneling through Kuwait and waiting their turn to redeploy. Since it was a small unit, the detachment redeployed within a week of arriving in Kuwait and returned home on the night before Thanksgiving.

When a finance detachment deploys independently of its company headquarters, it can face many unique challenges. As a dispersed and small unit, A/9th FMD's success was contingent on receiving support from military units assigned within the area of operations. The detachment built relationships with those units and joined the drawdown planning process.

Captain Jeremy R. Eckel is assigned to the 593d Sustainment Brigade. He was the commander of A Detachment, 9th Financial Management Company, 593d Special Troops Battalion, 593d Sustainment Brigade, when he wrote this article. He holds a bachelor's degree in geology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He is a graduate of the Infantry Officer Basic Course, the Finance Officer Advanced Course, the Army Ranger School, the Special Operations Combat Diver Qualification Course, and the Army Airborne School.

Soldiers from A Detachment, 593d Special Troops Battalion, 10th Sustainment Brigade, maneuver an 850-pound safe into the finance office at Al Asad Airbase, Iraq. The safe was used to secure $4 million in U.S. and Iraqi currency.