

UNCLASSIFIED

Running head: FOB Airfield Operations

Afghanistan: Forward Operating Base

Non-Doctrinal Airfield Operations

SGM Thomas J. McCahon

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

SMNRC Class 35 Phase II

Operation Enduring Freedom, 15/06/2004 – 20/05/2005

Unclassified

Detachment NCOIC, 870th Movement Control Detachment

30 June 2009

UNCLASSIFIED
Abstract

This paper describes U.S. Army Airfield operations from May 2004 to May 2005 at Forward Operating Base Salerno in eastern Afghanistan (Khowst) near the Pakistan border. The non-doctrinal operation of the 870th Movement Control Detachment and its mission interaction with the U.S. Air Force, U.S Army Special Forces/Rangers, U.S. Marines, and Other Coalition Forces (OCFs) is described in some detail. The operations, task organization, and unique mission assignment illustrates military operations in a frontier environment.

Airfield Operations at FOB Salerno

On 16 Jun 2004 the 870th Movement Control Detachment under the command of CPT Todd McKay started the RIP/TOA process with the 1/501st PIR at FOB Salerno to take over airfield operations. I was the only member of the detachment that had experience in airfield operations (Hungry, Bosnia, Qatar). However, we soon discovered that the mission was not to be the usual Movement Control Aerial Port operation as taught by U.S. Army doctrine. The airfield had a clay-packed surface and supported all aircraft up to C-130s. As a detachment we would have to adjust to the non-doctrinal mission and try to improve on the 1/501st operation procedures.

Our first objective was to locate a terminal building and storage facility for all air cargo. We located a building near the airfield that had been previously occupied by an Italian PIR battalion back in 2002, and later the 82nd Airborne. This building with its bright-colored Italian murals on the walls was converted into a passenger terminal and airport-operations center that was only two hundred feet from the airfield. Phone service, along with NIPR and SIPR was installed and allowed us access to the Uzbekistan K-2 U.S Air Force flight scheduling for the Afghanistan Theater and CENTCOM inter-theater flights. .

Establishing our automated systems and communications were critical to maintaining a viable operation. SGTs Roberto Cruz and Carlos Mejia were our primary AALPS (Army Airplane Load Planning System) operators. With AALPS they configured our outgoing cargo so it was properly balanced on the C-130 aircraft. The U.S. Air Force GDSS (Global Decision Support System) was used to track aircraft in the CENTCOM theatre, allowing us to post arrival-departure flight schedules in the air

terminal. On the SIPR, we installed mIRC (Microsoft Internal Relay Chat) in order to chat immediately with outlying bases (US Marines and SF teams) and theatre airfield operations centers and control towers.

The first lesson we learned from the 1/501st PIR personnel was that the clay-packed 4400x120 feet airfield (including the hammerheads / turn-arounds) needed constant maintenance to ensure a flat surface, especially for the larger C-130 aircraft. Coordination was made with the local engineer unit to have rollers and water trucks work the airfield surface at least 2-3x a week. In addition, members of the detachment would police the surface of the airfield at least twice a week to remove metal and sharp rocks that might create flat tires for the landing aircraft. Much of the metal (working its way to the surface) on the airfield was shrapnel or un-exploded ordnance (UXOs) from when the Russians occupied the airfield in the 1980s. The local FOB ordnance team assisted in the removal and disposal of all UXOs. These little packages on the airfield were not something we openly discussed with flight crews, otherwise they would never use the airfield, and air was the only logistical link to Bagram, Kandhar, and K2. There was never an incident as a result of undiscovered UXOs during our tour.

To our surprise, all cargo was removed from the C-130 tailgates with large U.S Air Force 15K forklifts at the eastern hammerhead. Our detachment had no forklift operators. The 1/501st PIR personnel took the time to train three of our Soldiers (SSG Henderson, SGT Roberto Cruz, and SSG Jeremiah Greenfield) in an OJT environment by actually unloading the C-130s. All C-130s that landed at FOB Salerno never shut down while unloading/loading operations were in process. The C-130 air crews refused to shut down due to the frequent rocket attacks, and therefore forced a "hot" off-loading

routine with engines still running. This created noise and dust hazards for my ground crews, but to the Air Force was a non-negotiable subject. This "routine" loading-off loading process occurred even during rare cargo loads like towed 105mm and 155mm howitzers. By the time our detachment departed FOB Salerno, we had off-load / loading times of cargo (4-5 pallets on and off) and passengers down to an average of 19 minutes. According to the flight crews during our tour, this was the fastest time of any other airfield in Afghanistan. Prior to redeploying from Afghanistan, our ground crews personally assisted Air Force personnel in the changing of five flat C-130 tires. The exceptional performance by our detachment in air-ground operations became a focus of pride to our ground crew personnel, probably because it was non-doctrinal and unexpected of the "Army."

The non-logistic fixed-wing aircraft that utilized the FOB Salerno fell into three categories: 1) covert operations, 2) Mail and passenger flights, and 3) Other government agency / other coalition forces operations. The mail and passenger flights were typically STOL (Short Take-Off and Landing) Spanish-made CASA C-212-200 Aviocars (Construcciones Aeronauticas, S.A.) turboprops operated by Blackwater crews. These flights were usually 2-3 times a week and not on our US Air Force flight schedules, but we were tipped off by our sister detachment at the Bagram Air Field after the flights had departed. Presidential Airways that operated the CASA-212-200s was contracted by the US Department of Defense to supply U.S. Forces stationed in the remote areas of Afghanistan. The detachment ground crew responsibilities was typically unloading and loading mail and checking in the passengers. Passengers could

not fly around the Afghanistan theatre without the permission of an O5 or above, and therefore needed to be checked into the terminal for accountability.

Covert fixed-wing operations by the 1/75 Rangers and 2/75 Rangers were almost exclusively conducted at night. Typical aircraft were the USAF MC-130 Talons, CASA-212s, and Pilatus PC-6s (Piper Cubs). SSG Greenfield and I took responsibility for the night operations on the airfield. This centered on setting out a 4 and 1 configuration of TEKTITE infrared LED lights that consisted of four lights to delineate the landing box w/ 1 light on strobe-mode to delineating the eastern hammerhead where the aircraft would turn around. This setup on the 4400 foot runway was typically done with only 15-20 minutes of notification from the Air Control Tower (covert operation flights were never communicated or placed on GDSS in advance). SSG Greenfield and I assisted in removing confiscated weapons and munitions along with captured PUCs (persons under custody) from the aircraft. All night operations were conducted with night vision goggles: from the aircrews, covert operatives, to the ground crews (to include driving the length of the runway). The dark charcoal-colored PC-6 aircraft usually carried select Rangers on recon missions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The MC-130 Talon flights out of Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in Uzbekistan were almost always used when the rangers were taking vehicles (HUMMV's or Toyota pickups) on their nighttime missions. We would always be sure to get the return time from the air crews on these flights to ensure the field was prepared again 30 minutes prior to their return. U.S. Special Forces teams in the surrounding countryside were usually accommodated on regular C-130 flights during daylight hours.

One other government agency (OGAs) that utilized the airfield was USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development). The USAID flights used an Islamic Republic of Afghanistan sub-contractor, Balmoral Central Contracts out of South Africa, to transport personnel and cargo. The "Boys from Balmoral," flew turboprops, either a Beech 200 Super King or Beech 1900C-1. We always received emails from the Balmoral crews about 3-4 hours prior to their expected arrival at FOB Salerno from Kabul. The USAID personnel occupied a small building on the north side FOB Salerno. These personnel worked with other USAID teams in nearby Khowst. These aircraft required our ground crews only to assist in the loading and unloading of cargo. The British Royal Air Force would occasionally land to drop off passengers that were destined to OCF (other Coalition Forces) bases near Khowst, but these required little interaction from the ground crews. No records were kept of these USAID flights or the covert operations of the Rangers.

Approximately half way through the deployment period the 3/6 Marines (who replaced the 1/501st PIR) asked if our ground crews could assist in loading and off-loading cargo from their Ring Route UH-53 Seahorse helicopters. This opportunity provided a unique experience for our forklift operators, since the rear blade sits right above the rear cargo door. Several months later, our ground crews also assumed full responsibility for passengers and cargo of the UH-47 helicopters entering and leaving FOB Salerno. This even included the sling-load cargo munitions re-supplies to outlying bases (usually SF teams). Our movement control detachment of all 88Ns was quickly becoming a jack-of-all-trades air operations detachment. Sadly, one of the last missions we pushed off prior to our RIP/TOA was on 6 April 2005. One of the three CH-

47s taking re-deploying 25th ID personnel to Bagram crashed as a result of a sandstorm near Ghazni, killing all 15 military personnel and three civilian contractors. A friend headed home, MSG Edwin Matos-Colon, 25th Divarty, was on the downed CH-47D Chinook.

Our air-ground crews were supported by two USAF fire-fighting teams that were changed out from Manas Air Base every 60 days. These US Air Force fire fighters manned two fire engines that sat at the terminal eastern hammerhead where incoming planes turned around to off-load. We kept the fire teams informed on the daily flight schedules, and they supplied us with hard to get comfort items when one of our flights originated from Manas Air Base. Our air terminal personnel also maintained a close relationship with the U.S. army air traffic control tower. We passed along daily flight schedules and the air traffic control personnel alerted us to un-scheduled planes requesting permission to land. The air traffic control personnel were particularly helpful in sounding the alarm of incoming aircraft when our engineering crews were out prepping the air field surface. Getting heavy equipment off an air strip required time, and the air traffic control personnel were extremely helpful in several cases short response times.

The operations at FOB Salerno airfield was one of the more gratifying missions during my military career. The incoming 122mm rockets at FOB Salerno reminded me of my service at Pleiku, South Vietnam in 1972. The rockets are more a psychological threat than an actual physical threat, since they are haphazardly aimed and fired. I know the Soldiers of the 870th Movement Control Detachment felt they made a significant contribution to the U.S. military effort after their tour of duty. Being an

integral part of the effort against the insurgents in eastern Afghanistan served as a point of pride for the Soldiers. I'm sure this tour will be a high point for the careers of the detachment Soldiers.

ATSS-MH (870)

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Personal Experience Papers

1. I, Thomas J. McCahon, have submitted a Personal Experience Paper to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences from my participation in Operation Enduring Freedom that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

- () None
- () Other:

I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 15 Sep 2009

Printed Name: Thomas J. McCahon

Signature: Thomas J. McCahon

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

Printed Name/Date: _____

Signature: _____

USASMA FORM 7273-R, APR 06