

Part 4: Female Engagement Teams break barriers, make history

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.

“One thing I saw as a child, being surrounded by war and conflict, was that while my brothers could serve I, as a woman, could not,” said Hali Jilani, a civil-military liaison with 2nd MEB-A during their time in Helmand. “I saw no women in policy-making. When I met (U.S. Marine Corps Gen.) Larry Nicholson in Fallujah, I told him ‘you are not talking to the 50 percent of the population who are not bombing you or shooting at you. You need to utilize your women Marines.’”

Jilani is an ethnic Afghan who spent time in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 to 2010. She grew up on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, with her parents under frequent fire for their work assisting Bengali families out of Pakistan and to Bangladesh. In 2008 and 2009, she worked with 2nd MEB-A helping to implement Female Engagement Teams (FETs), the first of their kind in warfare.

“The Marine Corps initiated the FET to help reach the other half of the Afghanistan population because the males were not able to communicate or engage with the female population of the Afghan people,” said retired U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Raquel Painter, who served on FETs with 2nd MEB-A. “The FET opened doors for female Marines and displayed the capabilities females can bring to the fight.”

2nd MEB-A’s FETs were a special breed. Much like the rest of the MEB, where everyone was expected to wear as many hats as was necessary, FETs were ad hoc to bring in the most qualified and dedicated women Marines.

“The MEB at the time of arrival didn’t bring dedicated female teams to function solely in female engagement roles,” said retired U.S. Marine Corps Master Sgt. Julia Watson, who was attached to 4th Civil Affairs Group with the MEB and would go on to operate as a Civil Affairs Marine in Garmser District. “To conduct engagements, the MEB had been able to borrow or source motivated and hard-charging female Marines and Sailors that were in theater in other jobs or unit requirements. The service women that would support engagement operations were also able to conduct searches similar to Lioness function in Iraq. The teams would pop in and out of locations for brief times as needed; they had anecdotal evidence of value with engagements and information gathering, but were not in the communities long enough to follow-through on relationships or stability operations.”

Unlike engaging an enemy, FET Marines were called on to engage with Afghan women and children in a way that made them open to receiving aid and, possibly, getting men on board with Marine presence.

“This was about gaining the trust of women on the ground,” Jilani said. “It was not an intel operation. People would ask that FETs fall under the wing of a specific group, but the FETs had to be entities in their own right to function properly. Otherwise, they will lose their purpose. We asked the Marines, men and women, to break bread with the Afghan people, or to play with their kids. Make it personal. Helmand was amazing in terms of allowing Marines to relate to women and children on a personal level.”

FETs also helped to assure women and children had access to medical assistance as needed. Women Marines and Sailors would direct women to clinics where they could be treated by U.S. military personnel. Painter recalls an instance where only men arrived at a clinic. Her teams saw to it that women got their treatment as well.

“I took my FET members and the female medical personnel and patrolled from compound to compound to help the females and children of the villages,” Painter said. “Security was provided by the Afghan Army and 2nd Tanks Bn. That was when I learned the importance of the FET in reaching out to the females and children of the Afghan population.”

The FETs also worked at a tactical level.

“A shootout had occurred and a young man had been killed,” Jilani recalled. “He was confirmed to be connected to the Taliban but we were still refined to our trucks. It was tense and we wanted to deescalate the situation. I took a few female Marines to keep an eye on me and we went to speak with the villagers. ... A young woman told me, ‘I just want my children to be safe.’ I asked if I could see her daughters and she handed them over, no problem. I took them to see the Marines (men and women) and let them spend some time with them. It was a very human moment.”

Possibly most importantly, the work of FETs with 2nd MEB-A also made a big difference in changing restrictions placed on women service members in combat zones.

“Although anecdotal and immeasurable, the MEB FETs and the I MEF FETs have paved the way for our military forces to take a bigger and broader approach to engagement during all forms of future operations and in different theaters,” Watson said. “I believe that there was enough movement forward to progress the idea of the use of gender on the battlefield and what we need to prepare to study about gender roles, how we work with NGOs (non-governmental organizations), the State Department and other key leaders to build stability. Instead of reacting, our military will build the capacity within its ranks and we will be more prepared to fight and resolve conflicts faster with longer lasting outcomes. Both our men and women will be better equipped to engage with the local population as a whole.”

FETs would go on to be implemented by the Army in future conflicts, and other nations such as Canada have sought advice from Marines who spent time in and around FETs. “It took a man like Larry Nicholson to understand how women can have an impact on conflict and cultures,” Jilani said. “The MEB was an amazing outfit.”