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In a conflict with a near peer adversary, commanders ought to maintain operational control of their unit's retrograde. From 2012 to 2014, Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan did not have operational control of Redeployment and Retrograde in support of Reset and Reconstitution Operations Group (R4OG). While the operation was successful, the Taliban did not present a significant threat to the mission.

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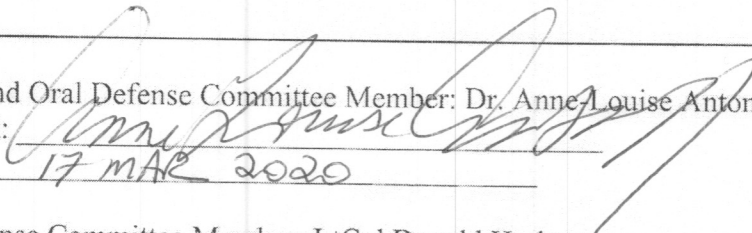
RETROGRADE OPERATIONS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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MAJOR DAVID S. ELLIOTT, SR.

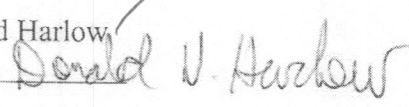
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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff

Approved: 

Date: 17 MAR 2020

Oral Defense Committee Member: LtCol Donald Harlow

Approved: LTCOL D.W. HARLOW 

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Executive Summary

Title: Retrograde Operations

Author: Major David S. Elliott, Sr., United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Employing doctrinal unity of command in a future retrograde will facilitate operational success.

Discussion: From 2012 to 2014, in order to conduct the retrograde from Afghanistan, the Marine Corps utilized an ad-hoc retrograde unit named Redeployment and Retrograde in support of Reset and Reconstitution Operations Group (R4OG). This unit was adjacent to, not subordinate to Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan (MEB-A). While R4OG was in direct support of MEB-A, the two units had different missions. MEB-A was tasked with conducting operations against the Taliban, while R4OG was tasked with retrograding MEB-A's equipment back to the United States. While coordination and cooperation resulted in the accomplishment of both missions, a future retrograde against a near-peer adversary ought to be operationally controlled by the commander who owns the equipment.

Conclusion: MEB-A and R4OG were successful, in part because the Taliban did not constitute a significant threat to the retrograde. If and when the Marine Corps conducts a retrograde against a near-peer competitor, commanders in contact must have control of their commands' retrograde.

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INTRODUCTION

It is never a case of if the United States will go to war again, but when. The Marine Corps should not expect that a future engagement will resemble the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; indeed Commandant Berger has directed that the Marine Corps shift its focus from conducting counterinsurgency in the the Middle East, to preparing for a near-peer adversary, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. Such a conflict, should it occur, will not resemble operations against the Taliban or Islamic State. A conventional enemy military will contest terrain and seek to hold lines in much the same way as the Joint Force. The initiative will change hands repeatedly, as one side or the other seeks to press any advantage it can find. Accordingly, the Marine Corps ought to be prepared to transition from the offense to the defense and to the offense again.

An often-overlooked consideration of these ebbs and flows is the retrograde mission. The logistics of sustaining a force within the Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ) of an advanced adversary possessing long-range, precision-guided munitions systems will require maximizing the lifespan of all equipment that makes it to the campaign. The Marine Corps has invested heavily in preparing to sustain itself through the support of the U.S. Navy and the expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept. Given the potency of near-peer Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2AD) capabilities, it is not a given that lines of supply will be available early in a conflict. The Marine Corps will need to maximize the lifespan of available equipment until additional materiel is supplied

The retrograde is a mission that the Marine Corps has become accustomed to executing once, at the conclusion of a campaign, with little opposition from the enemy. The Marine Corps that may face a peer adversary in the future must be prepared to execute multiple retrogrades within the WEZ of a capable enemy. Doing so will not be the first time that Marines have

accomplished such a task, but it will be the first time they have done so since the Korean War. Existing doctrine and lessons learned from Afghanistan will aid in preparing for this task.

EXISTING DOCTRINE

The purpose of a retrograde mission is to move all Marine Corps assets away from the enemy, in a manner that prevents pursuit or counterattack. Doctrinally, a retrograde “involves organized movement away from the enemy. A transitional operation, the retrograde defense occurs within a larger scheme designed to regain the initiative from the enemy.”¹ It is therefore by definition, an operation which takes place at a point in time when the enemy has seized the initiative and the Marine Corps is reconstituting its forces. A reconstitution is defined as “those actions taken by a military force during or after operational employment to restore its combat capability to full operational readiness.”²

The reason that the Marine Corps has not focused on preparing for a retrograde in the past is because control over every warfighting domain has been assumed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Should the United States find itself in a conflict with China, Russia, or Iran, such assumptions would not be prudent. The Marine Corps retrograded material from Afghanistan and Iraq with relatively little challenge from our adversaries in those countries. Despite the relative ease of the operation, there were lessons to be learned, especially when considering the unity of command of such an operation. A retrograde is after all, a military operation that typically occurs while under fire from enemy combatants.

A retrograde is defensive in nature. Indeed, “three specific defensive methods—delay, withdrawal, and retirement—are associated with the retrograde.”³ Unlike typical combat operations, where a battle may flow repeatedly between the offense and defense, during a retrograde there are specific point in time when a delaying action turns into a withdrawal, which

in turn becomes a retirement. At each point, a commander makes a conscious decision as to what assets he needs to leave on the field in contact with the enemy, and what assets should be retired for future use. Eventually, the commander disengages his unit completely, in order to reset it and return it to a future fight.

The commander's intent of ordering a retrograde is based on the belief that there is a greater chance of success in the future, or that remaining on the field will bring a minimal return on the effort and risk. Possibly, the commander has pressed the operation to the point that he believes there is little else to gain and that, as the enemy establishes defensive lines, a retrograde is more prudent than becoming mired in enemy controlled territory. While the Marine Corps focuses on offensive operations and instills in Marines, a bias for action, retrograde is not synonymous with a retreat; it is the consequence of pressing an advantage into contested terrain, to the point that the enemy is able to fall back to a strong point. Neither is it synonymous with a withdraw. A withdraw is one phase of a retrograde, but while used colloquially as a synonym, such as "American forces are withdrawing from the Middle East", the tactical task of withdraw does not encapsulate the retrograde operation.⁴

Despite the significant risks, the Marine Corps does not train to any standard in preparing for a retrograde; indeed, doing so would be complex, as doctrinally, some of the materiel being retrograded may very well be needed to prevent a further advance from an enemy who has gained the initiative. Such training would also need to involve tactical analysis of a strongpoint to which to retrograde equipment in order to reconstitute the force. It is possible that such a point may include multiple engineering and logistical challenges.

Nevertheless, unless a commander expects to maintain the initiative for the duration of an operation, it would be unwise not to consider the retrograde options prior to commencing

operations. As battle damage occurs, a commander will eventually need to execute a retrograde as the situation allows. Even when the enemy does not pose a peer-military threat to the United States, every campaign will eventually end, and unless the enemy is completely destroyed and military equipment turned over to regional allies, a retrograde will occur on some level.

While turning used equipment over to a partner nation is something that the United States has done in the past via the State Department, it is not ideal. Given the limited resources of the Marine Corps as well as the importance of the Foreign Military Sales program, which makes comparable equipment available to allies, the Marine Corps should seek to recover its materiel at the conclusion of a campaign. A recovery is defined as “actions taken by one nation prior to, during, and following an attack by an enemy nation to minimize the effects of the attack, rehabilitate the national economy, provide for the welfare of the populace, and maximize the combat potential of remaining forces and supporting activities.”⁵ A recovery is therefore, somewhat predictably, in the interest of both the Marine Corps and the economy of the United States.

A retrograde seeks to recover all material to reconstruct the force. Reconstruction is defined as “those actions taken by a military force during or after operational employment to restore its combat capability to full operational readiness.”⁶ During operations, reconstruction can be as simple as the maintenance involved in repairing a vehicle in country in order to put it back into the fight. At the conclusion of operations, or if the damage to the hypothetical vehicle is too severe, a reconstitution may involve moving that vehicle back to the United States in order to be repaired and returned to the Fleet Marine Force for future use. The decision to remove the equipment from the battlefield and return it to the United States for more advanced repairs, rather than to repair it hastily in country, is a decision that ultimately impacts the combat power

available to the commander. That decision should therefore rest with the commander or be delegated to his staff.

More than likely, a conflict with a near-peer will involve multiple retrogrades, multiple recoveries, multiple resets, etc. The equipment that makes it into theater will need to last until reliable supply lines are established. That means that as the initiative changes hands a commander must be prepared to fall back to or establish a strongpoint with materiel reset for his next advance. It is unlikely that a future campaign against Russia or China will resemble the invasion of Iraq, where there was little Saddam Hussein could do to prevent an advancing joint force. The decision when and where to retrograde therefore must be planned for, just like any other contingency plan within the operation.

The decision to retrograde may be made at the tactical, operation, or strategic level of command. Retrograding at a lower level may have implications for a higher level and a commander at a higher level may direct a retrograde at a lower level. This was the case in Afghanistan, where the commander of Marine Forces Central Command (MARCENT) directed the retrograde in 2012. The tempo of the retrograde rapidly increased in 2014, following a public statement by President Obama that American forces would leave the country by year's end.⁷

While a decision to retrograde may be made at the strategic level, it is best still to maintain unity of command. In Afghanistan, unity of command with regard to the retrograde did not exist, causing a significant degree of friction. This was in large part due to the fact that the Taliban did not present an existential threat, and the Marine Corps had the flexibility to ignore retrograde doctrine and assume additional risk in exchange for efficiency. Instead of Marine Expeditionary Brigade–Afghanistan (MEB-Afghanistan) retrograding itself, the Marine Corps reinforced it with a retrograde unit composited from all three MEFs. This unit, named

Redeployment and Retrograde in support of Reset and Reconstitution (R4OG) was in direct support to MEB-Afghanistan, but was operationally controlled by MARCENT and therefore technically an adjacent unit to MEB-Afghanistan.

RETROGRADE FROM AFGHANISTAN

The purpose of a retrograde mission is to move all Marine Corps assets away from the enemy, in a manner that prevents pursuit or counterattack. Ideally, a retrograde is completed in a permissive environment, following the destruction of an enemy's military. Even in a non-traditional campaign, such as Operation ENDURING FREEDOM the enemy is still able to conduct harassing attacks in support of his objectives, while the Marine Corps displaces its equipment and personnel. It is reasonable to expect and plan for the fact that a future retrograde will also face an enemy that is not completely destroyed and that a future enemy will detect and harass a future retrograde effort, to a greater degree than was the case in Iraq, and more recently, in Afghanistan . Accordingly, the lessons learned from Afghanistan should be applied to a future retrograde, provided they do not conflict with doctrine. The most important of these lessons reinforces the importance of unity of command during the retrograde.

The retrograde from Afghanistan occurred over a two-year period, starting in 2012. The effort culminated in 2014 as operations in Afghanistan declined and the final equipment was collected and sent back to the United States. MEB-Afghanistan, then commanded by Brigadier General Yu conducted offensive operations until October 2014. Adjacent to MEB-Afghanistan, R4OG was in direct support to MEB-Afghanistan, but under the operational control of MARCENT.

R4OG was composed from across the Marine Corps. Until March 2014, R4OG operated adjacent to a Logistics Command (Forward), based in Albany, GA. LogCom (Fwd) was

comprised primarily of civilian contract personnel, led by a small number of Marine officers. In May 2014, R4OG absorbed the personnel within LogCom (Fwd) to eliminate a duplicative effort. By the summer of 2014, R4OG was comprised of approximately 350 Marines with contracted civilian personnel in support.

R4OG comprised two companies: Headquarters Company and Retrograde Operations Company. By October 2014, the Marine Corps had retrograded or redeployed all Marines and equipment, with the exception of a force of approximately 200 Marines, which primarily included General Yu, the R4OG Commander, the majority of Retrograde Operations Company, and a small number of staff officers and security personnel from Headquarters Company and General Yu's staff.

In October, General Yu closed Camp Leatherneck, turning over control of the camp to the Afghan National Army. This signified the end of Marine Corps operations in Helmand Province. It also marked the culmination of a massive retrograde operation, which moved billions of dollars in equipment back to the United States.

In just the final six months of the mission, R4OG retrograded over \$846 million worth of equipment. This was a moment of pride for the Marine Corps, as the objective of the deployment was to avoid the public embarrassment that the U.S. Army had suffered in Iraq.⁸ When leaving Iraq, the U.S. Army left tens of millions of dollars in equipment behind, much of which fell into the hands of enemy fighters. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Amos, was intent on ensuring that all U.S. Marine equipment would be retrograded back to the United States, turned over to coalition partners, or documented and destroyed. This concluded a multi-year effort, which while effective, was not doctrinal.

In 2012, the logistical effort of retrograding all of MEB-Afghanistan's equipment became a distinct Line of Effort (LOE). R4OG was never formally designated the main effort in Afghanistan, although Commandant Amos and Assistant Paxton both verbally stated this to the Marines of R4OG. This operational miscommunication was likely a result of strategic (and public) guidance from President Obama to expedite the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While R4OG was not designated as the main effort, the logistic effort increasingly became the priority as the withdrawal deadline approached. Doctrinally, no warfighting function should effectively serve as the main effort. Units are designated as the main effort and supporting efforts. The main effort accordingly receives the weight of the available equipment set in order to accomplish their mission. A commander weights his subordinate main effort commander in order to accomplish his intent. This is where the Afghanistan retrograde became convoluted. Effectively, President Obama (and Commandant Amos) identified the logistic mission as the main effort, but weighted MEB-Afghanistan as the main effort for offensive operations against the Taliban. As the 2014 withdrawal deadline approached, the equipment used to weight the main effort was pulled away for retrograde. By establishing R4OG adjacent to MEB-Afghanistan, MARCENT retained the ability to control the flow of equipment leaving Afghanistan. MARCENT planners recognized that due to the limited number of aircraft available to support the retrograde mission, MEB-Afghanistan needed to push equipment out of the country at a steady rate.

Despite its status as a LOE, the retrograde did not at first proceed as rapidly as intended. Because R4OG was in direct support of MEB-Afghanistan, the pace of the retrograde was determined by the operational tempo of the MEB. While the retrograde focused on defensive operations, the requirement to conduct offensive operations against the Taliban took priority

during the early months and MEB-Afghanistan retained the overwhelming majority of equipment in country. This situation resulted in a minimal amount of equipment being retrograded until 2014. From May to October of 2014, by contrast, R4OG retrograded a 51% increase in equipment.⁹ This spike necessitated the involvement of Air Force and Air National Guard aircraft to support the retrograde mission.

The Marine Corps was unable to retrograde its equipment using operationally controlled assets, primarily due to MEB-Afghanistan's hesitancy to retrograde equipment used for operations. Brigadier General Yu was tasked by the Commanding General of MARCENT with conducting offensive operations against the Taliban, while Colonel Whitaker, commanding officer of R4OG, was tasked by MARCENT with conducting the final phase of the retrograde. A great deal of cooperation was necessary in order to accomplish both missions, as both commanders were adjacent to one another, with R4OG in direct support to MEB-Afghanistan, but with seemingly conflicting missions.

While R4OG was awarded the "Logistics Unit of the Year" twice during the period from 2012 to 2013, that symbolic achievement did not change the fact that the overwhelming weight of the military equipment in country would not be transported until late in 2014.¹⁰ This delay was possibly due, at least in part, to the expectation that political rhetoric regarding a withdraw did not constitute official orders and that combat operations would continue for the near future.

In May 2014, however, President Barack Obama unexpectedly announced that the military would cease operations in Afghanistan by the end of December 2014.¹¹ This change resulted in MEB-Afghanistan increasing the amount of equipment it retrograded. Tension still existed between the two competing missions, but as a strong command relationship existed,

MEB-Afghanistan dramatically increased the amount of equipment that it turned over to R4OG as the December deadline approached.

Ascertaining the amount of equipment in Afghanistan now became paramount, as it was increasingly apparent that the amount of equipment in Afghanistan had not been accurately accounted for over the previous 13 years of war. As units within MEB-Afghanistan redeployed back to the United States, gear was frequently left in front of the R4OG gates anonymously. Additionally, units would turn in greater numbers of materiel than they had accounted for on paper. These were the matters that R4OG and MEB-Afghanistan concerned themselves with, due to the overmatch between the United States and the Taliban. In a future retrograde against a near-peer adversary, documentation and accountability of equipment would be secondary to generating combat power quickly.

The retrograde from Afghanistan seemed to represent the end of combat operations in that country. While that has since proven to be a false assumption as the train and equip mission continues, the Marine Corps retrograded all assets from Afghanistan with the expectation that the equipment would be used again in a future campaign in another country. In this sense, the retrograde from Afghanistan could be an example of a retrograde at the conclusion of a conflict.

If the United States finds itself in a war with a near-peer adversary, it is probable that there will be multiple retrogrades during the conflict, as the initiative is traded between belligerents. A campaign can have as many retrogrades as it has changes in initiative. In such a scenario, the commander must rely more on retrograde doctrine, rather than what was effective in Afghanistan. Effectively establishing a “retrograde phase” of a campaign and creating a new retrograde unit to conduct that mission proved effective in the end against the Taliban, but

expecting similar freedom of movement against the Chinese is unrealistic. A commander must therefore be the one responsible for his unit's retrograde.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

As previously mentioned, General Yu was not given operational control (OPCON) of R4OG. Instead, R4OG was in direct support to MEB-A. This presented a challenge for both MEB- Afghanistan and R4OG.. MEB-Afghanistan was not assigned responsibility for the retrograde and as there were still security requirements and an offensive mission to accomplish, MEB-Afghanistan continued to conduct operations against the Taliban. Meanwhile, MEB-Afghanistan's higher headquarters, MARCENT, retained operational control of R4OG, and the retrograde mission.

This dual chain of command and two missions presented a conflict, where R4OG sought to recover as much of MEB-A's equipment as possible, as quickly as it could be retrieved, while the subordinate commands were still prioritizing their missions. General Yu gave clear guidance to his subordinate commanders that they were to assist in the retrograde, but the units also needed to be prepared to execute their assigned missions. The tension between the need to retrograde and the requirement to conduct current operations resulted in many units seeking to hold on to their equipment for as long as possible. If R4OG had been assigned either OPCON or TACON to MEB-A, this would have alleviated the conflicted missions. General Yu would have assumed responsibility for the retrograde mission and been able to direct the pace of the retrograde. Instead, MARCENT directed Col Whitaker and R4OG to retrograde, in particular to plan the necessary airlift required to retrograde and to recover enough equipment so that no airlift was wasted or plane sent unnecessarily.

For the staff at MARCENT and at Logistics Command, the problem of conflicted command was academic. As Marines they understood the need for MEB- Afghanistan to retain their equipment as long as possible. The truth of the situation nevertheless was that the missions to conduct offensive operations and to retrograde were in conflict.

This conflict could have been prevented if MARCENT had ensured the command structure was in accordance with doctrine. Ensuring unity of command in Afghanistan would have nested R4OG within the MEB- Afghanistan strategy. Instead, R4OG supported the MEB- Afghanistan strategy, but their primary mission was to recover materiel that at times was required for MEB-Afghanistan operations.

Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-1 defines unity of command as “vesting of a single commander with the requisite authority to direct and coordinate the actions of all forces employed toward a common objective”.¹² R4OG demonstrated this principle extremely well when Col Whitaker took command. Previously, R4OG was commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel, while Logistics Command – Forward (LogCom-Fwd) was an adjacent unit, also commanded by a different Lieutenant Colonel (at times a Major), but with an almost identical mission. LogCom-Fwd was primarily comprised of civilian contractors, supervised by Marines.

When Col Whitaker arrived in Afghanistan, one of the first things that he did was to have LogCom-Fwd merged into R4OG. Even if the two commands had identical missions and a good command relationship, they would have had different metrics for success and been in competition for retrograde assets such as wash racks and airlift. By merging LogCom-Fwd into R4OG, Col Whitaker took responsibility for the entirety of the retrograde mission. This also provided the Marines and civilians an organizational chart that included unity of command, as

well as a prioritization of objectives. The same is true of the adjacent/direct support command relationship between MEB- Afghanistan and R4OG. The plan that was executed from 2012-2014 worked, but it was not ideal and certainly not doctrinal.

The retrograde in Afghanistan was artificially simple with regard to force protection. MEB- Afghanistan had the security of knowing there was a significant overmatch compared to the Taliban, all the way until the final few weeks of the retrograde. Task Force Belleau Wood had responsibility for securing Camp Leatherneck. When the camp was under attack, each command aboard the camp had responsibility for a section of the perimeter. For example, R4OG was responsible for sector green aboard Camp Leatherneck. This responsibility was delegated down to a platoon within Retrograde Operations Company.

While a retrograde from Afghanistan provides many salient lessons that may be applied to a future retrograde, it is important to recognize that the Taliban in 2012-2014 did not present a significant opposition to the retrograde. Indeed, despite the occasional mortar or rocket, the operation was uncontested. This was certainly due, at least in part, to the continuing offensive operations being conducted by MEB-Afghanistan, which may have drawn some of the Taliban's attention away from the retrograde. Security patrols around Helmand received enemy contact because their mission was to seek out the enemy and make contact. The retrograde incidentally received contact because of its proximity to the rest of MEB- Afghanistan aboard Camp Leatherneck.

MEB- Afghanistan had the luxury of being able to compartmentalize combat operations, retrograde operations, passive force protection, and the train and equip mission that involved allied nations. While R4OG did receive multiple indirect fire attacks and MEB- Afghanistan subordinate commands received several casualties due to vehicle borne IEDs, there was minimal

overlap between combat operations and the retrograde mission. While the MEB-Afghanistan and R4OG command relationship accomplished the retrograde mission in Afghanistan, in a conflict with Russia or China, it may take the majority of a unit to protect a retrograde. At the same time, it may not be possible to designate a subordinate unit for a retrograde, let alone to designate a separate phase for it. [?]

Unity of command between R4OG and MEB-Afghanistan could have ensured not only a better weighting of effort between retrograde and operations, but also a greater degree of force protection. When Camp Leatherneck received indirect fire, a platoon commander within R4OG and a small security force of 12 Marines would rush to the perimeter of sector green and establish a defensive posture. While it was understood that the Marines would tie in with a MEB-Afghanistan subordinate command on their left flank, and a squad of Georgian Marines on their right flank, at no point did they formally become TACON to the Task Force Belleau Wood commander, who was responsible for camp security within MEB-A.

In 2012, Camp Leatherneck was attacked by Taliban jihadists, resulting in two casualties and the destruction of several aircraft.¹³ One of the contributing factors to the loss was a decrease in security along the east side of Camp Bastion, which was adjacent to Camp Leatherneck. This deficiency was due, in part, to the retrograde and the redeployment of many security forces. Ultimately, force protection is the responsibility of the commander at every level. In the case of the 2012 attack, the squadron commander was one of the Marines killed. That commander, LtCol Raible, understood that the security of Camp Leatherneck was the responsibility of Task Force Belleau Wood. The security of MEB-Afghanistan's precursor unit was the responsibility of Major General Gurganus, who commanded all Marine Expeditionary Force Forward (MEF-Fwd) at the time.

A month prior to the attack, MajGen Gurganus had ordered the security force at the flightline decreased from 250 Marines and contractors to 100. While the investigation into the 2012 events does not reference the retrograde effort, 2012 is the same year that the retrograde began.¹⁴ Ultimately, MajGen Gurganus was denied promotion to Lieutenant General by then Commandant Amos and forced to retire. The first rotation of R4OG was established in April 2012. MajGen Gurganus directed the decrease in security forces in August of 2012. The Marine Corps ultimately found MajGen Gurganus responsible for failing to ensure the security of the force.¹⁵ This outcome sent a clear message to subsequent commanders not to take security for granted aboard Camp Leatherneck. It may have also contributed to the hesitancy of MEB-Afghanistan subordinate commands in 2014 to relinquish their equipment until told to do so. It is fair to assume that their priority was force protection, not retrograde efficiency.

If MARCENT had given BGen Yu OpCon of R4OG, he would have needed to balance the security of the camp with the retrograde mission. MARCENT did not hold BGen Yu responsible for the retrograde, although MEB-Afghanistan subordinate commands were implicitly required to relinquish equipment due to the nature of their relationship to R4OG. If another attack on Camp Leatherneck had resulted in the loss of life, there would undoubtedly be a thorough investigation as to whether BGen Yu had done everything in his power to ensure the security of the camp. If the retrograde mission had failed and high visibility end items or sensitive equipment had been left in Afghanistan, the failure would have been attributed to Col Whitaker and/or MARCENT, but not MEB-Afghanistan. Both commanders were working to accomplish their assigned missions; but those missions were often times in conflict. Retrograding equipment used for security was a risk to MEB-Afghanistan, but at least in principle, a success for R4OG.

Unity of command is the principle that a single commander holds all responsibility and authority for the accomplishment of a mission. Ideally, that commander receives a mission-type order including a tactical task, commander's intent, and end state. One of the challenges of senior leadership is the frequent need to translate guidance or a vague intent into a mission for their subordinates. The retrograde ultimately proved successful, but if the Taliban presented an existential threat in the way a near-peer adversary would, MEB- Afghanistan would never have been able to turn over equipment to R4OG be retrograded. Instead, they would need to retrograde the equipment themselves, conducting a defense to their front and pulling equipment back based on the willingness to assume risk by the commander.

ACCOUNTABILITY

To prepare for a future retrograde operation, the Marine Corps ought to train to a standard. At this time, those standards do not exist. This situation in 2014, caused MARCENT to require R4OG to retrograde MEB-Afghanistan equipment. To be sure, MEB-Afghanistan was sufficiently occupied conducting what was expected to be the final combat operations of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, but the Marine Corps may not have the ability to task a dedicated retrograde unit in a future conflict with a near-peer adversary. A commander must retain the ability to control what assets are pulled back from the line and retrograded.

One reason why MEB-Afghanistan did not, and indeed could not, to train for a retrograde was due to the practice of newly arrived units "falling in on" gear from the previous unit they were relieving. Some of the gear that was retrograded in 2014 had been in Afghanistan since almost the start of the war. The Marine Corps became accepting of redeploying Marines while turning over equipment and ammunition to Marines freshly arrived from the United States. Often, some of the material was organic to the redeploying unit, but some was turned over, from

one unit to the next. This practice saved the Marine Corps money and time, as individual units did not need to transport all of their equipment in and out of Afghanistan.

In a future war against China or Russia, a unit will need to maintain a high degree of mobility and will not be tied to a forward operating base (FOB), where it could be detected and targeted. The supply process must therefore be additive and innovation, such as 3D printing of part or locally sourcing of supplies, will become the norm. The fluidity of future operations will not allow the artificial simplicity of Afghanistan, where the United States enjoyed total air control and the enemy possessed minimal (if any) electromagnetic detection capabilities. When a unit arrives in a future combat zone, they must be prepared to begin conducting operations immediately, as they may be reinforcing a unit already in contact, or possibly replacing a destroyed unit.

While falling in on equipment was artificially easy, the practice of handing over gear in Afghanistan to relieving units and maintaining strict accountability caused no small amount of consternation for R4OG. Because the equipment had changed hands so many times over the course of 13 years of war, records were not always maintained. This resulted in MEB-Afghanistan actually having more equipment in country than the documentation indicated. What was on the one hand, a boon to commanders who could generate combat power from that equipment, eventually became a major concern to R4OG.

Commandant Amos had directed that all Marine Corps assets in Afghanistan would be accounted for and either retrograded, turned over to allies, or when appropriate, destroyed in country. In giving such an order, he hoped to avoid the negative press that the Army had received in Iraq, after leaving tens of millions of dollars of equipment in country.¹⁶ Some of that equipment eventually found its way into the hands of insurgents and there was no shortage of

propaganda showing Al Qaeda jihadists using and posing with U.S. Army vehicles and other materiel.¹⁷

In Afghanistan, R4OG was challenged to find enough strategic air lift capability to retrograde all of the Marine Corps equipment back to the United States. Much of the equipment was sent via contracted flatbed to ports on the Pakistani Ground Line of Communication (GLOC). After one vehicle was intercepted by an Afghan tribal leader who expected to be compensated for its return, more of an emphasis was placed on finding additional air lift capabilities. While the tribal leader ultimately determined that returning the intercepted vehicle to MEB-AFGHANISTAN and R4OG without ransom was in his best interest, the event highlighted the fact that as MEB-AFGHANISTAN redeployed more of its forces, combat power would decrease and if such an event happened again, the United States might not recover the asset again.

To further illustrate why the Pakistan GLOC was not a viable solution toward the end of 2014, some of the assets being transported were high-visibility major end items such as the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles. The MRAP was a highly publicized solution to the improvised explosive device (IED) threat within Afghanistan. Accordingly, it would have been extremely bad publicity for the Marine Corps should one of those vehicles be captured by the Taliban, who could then examine and perhaps counter the defensive V-shaped shields under the vehicle. By the end of 2014, air lift was the preferred method of retrograde for all equipment, especially major end items, high-visibility assets and especially weapons and ammunition. R4OG was especially cognizant that weapons needed to be carefully accounted for before redeployment and tracked during movement.

Before any of the materiel could be redeployed however, it was necessary to determine how much equipment was left in Afghanistan. Due to the level of unexpected equipment being recovered by R4OG, the R4OG Mobility Officer, CWO3 Christopher Wright quickly realized that the Marine Corps might not have the requisite aviation capability to fly the equipment out of the country. In order to determine how much equipment was in the country, General Yu instructed all of his subordinate commanders to conduct a “wall to wall” inventory. R4OG assisted in this effort, and by July 2014, the Marine Corps had a much more accurate assessment of what assets were in country. This is clearly not something that the Marine Corps would do if it were in contact with Russia or China.

In Afghanistan though, CWO3 Wright’s suspicion was correct: The Marine Corps did not have enough organic assets in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM to retrograde all of the equipment home by the target extraction date. In order to supplement the available airlift, Transportation Command reinforced the retrograde with U.S. Air National Guard aircraft. Utilizing these aircraft in conjunction with operationally controlled Marine C-130, R4OG completed the retrograde well ahead of President Obama’s end of year deadline.

Even in an artificially simply environment, where the operation included a phased retrograde, R4OG and MEB-Afghanistan encountered a significant amount of friction. The circumstances that allowed R4OG to be successful cannot be expected to prevail in a future war; the enemy and the operating environment would be very different, requiring a very different operating concept, one based on rapid, frequent movement with low-signature, small-footprint, sustainable assets, without the certainty of resupply. Operating within the WEZ would put a premium on sustainability, thus requiring retrogrades, which might become more frequent, to occur with little loss or waste. Longer resupply lines which were sustainable in Afghanistan may

not work in war with China, Russia, Iran, or a proxy-state armed with per-competitor A2/AD systems.

PLANNING FOR A FUTURE RETROGRADE

If the Marine Corps finds itself in a near-peer conflict, it will not have the ability to neatly assign the mission of the retrograde to a unit in direct support, such as R4OG. Because the Taliban lacked the size and proximity to conduct a significant attack aboard Camp Leatherneck, General Yu was willing to accept risk to MEB-A's force protection, as the final vehicles and weapons were being loaded onto aircraft. At a certain point, the last Marine rifle squad needed to be pulled off the perimeter and Camp Leatherneck turned over to the Afghans, and their equipment could not wait until the last moment.

In a fight against China or Russia, the initiative may change hands many times. There will be multiple times when a retrograde is the appropriate decision. A force that overextends itself, especially with battle damaged equipment, is not going to be as effective against a counterattack when the initiative changes. The Marine Corps must have the ability to establish defensive lines and strongholds; as well as the ability to repair and reset damaged equipment. In a future fight against a near peer, a unit conducting combat operations will likely need to be able to retrograde itself while simultaneously maintaining contact with the enemy.

Likewise, a logistics unit in direct support of a retrograde, will need to be prepared to shift its mission from a friendly-focused convoy to enemy focused mission with no additional time to prepare. While the retrograde in Afghanistan was widely declared a success, the task organization and the compartmentalization of combat and retrograde operations was a method that works against an overmatched enemy. Just as "every Marine is a rifleman", if and when a

retrograde against China or Russia is necessary, every Marine conducting combat operations ought to be ready to retrograde.

This is akin to a squad on patrol “going firm”. Periodically while on patrol, a squad leader will direct the patrol to pause and adopt a stronger security posture. This might involve moving M249s onto rooftops or other positions with increased visibility. The squad leader might need to refine his assumptions about the enemy or perhaps receive a resupply. Similarly, a battalion commander may decide that he no longer has a position of advantage compared to the enemy and believes that he has pushed so far into the enemy’s rearward area that they have reconstituted a force ready to mount a successful counterattack. If the commander has equipment in need of repair and the ability to do so, he may retrograde the equipment to a point where it can be repaired and reset. Currently, most commanders are familiar with a wrecker towing a single vehicle or two out of the fight for repair. If and when a near-peer conflict begins, a retrograde would more likely look like those of WWII or Korea, where a battle worn unit is pushed to the rear for reconstitution before being returned to the fight.

Afghanistan afforded the Marine Corps the opportunity to recognize that the retrograde mission is not an afterthought. It also provided the opportunity for a highly complex retrograde from Afghanistan to the United States. In the South Pacific or Scandinavia or the Baltic States, a retrograde would not be nearly as far. Neither would the expectation of the American taxpayer be that every single Marine Corps asset be recovered. The standards for a successful retrograde would be lower, but the risk of failure would be much higher. In Afghanistan, if all equipment was not retrograded, the Marine Corps would receive bad publicity. If a war with Russia or China started, the cost of failing to retrograde key principle end items would translate almost immediately into combat effectiveness.

In future combat, moreover, a unit that does not fully retrograde its equipment may not have the ability to be resupplied immediately during reconstitution. Operating initially within the WEZ, the Marine Corps will have to fight to create the conditions that make it possible to establish external lines of communication for significant resupply. A future engagement will be disaggregated with very long lines of communication. The Marine Corps must therefore be stealthy, self-sustainable, and a good steward of its resources.

The Marine Corps deploys with extra parts, but rarely are extra vehicles waiting to be issued, especially if a unit is retrograding for the third or fourth time after six months of fighting. The Marine Corps has always taken pride in accomplishing the mission without asking for too much in the way of resourcing. At a certain point, at least in the beginning, what is brought to the expeditionary advanced base in peacetime is all that is available; and pride or being accustomed to austerity will not substitute for the combat power of ready equipment. While the taxpayers want victory and don't care if a damaged principal end item is left on the battlefield, the warfighter will care in a future fight if that end item cannot be quickly repaired and returned to service.

CONCLUSION

The retrograde from Afghanistan from 2012 to 2014 provides many lessons which should be applied to future combat with an enemy that poses an existential threat. Such a war will afford multiple occasions when a retrograde becomes advisable. The organizational structure and method used to retrograde MARCENT from Afghanistan ultimately proved successful. It is important to recognize though, that the retrograde was not doctrinal and that a major reason that the retrograde went as smoothly as it did was because the Taliban did not present a significant threat to MARCENT. They conducted harassing attacks and were largely content to wait out the

Americans in Afghanistan. If the Marine Corps had been conducting a retrograde during a war against Russia or China, when the enemy seeks not simply to eject Americans from their sphere of influence, but to claim territory from US friends and allies, construct of R4OG adjacent to MEB- Afghanistan would not have been successful.

The most important lesson that was learned from the retrograde from Afghanistan was the need for doctrinal unity of command. While both commanders were able to accomplish their missions, placing R4OG in direct support to MEB- Afghanistan instead of attaching it to them was not the best use of the force. When planning for a future fight against an existential threat, the Marine Corps must rely more on doctrine than on past practice against the Taliban.

¹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Infantry Company Operations*. MCWP 3-11.1. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2014), p. 7-2.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Deployment and Redeployment Operations*. Joint Publication 3-35. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), GL-8.

³ U.S. Marine Corps, *Infantry Company Operations*. MCWP 3-11.1. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2014), p. 7-2.

⁴ U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*. MCDP 3-0. (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), Appx C.

⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Deployment and Redeployment Operations*. Joint Publication 3-35. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), GL-8.

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Deployment and Redeployment Operations*. Joint Publication 3-35. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), GL-8.

⁷ The White House. *Statement by the President on Afghanistan*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan> (accessed 24 Jan 2020)

⁸ Rowan Scarborough. *Gear Galore Left in Iraq as Last Troops Pull Out*. The Washington Times. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/dec/15/gear-galore-left-in-iraq-as-last-troops-pull-out/> (Accessed 20 Jan 2020)

⁹ Data tracked by R4OG mobility officer, CWO-3 Wright. Reported to author in Oct 2014.

¹⁰ Sgt Jessica Ostroska. *Afghanistan Unit Awarded Logistics Excellence Award by Commandant of the Marine Corps*. U.S. Marine Corps. <https://www.imef.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/535261/afghanistan-unit-awarded-logistics-excellence-award-by-commandant-of-the-marine/> (Accessed 24 Jan 2020)

¹¹ The White House. *Statement by the President on Afghanistan*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan> (accessed 24 Jan 2020)

¹² U.S. Marine Corps, *Infantry Company Operations*. MCWP 3-11.1. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2014), p. 7-2

¹³ Quentin Sommerville. Camp Bastion Assault: Details emerge of Taliban Attack. BBC.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19704620> (Accessed 24 Jan 2020)

¹⁴ U.S. Marine Corps, Accountability determination of U.S. Commanders for the 14-15 September 2012 Attack on the Camp Bastion, Leatherneck, and Shorabak (BLS) Complex, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (Washington D.C.: HQMC, 2013).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rowan Scarborough. *Gear Galore Left in Iraq as Last Troops Pull Out*. The Washington Times.
<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/dec/15/gear-galore-left-in-iraq-as-last-troops-pull-out/>
(Accessed 20 Jan 2020)

¹⁷ While there is no documentation to support this hypothesis, it is possible that the equipment left in Iraq by the U.S. Army was the delta between equipment that was accounted for and equipment that had been improperly handed off between units, without sufficient documentation.

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