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U.S. consolidates Afghan bases with eye toward pulling out

By Jay Price

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At FOB Apache, U.S. military engineers are frantically finishing a second chow hall and a new recreational building four times bigger than the old one. The gym will be expanded soon to more than double its current size, and dozens of new tents and rows of gleaming white containerized housing units are sprouting to prepare for an influx of troops who'll raise the base's population from several hundred to a few thousand.

Here, amid the shriek of electric saws and sharp scent of fresh plywood, the U.S. and NATO drawdown looks more like a frenzied buildup.

It's deceptive. The building boom at FOB Apache is a quirk of the planned pullout of more than half the U.S. and NATO forces this year. It's one of the largest of a handful of construction projects under way across Afghanistan, aimed at fine-tuning where troops and their equipment are based in preparation for their final departure next year.

FOB Apache is taking in troops from about half a dozen smaller, front-line bases elsewhere in Zabul province – which is in the restive southwest corner of the country – so that those bases can be torn down or handed over to the Afghan government. It's adjacent to a major Afghan army base, Camp Eagle, which makes it easier for U.S. troops at Apache to perform their new main roles as advisers and trainers to the Afghans.

"As the Afghans take the lead, we've got to have someplace to move into behind them," said Lt. Col. Andrew S. Ring, who oversees construction for the 555th Engineer Brigade from Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma, Wash.

A multi-service task force of more than 5,000 active-duty, National Guard and reserve troops led by the 555th is responsible for most of the build-it-so-we-can-leave projects. Those include FOB Apache, a few smaller but similar bases and the massive Camp John Pratt near Mazar-i-Sharif, in the far north, which will be the staging area for some U.S. and NATO equipment to exit via Uzbekistan. From there, shipments can move by rail through Central Asia to ports. The rest of the equipment is expected to leave through Pakistani ports and by air.

The deconstruction of bases is about to accelerate, said Col. Nicholas Katers, the 555th's commander.

Afghanistan held about 800 U.S. and NATO facilities in late 2011, according to figures supplied by NATO. More than 600 of them had been shut down or handed over to the Afghans by the beginning of this year. Nearly all of those were tiny bases suitable for a few dozen troops or fewer. Some were simply checkpoints.

Now the hard part is beginning, Katers said. His task force is about to begin closing or transferring 15 to 20 bases that once held hundreds or thousands of troops each. That will be significantly trickier than tearing down the smaller bases. The engineers don't know quite what to expect.

"We do know it's going to be difficult, because we've been in some of these bases a long time; 10 years," Katers said.

They're in a race with time. The engineers need to finish most of the tear-downs and refits this year, as the drawdown – which is expected to accelerate in the fall as the fighting season ends – will leave little manpower for the mission by next year.

"Summer and fall will be critical," Katers said, noting that if the drawdown occurs as scheduled, fewer than half the current 66,000 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan next year. And they'll be needed primarily for advising and training Afghan troops, not building and decommissioning bases.

When tearing down bases on private property, the goal is to return to the land as much as possible to its previous state, Katers said. But even bases that are being turned over to Afghanistan for official use require U.S. engineers to modify them. That may mean tearing out wiring designed for U.S. electricity standards and removing things such as expensive-to-operate water and latrine systems that the cash-strapped Afghan government won't be able to maintain.

The building boom at FOB Apache and similar projects elsewhere are all about holding down costs and making it easier for the expansions to be torn down in just a few months. That means that designs meant to last five to 10 years are gone. For Apache now, the standard is good

enough to last a season. The housing is mainly tents on wooden decks, which will be cheap and easy to remove. Showers and latrines are in trailers.

Apache has grown so fast that it's burst beyond its walls, leaving older guard towers in the middle of the base rather than on the perimeter. Its population of 800 to 900 in December grew to a few thousand starting in January, said Army Capt. Tyjuan Campbell, who oversees base operations and is akin to the mayor of a small town.

Expanding a base so quickly in the middle of a pullout has presented odd challenges, said Campbell, who's with the 3rd Infantry Division in Fort Stewart, Ga. One issue has been drawdown-related rules that make it hard to bring in more contractors to help get the second dining hall running and maintain the additional generators needed to operate a large camp.

And even with creative thinking by the managers of the lone chow hall, who expanded seating and went to 24-hour service for sandwiches to ease the crush, there are long lines for every meal.

Members of the 181st Engineer Company of the Massachusetts Army National Guard, which is part of the 555th's task force, arrived four months ago to take on what was supposed to be three weeks of work. Campbell begged them to stay, and they're still at it, said Staff Sgt. Ricky Wolff, of Beverly, Mass.

Among other projects, they renovated building shells for several unit headquarters, more than doubled the size of the fire station and built a second residential area, with dozens of tents. They built a camp for interpreters and have nearly completed the recreation center. Still to be done: a major addition to the helicopter pad and floor platforms for another neighborhood of tents, to house hundreds more soldiers.

Supplies and equipment are hard to find this far from the larger bases, and the engineers of the 181st have resorted to a military tradition: scrounging. They root through an unmonitored supply dump where materiel had been building up for years and they've even dug through the trash to find electrical and plumbing parts they need, Wolff said.

So much of what's going up is simple and basic that the guys in the unit, who include master carpenters and master electricians from civilian life, were happy to get the job of building the recreation facility, which also is in a tent but requires a fair amount of interior construction.

Wolff, who's on his sixth deployment, was involved in similar projects during the drawdown in Iraq.

"In a strange way, it's kind of nice to be around for the last hurrah," he said.