

Part 5: MAG-40 shrinks the battlefield

Out of his 34 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, Col. Trey Meadows, chief of staff, 4th Marine Division, vividly recalls his time with the 2nd MEB-A as being one of the most interesting. It was also one of the most exhausting.

“Being a very small ad hoc staff, to do something of this magnitude... After a year of that I was worn out.”

In 2009, Meadows was a lieutenant colonel serving as the executive officer (XO) of Marine Heavy Helicopter Training Squadron 302 and slated to take command of Heavy Helicopter Squadron 366. As 2nd MEB-A formed, Meadows was instead sent to be the operations officer for Marine Aircraft Group 40, the eventual air support element of the MEB.

“All the department heads were O-5’s,” Meadows said. “That small handful of lieutenant colonels ran the MAG for a year... we came together in early 2009 and within a few weeks of forming we were off to Afghanistan.”

The aviation element of 2nd MEB-A was essential in a region like Helmand, the largest province in Afghanistan.

“Helmand is enormous,” Meadows said. “Being able to get north to south, as well as to Kandahar where we could link with Rhino (the primary operation point for U.S. troops in Afghanistan), required aviation.”

Laying down the groundwork to sustain an aviation element was a challenge. British allies at Camp Bastion initially provided runways for aircraft, but on the Leatherneck side there was little to start with.

“The runway was bare,” Meadows said. “We started working in GP (general purpose) tents and laying down Marston matting. When we were finished we had full blown hangars and work tents.”

Meadows was part of the Aviation Combat Element (ACE) alongside Col. Kevin Vest, who served as the group's commanding officer. Aircraft included AC-130s, FA-18 Hornets, Harriers and helicopters such as Bell UH1-N Twin Huey and AH-1W Super Cobras.

"We provided logistical support with our CH-53E's and Deltas, as well as close air support with other helicopters," Meadows said. "We spanned that area to enable Gen. Nicholson to control the region from a ground combat element... everything we do as aviators is in support for that GCE to locate, close with and destroy the enemy."

MAG-40 also provided transport for Afghani leaders and civil affairs Marines to conduct key leader engagements with tribal elders.

"We had Marines supporting the CAGs and women Marines with female engagement teams out to support as well," Meadows said.

The ACE would play an important role at the Battle of Marjah in 2010, which Meadows recalls as "an absolutely enormous air assault." The assault flight leader was Phillip Deeble, a captain at the time.

"He was a rising star in the 53-Echo community and a fantastic Marine aviator," Meadows said. "The coordination between Army, Navy, Marines and Brits to move that strike force in Marjah was incredible," said Meadows. "It was a long night for me and I am sure Col. Vest would say the same. We watched from our tent and waited to see if it went off. It did."

For all the trials the Marines faced, Meadows says that he would not trade the experience for anything.

"It was a broadening, career defining experience," Meadows said. "I mainly recall the professionalism of the entire staff. We had some true rock stars."