

Part 10: Strike of the Sword

While Marines at Camp Leatherneck laid down infrastructure, ensured life support functions, secured flight lines and engaged with local leaders, Marines with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment and 2nd Light Armored Recon Battalion (LAR) confronted the enemy in strongholds dotted across Helmand's landscape. Operation Strike of the Sword, otherwise known as Operation Khanjar, paved the way for future operations. Before Khanjar, however, Marines fought for a foothold in the province.

Retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Christian Cabaniss, then a lieutenant colonel and battalion commander with 2/8, recalls the days leading up to the deployment as full of changes.

"2/8 was slated to go to Iraq but we got the news while we were at Twentynine Palms in January or February of 2009 that we were headed to Afghanistan," Cabaniss said.

"When I told the battalion we were going to Afghanistan, they cheered. They knew they were going to establish something there. By the time we got on the planes in May, there was no more cheering. They were stone serious."

"It was literally at 12:30 we were learning Iraqi (languages) and at 12:31 we were learning Afghan," recalled Staff Sgt. Darron Dale, then a corporal machine gunner with weapons platoon. "Our company sergeant was handed 25 KIA bags to bring back casualties. He said it was the first time he'd received that."

Within an hour of landing, 2/8's Echo Company had sustained their first casualty, Lance Cpl. Charles "Seth" Sharpe.

"We were the first assault team on the ground," Dale said. "We were establishing the perimeter and ended up being under attack for about 23 hours. Our first casualty was about 30 minutes in, about 200 meters from the bird. I saw him go by on a gurney and

the corpsmen shaking their heads. Younger Marines were asking what was happening but, as a leader, I told them to just keep firing.”

The two months leading up to Operation Khanjar saw relentless combat.

“Golf and Echo were immediately involved in heavy combat,” said Cabaniss. “Fox company headed north. Golf company had no cold water for about 70 days. I’ll hand it to Gen. (Larry) Nicholson, they figured out how to freeze a pallet of water, put it under a helicopter and transport it in the desert.”

Taliban insurgents were dug in for the initial surge of Marines in Afghanistan, having already engaged with British soldiers who’d taken over from the 26th MEU’s establishment of Camp Rhino. The turnover between Brits and Marines was rather seamless, according to Dale, and allowed Marines to get established both with the locale and working amid the MEB’s ad-hoc facilities.

“It was a great handover,” Dale said. “We worked an AO (area of operations) handover with allies and would have daily sit reps at Camp Dwyer. Our AO was from the Helmand River to Pakistan, along the Ring Road, so we initially patrolled the whole AO to get a feel for what was around it, see who was hostile and see who we were helping.”

The language barrier Marines ran into came, in part, from training.

“The locals spoke Dari and we knew Pashto,” Dale said. “They felt like we were speaking down to them. We had a local who helped us out in understanding. Over the course of the deployment I learned Dari.”

A language barrier was not the only challenge faced by 2-8, and one of its most crucial would come in the Taliban stronghold of Garmsir.