

Part 1: Making a MEB

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.

“We were the first large Marine footprint in Afghanistan,” said Ernest Hoopii, former sergeant major for Marine Expeditionary Brigade - Afghanistan (2MEB-A). “We went in with two regimental combat teams, a Marine Aircraft Wing and joint task force support.”

Retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Larry Nicholson was the commanding general of 2MEB-A during its time in Helmand Province. In 2008, during a deployment to Iraq, Nicholson had heard rumblings of an Afghan deployment in the works. Stateside, he was assured by Lt. Gen. Hejlik, then commanding general of II Marine Expeditionary Force, that the chances of a deployment to Afghanistan were low.

Later that year, he was informed he was to be the CG of 2MEB-A.

“Late 2008 Lt. Gen. Hejlik told me, you’re going to Afghanistan” said Nicholson. “That began an interesting 60 days at Camp Lejeune. The MEF Forward was on its way to Iraq. We formed and started deploying in February, March and April (of 2009).”

The MEB was composed of elements from across the Marine Corps. As such, there was no room for egos.

“We were not an East Coast or West Coast brigade,” Nicholson said. “In terms of training a MEB staff, we were building the plane as we flew it. We were an international undertaking. There were Marines from all three MEFS as well as reservists with MARFORRES (Marine Force Reserves). As we went through procedures we would record our time. A big part of it was finding out how to procure what we needed to help Marines and the Afghan people.”

In the beginning, 2MEB-A was 11,000 strong. That number would grow as needs were addressed, but the small staffing meant that things happened at a breakneck pace. Curtis Lee,

part of the MEB's civil affairs group, saw the numbers as a part of what made the experience work.

"There was no room for infighting or politics," said Lee. "We were nimble because we had to be. It was not perfect but these are folks I would follow anywhere at any time."

Establishing a footprint would require a base of operations for Marines. From the ground up, Marines would establish Camp Leatherneck in the middle of one of the most hotly contested Taliban footholds, Helmand province.