

Part 3: Civil Affairs

From May 29, 2009 to April 12, 2010 the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade was deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Over the course of that year, Marines would establish expeditionary installations, train Afghan police and soldiers, take back Taliban controlled strategic hubs and lay down for posterity new operating procedures among the U.S. Marine Corps.

The country of Afghanistan has a troubled history with outsider influence. British colonialism took its toll on the country in the early 1800s all the way through the 20th Century. The Soviet - Afghan War saw over 1 million Afghans killed and 5 million more wounded, along with hundreds of thousands left refugees from the conflict. Due to that history, one of the most important roles among 2nd MEB-A fell to Marines in Civil Affairs Groups (CAG) who sought to solidify relationships between the U.S. Marines, Afghani leaders and tribal elders.

In Helmand, Taliban influence was strong and the production of opium was one of the only safe roles Afghans could fill.

“(Part of supporting the local communities) was giving them aid and security while still showing (them) things they could do outside of poppies,” said retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commanding general of 2MEB-A.

In the district of Nawa, Gus Biggio was a CAG team leader in support of 1st Battalion 5th Marine Regiment who, with his team, worked to ensure the operation of schools and other necessary government facilities to aid Afghans.

“1-5 came in with 1,000 Marines,” Biggio said. “Prior to that, the only NATO presence was British and Georgian soldiers. They could not venture from their home base without being engaged. ... There was a lack of resources to battle the Taliban. When we came, we multiplied the available manpower 20 times over.”

Nawa is roughly the size of New York City's five boroughs, meaning that CAG Marines were spread out and under enormous responsibility to aid platoon leaders.

"It was certainly a combat environment," Biggio recalled. "An important message we had to share was that the Afghani government was on its way to help the people help themselves. There was skepticism, naturally, since historically once an election was over the foreign presence would just leave. They thought that Marines would do the same. We did not, however. We stayed and we helped with providing fundamental education and healthcare. ... they saw we were diplomats as well as capable fighters." In Nawa, schools that were once abandoned due to teachers' fear of being targeted as government employees were, in a sense, liberated.

Kael Weston, now a teacher at Marine Corps University, was the political state department head in Helmand for Nicholson. The two had met in Fallujah in 2004, where Nicholson was wounded by a rocket strike. The two had worked closely during that time and, when it came time to head to Helmand, Nicholson requested Weston be a U.S. Department of State representative.

"Most of my job was working on the political side with governors and handling elections," Weston said. "We were also building our relationship with Brits, Danes and other NATO allies."

The bond with England in particular was important and, as British politics began to shift towards a withdrawal from Afghanistan, CAG Marines and civil servants worked on which way to transition.

"CAGS are an undersung element of the Marine Corps," Weston said. "Something you need to take into account is that these tribal elders did not like us and did not like the Taliban. They felt stuck between us so we had to do things right."

The perception of Brits as colonizers was still strong in Afghanistan, something that gave the Marines a piece of leverage.

“One thing the Marines had going for them was that they were not British,” Weston said. This gave them some time to learn pre-existing power structures which they could then relay back to command and at a regimental level.

“Say an Afghani shows up in Jacksonville,” said Weston. “How long will it take for him to learn the ins and outs there? It was a matter of expectation management. When you ‘send in the Marines!’ (metaphorically), it is a large strategic signal. You have to let these people know that they are not just people going in to kill bad guys.”

Biggio says Nicholson shared advice with CAGs on how they would have to operate in hostile environments.

“He told me, ‘you have to be willing to put down 5.56 rounds with one hand and hand out Jolly Ranchers with the other and have the same passion about it,’” Biggio said.

“Someone else told me that Marines show up to win, whether with guns or with infrastructure. I am proud to say that, for the time we were in Nawa, we won.”