

Part 6: Helmand

Located in southern Afghanistan, Helmand spans 22,619 square miles. That's roughly the size of the entire state of West Virginia. While air support provided Marines with tactical mobility, the challenges that the area presented spanned beyond miles and feet. From a geographical perspective, Helmand was a test for the Marine Corps' ground capabilities.

"One of the greatest challenges is, by setting up a semi-permanent landlocked base of operations, we did not have access to the Naval capabilities Marines benefit from," said Gus Biggio, a Civil Affairs Group Marine who was attached to 2nd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment in Nawa. "Expeditionary injunctions benefit from working with the U.S. Navy. It is important to remember that the Marine Corps is an expeditionary force."

David VanHorn, a retired U.S. Marine Corps Master Gunnery Sgt., served as the logistics support chief for 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion during the Helmand campaign. Due to the tight cap on the number of personnel being deployed, he also handled the role of 2nd LAR's operations chief.

"We operated along the Helmand River in the hook (Combat Outpost Payne), Rig (Kahan Neshin Castle), Southern Garmsir, Lashkar Gah to conducting patrols across the river into Balochistan," said VanHorn. "We had two companies covering these areas which were stretched pretty thin. Our Motor-T, supply and maintenance Marines did an outstanding job supporting the companies operating so spread apart."

During the initial push into Afghanistan in 2001, Marines and Sailors had learned a bit about what equipment to bring into the fight. James Davis was the Combat Service Support Supply Chief for ground equipment on the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit during that time. He recalls the challenges the climate had presented to Marines during their taking of Camp Rhino.

“During the initial invasion the 26th MEU teamed up with us and we pushed into a small airstrip that we were able to set up initial supply support and airfield operations. At that time it was called Camp Rhino. We ran operations for awhile until a decision was made to take Kandahar airfield. 26th MEU led that mission and we slowly transitioned back to the ships to come home,” Davis recalled. “The climate played a huge role in our initial ability to perform certain missions. We didn’t have extreme cold weather gear with us, only hot weather gear which kept us from high mountain missions. Also, equipment filters would clog up due to the quality of the diesel fuel.”

In 2009, at Camp Leatherneck, the issues of geography also needed to be overcome.

“We could not get gravel,” said Al Faxon, a colonel at the time serving as Assistant Chief of Staff and lead engineer. Faxon was the first officer assigned to the MEB during its initial forming and is widely considered the architect behind Task Force Leatherneck. “The soil was so dusty you could not drive. Our guys were scouring the globe to find assets to create gravel... We were working with Afghans who filled these Soviet era trucks with gravel to sell to Marines so we could have landing zones and traction for our trucks.”

The oppressive heat and sand were a bad combination, with Faxon recalling cotton tents getting up to 120 or 130 degrees. A Major had the idea to apply foam to the tents, which dropped the temperature nearly 30 or 40 degrees.

“It seems like a minor thing but it was not,” Faxon said. “We had to provide water and showers post training in that kind of heat.”

Culturally, Afghans who were comfortable with the Marine presence aided the MEB by digging wells and transporting supplies from Kandajar.

“The companies, on a cultural level, did a good job developing relations with some of the villages,” VanHorn said. “We did some work on digging canals for the village across

the river from COP Payne. There were other projects put in place or started to build relations with villages in our Area of Operation but did not know the status of completion for most of the projects. Overall, I know the relations we developed prevented some attacks on some of our positions.”

While the elements were a concern for the Marines from an operations perspective, the deadliest foe was still the Taliban.