

# Preparing for the Retrograde Customs Mission in Afghanistan

The 427th Brigade Support Battalion provides its lessons learned from supporting the customs mission for U.S. Central Command retrograde operations in Afghanistan.

■ By 1st Lt. Jennifer Speeckaert

The intent of the U.S. Military Preclearance Program is to simplify the return of Department of Defense (DOD) materiel from deployments. It does not replace customs inspections; instead, it assists customs and border patrol agents (CBPAs) in ensuring that the items that are arriving are free of contraband and infestations through the use of customs and border clearance agents (CBCAs) who preclear materiel. Stateside CBPAs still inspect items that have been precleared but more as a quality control check than an overall inspection of all items entering the United States.

The program helps to maintain relationships with other countries because it ensures the United States does not ship dirty items through its transportation systems.

U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Regulation (CCR) 600-10, Customs and Border Clearance Program, recommends that 10 percent of personnel in every unit deploying to the region be CBCA trained. Commanders who may be tasked to provide CBCAs need to know the certification requirements, understand the mission, and be prepared to work with other military branches and civilians. A smoothly running mission lets CBCAs focus on their jobs, which helps prevent agriculture disasters.

## How CBCAs Joined the CMRE

Traditionally, Army and Navy military police administer the U.S. Mil-

itary Preclearance Program. However, as the need for preclearance has grown in Afghanistan, Soldiers with no prior training have taken on the role as part of the CENTCOM Materiel Retrograde Element (CMRE) mission.

The customs and agricultural teams of B Company and Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 427th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), arrived in Afghanistan in April 2012 after receiving three days of training as CBCAs. The companies were tasked with providing a CMRE-sourced customs solution.

These units were the beginning of the CMRE mission in Afghanistan. Customs personnel initially were assigned to support the redistribution property assistance team (RPAT) yards. Two months later, the companies were task organized under the 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) from Grafenwoehr, Germany. After a few more months, H Company, Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group Forward, augmented the customs mission, expanding the roster to 48 customs personnel and establishing the first joint customs teams in the CMRE.

## CMRE Customs Mission and Purpose

The CMRE customs mission is to support the movement of materiel out of Afghanistan. This means that the customs element supports the RPATs and retrograde sort yards

(RSYs), which move vehicles, equipment, and containers.

CMRE personnel provide customs inspections for RPATs and units managing RSYs that ship materiel from Afghanistan. The customs agents develop a working relationship with the yards, which are operated by mainly contractors and Department of the Army (DA) civilians. This varies from a traditional customs mission in which units request support for redeployment and the interaction lasts only as long as the appointment.

Since a need for permanent CBCAs in the RSYs was recognized, their role has expanded. This is because the large number of units leaving theater without replacements has increased requirements at RPAT yards.

## CBCA Requirements

In order to be CBCA certified, a Soldier must be trained by both the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The training is coordinated through CBP. Any Soldier who is not qualified in a military police branch military occupational specialty must be an E-4 or above in order to be a CBCA.

Furthermore, CBP conducts background checks before the training. This ensures integrity and reduces the risk of blackmail. The regulation states that potential CBCAs may not have any record of disciplinary action that would bring into question the

individual's integrity. CBCA candidates may not have any prior record of theft, drug, or alcohol abuse. CBP has the final word on whether or not an individual is qualified.

CBCA training is difficult to get in theater because CBP agents, not the military, must conduct the certification. CBP agents must be flown to Afghanistan to teach the class, which presents a challenge to a deployed unit requiring the training. The class must be coordinated through the regional customs program manager. Because of these complications in coordinating training in theater, it is important to conduct the training before deployment, if possible.

The training provided by the CBP covers the regulations, but there is more to the mission than what is covered in training. For that reason, on-the-job training with military police customs units, either Army or Navy, can greatly assist in properly executing the mission.

### Regulations and Command Structure

Regulations, including CCR 600-10 and the Defense Transportation Regulation 4500.9, Chapter 5, cover the customs processes, but changes to the processes can be made in the course of operations. For example, when B Company arrived in theater, items being shipped to Kuwait were required to have a full customs inspection, which had not been the case in Iraq. Many civilians and military units assumed that the rules of the Iraq redeployment still applied to Afghanistan operations. Several units had to learn the regulations. However, a few months later an agreement was reached with Kuwait and the requirement was lifted.

Regulatory changes are not always widely published, and it is important to keep in contact with program managers (including the CENTCOM customs program manager, Afghanistan customs program manager, and the manager for each regional command in Afghanistan) who have an established hierarchy to help maintain these standards.

In addition to regulatory oversight, customs teams require a clear command structure to optimize the support relationship and ensure the CBCAs understand their roles and responsibilities. For B Company, the arrival of the Navy's customs unit provided unity of effort and validated the subject matter expertise of the team. B Company joined with HHC, 427th BSB, to create unity of command and one standard across the Combined Joint Operations Area-Afghanistan.

Additionally, the BSB found it important for small teams to have a direct support relationship instead of a command relationship with the supported unit. For this reason, it is imperative to assign at least two CBCAs to the site and ensure military leaders are engaged in the mission. Clear command structure and direct support relationships with supported units help CBCAs to enforce stan-

dards and determine if an item passes inspection.

### A Joint Effort

When H Company, Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group Forward, joined the 18th CSSB, the CBCAs of B Company and HHC found themselves working alongside Sailors. Some of those same Sailors had provided initial on-the-job training for B Company Soldiers when they arrived in theater.

The Navy CBCAs were attached to the 18th CSSB to provide additional CBCA subject matter expertise and helped to provide unity of command. The Sailors had technical expertise in custom operations since they had been doing it for more than 10 years; however, the Soldiers had been performing the RPAT and RSY missions for several months and had an in-depth understanding of what was needed for the opera-



*Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno greets Petty Officer 1st Class Janelle Switzer, a customs and border clearance agent, during a visit to the Bagram Airfield retrograde sort yard in Parwan province, Afghanistan, Feb. 21, 2013. The joint facility serves as a central part of the logistics chain for the redeployment of military property in Afghanistan. (Photo by 1st Lt. Henry Chan)*

tion. All of the Sailors and Soldiers embraced the “one team, one fight” concept, combining their knowledge to provide the best support.

### Support from Civilians

The RPAT and RSY require contracted support. Only a small team of military personnel manage a military operation that is executed by a contracted solution with more than 100 contractors and DA civilians.

The wash rack at the Kandahar Airfield RPAT yard primarily cleans vehicles that are ready to be shipped out of Afghanistan. This operation is executed by third-country nationals, many of whom do not speak English. The CBCAs assigned to the wash rack communicated with the contractors to show them the areas that still needed to be cleaned. The CBCAs also coordinated with the wash rack supervisor and program managers, none of whom were military.

Many DA civilians and contractors are military veterans. These veterans understand how the Army works; however, they also know that they are not obligated to follow military orders. Civilian contractors have contracts restricting what they can and cannot do. They generally require written proof of changes being made before they will accept a change or new requirement.

When contractors cannot execute orders immediately, it may frustrate Soldiers. However, if contractors go outside the realm of their contract, the government can refuse compensation. As such, asking contractors to perform a new duty can require a review by superiors and often a lengthy perusal of the contract to determine if it can be done within the scope of the existing contract.

To receive full support from contractors, Soldiers should strive to develop relationships with them and take the time to understand their mission. No matter how we view their roles, they are not military. They are paid to work a certain number of hours and provide certain services. Many contractors will go above and

beyond to assist in any way they can. However, they are under no obligation to do so. Relationship building with the civilian workforce allows for a better understanding of the regulations, increasing the first-time pass rate.

The development of the CMRE joint customs mission was and will continue to be successful if the lessons learned by the 427th BSB and 18th CSSB can be applied to future missions. The Soldiers that arrived in theater with certifications were able to work immediately, while those arriving without certification caused a delay that interrupted the mission.

The Soldiers learned how to work with their civilian and military counterparts in order to make the mission run more smoothly. Once a clear command structure was developed, with the Navy customs act-

ing as the final inspection authority, both Soldiers and Sailors were able to focus on executing their mission. The mission continued expanding, and eventually the companies supported 11 customs teams at nine different locations.

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*Soldiers from the 247th Quartermaster Company and Sailors from H Company, Navy Expeditionary Logistics Support Group Forward, work together in the customs mission to protect the U.S. borders. (Photo by 1st Lt. Henry Chan)*