

## Part 2: Leatherneck

The heat of Afghanistan in Summer is not the ideal climate to build an installation in hostile territory, but that was the exact challenge Marines with Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Afghanistan (MEB-A) faced in 2009. On top of that, it was a wildly new operation for the Marines who made up the force.

“There was definitely a learning curve,” said Jeff O’Brien, a retired U.S. Marine Corps master gunnery sergeant who served as the operations chief for MEB-A. “We were understaffed and had to deal with a lot of moving pieces.”

The base that would be Camp Leatherneck was constructed by MEB-A in Helmand Province. At the time, Helmand was a hub for Taliban activities, serving primarily as a safe haven for heroin trafficking. According to retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Larry Nicholson, that meant Helmand was where Marines needed to be.

“We arrived at (British Camp) Bastion,” said Nicholson. “We walked out a side gate with their commanding general and saw a stretch of open desert. I asked him, ‘What’s all this?’ He told me, do what you want with it.”

What the Marines wanted was a strategic hub. The turnaround time on Leatherneck’s construction had to be quick and it had to be done the right way.

“We purposefully got in the middle of a Taliban area,” Nicholson said. “We knew that this was a critical mission that would require a lot of courage. ... There was a limit on what you could get done with 10,000 people, so that meant everyone ran cables, everyone was digging. Everyone had a specific job to do, but that did not mean you would not end up doing something else.”

The task was daunting and conditions were less than ideal.

“We had a Marine Wing Support squadron building runways out of thousands of mattings, around the clock in 130 degree heat every day,” said Ernest Hoopii, the

MEB's sergeant major in 2008-09. "People think 130 is an exaggeration. Trust me, it is not."

The Civil Affairs Group which helped establish the base was made up of Marines and civilians. According to retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Curtis Lee, the group's work with the rest of MEB-A was some of the most impressive teamwork he had ever seen in his time in service.

"We had fantastic civil servants out there," said Lee. "These were people who got it working with Marines on the front lines. All of us were extremely proud of what we accomplished. That was probably the hardest year of my life. ... Gen. Nicholson, that man got more out of me than anyone ever has."

According to O'Brien, the need to keep Marines prepared amid short timetables meant those in command were focused on the task at hand. There was no time for pettiness or egos.

"It is funny looking back," O'Brien said. "I probably look fifteen years younger now than I did when I was in the Marine Corps. I never had much time to worry about my own (problems) because I was helping fix other people's (problems). That time getting Leatherneck prepared and being with the MEB was the finest part of my career as a non-commissioned officer."