

## Part 7: Warriors, Diplomats

“Gen. Nicholson and I would go in (to Combat Hospital Bastion) every day and I would see people dying,” said Kael Weston, a teacher at Marine Corps University who served as the political state department head in Helmand Province to Gen. Larry Nicholson, then commanding general of 2nd MEB-Afghanistan. “British soldiers and Marines. An Afghan boy missing his legs playing with a stump.”

While fighting Helmand’s harsh climate while establishing an operating base was challenging, the biggest threat to the U.S. Marines in Afghanistan was improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed by Taliban opposition. In 2010, a report from the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization recorded that a total of 539 U.S. troops had been killed in action, and 4,845 wounded in action, from IEDs in Afghanistan from 2001-2010.

“The only paved road around Leatherneck was what we called The Ring Road, and saying it was paved is being generous,” said Col. Al Faxon, the lead engineer for 2nd MEB-A. “It was riddled with Taliban IEDs. We would do our best to keep an eye out for culverts and fresh digging. When you were out, you had to feed information back to the ops people.”

Past U.S. presences in Afghanistan, both in times of peace and conflict, also had an impact on the way combat was conducted between Coalition forces and Taliban opposition.

“Nawa has a vast series of canals that were originally dug in the 50s and 60s by USAID,” said Gus Biggio, a Civil Affairs Marine attached to 1st Battalion 5th Marine Regiment in Nawa. Biggio underwent vast research while undergoing a 10 year endeavor to put together a book about the MEB’s time in Afghanistan. “The intention was to make the Helmand River Province very fertile and ensure Afghans could grow

their own food. These canals would range from ten meters across to more narrow-like ditches. When they were digging that array of canals, I can't expect they foresaw U.S. Marines shooting from and being shot at from them."

The Taliban also employed hit and run tactics meant to sabotage or bog down Marines. "For our LAV's and Scouts, most of our contact with the Taliban was harassing attacks around Khan Neshin Castle, sporadic rocket attacks on Combat Outpost Payne, the castle and the extensive use of IED's," recalled retired Master Gunnery Sgt. David VanHorn, who served as logistics chief with 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. "One of our convoys was ambushed. I do not remember anything that was sustained kinetically. If I remember correctly, we had two KIA internal to the battalion and one or two attachments, but not sure of how many were wounded. We had a handful for sure."

Weston believes that the Marines with 2nd MEB-A were aware of the risk inherent to the combat zone. He also knew they were willing to do what needed to be done.

"If you're going to be in a horrible place like Helmand, I wouldn't want to be around anyone but Marines," Weston said. "Take for instance Sgt. Friend, who approached a small village who thought our guys were Russian because of how long it had been since they had seen outside contact. You surge Marines in and there is no bridge too far for the USMC. It came down to how with us the Afghans were. There were shifts toward the end, but the attitude remained positive... There was a lot of sacrifice in the seven years I was over there (2003-2010). When that kind of sacrifice is going to happen, we sure as hell better be able to answer why it is being made as a government."