

## Part 8: Special Operations on the fly

Special Operations Forces (SOF) can help shape a combat theater. Acquiring operational or strategic footholds gives Marines, Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen a leg up on the enemy. In Helmand, a SOF element could provide support throughout the province to battalions who needed it. With no traditional SOF being deployed in support of the MEB, leaders had to adapt.

As we've seen, adaptability was one of the MEB's strengths.

Col. Jordan Walzer, commanding officer, II MEF Intelligence Group, served as the detachment commander for the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion detachment attached to the MEB. 3rd Recon Bn entered the theater to backfill 2nd Recon Bn, a force that had been designated Task Force Raider out of a need for SOF support.

"TF Raider was really born out of necessity. MEB-A had a number of time-sensitive targets, or TSTs, which were suited for SOF units but the MEB wasn't a priority so they wouldn't get actioned," said Walzer. "From what I was told, TF Raider was the brainchild of a British SAS liaison officer. They called him "Crazy Rob," if I'm not mistaken. His idea was to use a recon company as a base unit to build out your own TST raid force."

According to Walzer, Helmand Province's geography was not suited to traditional ground reconnaissance. The landscape provided the enemy vantage points and allowed for tactics that could compromise a recon team.

"Traditional ground reconnaissance isn't a great fit for a counterinsurgency fight like the one in Afghanistan," Walzer said. "As a reconnaissance unit, our Marines and Sailors were specially trained and equipped. Couple that with a number of critical enablers like Radio Battalion Marines, linguists, a military working dog team, and Afghan National Army soldiers and you've got a task force."

Being able to scramble and be in the air quickly meant TF Raider was a general support. Marines and Sailors operated across Helmand's sprawl, often with no room to take a breath between missions.

"We could task organize a force for any given mission and be on the objective within hours," Walzer said. "In fact, I remember being extracted early from the raid so we could quickly refit and action another objective... we could be supporting a battalion in Now Zad one day and then a regiment in Garmsir the next. We were in high demand because of the absolute competence and professionalism of our Marines and Sailors."

The first operation Walzer was a part of was Cobra's Anger, which saw about 1000 Marines in company with NATO allies and Afghan forces. The operation would disrupt Taliban lines in Now Zad Valley as well as help alleviate opposition pressure on Forward Operating Base Cafferetta. Now Zad was a Taliban safe haven, but Cobra's Anger changed that.

"It was the first combat mission using MV-22s," Walzer said. "I've gotta say the Osprey Squadron we worked with, VMM-261, talk about true professionals. A few of us had been in enough helo 'brown outs' to know they aren't fun. We were relieved to be flying in the Ospreys."

A brown out is a dangerous situation where sand, dust and other debris can obscure a pilot's vision upon landing. MV-22 Ospreys were oriented off of instruments, reducing the danger associated with brown outs. Their tiltrotor capability also allows for vertical take off to transition to transportation at speed.

"When they took off, it was like being shot out of a cannon," Walzer recalled. "I remember being in the first wave on the Now Zad raid and we couldn't believe how quickly we went from Leatherneck to the objective."

Journalist Oliver North was also embedded with TF Raider for a time. Walzer described him as “stepping out of a history book.”

“A lot of the younger Marines weren’t familiar with him but older guys like me remember watching the Iran Contra hearings on TV so having him there was somewhat surreal,” Walzer said.

According to Walzer, the efficiency of TF Raider and the MEB as a whole came back to leadership. Being part of a non-traditional ad hoc staff was par for the course in Helmand, and being able to rely on the decision of ranking officers and non-commissioned officers made for a special group of service members.

“If you’re going to combat, you want to fall in on leaders like Lt.Gen. Larry Nicholson and Sgt. Maj. Hoopii,” Walzer said. “And you definitely want to be a part of a world-class unit like MEB-A. I’ll always be proud to say I served with this team and I’m even prouder of the men and women I served alongside.”