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USMC RETHINKING COIN IN HELMAND PROVINCE AFGHANISTAN

by

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Introduction

Governmental changes in Helmand province Afghanistan over the past century have created an environment of instability and dissatisfaction among the population. Helmand is generally considered a fringe society within the political structure of the Afghan state and has warranted limited attention and involvement from multiple central governments in Kabul.¹ The central governments of Afghanistan have historically resided in Kabul, which is over 700 miles away from the provincial capital of Helmand, Lashkar Gah. The physical and cultural disconnect enabled the Taliban to continue to fight a successful insurgency in Helmand province well into 2010. Their capacity to deny the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) the ability to provide governance for the people of Helmand, defined their success as an insurgency. Not until the summer of 2010 and the introduction of the United States Marines and their brand of counter insurgency (COIN) did the people of Helmand province fully embrace the GIROA and deny the Taliban the opportunity to conduct operations which plagued their society. The Marines were able to transition the people of Helmand from providing sanctuary to the Taliban into active participants of governance provided by the GIROA by personally interacting with the general population, pursuing the Taliban relentlessly, and reinforcing local governmental actions and capabilities.

In 2006, the Taliban was able to conduct insurgent operations in Helmand due to the combination of tribal, religious, and governmental infighting.² An insurgency is defined by David Galula as a “protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading to the overthrow of the existing order.”³ The primary goal of the Taliban was to destabilize the country and render the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) ineffective in their attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of the GIROA.

The Taliban had retreated from positions in Afghanistan to Pakistan to regroup and rebrand. ‘Between 2004 and 2006 there were about 5,000-10,000 Taliban fighters active in Afghanistan’ and were developing a two tier organization with fragmented leadership willing to embrace some elements of modern society within Afghanistan to garner support from the populace.⁴ The “neo-Taliban” returned with a regional focus and ability to engage with local leaders on the production of poppy, that they had previously discouraged with brutal tactics to prevent the production of narcotics. This reversal of position enabled the Taliban to not only engage with locals, but they now could tax the narcotics sales to fund their organization, which demonstrated the weaknesses in the national governments authority and legitimacy.

The Taliban exploited weaknesses in the GIRoA in Helmand and divided the population by using historical tribal and religious disputes. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1970s and 80s and the foundation and growth of multiple Mujahedeen groups magnified these long standing tribal disputes.⁵ The limited governance provided by Taliban shadow governments proved capable of quelling the infighting of the occupants of Helmand because they had an understanding of the local political climate and culture.⁶ The Taliban’s limited capability to provide governance was more than the GIRoA. The lack of governance the national government provided was due to insufficient understanding of the local population, and ignorance of the realities the Helmandi people were encountering.

Historical Background

Afghanistan’s largest province is Helmand, which roughly covers the same area as West Virginia. The province is located in the southwestern region of the country and is bordered by the Hindu Kush Mountains to the north, Kandahar province to the east and vast deserts to the south and west. The Helmand River is Afghanistan’s longest, divides the province in half, and

provides water to a large agriculture sector that produces over half of the poppy grown in Afghanistan.⁷ With western aid, the people of Helmand have developed a large network of canals to harness the water provided by the Helmand River to create vast areas of arable land where desert once stood. Also of note the singular major highway of Afghanistan runs through the province east and west and provides a link to the outside for people to develop commerce opportunities, but also serves as a highway for the movement of Taliban fighters and narcotic trafficking.

The province of Helmand became a hotbed for Mujahedeen recruitment and operations during the Soviet occupation because of central government policies on land redistribution.⁸ The khan, or landowner, in Helmand culture traditionally was a tribal leader that provided governance to his people. When the Soviet policies attempted to break up large land holdings, the khans used their influence to back the multiple Mujahedeen groups fighting in Helmand.⁹ The khans had historically been able to sway the opinion of the people through tribal connections and the presentation of business and agricultural opportunities. To coincide with the rise of Mujahedeen based on their ability to resist the aggression of the Soviet occupiers, the khan's influence diminished due to their loss of land to communist land reform. The power shift to the Mujahedeen complicated traditional tribal alliances and created modern fractures to an already divided society in Helmand. The new rifts in the Helmandi power struggle introduced by the Mujahedeen set the stage for later Taliban actions.

The Taliban was a group of fighters that formed in the Madrasas of Pakistan and Afghanistan with the intent to establish a Sunni Islamic caliphate in Afghanistan. As the Mujahedeens continued to demonstrate a capability to resist the Soviet expansion in Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as a rising fighting force under the leadership of Mullah Omar. The

original center of power for the Taliban was in the regions surrounding Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan. This region is primarily inhabited by Pashtun tribes, which historically did not control the central power of Afghanistan in Kabul.

After the Soviets departed Afghanistan there was once again a power vacuum created in the arena of national government. The Taliban filled the vacuum in 1994 by establishing a central government in Kabul. Their power matriculated to Helmand in the form provincial government once again centered in Lashkar Gah.¹⁰ The Taliban took advantage of hostilities created through multiple years of infighting between tribes in Helmand centered on the rightful land ownership and legitimate government.¹¹ The Taliban was willing to empower tradition power brokers to provide local governance as long as they were loyal to Taliban policies and provided support when requested. These policies created instability of the population and limited the ability of any actual governance provided. The people of Helmand were complicit with Taliban actions not because they agreed completely with their beliefs, but because there was no viable alternative. “The Taliban maintained control over most of the province through charismatic leadership, impartial administration of justice, and ruthless suppression of opposition.”¹² The Helmandi were not able to mount any resistance to the Taliban, who were able to remain securely in Helmand province well after western interdiction of 2001. They were able to take advantage of the tribal culture of Helmand, where westerners were not.

The clans and tribes of Helmand province endured many regime changes in Kabul, the national power of Afghanistan, but continued to challenge each other for control at the provincial level. The Akhundzadek clan dominated Helmand after the Soviet retreat and controlled the poppy trade and most arable land in the province. When the Taliban arrived in Helmand, they made a deal with the Ishaqzai to remove the Akhundzadek clan and dominate provincial society.

With the creation of the GIRoA in Kabul, the Akundzadek came to power once again in Helmand with the support of ISAF forces. This back and forth power struggle demonstrated the every changing environment of Helmand leadership, and shows the fragments within the provincial culture.

When western troops arrived in Afghanistan to hunt the terrorist responsible for the attack on American soil, they encountered a country with a fragmented society and limited government. Nowhere in the country was this truer than in Helmand province. The stage had been set where the people of Helmand had been the pawns of power brokers for multiple decades of changing national leadership from Soviets, Mujahedeen, and Taliban. As the western powers were able to establish operations in Afghanistan and hunt down terrorists, the people of Helmand were caught in the middle. Their main concern was their ability to live day to day and provide basic subsistence for their families. This led many to continue support for the Taliban because they were the only functioning government and provided promises of governance. The ability of a government to provide governance is the determinant to establish legitimacy.¹³ The western armies that participated in counter insurgent operations in Helmand province failed to ensure the GIRoA was seen as the legitimate government until the Marines arrived in 2010 and completely changed the direction of operations.¹⁴

COIN Operations

There are two distinct methods to conduct counter insurgent operations, enemy or population centric. The first course is to focus on the eradication of the insurgency through military operations to find and destroy the enemy. The second course is to focus primarily on participating with the population and developing an environment where the insurgent is incapable of operating. This inability to operate occurs because the population no longer

provides needed support or sanctuary to the insurgent. David Galula describes victory for the counter insurgent as the, “destruction in a given area of the insurgent’s forces and his political organization,” in addition to, “permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population, isolation not enforced upon the population but maintained by and with the population.”¹⁵ All counterinsurgency operations focus on the ability of the legitimate government being able to provide adequate governance to the population of a nation.

Upon the expulsion of the Taliban and establishment of the GIRoA in Kabul, western powers transitioned their objectives to reinforcing the ability of the GIRoA to deliver governance. President Karzai assumed power in December 2001, after the signing of the Bonn Agreement with the formation of the modern Afghan state. The transition forced western powers into a COIN operation in Afghanistan to root out the remaining Taliban and legitimize the GIRoA. The methods of COIN used ranged from enemy to population centric approaches previously identified. ISAF forces sectorized off the country and conducted limited operations outside of the capital, Kabul. In addition to American support the major players were the Germans, who focused on developing police forces, the British, French and Turks who focused on training an Afghan National Army.¹⁶ The remainder of the paper will focus on Helmand province and the influence and capability of the GIRoA to provide adequate governance to defeat the insurgency of the Taliban.

ISAF in Helmand

ISAF was established in Afghanistan after the United States led an invasion to provide a system of command and control for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member’s military operations in Afghanistan. ISAF initially focused on Kabul, but expanded its role country wide after the Bonn Agreement in 2001. The agreement called for NATO countries to

provide measures to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and reinforce the governance of the GIRoA. This fragmented approach to country wide COIN operations left Helmand province as an afterthought under the control of Canada, Holland, and the United Kingdom focused on Kandahar. Under initial ISAF operations Helmand remained an uncontrolled province and the Taliban was able to operate with little resistance. Eventually the leaders of ISAF recognized the shortcomings associated with having such little control in Helmand province and shifted British forces focus to Helmand.

The Helmandi's primary focus after the ISAF intervention was on physical and human security to conduct life under both the Taliban and GIRoA. Physical security focuses on the protection of the population from hostilities and human security is the ability of a population to conduct their lives and maintain order. The ability to provide governance is measured by recognizing what the people desire and determining if the government is able to deliver.¹⁷ The multiple factions of Helmand had come to live with external powers dominating the central government of the province through the capital of Lashkar Gah, but demanded some autonomy at the local level.¹⁸ The local government was required to afford the people the opportunity to conduct agricultural business and commerce. The people of Helmand were willing to abide by any government capable of delivering this limited governance.

The British took the lead role for ISAF operations in Helmand province in 2006. The initial focus of the British military was tasked with establishing security, stability, and eradication of the narcotics trade taking place in the province.¹⁹ The British also focused on the integration of the GIRoA in the governance of the province and rendering the Taliban incapable of operating a shadow government. They encountered a society in upheaval with cultural baggage attached to century old battles at Maiwand, and misinterpreted intentions involving

poppy harvest.²⁰ The focus on the physical security was the priority from the beginning of the British expansion in Helmand province, and led to the employment of enemy centric COIN operations.

In 2006 Northern Helmand Province was a sanctuary for Taliban activity and the British moved into the province with 3,000 military members prepared to root out the enemy.²¹ The focus of operations was to create an environment where the population felt secure enough under the protection of ISAF to negate the Taliban's ability to have sanctuary.²² Lashkar Gah and the surrounding areas remained stable and under the governance of the GIRoA, but the northern portion of the province was unstable and riddled with Taliban in May of 2006. The British recognized this fact and shifted the majority of their troops to the north around Now Zad, Musa Qala, and Sangin. The focus of troop's development to coincide with the enemy areas of operation signified the enemy centric tactics employed by the British. Poor information operations and message management developed resentment in the northern Helmandi with the British force build up.²³ The establishment of multiple bases and employment of air strikes into centers of population diminished the Taliban's operations, but also negatively affected the population's outlook on ISAF combatants.

Combined with the kinetic activity in the northern portion of the province the British also failed to understand the perspective of the population when it came to the importance of the poppy production and historical Anglo-Afghan relations. The British moved into their Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and started to search out the enemy. The populations interpreted this as an attempt to completely eradicate their way of living based on the production of poppy.²⁴ The distrust of the Helmandi was fostered by past interactions based on the Afghan massacre of the British at Maiwand, and the assumption that the British would be exacting revenge.²⁵ The

British conduct of COIN operations in northern Helmand disregarded the population's perspective, which led to future failure. Initially the enemy centric operations were successful because the Taliban lost the ability to move freely in northern Helmand while the British were able to take ground around Musa Qala, Now Zad, and Sangin. Quickly the population transitioned to being hostile to British activities because of misunderstandings and damage to homes and crops.²⁶ The British missed an opportunity to quell the violence in Helmand and eradicate the Taliban by focusing too much on killing the enemy while neglecting to foster a positive relationship with the population.

While the British moved north, they relied on Afghan National Army (ANA) and police to maintain the peace in central Helmand. Once again, the British misinterpreted the situation and this action allowed the Taliban to evade ISAF and establish operations in central Helmand. The tribal alliances united the Taliban in the north to the population of central Helmand, and the insurgents hunted in the north were able to escape to the sanctuary of Nadi Ali and Marjah. Sanctuary provided by the Helmandi in central Helmand was in response to a GIRoA program of poppy eradication conducted by the ANA and police in 2008.²⁷ The expectation of the British that the ANA and police would hold the southern perimeter of the COIN operations was incorrect and the insurgency was not defeated, but merely moved to the south and caused central Helmand to destabilize.

When the Taliban was firmly rooted in central Helmand the British policy makers also had a change of course in their expectations of the military and transitioned their COIN operations to a more population centric approach. The transition in approach forced the British army to reduce the number of raids in the north of Helmand so they could reassign forces to central Helmand to combat the Taliban's influence. The population interpreted the drawdown of

British forces as a retreat and a decisive victory based on Taliban propaganda. Limited troop numbers and shift in policy that dictated more population outreach programs confined the British to their bases. The outreach programs focused on rebuilding projects and improving the local's ability to conduct trade. The projects were able to sway the opinion of the Helmandi, but did not displace the Taliban leadership who were able to operate a powerful shadow government province wide.

The existence of a Taliban shadow government undermined the primary objective of COIN operations to reinforce the GIRoA's ability to provide governance. In Helmand the people were willing to take goods and services provided by the British, but withheld trust and reliance. The Taliban were still able to dominate the security environment because "people in the Afghan conflict are really actors in their own right, and act according to their own interests, as opposed to that of a given side."²⁸ Until the British changed strategic objectives to ensure physical and human security province wide the people would never rely on the GIRoA and all COIN operations would fail.

The leaders of ISAF recognized the failing actions in Helmand province and determined that more troops were required to flush out the Taliban and establish a parameter province wide. The United States Marines were the force identified to reinforce the British and deployed in a limited scope to Helmand province in vicinity of Nawa, central Helmand.

Looking Back at British COIN

On arrival in Helmand province in 2006 the British instituted a stabilization policy that focused on sequential lines of effort under the U.K. Joint Plan for Helmand.²⁹ The lines chosen were in the order of prevent or contain violence; protect the people, key assets and institutions; promote the political process; and prepare for long-term development.³⁰ The British determined

that they first needed to establish security around the provincial capital Lashkar Gah in order to facilitate the distribution of vital development projects and aid. The flaw with this method was the nature of the fragmented Helmandi society enabled the friend today to become the enemy tomorrow, and the British misinterpreted Afghan society by assuming that it “was essentially a post conflict state with an emerging government.”³¹ The British were never able to fully develop an operational approach that would keep pressure on the Taliban, while providing the required assistance to the population because the security required in their approach was never achieved. The British had the forces available to hold only segmented portions of the province while the Taliban continued to operate in the other portions. Each time the British would move into a new area they were forced to reestablish security prior to transitioning to population centered programs. The reader can see where this became problematic for the British based on the fact they did not have the troops available to hold terrain after establishing security. The British also used air delivered munitions into population centers to bolster security, which actually “significantly weakened support or the U.K. presence.”³² This fundamentally flawed approach led British leaders to abandon the requirement for security in area prior to transitioning to development work.

The British soon abandoned the enemy centric COIN approach of establishing security by eliminating the Taliban prior to engaging with the populace and provide much needed services. The alternative they arrived on was to move into areas and provide assistance prior to guaranteeing security, which left aid workers vulnerable and development project under the influence of Taliban fighters. While nestled in large bases the British attempted to conduct population centric operations in Helmand through aid workers and local contracts, but were

unable to achieve the required effects of greater reliance of the people on the GIRoA because the Taliban was able to sustain control throughout the province.

Lesson learned in Helmand demonstrate that foreign organizations conducting COIN operations must be willing and capable of conducting simultaneous population and enemy centric focused efforts rather than a sequential approach. This requires an organization to have a wide range of capabilities to include the capacity to provide security, generally defeating the insurgency in combat, while maintaining the logistics support to provide for the population until they are capable of self-sustainment. A military organization is best suited for this task, but must retain focus on the wide range of responsibilities associated with successful COIN and be prepared to operate across the spectrum and integrate other agencies into the effort. Not only must a force be capable, but they also must be prepared and willing to fight in a COIN environment to be successful. In order to take advantage of the identified responsibilities a commander must recognize what is required and ensure efforts are taken to complete the required tasks. This broad range requires a commander to be flexible, knowledgeable of cultural aspects, and also remaining capable of delivering the decisive action on the battlefield to defeat an enemy willing to fight. The organization I see fighting America's COIN battles in the future based on the experiences of Helmand province is the United States Marine Corps.

Devil Dog Tribe

The United States Marines were brought into Helmand province Afghanistan to reinforce the efforts of ISAF operations and ensure the GIRoA was able to deliver much needed governance. The unique attributes the Marines possessed in comparison to their allies in ISAF was the organization of the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) and a fundamental belief in maneuver warfare supported by centralized command and decentralized control. As the initial

contingent of Marines arrived in Southwest Afghanistan, the fate of Taliban soon started to change. The Marines brought an attitude in line with their heritage of being America's preeminent small war force and quickly adjusted the tactics, operations, and strategy of the counterinsurgency in Helmand province. In regards to tactics, the Marines were determined to conduct foot patrols and interact with the local populace. The change in operations was recognizing the requirement for a greater number of forces to deny the enemy sanctuary in the countryside. The major change in strategy for the Marines that diverged from ISAF actions was to continue to reach out to the Helmandi while bringing to bear a combined arms campaign against the Taliban in a simultaneous operation. The significance of these changes was that the Marines demonstrated to the people of Helmand that they were willing to fight and defeat the Taliban while continuing to provide security and stability. This is much harder than it sounds in a fragmented rural population such as Helmand province.

The demands placed on leaders in a COIN environment require quick reaction to an ever changing situation regarding enemy forces and populace sentiment.³³ The construct of the MAGTF enables Marine leadership to take advantage of organic logistic and air assets to support the ground maneuver elements. The major subordinate commands in a MAGTF are the ground combat element (GCE), air combat element (ACE), and logistic combat element (LCE). Flexibility and tempo are the byproducts of having a single commander control ground forces, fixed wing and rotary wing air assets, and logistic elements available in a MAGTF, which are attributes required to be successful in COIN. A Marine commander conducting COIN operations retains organic capabilities to adjust operations quickly delivering combat troops and required supplies across a battlefield via both air and ground elements.

In Helmand province the Marines were able to conduct COIN operations province wide, after initial operations in central Helmand. The Marines determined that to achieve success they must spread their forces across the entire province to reinforce their commitment to the people and prevent the Taliban from merely relocating and not losing any authority. The establishment of bases amongst the rural populace developed inroads of trust with the Helmandi people that were marginalized by both the Taliban and previous ISAF forces. The will to conduct dispersed operations did not manifest itself into holistic operations, but Marines were able to take advantage of the MAGTF construct to support the dispersed operations that earlier forces could not achieve.

The MAGTF in Helmand province was able to safely and expediently deliver supplies and troops across the province by using ACE and LCE assets. The ACE consisted of a full range of air assets to include a robust Marine Air Command and Control system (MACCS) to integrate and deconflict the dynamic battle space above Helmand. Fixed wing fighter aircraft assigned to the MAGTF in Helmand province were able to deliver fires when required, but mainly served the role to demonstrate to the Taliban that the potential to deliver fires was available. The Marines attempted to avoid the pitfalls the British had fallen into by causing more upheaval in the populace by delivering bombs into urban centers in Helmand while trying to root out the Taliban. The greatest impact the ACE was able to deliver is the support of distributed operations with heavy lift and attack helicopter operations. By using the AH-1 "Cobra" and UH-1 "Huey" helicopters to support ground operations commanders were able to deliver precision fires while retaining visible sustaining air presence to dissuade enemy actions. In combination with attack helicopter operations the CH-53 "Super Stallion" was able to deliver supplies to distributed bases within the urban and rural areas at over 15,000 pounds a load.

Distributed operations conducted by the Marines in Helmand province forced the Taliban to either fight or cease to exist because the Marines were able to eliminate sanctuary province wide. By moving out of the city centers the Marines were able develop a network of forward operating bases (FOB) which facilitated interaction with locals and built trust. In the tribal society of Helmand, the inability of the British to develop a system where they lived amongst the populace province wide led to mistrust and proved to be a boon for the Taliban. Prior to the arrival of the Marines, the Taliban had taken advantage of the low numbers of ISAF troops and formed shadow governments province wide. The nature of the MAGTF enabled Marine commanders to disperse, while retaining the ability to mass if required. They also lived amongst the populace and conducted foot patrols, which led to higher levels of human intelligence from the populace.

The Marines were able to conduct operations in southern, central, and northern Helmand province and pressure the Taliban simultaneously throughout the province. The British had focused on Lashkar Gah while executing the ISAF campaign to control the provincial population centers. The requirement for a large contingency of troops prevented the British from achieving security for the populace throughout the province, and forced them to remain in the civic areas. The Marines were able to not only expand area of control because of troop levels after 2009, but also could conduct dispersed operations because of small unit leadership and trust developed within the Marines. Throughout training, the United States Marines Corps focuses on the development of small unit leadership and commanders trust their subordinates to conduct operations as prescribed. The trust developed became a “game changer” for the Marines in Helmand province because they were able expand beyond the population centers and infiltrate the rural areas that had been the Taliban’s sanctuary. Not only did the commanders trust their

Marines, but this was a reciprocal relationship and the Marines trusted their commanders to support them while they were conducting small unit dispersed actions. This is where the flexibility of the MAGTF aids a commander because if a Marine is in contact with the enemy while displaced from the major FOBs the Marines are able to count on aviation delivered fire and potential resupply or extraction by both air and ground methods. This availability of air power to support dispersed operations not only aided kinetic operations but also non-kinetic actions by delivering required supplies in timely manner to influence the lives of the Helmandi.

The Marines in Helmand offered the population a viable alternative to the Taliban for the administration of governance. The GIRoA was still unable to deliver comprehensive government services throughout the province, but the Marines were able to effect security while simultaneously executing operations to enhance the living situation of the Helmandi people. Marines were determined to engage with local leaders, which allowed them to understand what would actually affect the lives of the people to foster trust. Many times in military operations involving COIN the response to the what the population needs is delayed by bureaucracy between military units and civilian agencies, but the MAGTF construct enables commanders to use organic logistic assets to not only acquire but also assist in the execution of development projects.

Establishing security for the population of Helmand province was just part of Marines operational outlook, they also focused on building trust across the local, district, and provincial levels to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban in the future. They understood the tribal nature of Helmandi society and the Marines developed a tribe-like identity for themselves. The nature of this identity manifested itself in the participation in shuras and providing governance, security, and support for the population in vicinity of Marine bases. Small unit leaders within the Marine

Corps would engage with locals, and in a fashion developed an impression of a tribal society for the Helmandi people to see. The Marines were able to demonstrate a society the people could understand rather than demonstrate an example of a western democratic bureaucratic military, which cultivated trust with locals.

Send in the Marines

The first Marines to arrive from 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment were assigned duties in central Helmand in the summer of 2009. The detachment included 300 Marines to reinforce British and Afghan forces in Nawa. The Marines instantly changed the tactics formerly employed by the British and began an aggressive patrolling campaign and population interactions, which “defeated the Taliban tactically in two days.”³⁴ They established shuras with local elders to demonstrate their recognition of local politics and power structure. The primary objective was to separate the population from the insurgents prior to any other operations. As the summer continued an additional 800 Marines arrived to aid the COIN operation. These Marines continued to pour into Nawa and conducted an aggressive patrolling operation focused on human interaction. The success in Nawa demonstrated the effectiveness of Marines in COIN operations in Afghanistan. President Obama’s decision to provide more American troops enabled the Marines to expand beyond Nawa in Helmand.

The Marines of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5) arrived in Helmand and turned over operations from the British in vicinity of Sangin. The British had conducted COIN in Sangin and initially been successful in driving out the Taliban, but with the shift to population centric operations the Taliban started to reemerge in the region and garnered ISAF attention. The Marines of 3/5 built on the successes in Nawa and brought the unique flavor of Marines COIN to Sangin and the surrounding areas. The Taliban had taken advantage of the British forces

restriction to their bases and focused their efforts little more than a mere 100 yards from the gates of the FOBs.³⁵ The Marines' reliance on aggressive patrolling tactics in a COIN environment, to interact with the population, date back to "Chesty" Puller in the jungles of Nicaragua.³⁶ Patrolling enables Marines to not only demonstrate intentions to the populace, but also gather real time intelligence. The Marines of 3/5 started the aggressive patrolling campaign soon after arrival and reached out to the community of northern Helmand province. During the patrols, the Marines received heavy fire that led to a large number of casualties in vicinity of Sangin. This did not dissuade them from their course and they continued to divide the populace from the Taliban to enable the GIRoA to provide governance to their people. Other portions of the north mirrored the success in Sangin as the Marines continued to expand operations in central and southern Helmand. The ability of the Marines to conduct successful operations province wide denied the Taliban sanctuary and reinforced the security of the people provided by the partners of the GIRoA.

The Marines were able to succeed where others failed because the residents of Helmand province recognized the security provided by and sincerity of the Marines. When 3/5 arrived in Helmand province under Lieutenant Colonel Jason Morris, their focus was zeroed in on the transition of governance from the Taliban to the GIRoA. The Marines' first priority was to conduct foot patrols in vicinity of their FOBs to establish human contact and reinforce their position of strength. "When confronted by insurgent fighters, the Marines did not fire warning shots or back away...but instead kept fighting until the enemy was destroyed or driven off."³⁷ By conducting aggressive patrols the Marines were able to demonstrate clearly to the Taliban and Helmandi that they utilized different tactics than the British. Where they conducted foot patrols they also sought to eradicate Taliban influence by delivering much needed resources.

When the resources required were not available through civilian avenues the Marines supplemented the stocks from their own to ensure development projects were supplied.³⁸ These actions demonstrated the Marines' commitment to locals and utilized the community projects to form a bond of trust with the Helmandi.

The Marines arrived in the northern Helmand to a large network of FOBs established by the British that required an enormous amount of man power to defend. The extensive FOB network left many undermanned and the surrounding area vulnerable to the Taliban. The majority of Taliban operations occurred in the unprotected zones between the FOBs. The British were not able counter this with their later ultra population centric approach, which led to a perceived strength for the Taliban. The Marines vacated over half of these FOBs in 2010 to consolidate forces in the most highly contested areas, and used the excess man power to conduct foot patrols. The use of foot patrols put the individual Marine in the forefront and enabled the development of relationships and security. The relationships that Marines built on these patrols enabled them to gain a clear understanding of the culture on the ground, which had eluded the British in previous years and developed opportunities to gain human intelligence from the Helmandi. By holding shuras, Marine commanders developed relationships with Helmandi power brokers, which led to information sharing and better understanding. The Marines quickly surmised that the Helmandi welcomed development projects, but the British failed to ensure the local government delivered as contracted.

The Marines promoted a program of “seeing is believing” in the government funded development projects and would withhold funds to any site they were unable to personally inspect. The British had previously continued to deliver funds when security dictated that no representative of the GIRoA were able to inspect development sites.³⁹ Locals informed the

Marines during the initial waves of patrols that the government funds were being misused and the projects were poorly constructed, when in existence at all. The Marines determined this was unsatisfactory and used their patrols to inspect the construction sites and determine the quality and progress. The Helmandi respected this because they had looked negatively on the British for being taken advantage of in business. The Marines were able to inspect the sites themselves, but also brought representatives of the government with them. This act reinforced to the population the source of the governance. Patrols that went much further into Taliban controlled areas to inspect the development sites met resistance and once again, the Marines took a different approach and engaged the enemy until they were defeated.

The British resigned their patrols to the immediate vicinity of their FOBS and established procedures to fall back behind their walls when encountered with resistance, but the Marines were determined to engage with the enemy. An ANA officer articulates the difference in forces when he states, “When the Taliban attacked, the British would retreat in their bases, but the Marines fight back.”⁴⁰ The first patrols by Marines around Sangin consisted of one rifle squad, 12 Marines. Immediately identified as insufficient the patrols were increased to two squads. The change in tactics enabled the Marines to have overwhelming forces in most cases while conducting patrols.⁴¹ The Taliban had become accustomed to overwhelming British forces with limited fire, but now the Marines were determined to stand and fight and the local populace positively responded to these tactics. The Helmandi recognized that the Marines were going to continue patrolling to ensure physical security in their districts as well as promote human security. The Marines were able to push the Taliban into the infertile desert areas of Helmand and the fringe of society.⁴² The Helmandi saw the balance of power shifting in favor the Marines and wanted to take advantage. In the fall of 2011, the populace was much more likely to identify

individuals in the Taliban and possible improvised explosive devices (IED) to Marines to enable them to conduct safe patrols through the Helmandi neighborhoods. The Marines took advantage of the shift in the population and exploited the information provided to conduct night patrols, which had previously been impractical due to the high number of IEDs.⁴³ The Marines were now equipped with current, relevant information on the enemy to further enhance their patrolling efforts.

The patrolling efforts forced the Taliban from their strongholds in northern Helmand and the Marine efforts in central and southern Helmand ensured there was no sanctuary for the insurgency in the province. The Taliban retreated from the province and regrouped in Pakistan, where the leaders told the fighters to return to Helmand and continue the jihad.⁴⁴ When the fighters returned to Helmand in the fall of 2011 they reentered into a much changed environment. The Marines had secured the province and established the legitimate GIRoA into positions of power throughout Helmand. The Marines were determined to root out corrupt officials within the GIRoA and have them replaced. They also saw the break in Taliban action as an opportunity to expand their FOB network and fill in the gaps the British had in security. Now the Marines had a well developed network of FOBs with an aggressive patrolling campaign supported by the Helmandi. The people of Helmand recognized the influence the Marines had on security and welcomed the change.

In addition to the changes in patrolling, the Marines also determined that the tactical messaging the British had been employing had failed. The primary concern of the Helmandi after physical security was human security, which involved the ability to provide for one's family and improve their lives. Commerce in Helmand focused on poppy production for the narcotics trade. Earlier the British and GIRoA had focused efforts on eradicating poppy

production. On arrival, the Marines determined to shift focus from poppy eradication to delivering security. The Marines informed the locals in their areas of operations of this fact. The Helmandi appreciated the Marines understanding of their way of life, which built inroads for Marines into their society. By showing a willingness to focus on clearing the insurgency and holding territory to enable the populace to prosper, free of insurgent effects, the Marines were able to build lasting relationship based on respect and trust. The idea that a western power would understand the plight of a local farmer was foreign to the people of Helmand. The Marines demonstrated that they were not just different in their kinetic approach, but also in the population outreach.

The Marines soon realized after arrival in Helmand that they were responsible for much more territory than they could control on their own, so they were determined to train the ANA and police to aid in their COIN efforts. Around Sangin the Marines developed a strong relationship with local government forces and shared techniques. They also used many Afghan forces to supplement their patrols through the villages of Helmand. This demonstrated to the people that the Marines were working with the GIROA and the people of Helmand could connect the government with all of the Marines efforts. The training conducted was developed and delivered by general purpose forces. This demonstrated the Marines were capable of conducting what is normally considered a Special Operating Force (SOF) function.⁴⁵ The training delivered not only bolstered the Marines capacity to hunt and kill the Taliban, but also developed a force that could stay in place on ISAF's departure and continue the mission.

The GIROA representatives in the northern Helmand had historically been incapable of delivering the governance for which they were responsible. The Marines recognized this truth soon after arrival and put all district government members on notice that policy was changing.

The Marines instituted oversight and requested many changes in personnel. The central government facilitated the changes and finally delivered governance to the people of northern Helmand.⁴⁶

Marine COIN Lessons Learned

The Marines possess a command and control structure capable of scaling to the requirements of an operation and stress the importance of small unit leaders executing based on mission type orders. The ability to deliver a combined arms campaign under a single commander in the MAGTF construct enables the Marines to deliver a functioning military service to fights around the globe. The expeditionary nature the Corps also supports their role in future COIN because it will require a timely response. If a military is capable of engaging the insurgency in its infancy it is able to deliver security to the populace with minimal effort and avoid drawn out conflict. In addition, a world class COIN organization must be willing to engage with partner nations to build relationships that can support both population and enemy centric aspects to a COIN campaign. The Marines currently have these attributes, but must continue to build on their success in Helmand to develop a force capable of conducting COIN operations world wide.

The United States Marine Corps must continue to identify weakness in its current organization that protracts the initial phases of COIN operations. These weaknesses are the understanding of potential environments where COIN may be taking place. The first step is to get Marines to positions around the globe and start to develop regional relationships to foster trust and cultural understanding. Not only must the Marines understand the cultures they may encounter around the globe, but the participant, both friendly and enemy, need to understand the culture of the Marine Corps. The culture of the Marines plays a significant role while

conducting COIN. Marines are able to deliver effects across a broad spectrum in regards to both kinetic and non-kinetic actions because of the integrated task force nature of the MAGTF. The arrival of a MAGTF to a region represents a capable weapon available to a commander in a potential crisis involving COIN. Marines show up ready to do what is required to achieve victory, ranging from conducting humanitarian assistance to direct action. The Marines remain focused on the mission and the unity of command presented by the MAGTF leads to unity of effort in foreign COIN, and facilitates the integration of civil agencies or partner nations.

The Marines do need to develop capabilities explicitly required to strengthen a partner nation to avoid the requirement for COIN operations. The development of a force capable of conducting professional foreign internal defense with an emphasis on partnership building would eliminate the need for Marines to engage in many enemy centric campaigns in the future. A capable force willing to remain in a foreign country and provide professional development of the hosts nations COIN capacity enhances the avoidance of conflict. The Marines are capable of doing this, but must ensure they bring other government agencies in to deliver effects that may be beyond their scope. To recognize they not are capable of doing everything would greatly enhance the Corps capability in becoming, once again America's premier force in regards to relationship development on a global scale.

Conclusion

The Marines were able to transition the people of Helmand from providing sanctuary to the Taliban into active participants of governance provided by the GIRoA by personally interacting with the general population, pursuing the Taliban relentlessly, and reinforcing local governmental capabilities. The implementation of an aggressive patrolling campaign enabled the Marines to foster a relationship with the Helmandi. By developing relationships, they were able

to gather intelligence on the locations of Taliban insurgents. The Marines conducted operations to eradicate the Taliban where they were found and did not back down from any fight. They informed the population of their intentions to reinforce the capabilities of the GIRoA. The Helmandi eventually saw that the Marines were serious in their claims which they demonstrated by removing poor government officials. The development projects in Helmand were corrected under Marine control and finally the population could take advantage of the government's construction projects. Most important the Marines established what would influence the Helmandi to deny the Taliban sanctuary and carried out operations to ensure the population remained separated from the insurgency.

The ability to conduct a well informed, integrated COIN operation in the future will determine victory or defeat. The United States Marine Corps current command and control system, MAGTF, is inherently integrated and capable across the entire spectrum of warfare. Current doctrine states that, "All organizations contributing to a counterinsurgency operation should strive... for maximum unity of effort."⁴⁷ The Marines also have a fundamental advantage in COIN because of their reliance on small unit leadership to remain flexible when required. A leader of COIN operations must be informed of the situation they are fighting and ensure their end states are achievable. Once the end states are set, the military must identify their role in the whole of government approach to accomplish them. Much will be asked of leaders in COIN operations in the future, but with a flexible organization, sound intelligence, the will to fight when required, and compassion to cooperate a military leader will be capable of success when called.



MAP 1 | HELMAND PROVINCE

Map

of Helmand Province Afghanistan⁴⁸

Endnotes

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