

### Part 13: Corpsmen keep Marines in the fight, aid locals

U.S. Navy Sailors were essential to Marine Corps activity in Helmand. Seabees worked alongside combat engineers in constructing forward operating bases (FOBs), chaplains kept a wary eye on mental health and aviators provided air support and transport for Marines on the move. As in all endeavors undertaken by Marines, Naval personnel were essential to the mission. As infantry units pushed into hostile Taliban areas of operation (AO's), Corpsmen did their best to keep Marines in the fight.

From the jump, the MEB's medical staff was met with challenges. Retired U.S. Navy Master Chief Shannon Dittlinger was a senior chief at the time serving as the command element for the MEB's Navy enlisted.

"We were knee deep in planning for Khanjar," Dittlinger recalled. "One of the most horrific things we had to do was getting our med hall blocks built."

In transit, customs had cut bands holding together AMAL equipment. With Marine infantry units already in the fight, getting medical blocks together was a top priority. All hands were on deck in hellacious heat to rehash the logistics element.

"We had every Corpsman in Leatherneck working to get them put back together and out where they were needed," Dittlinger said.

At Leatherneck, Dittlinger ran the logistics for medical while U.S. Navy Lt. Diana Loffgren served as Gen. Nicholson's medical planner. The two served alongside U.S. Navy Capt. Stephen McCartney, the MEB's surgeon, working with British military personnel at Camp Bastion and Marines at Leatherneck.

"Marines have not traditionally moved into such coalition heavy environments," Loffgren said. "Everything we were operating in terms of Medevac was different than traditional Marine deployments. Limits on Medevacs were based on what airfield we had access to."

Forward operations were made the priority early on, with Corpsmen working almost around the clock to patrol and seize objectives alongside Marines. Beau Chandler was a Corpman for 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment's India Company, 2nd Platoon. "3/6 had a unique perspective coming into a clean slate as far as having no American or allies present," Chandler said. "We walked into Marjah and would typically sleep in the last compound we had cleared, set a fire watch and patrol. Our schedule was to go eight hours on patrol, rest, eight hours of fire watch and then rest. Due to Marine Corps staffing, which leaves a Corpman to an entire platoon, back to back patrols were not uncommon. If the Marines were doing something we were doing it. You could not have those guys out without a doc."

Managing risks associated with Marines being in combat zones came down to two things according to Dittlinger - response time and need assessment.

"Unfortunately, there will always be casualties," she said. "Whether it is KIA or wounded, we were in charge of accounting for human error, seeing what our needs would be and applying our insight there."

Dittlinger remembers a staff meeting prior to the assault on Marjah. As she prepared a presentation, Nicholson and allied generals sat front and center.

"I bumped my head there were so many stars," Dittlinger said. "As I was giving my presentation, Gen. Nicholson stopped me and asked, 'What keeps you awake at night?' I told him it was our medical assets and how far away they would be, especially our air assets."

Under that guidance, Nicholson and other leaders made the call to move air support closer to the fight, cutting down on response times for the "Critical 60" that could make the difference between a Marine being injured, severely wounded or killed.

“A lower response time meant better capability to get where we needed to go,” Dittlinger said. “We had our Battle U, a team monitoring every nine-line that came out to ensure our birds could get out with wounded. Having the extra 18 minutes to get wounded to Bastion or Leatherneck, or even Kandahar, was crucial. Getting them somewhere with an MRI did so much to make the victim’s life more saveable.”

The elements in Helmand Province provided a number of challenges, both from the heat of the day and the extreme colds of a desert winter. Improvisation was not outside of the realm of Chandler’s duties.

“I had to treat a Marine going hypothermic in the days leading up to (Marjah),” Chandler said. “It was a bad situation for him. The rain was coming down and his shelter had collapsed. They found him shivering and called for medical. We had a dog handler with us for IEDs and ended up using a dog tent to regulate his body temperature.”

Back at Leatherneck, a lack of immediate resources and staffing led Loffgren and Dittlinger to wear many hats while keeping access to things like water in check.

“While they were worried about matting for the airfields, we were worried about potable water,” Loffgren said. “I learned a great deal about environmental health fast.”

“We had to put guards on the water,” Dittlinger recalled. “We had folks wanting to shower with it. We told everyone that if they saw someone taking bottled water to the head, call them out on it.”

In addition to keeping Marines fighting fit, medical staff also provided aid to locals.

Following Operation Moshtarak, Nicholson decided to do a walkabout as a way to show locals the extent of security Marines had put in place. Dittlinger accompanied him and, as a Corpsman, made sure to keep eyes on the general at all times. That was where she met Kila.

“This little girl ran up and was so excited to see me wearing the same uniform as the boys,” Dittlinger recalled. “She was going a mile a minute and the translator was keeping me up on what she was saying. She showed me the chicken she would get to eat for dinner and the school she would go to. She was so excited to see these things she had never had access to before. I just remember her holding on and not letting go.”