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CentCom's logistics facing a do-or-die test

William R. Levesque

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With President Barack Obama poised to ramp up troop levels in Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command planners are in the midst of the military's biggest logistical challenge since the Vietnam War.

How do you marshal billions of dollars in equipment to escalate one war in Afghanistan while scaling back another in Iraq?

"This is probably the most complicated logistical operation we've done in our lifetime," said Army Maj. Gen. Kenneth Dowd, director of logistics for CentCom, which is based at Tampa's MacDill Air Force Base.

In a wide-ranging interview with the *St. Petersburg Times* this week, Dowd said landlocked Afghanistan presents greater difficulties than Iraq with its fewer routes of supply.

CentCom is now conducting an assessment of air strips in Afghanistan, and Dowd said engineers will have to expand them in order to resupply larger numbers of troops by air.

"I'm a little concerned about" airfield capacity, Dowd said. "We've got to expand and make it better."

At the same time, Dowd said, engineers will have to spend considerable time removing mines in the rugged country dating to the Soviet invasion three decades ago.

All of that activity comes as his office determines the fate of 2.8 million pieces of equipment troops have brought to Iraq.

"It's really quite an art," Dowd said of this life-and-death logistical dance.

Obama is expected to announce next week an escalation of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan that will send as many as 30,000 additional troops on top of the 68,000 already there.

Much of the U.S. equipment in Iraq will never return to the states.

Often, it isn't cost-efficient to do so, planners say.

Much of it will be sold to Iraqi security forces, Dowd said. Other gear not sent to Afghanistan after refurbishment in Kuwait might be placed in storage somewhere in CentCom's area of responsibility, which includes 20 nations in the region.

This can be a daunting political challenge in the Middle East, where other nations will not want any U.S. presence in their territories.

Some look back at the U.S. experience in Vietnam as a cautionary tale for Iraq planners.

Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., told reporters earlier this year that he worried about too much gear being left behind, which he said happened in Vietnam.

When he visited Vietnam after the war, "I remember seeing rows and rows of U.S. equipment that we left behind. We must do a better job managing the redeployment from Iraq," he said in a statement in July.

Dowd said his planners have been working for more than a year on a smooth withdrawal from Iraq. He said he expects few major problems.

He said technology helps his office more efficiently move and track gear than ever before.

Dowd acknowledged that planners have to learn from mistakes made in Iraq, particularly in quickly building a military infrastructure providing for tens of thousands of troops.

He noted problems with poorly installed and maintained electrical wiring. Some troops were electrocuted.

"We jumped into some of these buildings over there," Dowd said. "We occupied them. ... But you wouldn't want to live in that house because of the way the electrical wiring was done. We spend a lot of time making sure these locations are safe."

To Dowd, the folks working under him who make sure the flow of supplies doesn't stop are some of the unsung heroes of the wars.

"There are young American folks who make this happen," Dowd said. "They don't wear much rank on their lapels. But they're phenomenal."