

Get home safely

How the army's Logistics Support Regiment's fleet of vehicles was brought back to the UK and Germany from Afghanistan in one piece

By Gary Sullivan

IN MARCH 2013 I wrote about a young Royal Logistics Corps (RLC) driver and the Convoy Logistic Patrol (CLP) he was part of. As we approach summer 2014, the last CLP has rolled into Bastion and by the time you read this the trucks and drivers of the Logistics Support Regiment will be back at their bases, either in Germany or the UK.

The base closure programme is nearly complete as there is now just Camp Bastion plus one left from the 136 at the peak of the operation. Troop numbers are down to around 5,000, from a high of 10,000 and as ever, the military are as efficient at creating acronyms as they are at delivering military effect. The phrase on everyone's lips is Pogo – proof of good order – and that's how we are going to redeploy from Afghanistan to the UK, in good order.

However, it is not as straightforward as packing your old kit bag and jumping on the next plane to Blighty. There is the small task of 5,500 containers of equipment, 50 aircraft (mostly helicopters), 400 tonnes of ammunition casings and the small matter of 3,345 vehicles and major equipment (VAME).

In simple terms, the operational requirement plans are drawn up and all the necessary equipment allocated. With the Afghan national security forces leading 98% of the operations, the equipment requirement is much reduced and the surplus goes into the redeployment machine. I followed the process around Camp Bastion from the moment a vehicle is deemed no longer required, to the point it is loaded on the aircraft on its journey back to the UK. I also had a chance to speak to some of those involved.

The first stop was to the super hand car wash where the vehicles are cleaned inside and out, each vehicle taking as much as 80 man hours as every nook and cranny is washed until there is not a grain of sand left anywhere. From there the vehicle goes to be proved free from explosives (FFE) and de-gassed, before checks to ensure



all first line equipment is accounted for, all documentation is correct and fuel tanks are at the correct level for flying.

The vehicle is then taken to the Royal Electrical & Mechanical Engineers (REME) theatre equipment support group (ES Group) – the people who repair and maintain all the vehicles in Afghanistan.

Defence support group

Headed by Lt Col Rich Gibbs, the commanding officer, the team is a mixture of British army specialists and civil servants who work for the defence support group (DSG). DSG has a long history of supporting the army's equipment and vehicle fleet, whether here in Bastion or back home; they are very much part of the day-to-day activity that keeps the army's vehicles on the road.

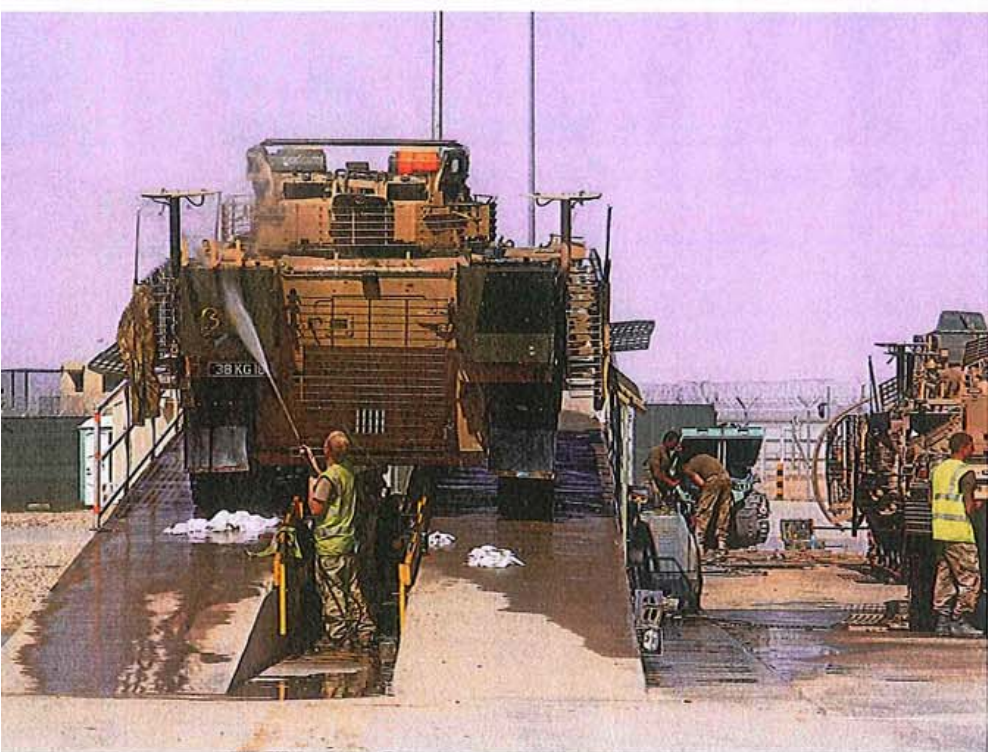
It is an impressive operation, not least as the rules



imposed on UK vehicle operators are followed here in the desert of Afghanistan. During the 10 years of Op Herrick the facilities have grown to accommodate the scale of the operation. In fact, Major Matt Davis, officer commanding, equipment support company, is confident enough to claim that the facilities in Bastion are the best the army has anywhere, including the UK and Germany. He goes on to explain there is no repair they cannot carry out, no vehicle they are not expert on, and when you walk round the huge facilities you can believe it: all the very best kit matched with highly skilled technicians, both civilian and military. Again, the fitters and technicians are driven by two masters – to maintain operational capability, while packing up to come home. They have already returned more than 180 20ft-equivalent units (TEUs) of spares, worth about £44m, to the UK. While

Main image: Cat excavator being loaded onto a C17
From left: WO1 Trevor Ryder, Pte Parris Langridge, L/Cpl Jonathon Miller, L/Cpl Billy Braniff, Pte Daz Fernando and Cpl Peter Marshall.
Vehicles due to be flown out of theatre include Mastiff (far background), Excavator, Husky and Foxhound

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Above: super hand car wash
Middle right: Foxhound chassis and body, four bolts hold it together but it has good ballistic protection
Bottom right: craftsman Steven Burns from Irvine, a reservist with the Scottish Transport Regiment

the vehicles and spares will all be coming home, the sheds and plant will not.
 Looking at the terrain across Helmand Province – there were very few roads when the army arrived in Helmand – and considering the extremes of weather, from snow at -10C to over 45C in the summer, you can see why the ES group is a vital component of the military effort.
 The modern military vehicles are complex as far as their operational capability goes; however, the design of many of them means that the chassis, body and powertrain are all plug-and-play and often only four bolts hold everything in place. The protection of the soldiers inside these vehicles is paramount – today's fleet of Foxhounds, Mastiffs, Huskys, etc, are among the best in the world. It has meant a steep learning curve for the vehicle mechanics and technicians. However, the much-criticised MoD

procurement process got it right with the design of this fleet; the vehicles work and the soldiers like them.
 The repair and maintenance continues, but the redeployment operation is focused and on track. This has created a switch in workload for the ES group, to prepare vehicles to leave theatre in good order or, when beyond reasonable cost to repair, cut up and turn them into scrap, which is then sold in the local market.
 Once all works are completed, the vehicle is returned to the holding area where it is certified ready to travel, photographs are taken, customs forms prepared and a 40-page passport created. Everything is accounted for on the army's accounting system. All that remains, before the vehicle is loaded onto the aircraft, is a Defra standard bio wash down, to ensure no bugs or diseases enter the UK.
 This process, and the attention to detail, ensures the vehicle fleet arrives back in the UK, not just in good order, but with a full audit trail to confirm its Pogo.

So how do these many and varied vehicles move around Bastion efficiently to ensure they are in the right place at the right time? It is never difficult to be impressed by the professionalism of the full-time soldiers, sailors and airmen deployed to Afghanistan. On my previous visits I have also met a number of reservists that have impressed me, whether they were engineers, loggies or paras. All were embedded in regular army formations and frankly you couldn't see the join.

Redeployment expertise

This trip I met the team of reservists who were deployed not to back-fill for the regular army but as a unit with their own special expertise to support what is now the main effort, redeployment.
 The soldiers of 142 Vehicle Supply Squadron, part of 166 Supply Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps are based in Grantham, Lincolnshire; however, as reservists many of them travel from far afield. The team trained together and deployed together to Bastion where they operate the Vehicle Replenishment Squadron (VRS).

The VRS has two important but conflicting roles, as Lance Corporal Jonathon Miller from Manchester says: "We have to maintain a reserve of vehicles of all types, to ensure we can exchange any unserviceable vehicles within three days to ensure minimum interruption to operations. We have to work with the redeployment teams to ensure all the vehicles leave theatre as planned."
 "142 Sqn has to be able to drive any and all of the

vehicles deployed on Op Herrick, from a quad bike or excavator, to Mastiff or Warrior (a tracked armoured fighting vehicle)," says WO1 Trevor Ryder, who in his other life works as a project manager in Abbey Wood, London.

The army reservists are clearly a tight-knit team despite their different backgrounds. Unsurprisingly they include professional drivers of buses and goods vehicles but also, perhaps more surprisingly, a sales director for plastic buckets and a market inspector. They talk about the camaraderie, the lasting friendships formed and they are all intensely proud of their professionalism and the respect they get from their regular counterparts.

Later in my visit I am on the runway watching a C17 RAF transport aircraft being loaded and the soldier driving a CAT excavator up the ramp is Corporal Peter Marshall from Liverpool. The excavator just makes it into the aircraft – there is no room for error with the RAF's £196m C17 workhorse. The RAF Loadmasters team guide him up the ramp, as he carefully eases the vehicle into place. Just one more vehicle in the 1,800 that have already left Afghanistan, that is more than half the number deployed at the peak. ■

● Gary Sullivan OBE is chairman of Wilson James's construction logistics business.

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Just checking: Lance Corporal Damien Archer does the MoT checks on an enhanced palletised load system truck

