Return to Sender
The buildup in Afghanistan lasted 12 years. With 22 months left, can the U.S. get its equipment out in time? By Nate Rawlings Photographs by Yuri Kozyrev
Afghanistan,” says Rohling, “is designed to get you stuff.” For the past 11 years, logisticians have focused on pushing equipment to remote bases where much of the fighting has taken place. All over the country, the U.S. military air-dropped any supplies that were needed. This included everything from large vehicle parts parachuted out of airplanes to “speedballs”—body bags filled with water and ammunition—toos out of helicopters to troops under fire. As units rotated into and out of Afghanistan with no end date for the war, there was little incentive to get rid of equipment.

“The mentality that this can go on forever is exactly what has bred this big mess we’re sitting in with all this equipment,” says Major Adam Lackey, executive officer of the 173rd. “Why are we retrograding? It’s not just to get out of Afghanistan. It’s so that we can recoup some of the taxpayer dollars we’ve dumped into here—take this stuff and use it somewhere else.”

The stuff moves from smaller bases to larger ones for sorting to determine what makes financial sense to send home, what can be thrown away, what must be destroyed, and what can be given to the Afghans (who will receive some material but cannot possibly absorb all the U.S. equipment). At FOB Shank, troops from the CMRE separate bins full of batteries, piles of tires and collections of rakes and snow shovels, along with broom handles, folders, and binders. Afghan men have been contracted to drive the trucks to Bagram airfield, the largest U.S. base in eastern Afghanistan, for $5,000 per load. By sending only what needs to go, the CMRE team saves money, but more important, it cuts down on unnecessary convoys on dangerous roads.

Thousands of pieces of equipment arrive at Bagram every day. To process the flow, the CMRE runs a “retrosort” yard where civilian contractors work in shifts 24 hours a day classifying the material to decide what will be issued to units that remain in the country, what will be destroyed and what will be shipped home. The smaller pieces of equipment fill up white 4-by-4-ft. (122 by 122 cm) “kicker boxes,” which cost about $1,200 each to ship to the U.S. Each box can hold as much as $20,000 worth of equipment. Eight months ago, the CMRE was processing the equivalent of 250 shipping containers a month; now it averages close to 300 a week.

Armed vehicles are handled by a different unit. On the other side of Bagram, the 401st Army Field Support Brigade deals with equipment such as armored vehicles, radio sets, weapon mounts, and repair kits. Many troops drive to Bagram straight from the field, and as a result, their transports are filthy and stuffed with ammunition. The 401st cleans the vehicles and checks for ammo three times, combing through the cracks and crevices with long metal tools and lipstick cameras. If live ammunition is detected at a port, it could shut down the entire facility.

There are three main routes out of Afghanistan: by road south into Pakistan to the port of Karachi, more expensive, by air to seaports in the Gulf region; and on convoys north into Central Asia. With the Pakistani route often complicated by politics and the Hindu Kush blocked with snow, taking to the air has become the main choice in the winter. On average, a plane takes off or lands at Bagram every minute and a half—nearly 900 such movements per day. Though most of the equipment is carried by civilian transport companies, the Port Dogs of the 455th Expeditionary Aerial Port Squadron play a huge role on an average day, they move 1,300 troops and nearly 600 tons of cargo. The airmen of the 455th work 12-hour shifts, six days a week during their six-month tours. “We know we have until December 2014,” says Lt. Col. Colonel Luther King, commander of the 455th, “but every day, every week and every month that passes where we aren’t increasing that volume puts us on a potential strain on the logistics system.”

Afghanistan is called a logisticians’ nightmare for many reasons, including landlocked geography, mountainous terrain, a stubborn enemy and an entrenched bureaucracy. Add to that mountains of equipment amassing over a decade and it might seem like an impossible mission. “The numbers look intimidating, but we’re a big organization,” says Brigadier Felix Gedney, a British exchange officer serving as deputy commanding general for the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. “It’s in the art of the possible that it’s achievable.” In the great retrograde, the task is enormous, the conditions are formidable, and the only standard for success is whether the mountains of equipment disappear. The clock is ticking, and the U.S. military has less than 22 months in America’s longest war to execute its final mission.