

Part 11: Strike of the Sword pt. ii

On July 2, 2009, Operation Strike of the Sword was launched. The sword's metaphorical blade was made of 4,000 Marines from 2nd MEB-A alongside a few hundred Afghan soldiers and NATO air support. Marines with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, had been enmeshed in combat since landing in May, but Operation Strike of the Sword, commonly referred to as Operation Khanjar, was the largest U.S. combat operation since the Battle of Fallujah in 2004.

"Khanjar went off July 2," said retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Christian Cabaniss, then a lieutenant colonel and battalion commander of 2/8. "We had over 200 combat action ribbons prior."

2/8 was responsible for Garmsir, a major metropolitan hub at the center of Helmand. While Taliban opposition had made itself scarce in other parts of Helmand, those in Garmsir did not.

"The Taliban went to ground almost everywhere except Garmsir," Cabaniss said. "They decided to fight. 2/8 lost 14 Marines."

"3rd platoon was sent furthest south in Khanjar," recalled then 2nd Lt. Patrick Bragan, 2/8 Echo Company's 3rd platoon commander. "We were tasked with blocking off what would come north, near Garmsir. 2d Light Armored Recon Battalion pushed down toward the border."

Marines with 2d LAR were tasked with taking the fight to the Khan Neshin area, working southward toward the Pakistan border.

All in all, it was a battlespace the size of Rhode Island," said Lt. Col. Christopher Conner, now battalion commander of 2d LAR. Conner was, at the time, Charlie Company's commander. "Immediately upon gaining a foothold in the south, the battalion was tasked with seizing Safar Bazaar, a known point where illicit items, drugs, and

weapons were sold and staged. It was during this raid that the battalion would seize over 80 tons of poppy seed, which was estimated at the time to be 1/10 of the total poppy within the entire country.”

“We were assigned a larger AO than most units due to the fact that we could cover large amounts of terrain and bring to the fight not only heavy firepower, but scouts that could disrupt forces on the deck if need be,” said U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Alex Woodward, Alpha Company Operations Chief, 2d LAR. Woodward was a lance corporal at the time and part of the Jump Platoon.

“After seizing the castle, we were tasked with finding a location and building combat outpost Payne. When picking the location it was picked strategically in a location on the fish hook on the Helmand River in doing this it would give us a good location to provide over watch and great place to have the chain of command so we could control the battle space,” said Staff Sgt. Stephen Wright, A Co’s platoon sergeant, headquarters platoon, 2d LAR. Wright was a gunner in Afghanistan.

2d LAR was also part of a historic moment for the battalion.

“Once the COC moved to FOB Payne, we were tasked with building it. This was huge for us because we were able to be a part of something that will soon go into future history books,” Woodward said. “Upon arriving at Payne, we prepped our vehicles to swim across the Helmand River. We were told this was the first time that LAV’s had swam in a combat theater since Panama. Being able to be a part of that as a young Marine was amazing and gladly, we succeeded.”

Operation Khanjar was a tremendous opening salvo to provide the MEB’s foothold in Helmand.

“Without that foundation we could not have moved forward,” Cabaniss said. “I can’t say enough about (those Marines). Their ability to endure. It is something they have in

common with every generation of Marines. What sustains them is their love for each other.”

“This was a huge stepping stone in my career by not only teaching me discipline and experiencing the aspect ‘train as you fight’ really helped mold me as a junior Marine,” Woodward said. “This deployment helped me become the man that I am today, not only on the battlefield, but as a father and husband as well.”