

Part 15: MEB-A, where are they now?

Through the course of speaking to Marines and Sailors attached to 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade - Afghanistan, a common theme was how closely connected its veterans and active duty personnel remain. The near 30,000 Marines who went into Helmand Province were part of one of the largest combat operations in modern military history.

As retired Lt. Gen. Larry Nicholson said to his civil affairs Marines, the need to engage the enemy was equally important to the need to aid the Afghan community. Courses are taught across the U.S. military on the MEB. Marines established a working installation from the sand up, saw women step into the front lines of warfare and redefined how the U.S. military establishes itself in a coalition environment.

In the early days of insertion, Marines hit the ground firing carbines and readying their defenses. By the time the MEB was called home, aircraft could land outside the guidewires of Camp Leatherneck. Schools reopened and new foodways and agriculture was introduced to locals. Culturally, Marines were seen not only as warriors but as statesmen.

The people who established a footprint in Helmand have gone on a variety of different paths following the deployment. The following are Marines, Sailors and civilians who served and have continued to serve in one way or another.

Larry Nicholson retired in 2018 after nearly four decades of service. He now serves as the Vice-President for Execution and Leadership for the HT Hackney Company. "I spend the lion's share of my time traveling and visiting our many warehouses and operations centers around the company," Nicholson said. "I call it battlefield circulation."

Ernest Hoopii retired as the sergeant major of Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune - Marine Corps Installations East in 2014. He now works as the site lead in the base's Infantry Immersion Trainer.

Jeff O'Brien retired as a master gunnery sergeant. He now works as a consultant in the Jacksonville area.

Curtis Lee retired in 2016 and has gone on to found his own businesses in South Carolina. Lee and Nicholson also sit on the board for "Team Afghan Power," a non-profit aimed at bringing electricity to rural Afghan villages.

Gus Biggio retired from the Marine Corps and has gone on to become an author. His memoirs on the war in Afghanistan is set to release this year on Nov. 10.

Kael Weston released a book on his time in Iraq and Afghanistan and continues to serve as an instructor at Marine Corps University, teaching a course about civilians in warfare. He is currently running for Congress in Utah.

Raquel Painter retired as a sergeant major and now focuses on philanthropy work. She is the president of the United Way of Jacksonville.

Hali Jilani, or Bebe as young Marines call her, continues her activism work across the globe. She and Nicholson remain good friends.

Julia Watson retired as a master sergeant in 2016. She works in finance and runs "Doc and Gunny's," a philanthropy focused on providing healing to veterans through the arts. She also mentors veterans through the 4th District Court in Utah County.

Trey Meadows retired this year as the Chief of Staff for 4th Marine Division, the very same place he began his 34-year career as a 17-year-old private first class. "I came full circle," Meadows said.

David VanHorn retired from the Marine Corps and continues to work at the Infantry Immersion Trainer on MCB Camp Lejeune.

Al "Ramses" Faxon now serves as chief operations officer and deputy administrator of Vermont Veterans' Home.

Col. Jordan Walzer relinquished command of II MEF Information Group to Col. Brian Russell earlier this year. Walzer is now at Headquarters Marine Corps.

Lt. Col. Bob McCarthy is at Marine Corps War College in Quantico, Virginia.

Lt. Col. Matthew Hawkins currently serves as the regimental executive officer for 14th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division.

Chris Naler retired in 2014 and is director of business development for a Washington D.C. consulting firm. He is an adjunct professor at Texas Christian University, and pursuing his doctorate degree at University of Southern California. As a result of his command with 2d MEB in Helmand, Naler was recognized with the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force Regiment Commandant General's personal Commendation for his service as the first U.S. Commander of RAF Regiment forces during combat operations. Christian Cabaniss retired from the Marine Corps shortly before his interview for our story. He is actively spreading word of the MEB reunion to Marines who were under his command.

Darron Dale retired earlier this year as a staff sergeant. Patrick Bragan resides in Pennsylvania and works in finance. Dale pinned Bragan for first lieutenant in 2009 and Bragan was responsible for writing up Dale for a Bronze Star.

Lt. Col. Christopher Connor currently serves as battalion commander for 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. Gunnery Sgt. Alex Woodward and Staff Sgt. Stephen Wright have also returned to 2d LAR.

Beau Chandler went to Dive School after his time as a Corpsman in Operation Khanjar. He remains in the U.S. Navy.

Steve McCartney retired after 30 years in the Navy in 2012. He also hung up his surgical kit after 36 years. He speaks about combat surgery and vascular medicine and enjoys spending time with his wife and family. "No one told me retirement would be so enjoyable," he said.

Shannon Dittlinger retired as a Master Chief. She continues working in medical logistics, now as a data analyst assessing needs for veterans and helping them find care providers.

Diana Loffgren received a doctorate and now works as a clinical pharmacist in western North Carolina.

2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade - Afghanistan received a Presidential Unit Citation Sept. 14, 2012. The citation is awarded to units of the U.S. Armed Forces and friendly foreign nations for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy. The unit must have displayed such gallantry, determination and 'esprit de corps' in accomplishing its mission, under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions, to have set it apart from and above other units participating in the same campaign. The degree of heroism required is the same as the Navy Cross awarded to an individual.

2MEB-A has scheduled a reunion for May 7 through 9, 2021 in Quantico, Virginia.

**Editor's Note: Special thanks to Bruce Hemp for organizing and relaying information used in every step of our series on 2MEB-A. To read the full series, visit [camplejeuneglobe.com](http://camplejeuneglobe.com).**