

Part 9: "The little BHG that could"

A good Brigade Headquarters Group (BHG) is essential to any MEB undertaking.

Ensuring that Marines and Sailors are fed and have facilities was especially important in the deserts of Afghanistan, where a sharp, well-fed mind could make a difference in a combat situation. However, as an ad hoc unit, the staff of Task Force Belleau Wood, the BHG attached to 2nd MEB-A, saw a need to provide other services to Camp Leatherneck and Camp Dwyer.

"We liked to call ourselves the little BHG that could," said Col. Brian Russell, operations officer for U.S. Marine Corps Forces Cyberspace Command. Russell served as the Executive Officer for 5th Battalion, 10th Marine Regiment before serving in the same role for the BHG. "We were at Twenty-nine Palms in January of 2009 shooting artillery when I got the call to get back to Jacksonville. We had to go to Afghanistan as a BHG. The first question we asked was, 'What's a BHG?'"

5-10 was a quick study, however, and Russell reported to now-retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Chris Naler, the commanding officer of the BHG. Naler had three missions in mind - keeping Marines fed and facilities cleaned, securing installations and ensuring a system of governance for the bases. That meant appointing a "camp commandant" for Leatherneck.

"Capt. Kieran O'Neil was the mayor of Leatherneck," Russell explained. "O'Neil and his band of merry men kept things flowing and made sure Marines were policing themselves. It's a lot easier to keep the Port-A-Johns in order and the chow moving when Marines are taking care of themselves."

Dwyer was another story, having been established prior to the MEB's surge into Afghanistan. To maintain security, 5-10's Romeo Battery was appointed to assist British

allies with the transition of command. Fox Battery was appointed to Leatherneck. Naler describes the process of keeping up with expansion as a daunting task.

“As the camp expanded from March 2009 when our Advon arrived... the camp was nothing but a good idea as the dust blew from Bastion 2 west to what would become Camp Leatherneck. Our mobile defense and presence in surrounding nomadic villages and eventual build and manning of PB Boldak 9kms south of LNK, kept the enemy from penetrating our Dwyer camp.”

The artillery Marines at Dwyer found an interesting task of ensuring the transition from the Brits.

“We were moved to establish security at what would become Dwyer,” recalls Lt. Col. Matthew Hawkins, Regimental XO, 14th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division. Hawkins was the battery commander for Romeo. “We were building what would become the AC-130 landing zone and worked under a British cavalry and reconnaissance battalion. Dwyer was used for our push into Garmsir and Nawa. Initially, 30 or 40 Marines were in a platoon flown down to Dwyer to start transferring control from the British. We ended with about 140 handling security... At the time, it was one of the few bases we had further north. In terms of logistics and supplies, we relied on the Brits initially. There was also an excellent group of Navy Seabees. When the MEB surged, the U.S. resumed control.”

Hawkins recalls a particularly fruitful traffic stop conducted by a sergeant early on in his time at Dwyer.

“On a transit route that led from the Pakistan/Afghanistan border to most major population zones, we stopped a small pickup truck,” Hawkins said. “Turns out, they were transporting what I would call ‘pre-cursors,’ chemicals or what have you, to what could be bombs or other IEDs they were trying to move into those populated areas. The

vehicle was having some sort of issue and the young NCO's took note. It really showed us that we were in the right area. ... All the things we were able to accomplish, I would put on the NCO's we worked with as well as support from leadership. That's what we saw throughout that deployment - sergeants and corporals doing exceptionally well and maintaining security for our Marines and installations."

Working with allies, especially at Leatherneck, was essential to mission success.

"We knew going in we would have to coordinate with the UK and Royal Air Force (RAF) to maintain security," Russell said. "We built a very early relationship with the RAF and, by the end of the deployment, had established a combined ops center with them. The Afghan National Army camp was a sort of tri-camp with Leatherneck and Bastion, and their guys served as garrison support units. We worked extensively with them in the field."

Danish advisors also assisted with ANA forces in an advisory role. A plaque depicting the alliances that made the MEB's mission possible, thanks in part to the BHG, can still be seen at the Follow Me Bar at the Paradise Point Officers Club on Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune.

Naler looks back on the work of 2nd MEB-A and TF Belleau Wood with pride.

"Yes, I am still proud of the success of our command and the variety of missions we designed, pioneered and successfully executed," Naler said. "We would have not been successful without our partnered and coalition forces. Ironically, I teach twice a year in Germany at the NATO school Oberammergau and my case study is this deployment and good and bad experiences of our mini-coalition."