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LESSONS LEARNED AND FORGOTTEN FROM
OPERATION MOUNTAIN STORM, 2004

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Keith A. Milks

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to those families – including my own – who watch their loved ones sail away, await their return, welcome them home, and are sometimes forced to mourn their loss.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the staff and faculty of American Military University for their support and patience as I navigated my way through my undergraduate and graduate programs in military history. In particular, I would like to note the advice and assistance of Professors Anne Venzon, Don Sine, and Robert Young who kept me on track and guided me through the latter stage of my studies.

My experiences with AMU have been nothing short of exemplary. The professors were engaging, experienced in their fields of study, and brought real-life perspective to the discussions and assignments, and the coursework was challenging and comprehensive. This thesis is the culmination of several years of study that have enhanced my understanding of the past, the role warfare plays in history, and how conflict shapes the world stage.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

LESSONS LEARNED AND FORGOTTEN FROM
OPERATION MOUNTAIN STORM, 2004

by

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American Military University, October 12, 2014

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This research examines the role of the United States’ 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit in Operation Mountain Storm, a 2004 counter-offensive to the Taliban’s annual ‘spring offensive’ in Afghanistan. Tactical, strategic, and logistical innovations made the mission a success at a time when other theaters in the War on Terror were faltering. This thesis takes advantage of interviews with Mountain Storm veterans, after-action reports, combat narratives, news reports, and witness statements to examine the mission and the innovations that ultimately did not carry over to Iraq, and were only adopted in Afghanistan after many years and hundreds of U.S. casualties later. The delay in adopting these practices in Iraqi and Enduring Freedom hampered combat efficiency, interoperability with Afghan forces, and relationships with the Afghan people, and is a stark reminder that failure to adopt and improvise is detrimental to any sound military theorem.
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INTRODUCTION

In late spring and summer 2004, the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU (SOC)) served as the main effort for Operation *Mountain Storm*, a Coalition effort to disrupt and destroy anti-government elements in Afghanistan. Within three months, the unit had pierced into the heart of central Afghanistan and reestablished a semblance of central Afghan government presence in the remote region. The Marines suffered minimal casualties while inflicting significant losses on the enemy, destroying tens of thousands of weapons and munitions, invigorating the local economies, supporting United Nations voter registration efforts, and denying the insurgency what had long been a Taliban stronghold. Army Major General Eric Olson, the senior field commander in Afghanistan and commanding general of Combined Joint Task Force 76 addressed the Marines at Kandahar Air Field in late July:

“Never again can they use that place [Oruzgan province] as a sanctuary. You proved to the world the United States of America is going to take this fight to the most dangerous part of Afghanistan unafraid and absolutely determined. You went to find him [the Taliban] on his turf, on his terms, on his ground and kicked him in the ass.”¹

If the Marines’ efforts in Operation *Mountain Storm* were as successful as Olson described, then why have their efforts been relegated to a historical backwater? This is partly due to the tumultuous year that was 2004. The United States was preoccupied with a contentious Presidential election, the war in Iraq

was reaching new and bloodier heights, gas prices were surging, revelations about prisoner abuse in Iraq were unfolding, and terrorists continued to launch successful attacks across the globe, most notably in Spain and Russia. Despite the lack of media coverage and a dearth of attention from politicians and the public, this campaign should have sparked some recognition beyond maritime warfare circles, but did not.

This study will examine why the Marines’ efforts in Operation Mountain Storm have been forgotten not only because of other events vying for attention, but because the campaign was stained by controversy. The Pakistani-born commander of the unit’s infantry battalion was relieved amidst allegations of a volatile command environment, junior commanders and staff officers were reassigned or fired outright because of incompetence or misconduct, there were hints of prisoner abuse, and revelations that the MEU’s primary Afghan ally was a warlord with an abhorrent track record for human rights abuses. Controversies aside, the 22nd MEU (SOC) did perform superbly in the mountains of south-central Afghanistan during Mountain Storm and owed its successes to an array of innovative strategic and tactical decisions that were ideally suited to combating an insurgent movement deeply embedded with the population in a harsh, unforgiving climate.

The 22nd MEU (SOC) reinvented its combat model even before the first shots of the campaign were fired. Female Marines and sailors from aviation and support units found themselves embedded with infantry units, bulky body armor was discarded in lieu of lightweight vests more aptly suited for the mountainous
terrain, locally contracted light trucks and Humvees became the primary means of travel, and the professionalization of and integration with local police and militia forces was a priority. Combined with robust civil affairs and economic revitalization programs, the MEU approached the war in Afghanistan from a total-body perspective.

It is therefore surprising that the creation of the “Lioness Program” in Iraq in 2006 – assigning female service members to combat units – was heralded as the first known effort of its kind to overcome cultural sensitivities. When Improved Modular Tactical Vests were fielded in 2011, they were intended to give “Marines greater maneuverability in a firefight and decreases the chances of overheating in a hot environment like Afghanistan.” The mine-resistant ambush-protected all-terrain vehicle (M-ATV) finally entered the Afghan theater in 2011 after the heavier Stryker and mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles proved incapable of navigating the rough terrain in south-central Afghanistan. Writing for the Institute for the Study of War and The Weekly Standard, Kimberly Kagan described the so-called Anbar Awakening in Iraq in 2006 as the need for a “counterinsurgent force and the host nation [to] work together to strengthen and protect the institutions of civil society” and “convince the population to oppose the insurgents and support the government.” These innovations in Iraq and Afghanistan were depicted as new

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ways of doing business and even revolutionary, but these lessons were learned two years earlier in south-central Afghanistan by the 22nd MEU (SOC).

The question that remains is why were these lessons not embraced and adopted sooner, and thereby contributing to the counter-insurgency and nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was certainly not for lack of documentation. The 22nd MEU (SOC) and its major subordinate elements submitted its required command chronologies, including combat and humanitarian summaries of action. The November 2004 edition of *The Marine Corps Gazette* was devoted almost entirely to articles written by officers and staff noncommissioned officers that provided wide-ranging insight into how the unit adapted to the unique challenges of operating in a mountainous environment and operating with Afghan military and militia forces. Colonel Kenneth F. McKenzie, the 22nd MEU (SOC) commanding officer, authored an article for the November 2004 *Proceedings* titled “Marines Deliver in Mountain Storm.” Written in collaboration with members of his primary staff, McKenzie’s article provided a synopsis of the MEU’s efforts in Afghanistan, including the aviation and logistics elements. Despite the abundance of information regarding Operation *Mountain Storm* and tangible reminders of the 22nd MEU (SOC)’s successes – like the unit’s receipt of the Navy Unit Commendation and one of its members receiving the first Navy Cross to be awarded to a Marine for service in Afghanistan – the MEU’s achievements fell on deaf ears.

When an operation is tainted by controversy, the United States military, and the Marine Corps in particular, has an unfortunate habit of trying to
distance itself from the stain. Invoking the lessons of a military operation
during which a seasoned combat officer was relieved for misconduct and a
myriad of allegations of wrong-doing surfaced is distasteful to many in power.
When the military chooses – deliberately or not – to forgo the lessons from an
operation because of unfortunate circumstances, it is the military equivalent of
throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This is what happened to the 22nd
MEU (SOC) in the aftermath of Operation *Mountain Storm*.

Outside of government documents, a very narrow field of professional
publications, and scattered news reports, Operation *Mountain Storm* has all but
fallen out of military consciousness. This essay seeks to add to the limited
historiography of the early days of the war in Afghanistan by examining a
forgotten campaign and showing how the 22nd MEU (SOC)’s innovative
warfighting techniques were a harbinger of later ‘breakthroughs’ in Iraq and
Afghanistan, the delays of which may have hobbled the effectiveness of the
campaigns there.

Given the questionable future of Afghanistan and the backward slide of
Iraq in the face of the rising power of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),
it is pure conjecture to say that the adoption of the 22nd MEU (SOC)’s tactics
pioneered during *Mountain Storm* would have had any long-term impact on those
theaters. What is known is that many of the strategies the MEU employed in
Afghanistan were eventually put into effect in Iraq and later, Afghanistan.
American withdrawal from these regions has always been inevitable, but had the
military more willingly embraced the tactics pioneered by the 22nd MEU (SOC)
during *Mountain Storm*, the cost to the United States in blood and treasure to reach these points may have been lessened.
CHAPTER ONE: COUNTERING THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

Spring brings renewed fighting to Afghanistan every year. The end of the opium harvest and better weather, combined with the promises of pay and religious enlightenment from religious, ethnic, and tribal leaders, prompts Afghan men to leave their winter sanctuaries and again take up arms. Traditionally, “the ‘spring offensive’ [has] been the Taliban’s opportunity to ‘surge’ against Kabul following a period of relative hibernation during the winter when most insurgents fall back to the mountainous Afghanistan-Pakistan border.”4 The spring of the third year of the United States’ involvement south Asia was no different. Throughout the winters of 2002 and 2003, members of the disposed Taliban regime and al-Qaeda had publicly heralded their upcoming campaign with pledges to attack civilian, government, and military targets throughout the country. Feeding the insurgency were not only Afghan militants, but also narco-mercenaries, sparring warlords vying for power and influence, and an influx of foreign fighters from the Middle East, sub-Saharan and the Horn of Africa, other parts of Asia, and Europe.

In 2004, the United States and its Coalition partners in Afghanistan tried to pull out the rug out from under the al-Qaeda and Taliban propagandists. The Department of Defense released a statement announcing its own spring offensive in Afghanistan on January 28, 2004. There were few details and no hint of how the task would be accomplished, but only that the offensive was planned to “foil

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the expected movement of Taliban figures and al-Qaeda terrorists in still-troubled regions of Afghanistan” and that “defense officials have issued an order alerting troops to the planned ‘spring offensive’ so forces can start working on logistics and getting equipment in place.”

Days before the Pentagon announced its own spring offensive, the 22nd MEU received a warning order to prepare for operations in Afghanistan just as the unit entered the final stages of its pre-deployment training program for a scheduled six-month deployment to the European and Central Command theaters. The order named the 22nd MEU as the main effort for Operation Mountain Storm, the Pentagon’s preemptive ‘counter-offensive’ to the anticipated Taliban spring offensive. The unit deployed as scheduled in late February and was steaming northward through the Persian Gulf when the Pentagon announced it was sending the Marines to Afghanistan “to reinforce the American-led operation there to combat fighters of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.”

A March 26 article by Eric Schmitt of the New York Times cites a senior Pentagon official who stated that the commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Army General John P. Abizaid, and “his top lieutenants in Afghanistan had been planning a major spring offensive against Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters along that [Afghan-Pakistani] frontier, and he has intended for months to use the additional Marines.”

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7 Ibid.
WHY A MEU?

The growing commitment in Iraq and budding counter-terrorism missions in the Philippines and Horn of Africa in 2004 was beginning to strain American military power. In the face of criticism that Afghanistan was becoming a ‘forgotten war,’ Bush administration officials repeatedly asserted that the war in Iraq was not diverting resources from the mission in Afghanistan to hunt down and eliminate Taliban diehards and the architects of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States.\(^8\) However, fiscal year 2004 troop strengths in Iraq topped 130,600 and steadily increased while the average number of ‘boots on the ground’ in Afghanistan was 15,200.\(^9\) When the decision was made to commit the 22nd MEU, there were just under 13,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The vast majority of these troops were scattered along the border with Pakistan, isolated Special Forces outposts, at Kandahar and Bahgram Air Fields, and in the capital of Kabul. This left wide swaths of the country without a viable U.S. presence, and in the fledgling days of the Afghan National Forces and limited commitments from other Coalition members, the only thing keeping the entire country from backsliding into anarchy was American troops and the power and influence of local warlords.

In early 2004, there were two problems facing military planners regarding Afghanistan. The first was a force cap set by the administration limiting the number of troops in Afghanistan at 13,000, which was far too few to effectively

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combat the insurgency and establish the conditions for reconstruction. A way around this force cap was to send in the MEU, which is technically the theater reserve for a respective combatant commander and considered a discretionary force. By deploying the MEU to Afghanistan, General Abizaid could introduce more than 2,000 troops into the region without exceeding the DoD-mandated force cap and meeting the strategic needs of the spring offensive.

The second and more pressing problem was that with forces being stretched thin supporting the Global War on Terrorism, operating in remote areas of Afghanistan and under very austere conditions would require a significant pooling of resources. This is the exact conditions where a Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) organization could thrive. The MAGTF is the Marine Corps’ basic warfighting organization that places ground combat, aviation, and logistical elements under the control of a single commander and his staff. MAGTFs can be tailor-made for specific missions and range in size from several dozen to tens of thousands of Marines and sailors. The smallest standing MAGTF is the MEU. The 22nd MEU is one of seven MEUs fielded by the Marine Corps that are forward-deployed aboard amphibious shipping – two or more of which are deployed at any given time – and reconstituted with new units after each deployment. MEUs undergo an extensive pre-deployment training program prior to deployment that certifies them to conduct missions across the spectrum of modern warfare from full-scale combat to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This training earns the MEU the ‘Special Operations Capable,’ or SOC, designation.
In 2004, the 22nd MEU was commanded by Colonel Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., a 1979 Citadel graduate who had commanded Marines at the platoon, company, and battalion levels. His assignment prior to assuming command of the MEU in October 2002 was as the executive assistant for the Commandant of the Marine Corps. The 2,200-man MEU consisted of its command element and three major subordinate elements:

- **Command Element (CE):** Composed of staff and liaison sections, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), medical, civil affairs, public affairs/combat camera, intelligence, communications, Force Reconnaissance, and other specialized units, totaling 250 personnel. An 80-person, two-plane detachment of KC-130 Hercules transport aircraft were regionally deployed to support the MEU.

- **Ground Combat Element:** Battalion Landing Team 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment (BLT 1/6). A standard battalion with a headquarters, weapons, and three rifle companies reinforced with an artillery battery, engineers, tanks, light armored vehicles, a reconnaissance platoon, amphibious assault vehicles, and snipers. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Asad A. Khan and consisted of 1,200 Marines and sailors.
• Aviation Combat Element: Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 266 (Reinforced) [HMM-266 (Rein)]. A medium-lift helicopter squadron of 14 CH-46E Sea Knight assault helicopters, reinforced by six AV-8B Harrier II attack jets and six CH-53E Super Stallion transport, four UH-1N Huey utility, and six AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopters. Including aircrew, the 400-person squadron consisted of staff, maintenance, refueling, and ordnance sections, and was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joel R. Powers.

• Combat Service Support Element: MEU Service Support Group 22 (MSSG-22). The primary logistical arm of the MEU with 350 Marines and sailors organized into staff, engineering, transportation, refueling, water purification, supply, mechanical, medical, and dental sections. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin R. Braden.

The strength of the MEU is in its unity of command and self-sufficiency. Major General Eric Olson described the MEU by saying “It’s got everything. It’s got a ground force; it’s got both fixed and rotary-wing support. It’s a very capable force package.”¹⁰ This competency has proved time and again over the years as the 22nd MEU undertook missions in the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, the

Middle East, and south Asia. By doctrine, the MEU is capable of operating independently for 60 days without external support, and this capability fit perfectly into Abizaid’s plan for Operation *Mountain Storm*.

**THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES**

Few countries can boast a history as violent and turbulent as Afghanistan. Marauding armies and traders have used the Afghan mountains and desert as a land bridge connecting the Middle East, Asian sub-continent, and the vast steppes of central Asia since antiquity. Incessant tribal warfare plagued Afghanistan, as did a succession of invaders including the Greeks under Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the Persians, and in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, Great Britain. The British fought three wars in Afghanistan and in the 1920s, King Amanullah became Afghanistan’s first modern ruler as he attempted to modernize and secularize the country. Islam was too entrenched in Afghanistan and these reforms were almost universally rejected, leading to Amanullah’s abdication in 1929. Mohammed Zahir Shah ascended to the Afghan throne in 1933 and ruled for the next four decades, courting both the United States and Soviet Union for financial and military aid. Afghanistan eventually tilted toward the Soviet camp.

By 1978, the Afghan monarchy had been abolished and a succession of failed presidents, misguided economic reforms, and further attempts at secularization – promoted by the Soviets – led to open revolt by Islamic fundamentalists. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day 1979 to
bolster their client and despite tens of thousands of troops, learned that while Afghanistan was easy to take, it was impossible to control. The Soviet invasion gave rise to the Mujahideen, or ‘holy warriors,’ a loose-knit peasant army that was eventually supplied and financed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pakistani security services, and became flush with volunteers from throughout the Muslim world. The Soviets remained in Afghanistan until February 1989 when they withdrew the last of their combat forces after enduring 15,000 dead. Despite killing more than a million Afghans and displacing another five million, the Soviets and their Afghan allies were never able to control more than 20 percent of the country at any given time.

The Soviet puppet state in Afghanistan lasted only three years before it was overthrown and the country descended into a patchwork quilt of isolated government enclaves and local fiefdoms controlled by warlords. A grassroots fundamentalist organization known as the Taliban emerged in 1992 and by 1996 had assumed control of the entire country except for a pocket of resistance in northern Afghanistan. The Taliban instituted Shari’ā, or Islamic religious law, and became an international pariah as it amassed a horrific human rights record and openly provided sanctuary to and supported terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States launched a whirlwind campaign alongside anti-Taliban forces that toppled the Taliban regime and ushered in a transitional government headed by Hamid Karzai.

The new Afghan government adopted a constitution, restructured itself as a three-branch Islamic republic, stood up the Afghan National Army and Police
(ANA and ANP), and prepared for its first-ever ‘truly democratic’ presidential election scheduled for October 2004. Despite these political gains, Afghanistan remained dangerously unstable in 2004. The Afghan government was unable to assert control outside major population centers where the citizenry had little or no sense of national identity. Remnants of the Taliban regime still held sway in most tribal areas, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated south, and divisions built along tribal and ethnic lines further destabilized the country.

One of the greatest problems facing the Coalition was Afghanistan’s geography and population. Afghanistan has a total land area of nearly 251,000 square miles, making it a bit smaller than Texas (the universal land measurement comparison), and looks like a misshapen and jagged egg canted to the right. The land-locked country is bordered to the east and south by Pakistan, Iran to the west, and former Soviet republics to the north.

The Hindu Kush Mountains are the country’s dominant topographic feature. They create a thousand mile-long belt that runs from the northeast to the southwest with secondary ranges that extend to the south, north, and west that lead toward or into Pakistan and Iran and tamper into rolling plains and plateaus. The Kandahar, Oruzgan, and Zabul provinces where the 22nd MEU operated are in the western reaches of the Central Plateau where the mountains
gradually give way to valleys and scattered farms with an average altitude around 3,500 feet above sea level, but where some peaks top 10,000 feet.

In 2003, Afghanistan ranked 173 out of 178 on the United Nations’ Human Development Report as one of the world’s poorest and least developed countries. Less than 35 percent of the country’s adult population was functionally literate, nearly half the country was unemployed, the infant mortality rate was 165 for every thousand births, 20 percent of children died before reaching the age of five, and the life expectancy for men and women was 42 and 44, respectively.\(^{11}\) Although Islam is a unifying aspect throughout the country – with 99 percent of the population belonging to either the Sunni or Shi’a sect of Islam\(^{12}\) -- the country’s population was still sharply divided among ethnic, tribal, social, economic, and in some cases, village lines.

Most of the misery of the Afghan people could be tied to the government’s inability to assert itself throughout the countryside and unify the country with a national identity. The first step in doing so is providing essential services like governance and law enforcement, and extending critical infrastructure. Millions of Afghanistan’s rural citizens lived without electricity, water, sewage, access to education, essential medical care, communications,

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\(^{12}\) Ibid.
reliable income, roads, and local governance. These gaps were filled by local strongmen and often led to abuse, corruption, and overall misery, providing a perfect recruiting pool for extremists and narcotic cartels. Sean M. Maloney wrote an assessment of Afghanistan for a 2005 edition of *Parameters*:

“In sum, the Afghan transitional government had questionable legitimacy among the people, it was subject to coercion by better-armed entities, and it was dependent on international forces in every way. Without security, there can be no reconstruction, and with no reconstruction there would be no nation-building, thus leaving Afghanistan susceptible to continued instability and penetration by international terrorism.”  

The years immediately following the U.S. invasion were primarily geared toward hunting down rogue elements in the country with reconstruction taking a back seat. As the war entered its third year, the Afghan government tried to gain its legitimacy internationally and within its own borders. To do so, the leaders focused on its upcoming election and tackling the problems of essentially starting the country from scratch. The NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was in its infancy and limited to the capital region, and the Coalition approach was disjointed, unfocused, and weak. The U.S. would lead combat operations and train the new 70,000-member Afghan National Army, Japan would tackle disarming some 100,000 militia fighters, Britain would undertake an anti-narcotics program, Italy would oversee changes in the judiciary, and Germany would train a 62,000-member police force.  

Other Coalition members like France, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, the

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Netherlands, and Romania – among others – would provide logistical and security assistance.

By early 2004, the Coalition focus on Afghanistan’s population centers, the ‘ring road’ connecting major cities, and its porous borders had driven thousands of Afghan insurgents and foreign fighters into neighboring Pakistan and into central provinces where Coalition and Afghan government presence was weak or non-existent. Key among these were the northern Kandahar, Oruzgan, and Zabul provinces in the heart of Pashtun Afghanistan, and the birthplace of the Taliban and its leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. These regions had been all but ignored since the 2001 invasion except for limited civil affairs and special operations missions. Operation *Mountain Storm* would challenge the insurgency’s dominance in these areas.
CHAPTER TWO: OPERATION MOUNTAIN STORM

The concept for Operation *Mountain Storm* called for the 22nd MEU to be the mission’s main effort, or the effort a senior commander has determined to be the most important and whose success will make the most difference in achieving long-term strategic success.\(^{15}\) Its designation as the operation’s main effort gave Colonel McKenzie and his staff a great deal of latitude in his tactical planning. The most important early decisions by CJTF-180 were to allow the 22nd MEU to maintain its integrity as a MAGTF and be assigned its own area of operations which McKenzie, a fan of Southeastern Conference collegiate football, dubbed Area of Operations (AO) Linebacker.

Mission planners developed a mission statement that read:

> “Commencing 25 Apr 04, 22nd MEU (SOC) conducts combat operations to defeat anti-coalition militants (ACMs), secure major population areas, and support civil-military operations (CMO) in AO Linebacker to create a secure and stable environment in order to facilitate United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)-sponsored voter registration and elections.”\(^{16}\)

Specifically, the 22nd MEU’s tasks were to:

- Identify and destroy anti-coalition leaders and enables, areas of sanctuary, and infiltration lines.
- Provide a visible security environment for U.N. voter registration.
- Capitalize on MAGTF flexibility to conduct intelligence-driven combat operations.

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Aggressively link combat and civil-military operations to achieve long-term security in the northern Kandahar, Oruzgan, and northern Zabul provinces.

Develop infrastructure and logistical capabilities austerely so as to fight the MEU without detracting from other frontline forces.

Tailor combat support and combat service support to meet the requirements of small-unit leaders.¹⁷

Although Mountain Storm was heralded as a country-wide effort, the MEU would be the focal point of logistical and combat support for the duration of the mission. The mission was the latest in a string of ‘mountain’-themed operations that bore names like Mountain Lion, Mountain Viper, Mountain Resolve, and Mountain Blizzard. Mountain Storm actually began in mid-March with a series of localized missions and picked up steam with the arrival of the MEU and continued until the unit began retrograding to amphibious shipping in July after ten weeks of sustained combat operations.

DEPLOYMENT AND SETTING THE STAGE

The 22nd MEU departed Camp Lejeune, N.C., aboard the amphibious assault ships USS Wasp (LHD-1), Whidbey Island (LSD-41), and Shreveport (LPD12). As the ships steamed eastward across the Atlantic, they were joined by the cruisers USS Yorktown (CG-48), Leyte Gulf (CG-55), destroyer USS McFaul (DDG-74), and attack submarine USS Connecticut (SSN-22). Though the ships

¹⁷ Ibid, 49.
would do little more than carry and escort the MEU to its offload points in the
Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, this flotilla was itself a new concept.
Expeditionary Strike Group 2 (also known as the *Wasp* ESG) combined
amphibious forces with the long-range missile, air defense, and shore
bombardment capabilities of the surface warfare combatants and submarines –
creating what was referred to as a ‘blue-green’ Naval team.

As the *Wasp* ESG and its embarked Marines steamed eastward across the
Atlantic, planners from the MEU were already in Kuwait, Pakistan, and
Afghanistan paving the way for the unit’s deployment. BLT 1/6 participated in
an amphibious landing and live-fire exercise in Albania from March 8-12, and
the MEU’s Maritime Special Purpose Force (MSPF) trained with Israeli special
forces near Tel Aviv. On
March 16, the ships transited
the Suez Canal and entered the
CENTCOM area of operations.
The MEU began offloading
personnel and equipment in
Qatar and Kuwait on March 24
for air shipment into
Afghanistan, a process that
would take three weeks and culminate with the helicopters and jets of HMM-266
(Rein) flying across Pakistan and into Kandahar Army Air Field on April 13.
Equipment offloaded in Pakistani ports were driven overland to Kandahar.
During force closure at Kandahar, the 22nd MEU began the first of its four-phase operational concept. Starting in late March and throughout April, the MEU launched five overt, overland patrols into the Oruzgan province toward the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt. These initial missions, dubbed *Ulysses I-V*, were designed to provide key leaders terrain familiarization, identify the site for the MEU’s forward operating base (FOB), and establish relationships with local political and militia leaders. The site selected for what eventually became known as FOB Ripley – named after retired Marine Colonel John Ripley who in 1973 destroyed the bridge over South Vietnam’s Dong Ha River and blunted a North Vietnamese invasion – was on the site of a 4,400-foot Soviet improvised air strip that had gone unused since the 1980s. Tarin Kowt lies 80 miles north of Kandahar in the center of what is known as the ‘Tarin Kowt bowl,’ a place of relatively lush agricultural land ringed by rugged mountains.18 There are only two main passes that allow operational access into the region and this had contributed to Oruzgan becoming a “Taliban stronghold … suited ideally to insurgency because of its geography and isolated populace.”19

18 Kenneth F. McKenzie. Interview with a Marine Corps historian (August 30, 2004). Author’s collection.
19 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps,
SECURING THE BOWL

Phase II of the MEU’s role in Operation *Mountain Storm* commenced in the early morning hours of April 25 when six long convoys of Humvees, armored vehicles, and MTVRs departed Kandahar Army Air Field bound for Tarin Kowt. Operation *Ulysses IV* had inserted engineer and security detachments from MSSG-22 into Tarin Kowt where they began staking out FOB Ripley a week earlier. Two days later, Operation *El Dorado* began when Marine helicopters carried three reinforced rifle companies into the northern Kandahar and southern Oruzgan provinces. These helicopter assaults were intended to provide cover for and divert attention away from the ground assault convoys making the dangerous trek to the intended site of FOB Ripley and “directly challenge the Taliban’s ability to continue to isolate Oruzgan.”

Over the course of the next two weeks, as the infantrymen scoured the southern approaches to Tarin Kowt for insurgents, FOB Ripley slowly began to take shape. After throwing up a perimeter fence and security bunkers, the next priority was extending the runway to 6,054 feet to accommodate fully-loaded KC-130s. Creating an air bridge lessened the MEU’s dependence on overland

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supply runs and thereby diminished the threat from improvised explosive
devices (IEDs) and ambush. The first KC-130 Hercules landed at FOB Ripley on
May 4, the same day Marines pushed into the town of Tarin Kowt to begin U.N.
voter registration efforts. FOB Ripley would eventually grow to accommodate
13 helicopter landing pads, a helicopter refueling and rearming point, the MEU
combat operations center, compounds for the Army’s provisional reconstruction
team and the Jordanian Special Operations Force, an ammunition supply point,
14 bunkers, a fuel depot, and detention center. In keeping with the expeditionary
nature of the MAGTF, “the overriding rule was to minimize the personnel and
equipment needed to operate the FOB. Two-man tents, meals ready to eat, and
reduced infrastructure were the norm.”

During Phase II of the MEU’s operations, the MEU had begun interacting
with Governor Khan’s anti-Coalition militia, kicked off voter registration
efforts, and commenced or completed 27 civil affairs projects. Since April 24,
more than a dozen insurgents had been killed, approximately 40 had been
captured, and 34 large caches containing hundreds of weapons, thousands of
round of ammunition, and great quantities of mines, rockets, and bomb-making
materials. Some of this weaponry was transferred to the Afghan National Army
or local militia forces, but the vast majority was destroyed with controlled
detonations. One BLT 1/6 Marine, Corporal Ronald R. Payne Jr., of Lakeland,
Florida, was killed in a nighttime ambush May 7, and two other Marines and a
hospital corpsman were wounded. Payne was the MEU’s only fatality during

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Operation *Mountain Storm*. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were become the scourge of American forces in Iraq and had been used to great effect by the Mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. However, ACM forces only executed one successful IED against the MEU when they detonated a remote-controlled IED on April 24 against a MSSG-22 convoy headed toward FOB Ripley. The Italian-made mine destroyed a MTVR, wounding two Marines in the cargo area of the vehicle and severing the right leg of the driver.\(^{22}\)

The shift from Phase II to Phase III on May 12 turned the MEU’s attention from securing the Tarin Kowt bowl and the immediate area around the provincial capital and toward intelligence-driven raids against insurgent sanctuaries and high-value targets such as ACM leaders, financers, and Taliban sympathizers. While most of the infantry companies remained in the field during the transition from Operation *El Dorado* to *Rio Bravo*, another company established FOB Payne, a small logistics and combat outpost southeast of FOB Ripley. Meanwhile, the MEU’s Force Reconnaissance Platoon and an infantry platoon from BLT 1/6 went to Khas Oruzgan as part Operation *Pegasus* to buttress

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support for the government in that corner of the province. With the exception of a rifle company at FOB Payne, a platoon in Khas Oruzgan, and the approximately 700 aviation and logistics personnel remaining at Kandahar, the MEU consolidated at FOB Ripley on May 19 to conduct detailed planning and coordination for follow-on operations.  

The increasing security situation in the Oruzgan and northern Kandahar provinces established conditions for "a broad array of civil affairs projects designed to show a credible alternative to the negative path offered by the Taliban." The fledgling Tarin Kowt Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) was an Army-led entity responsible for long-term economic growth, infrastructure development, and promoting education, health care, and government viability in the region. The Tarin Kowt PRT was headquartered inside FOB Ripley and completely dependent on the MEU for its security, transportation, and logistics, so the initial job of interacting with the Afghan public in the region fell to the MEU. MSSG-22 was the lead agency for these endeavors as they conducted medical and dental visits, built wells, funded and built schools, and generally tried to provide essential

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23 22nd MEU ComChron, 3-4.
24 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps, 52.
services with the expectation the PRT and eventually the central government would backfill these roles.

Throughout the course of Operation *Mountain Storm*, the 22nd MEU (SOC)’s organized civil affairs programs – collectively known as Operation *Nightingale* – treated 2,027 medical and 107 dental patients, more than half of whom were women. The most common ailments were the result of unsanitary conditions and lack of essential services like worms, malnutrition, tooth decay, gum disease, respiratory infections, malaria, common myalgia, and skin infections. Acute treatment was provided for drug overdoses, burns, several cases of head trauma, a stabbing, and several shootings. More than $313,000 of school supplies, clothing, tools, food, and seed were distributed, and 15 drinking wells and irrigation systems were built or contracted.  

Workers contracted by the 22nd MEU build one of 15 new wells in Oruzgan province, May 14, 2004. USMC photo.

The MEU’s presence also permitted the introduction of UNAMA voter registration teams into the Oruzgan province. Between May 1 and July 10, 58,357 Afghan citizens were registered to vote, representing “more than 44% of UNAMA’s provincial goal and helped overcome the initial hurdle of demonstrating to the populace that safe election

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were possible in Afghanistan.” Contracts for building materials, labor, and locally-sourced food provided jobs and pumped money into local economies.

Late May was consumed by small, platoon or company-sized operations targeting specific ACM personnel and sanctuaries. Operations Mossberg, Winchester, Bladerunners I and II, Cadillac Ranch, and Darlington County met only scattered resistance, but netted several high-value targets and substantial amounts of weaponry. Intermittent sniper fire and rocket and mortar attacks against FOB Ripley did not produce any casualties or notable damage.

FIND, FIX, AND FINISH

The first three phases of Operation Mountain Storm made it clear that ACM elements were not operating in the Tarin Kowt bowl, but rather in the more mountainous regions that ringed the province. Operation Asbury Park commenced June 1 with a push toward the town of Dey Chopan in neighboring Zabol province by a 586-person joint force of U.S. Marines and sailors, ANA soldiers, and AMF personnel led by Governor Khan. An ambush on June 2 outside the village of Siah Chub Kalay kicked off an seven-day running gunfight

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26 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps, 52.
through the southeastern Oruzgan and northwest Zabol provinces. Operation *Asbury Park* resulted in 66 confirmed ACM fatalities, 12 prisoners, and an unknown number of enemy died in close air support, drone, and bomber attacks. Nine Marines, two AMF fighters, and an interpreter were wounded in the 13-day operation. The success of Operation *Asbury Park* prompted a 30-day in-country extension for the MEU to continue operations in south-central Afghanistan. On June 25, a reinforced U.S. Army battalion, dubbed Task Force Bobcat, was assigned to Task Force Linebacker to support operations and eventually assume responsibility for the region. Localized security operations and continuing humanitarian projects gave the MEU time to prepare for its final, operational maneuvers, Operations *Thunder Road* and *Asbury Park II*.

On June 27, Task Force Bobcat, commanded by Army Lieutenant Colonel Terry L. Sellers, launched Operation *Asbury Park II* when they retraced the road to Dey Chopan covered in *Asbury Park*. ACM forces, reeling from their losses earlier in the month, could not mount serious resistance to the eastern probe, and scattered firefights resulted in less than a dozen enemy killed and one soldier wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Khan led a joint Marine/AMF force – Task Force Genghis – into Cehar Cineh, the westernmost district in Oruzgan province. In Cehar Cineh during *Thunder Road*, Task Force Genghis scoured an area of 110 square kilometers looking for enemy fighters and weapons caches. A firefight on the first day of the operation killed three regional ACM leaders, disorienting enemy forces and negating effective response to the MEU’s operations.

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28 22nd MEU ComChron, 4-7.
The end of Thunder Road marked the end of the MEU’s offensive combat operations in Afghanistan and the MEU transferred authority for combat operations in the region to Task Force Bronco on July 12.

During the MEU’s three-and-a-half months of sustained operations in Afghanistan, March 26 to July 11, the MEU accomplished: 29

- 360 combat patrols
- 175 cordon and searches
- 536 battlefield detainees
- 116 prisoners, 96 of whom were forwarded for further processing
- Arms caches, including:
  - 2,629 pieces of ordnance
  - 75,205 pieces of ammunition
  - 2,502 weapons
  - significant quantities of bomb-making materials
- 101 confirmed enemy killed (40-60 suspected/estimated)
- 9 enemy wounded in action

MEU losses included:

- 1 killed
- 16 wounded in action (13 Marines, one sailor, one soldier)
- 3 Afghan Militia Force fighters
- 1 contract employee (interpreter)
- 1 CH-46E Sea Knight assault helicopter, 1 MTVR 7-ton truck

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OSCAR MIKE 180

Even before the MEU transferred operational responsibilities to Task Force Bronco, the unit was on-the-move, or ‘Oscar Mike’ in radio vernacular. The retrograde was the deployment in reverse, with ground convoys through Pakistan to the port in Karachi, flights from Kandahar to Kuwait, and the helicopters and Harriers of HMM-266 (Rein) flying themselves to waiting ships in the Indian Ocean. Once reconstituted on August 18, ESG-2 retraced its way westward, threaded the Suez Canal, and left the CENTCOM theater. ESG-2 made brief port visits to France and Spain, and after a wash down of MEU equipment and agricultural inspection in Rota, Spain, the ships of ESG-2 headed for their home ports. The Marines and sailors of the 22nd MEU (SOC) returned to their bases in North Carolina on September 15, 2004, and into the arms of their families and friends, but to a less welcoming Marine Corps.

REWARDS, RETRIBUTION, AND LEGACY

A total of 104 decorations for battlefield heroism were presented to the Marines and sailors of the 22nd MEU (SOC) during ceremonies in the weeks following the unit’s return to the United States. An equal number of awards for meritorious service were presented, and all members of the MEU and its attached units were awarded the Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary or Afghanistan Campaign Medal and eventually, the Navy Unit Commendation.

30 22nd MEU ComChron, 13.
Unfortunately, the euphoria of the unit’s homecoming did not last as revelations bubbled to the surface that stained the memory of the MEU’s deployment.

On September 24, Lieutenant Colonel Khan was summoned to the MEU headquarters where he was formally relieved of command by Colonel McKenzie. This administrative action, which is tantamount to being fired, stemmed from allegations that Khan fostered an overly strict command climate under which he publicly berated and verbally and physically abused his officers and staff noncommissioned officers. These problems first came to light in May at which time McKenzie ordered an inquiry of Khan’s actions that resulted in an official counseling. When complaints continued, a formal Judge Advocate General Manual investigation was conducted during the unit’s transit to the United States and the allegations were substantiated. In an article published in the October 11, 2004, issue of *The Marine Corps Times*, McKenzie was quoted as saying, “I have a tremendous amount of respect for Lieutenant Colonel Khan, but I lost confidence in his ability to lead” and that he was forced to act on what he described as a “combination of events over time.”\(^{31}\) The JAG investigation was reviewed by the commander of the II MEF who upheld the

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decision. Khan chose not to appeal his relief and quietly slid into retirement, a move viewed by some as a veiled admission of guilt.

The MEU’s 2004 deployment ended or dampened the careers of several other Marines, including two of McKenzie’s staff officers who were relieved prior to deployment due to lackluster performance. In Afghanistan, a BLT 1/6 officer received administrative punishment for cursing at and striking one of his Marines during a mission briefing. Another officer and his platoon sergeant were relieved of their positions for sanctioning hazing. Additionally, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service looked into allegations that Afghan civilians suffered physical and sexual abuse during raids of their villages. All of these issues, combined with an almost singular focus on the war in Iraq and alleged misconduct of U.S. troops, contributed to the tainting of the MEU’s legacy.

In February 2006, Sergeant Anthony Viggiani of BLT 1/6 became the first Marine to receive the Navy Cross for combat service in Afghanistan. An editorial cartoon by John Cox and Allen Forkum summed up the contradictions of the media, popular culture, and even the military by depicting a Marine’s heroism ignored in lieu of more salacious news.
CHAPTER THREE: LOST OPPORTUNITIES

From 1899 to 1902, the United States fought a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against Filipino guerillas, a struggle that is perhaps best remembered because of the atrocities committed by both sides. This was the United States’ first experience in combating a foreign insurgency and provided the Army with key tactical lessons such as the “importance of small-unit leadership; the need for small-unit operations and mobility; the importance of local troops; the need for an effective intelligence apparatus; and the significance of degrading the insurgent shadow government infrastructure.” 32 In an article for the Small Wars Journal, Bill Putnam blasts the Army for not incorporating these lessons into the 2006 publication of Field Manual (FM) 3-24 Counterinsurgency. Putnam blames the oversight on the Army not embracing the lessons of the Philippine insurgency because of the organization’s “long tradition of relegating insurgent warfare to the fringes of military art and science.” 33 Because the Philippine lessons were never adopted and codified into doctrine by the military, the experiences learned in the Philippines had to be discovered again during later conflicts.

This experience was repeated after Operation Mountain Storm. The 22nd MEU (SOC) had conducted a highly successful campaign using innovative tactics that were ignored or forgotten. There are two likely reasons for the

33 Ibid.
oversight. The first is the possibility a ten-week campaign in a remote part of Afghanistan did not have readily apparent implications for the growing war in Iraq that was soaking up so much attention and resources. Afghanistan was barely a blip on the radar in 2004 with tens of thousands of service members deploying to and from Iraq, Afghanistan was the furthest from the thoughts of most military members. Operating in the hills and valleys of Afghanistan had little bearing on the urban warfare of Afghanistan, especially with the focus on the embattled cities of Ramadi, Fallujah, and Najaf. Commanders and planners wanted to know what the units in Iraq where experiencing because that is where the bulk of military resources were headed.

Perhaps the most important reason that the military did not embrace and incorporate the lessons learned during Operation *Mountain Storm* is that the campaign was stained by the situation surrounding Lieutenant Colonel Khan. In the midst of two wars in Islamic counties, a popular – Muslim – field grade officer who by all accounts was ‘on the rise’ had been abruptly relieved of command. This overshadowed the success of the unit. Khan did not fight or appeal his relief and quickly slid into retirement without further ado. The decision to relieve Khan, though supported by two independent investigations, was unpopular in many circles and much like the U.S. Army after the Philippine Insurrection, the Marine Corps was apparently “reluctant to record official lessons learned that could have led to more public scrutiny of the conflict.”\(^{34}\) In the case of the 22nd MEU, such scrutiny might have further tarnished the legacy of the Marines in *Mountain Storm* and uncovered more about Khan.

\(^{34}\) Putnam.
Commanders and key leadership of successful units are often inundated for requests for interviews and submissions of lessons learned upon their return from a successful deployment. This did not happen after Mountain Storm. There was a single Marine Corps historian who visited the unit, and except for a brief article in Fortitudine published in 2006, the interviews he conducted remain archived in Quantico, Virginia. The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL) did not open an account for members of the staff to submit their observations nor did the organization send interviewers to meet with members of the MEU and its major subordinate elements. Despite the success of the 22nd MEU (SOC) on the battlefield and in engaging the Afghan populace, it was and remains one of the lesser known fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons the unit learned and the tactical innovations it pioneered were relevant for service member in Iraq and Afghanistan, but were forgotten and had to be relearned or ignored until the realities of the modern low-intensity battlefield forced change.

Most notable of these advances was tailoring equipment to the environment to maximize the effective of the Marine and sailors, making local forces a viable partner in securing their own futures, and using female service members to bridge cultural gaps. The delay in adopting these warfighting methods raise a question. If these tactics were important enough to eventually adopt and implement, why the delay and how different were they from what the 22nd MEU (SOC) had already proved was effective?

TAILORING EQUIPMENT TO THE ENVIRONMENT
South-central Afghanistan was a particularly difficult area for the 22nd MEU to operate. Its remoteness and the harshness of the terrain and climate tested the unit’s logistics and durability of its vehicles and equipment.

Aviation played a key role in Operation Mountain Storm, but the mainstay of the MEU’s tactical planning, the CH-46E Sea Knight medium-lift assault helicopter, proved ill-suited for the environment. The heat and attitude – which averaged 3,400 feet above sea level, the normal operating environment for the Sea Knight – significantly diminished the aircraft’s range and lift capacity. This required a shift in tactics as the assault role shifted primarily to the HMM-264 (Rein)’s contingent of CH-53E Super Stallions and Army CH-47 Chinook helicopters sourced through Task Force Wings. The trade-off between the size and power of the Super Stallion and Chinook were the difficulty in finding landing zones that could handle the downwash and size of these helicopters as compared to the Sea Knight. The weakened capability of the Sea Knight relegated the aircraft to a utility role ferrying only a few passengers or light cargo. This freed the UH-1N Huey from their command-and-control and utility role to a more active combat mission.
The Hueys were often paired with AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopters to create a ‘skid duo’ – so named because of the to capitalize on each platform’s strengths. In Iraq, the aircraft had normally flown in dedicated sections, but the lack of an armored threat and the nature of Afghanistan’s rocky terrain necessitated a shift in tactics. Gunnery Sergeant Andrew Radford was a UH-1N Huey crew chief who explained the rationale for combining the aircraft into sections:

“We fly mixed sections because the aircraft complement one another. There may be times when the enemy is too close to our forces for the Cobras to engage with rockets or cannon, but the Huey can get in with our machine guns so the mix of weapons between the Cobras and Hueys is really.”

According to Radford, the Huey would lead the flight of two helicopters so the Huey’s side-by-side-seated flight crew and the two crew chiefs in the rear of the aircraft could scour the terrain for signs of the enemy. The Super Cobra pilots would be on the alert for ground fire against the Huey, radio messages from the lead aircraft or forward air controllers, or fire from the Huey’s aerial door-mounted machine guns. If necessary, the Super Cobras would then follow through with strikes by rockets, cannon, or missiles. Most rotary-wing platforms have the benefit of

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having on-board mechanics, but the Super Cobras do not. By pairing the Hueys and Super Cobras, the MEU created an organic mechanical capability to conduct field repairs in case one or both of the aircraft sustained in-flight mechanical difficulties or damage.

While the dust, elevation, and heat wreaked havoc on and necessitated some changes for the 22nd MEU’s aviation platforms, the terrain and climate was most acutely felt on the ground. Many U.S. forces in Afghanistan were facing a difficult transition from road-bound to mountainous warfare. Afghan fighters had learned to use the terrain to their advantage against the Coalition as they had against the Soviets in the 1980s, peppering convoys with rockets and small arms and machine gun fire and melting back into the mountains before American air power could be brought to bear or ground troops could redeploy. BLT 1/6 focused on changing this paradigm.

The first way was to increase the reach, speed, and lethality of the unit’s ground forces. Armored vehicles had dominated the war in Iraq but were ill-suited to Afghanistan, and in fact the MEU had left its platoons of M1A1 main battle tanks and tracked assault amphibian vehicles (AAVs) aboard ESG-2’s amphibious shipping. This put the onus on the 22nd MEU’s fleets of wheeled vehicles. The heaviest vehicles sent to Afghanistan were BLT 1/6’s eight-wheeled, 12.8-ton Light Armored Vehicle-25s. Within days of the start of Operation El Dorado on April 25, the entire platoon of eight LAV-25s was experiencing significant mechanical difficulties. The lack of improved roads and rocky terrain proved too much for the vehicles’ suspensions and transmissions,
six of the platoon’s seven LAVs were ‘red-lined’ by mid-May for mechanical issues and out of operation, relegating them to static positions at vehicle checkpoints or combat outposts.

The Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement (MTVR) and High-Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) series of wheeled vehicles became the true workhorses for the MEU in Afghanistan. The MTVR, more commonly known as the ‘7-ton’ because of its cargo capacity, entered the MEU’s inventory in late 2003 and replaced the aging 5-ton (‘deuce-and-a-half’) truck. Although of comparable weight to the LAV, the MTVR fared much better in Afghanistan because its 13 tons was distributed over a wide, robust chassis with greater clearance. The toughness of the MTVR and its engine’s high power-to-weight ratio gave it the capability to navigate the difficult terrain in south-central Afghanistan and ferry supplies or carry troops into contact.

The bulk of the MEU’s HMMWV fleet were ordinary utility variants without significant armor that minimized protection for the crews but maximized the vehicles’ mobility, durability, and speed. Supplemental armor was added to some vehicles and ballistics windshields on others, but most HMMWVs were simply outfitted with ballistic vests hung on the inside of
windows and sandbags were laid on the floors and beneath seats. BLT 1/6’s “conducted 95 percent of its operations solely from HMMWVs,” and over the course of *Mountain Storm*, the “vehicles traveled an average of over 2,000 miles on primarily untenable mountain trails.” To extend the reach and vitality of the vehicles, each motorized task force was accompanied by a contact (mechanical) truck manned by mechanics and loaded down with equipment and spare parts to provide an organic capability to “provide fast, onsite second echelon maintenance for the maneuver units.” The MEU modified most of its troop-carrying variant HMMWVs by bolting machine guns to make them mobile light machine gun platforms. BLT 1/6 improvised racks on the tailgates of it vehicles that allowed them to carry up to nine water or fuel cans without sacrificing internal storage. This lengthened the vehicles’ operational reach without the need for resupply and saved space inside the HMMWVs for additional ammunition, food, or personnel.

The integration of the MEU’s wheeled fleet and its infantry companies “remade [BLT 1/6] into a flexible, motorized infantry task force capable of

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37 Ibid, 32.
38 Ibid, 32.
conducting a broad spectrum of missions in a low- to mid-intensity conflict or counterinsurgency operation.”39 Insurgent tactics in Afghanistan normally consisted of hit-and-run tactics that gave Coalition forces little time to respond. Ambushed convoys, tied to roads by tracked vehicles or armored HMMWVs, would normally return fire and sweep the ridges the close air support. The MEU altered tactics by keeping air support in a stand-off role and using helicopters and jets to prevent ACM fighters from egressing from the engagement area while the infantry pressed a ground attack. Captain Paul Merida, a BLT 1/6 company commander, described his unit’s tactics in an article for the November 2004 edition of The Marine Corps Gazette: 40

“Simply returning fire would not suffice – the enemy was adept at cover and concealment and during contact would quickly egress. The Marines had to dismount [from their HMMWVs or MTVRs] return fire, and then attack. That meant attacking up steep hills, under enemy fire – straight at the enemy – no time for fancy flank attacks, no time for long discussions over the radio.”

Merida described Afghanistan as “some of the toughest and most extreme terrain and environmental conditions in the world,” with the Marines and sailors operating “in mostly mountainous terrain in excess of 8,000 feet MSL [mean sea level], with temperatures ranging during the day from 80 to 100 degrees.”41 These conditions required a degree of mobility that the Marines and sailors’ issued personal protective equipment – body armor and helmets – did not allow and were not conducive to the MEU’s aggressive tactics.

41 Ibid, 39.
In 2004, the men and women of the MEU were outfitted with the Outer Tactical Vest (OTV). The OTV consisted of a Kevlar-lined, water-resistant outer vest with a detachable throat and groin protector. Ballistic plates called Small Arms Protective Inserts (SAPI) rated to stop 7.62mm rounds could be inserted into front and rear panels of the vest. The entire system – depending on size – ranged in weight from 13.3 pounds (extra small) to 22.7 pounds (extra large). When outfitted with ammunition and medical pouches, water bladder system, and the other odds and ends of modern warfare, the weight of the OTV and the ballistic helmet could weigh upward of 40 pounds. Physical fitness training helped mitigate the weight issue but could not lessen the mobility and movement restrictions imposed by the OTV.

Shortly after the 22nd MEU entered Afghanistan and after recognizing the limitations of the OTV, Lieutenant Colonel Khan contracted with a suitcase maker to Kandahar to produce plate carriers. These ‘SAPI holders’ were made of

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canvas and Velcro, and although they were “without kevlar padding and full-vest construction, the SAPI holders considerably lessened the weight Marines carried, and it vented far more than the interceptor [OTV] vest. This allowed Marines to move faster and farther on less water.” Without plates inserted and no attachments, the Afghan-built SAPI holder weighed approximately 18 ounces versus the 8.4 pounds of the comparable OTV.

The OTV and SAPI holder trade-off was akin to using the unarmored versus armored HMMWVs. The only way for the Marines to get into the mountains and pursue the ACM was to scale down the armor for increased freedom of movement and mobility in lieu of protection. IEDs and mines were rapidly becoming the scourge of U.S. forces in Iraq, but the tactic had yet to become as prevalent in Afghanistan and employing motorized infantry forces not tied to the roads further mitigated the risk. BLT 1/6 had hundreds of the SAPI holders made in black and coyote brown and distributed them to select members of the unit – primarily infantrymen in Bravo and Charlie companies, elements of headquarters company, and the Combined Anti-Armor Team (CAAT) – and were universally revered. There were no incidents in dozens of firefights where the use of SAPI holders vice the OTV were responsible for increased injury in the largely infantry-centric Afghan battlefield. What could not be measured was how the improvised system prevented over exhaustion and heat illnesses.

In the decade following Operation Mountain Storm, 1/6 deployed twice to Iraq and three times to Afghanistan. The unit’s 2005 deployment to Iraq saw the battalion’s return to the OTV even as perceived deficiencies concerning the

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43 Merida, 40.
OTV’s ability to protect Marines led to the development of the Modular Tactical Vest (MTV) which promised increased protection and weight distribution. The introduction of SAPI plates worn on the side under each arm and a larger MTV increased the coverage area of the Kevlar shell and ballistic plates, but at the cost of individual mobility and comfort. While this was not an overriding concern in the urban Iraqi combat environment, the MTV was also issued to Marines headed to Afghanistan. As the focus shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan, the unsuitability of the MTV forced the military to scramble for a solution.

During the first two years of the American build-up in Afghanistan that began in 2009, the Marines endured the limitations imposed by the MTV until the Scalable Plate Carrier (SPC) was introduced in early 2011. The ISPC was heralded as “the next generation of improved body armor designed to be more comfortable and adjustable than current models.” It featured a larger neck hole, shoulder straps, an improved Velcro-closed cummerbund, and less binding under the arms – attributes that were eerily similar to the MEU SAPI holder of 2004. The seven-year delay it took planners to realize of importance of lightweight plate carriers wasted millions of dollars and decreased combat efficiency. While the plate holder would be ill-suited for mechanized or urban warfare in Iraq, it was ideal for operations in Afghanistan. The tens of thousands Marines and sailors who had to endure MTV during their deployments to Afghanistan suffered as military logisticians scrambled over an appropriate armor design for troops in the field.

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SAPI Holder, 2004

Modular Tactical Vest, 2005-2010

Outer Tactical Vest, 2001-2006

Scalable Plate Carrier, 2011 –

Afghanistan, 2004

Iraq, 2008

Iraq, 2005

Camp Lejeune, 2010
The ISPC was eerily similar to the SAPI holder used by BLT 1/6 in Afghanistan. Though it benefitted from advanced materials and production qualities, it was essentially the same piece of gear field by the 22nd MEU (SOC) six years earlier, but whose acceptance was delayed by casualty averse leadership swayed by public opinion that the Pentagon was not doing enough to protect its troops. While the increased armored protection of the OTV and MTV undoubtedly contributed to troop safety, it also severely hampered their ability to close with and destroy the enemy more effectively. In 2009, the U.S. Army’s Combined Arms Center sanctioned an update of *The Future Soldier’s Load and the Mobility of the Nation*, S.L.A. Marshall’s classic examination of logistics. The authors relate an event from the Afghan War in 2009 when the Marines had reverted to vehicles laden down with armor and the bulk MTV:

“... a lieutenant led his patrol in hot pursuit of a Taliban band mounted on stolen pickup trucks. His six-ton up-armored vehicles [HMMWVs] bucked and swerved through the cross-country chase. The more agile pickups easily pulled away, and enabled the insurgents to escape on foot up the slope of a mountain. When the officer dismounted his troops and sent them after their quarry, they fell even further behind, for each man had to clamber upward encumbered with 60 pounds of body armor, as well a weapon, ammunition, communications and survival pack. The officer aborted the mission ...”

This brief statement reinforced the notion that U.S. “force-protection countermeasures to date have largely relied upon increased armor, and we have thereby rendered our forces less mobile, less sustainable, and because they are slower and more numerous, more vulnerable.” The 22nd MEU (SOC), and specifically BLT 1/6, had proved in 2004 that mobility on the battlefield was

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46 Ibid, 4.
key to defeating the ACM in Afghanistan. However, it took the Marines almost seven years to come full circle and reintroduce equipment and tactics already proven successful, and even then they did so halfheartedly as the Marines became tied to Afghan roads with the gradual replacement of HMMWVs in lieu of the larger, heavier, and less off-road capable Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected (MRAP) vehicles. Like everything else from the 2004 deployment, the lessons learned through the use of fast-moving HMMWVs, deep air support to fix enemy forces, and lightly-encumbered infantry was shunted aside because of the stigma hanging over the deployment and the general ignorance of Mountain Storm and its accomplishments.

A fantastic analogy is the fate of the hundreds of SAPI holders made in Afghanistan that were brought to the United States by BLT 1/6. The battalion was forbidden from using the holders in its 2005 deployment to Iraq, and the items were crated and put into storage. Eventually, the holders that served BLT 1/6 so well during Mountain Storm were disposed of a year before the ‘revolutionary’ introduction of the scalable plate carrier.

INTEROPERABILITY

The key to the success of any counterinsurgency operation is winning the support of the local population. In Afghanistan, the greatest problem facing the central government was its lack of credibility because of corruption and ethnic divides, and inability to assert itself outside major cities, and difficulties in providing critical infrastructure support to the people. When Operation
Mountain Storm commenced in the late spring of 2004, the Afghan government was still in a state of relative infancy as it struggled to extend services and influence into the hinterlands and contest the influence of ACM forces entrenched in traditional anti-government sanctuaries like Oruzgan. Pumping money into the local economy, providing medical assistance, and improving long-term capabilities for agriculture and industry were important, but would have been for naught without a stable security environment.

In April 2004, the Afghan National Army (ANA) boasted a strength of approximately 8,300 with another 2,500 or so in training. The Afghan National Police (ANP) consisted of “over 5,000 commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers [who] had been trained at the National Police Academy, while ‘about 4000 officers and patrolmen’ were undergoing training in regional training centers.” Most of these troops were clustered in population centers and around Kabul, and only a single company of less than 200 ANA soldiers were assigned for the whole of Oruzgan province’s 4,800 square miles. The 1st Company, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Afghan

National Army Brigade and an embedded training team from the Vermont National Guard was assigned to the MEU, and company was broken down into squads and then distributed among the infantry companies of BLT 1/6. The ANA troops initially accompanied the MEU on Operations *El Dorado* and *Rio Bravo* but their effectiveness was soon called into question. Because desertion throughout the ANA was so high – with estimates ranging from 10 to 20 percent – the 1st Company was composed entirely of ethnic Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek tribesmen, a move planners in Kabul thought would lessen the risk of the soldiers deserting in a Pashtun-dominated province. Instead, the ethnic differences led to conflict and resentment between the soldiers, the people of the region, and local militias cooperating with the MEU, so by mid-May the ANA troops were relegated to security duties in and around FOB Ripley, UNAMA voter registration missions, and occasional raids.

The only true power in Oruzgan laid with the provincial governor, Jan Mohammed Khan. The illiterate Khan was a former Mujahedeen commander who opposed the Taliban and spent several years in prison. A longtime confidant of the Karzai family, Khan was appointed to his gubernatorial position in early 2002 shortly
after the fall of the Taliban and his release from prison. Khan typified the leaders in post-Taliban Afghanistan in that he was not appointed for his potential or abilities, but because by naming Khan governor, Karzai co-opted the Pashtun military and political leader’s power as his own. Khan was described as “violent and vile; foul-mouthed; particularly cruel – a model of the leadership type Afghans do not like.”⁴⁹ While Khan’s treatment of the population and his alleged involvement in drug trafficking made him a pariah to some, “he [continued] to be a powerful local presence” whose power and influence denied the Taliban the ability to get a purchase in Oruzgan.⁵⁰ It was a odd tactic, but reasonably effective given the situation in south-central Afghanistan where the Kabul government could not assert control but instead depended on auxiliaries like Khan to keep the peace. One of the worst allegations levied against Khan is that he used his position, and the support of the Coalition, to settle old scores, giving credence to the saying that an Afghan’s allegiance “is to my family first. Then to my village, sub-tribe and tribe.”⁵¹ A national government does not factor in this equation.

Jan Mohammed Khan could muster a militia force of approximately 1,500 men whose allegiance he earned through tribal loyalty, promises of favors, and relatively hefty salaries in a region without industry or resources. Khan’s AMF were like others in that there was “very little training and they were designed as an interim force to provide security until the ANA was stood up,” and that their

⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ Ibid.
objective was “to simply enforce the will of its respective commander, without effectively coordinating with other AMF units and developing a strategy that leads to a successful campaign nationwide against transnational terrorists.”\footnote{Joshua Cavan and Bob Bullard, “The Next Decade,” \textit{The Marine Corps Gazette} vol. 88, no. 11 (November 2004), 22.}

The MEU’s allegiance with Khan and his AMF was a necessary evil because whatever his faults, Khan held considerable sway in the region and was invaluable to securing Oruzgan.

While Operation \textit{Mountain Storm} took place, the United States was foundering in Iraq. Attempts to pacify Iraq militarily were proving fruitless and the entire country teetered on the brink of total collapse. Al-Qaeda operatives throughout Iraq were launching a relentless campaign against the Coalition there, the Iraqi government, and the civilian populace. A rash of brutal attacks by al-Qaeda and their allies against the Sunni population in the al-Anbar province spurred local sheiks into action and the so-called ‘Anbar Awakening’ was born, which was seen as a turning point in the pacification – albeit temporary – of Iraq. The U.S. military and diplomatic corps embraced the notion of cooperating with local tribal leaders and more aggressively joined their military, governmental, and civil military operations to capitalize on the locals’ renewed interest in maintain the peace. From the start of the war in Iraq, the primary deficiency of U.S. policy in Iraq was its focus on trying to assert the central government from the onset of the conflict. After more than three years of stumbling, planners finally realized the true power lay in cultivating the
influence of local tribal and ethnic leaders – something the 22nd MEU (SOC) did throughout its time in Afghanistan.

Jan Mohammed Khan was clearly no saint, but in 2004 he was the only viable force in Oruzgan who could help begin to legitimize the central government. In Afghanistan as in Iraq, “a combination of military operations and reconstruction is necessary to achieve these ends [convince the population to oppose the insurgents and support the government], because the population must have a basic level of security in order to cooperate with the government and expel the enemy living amidst them.” Without a substantial commitment of U.S. troops (impossible because of operations in Iraq), and as the ANA and ANP struggled to professionalize and grow, the only way to establish security and protect the growth of infrastructure was to work alongside Khan and his AMF. Throughout Operation Mountain Storm, the MEU’s planners recognized that “the counterinsurgent force [the MEU] and the host nation [represented in Oruzgan by Jan Mohammed Khan] [must] work together to strengthen and protect the institutions of civil society: markets, government, economic, and religious institutions. The goal of

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the counterinsurgent is to convince the population to oppose the insurgents and support the government.” Combating the ACM and expelling them from Oruzgan was the 22nd MEU’s overriding goal, and to do so the unit had to strengthen and support the province’s organic forces – Khan and his AMF – until the ANA and ANP could take shape. This created a partnership in which the Americans had to choose the lesser of two evils. South-central Afghanistan is dominated by the Pashtu ethnic group which is broken down into a number of tribes, the largest and strongest of which was the Popalzai, of whom Khan and Karzai were members. Right or wrong, in any society there is a dominant class which holds the greatest economic, political, and martial power, and in Oruzgan, that was the Popalzai. Khan dominated the lesser tribes in the region, but also helped keep foreign fighters, jihadists, and Taliban diehards at bay because he was successful at “creating a whole marginalized class who were motivated more by the loss of tribal honour than any Islamist or anti-Western ideology.”

Prior to Mountain Storm, the AMF lacked the logistics and resources to prosecute a campaign against ACM forces in south-central Afghanistan. The Coalition helped overcome these deficiencies. Khan’s status in Oruzgan and the surrounding provinces, whether born through fear or tribal status, was a key ingredient to the MEU’s overall success in the region, and proved – while the U.S. strained to contain the insurgency in Iraq – that embracing tribal and ethnic leaders was at least an ingredient for a successful counterinsurgency effort.

54 Ibid, 12.
55 McGeough.
FEMALE SEARCHERS

In 2003, the 37-year-old Italian film *The Battle of Algiers* experienced a resurgence in the United States. The 1965 movie, directed by Gillo Ponecorvo and shot documentary-style interspersed with actual news footage, detailed the Algerian struggle for independence in the 1950s and French efforts to retain control of their north African colony. The film’s newfound popularity was spurred by the Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, a civilian working group advising the Pentagon on guerilla warfare beginning to surge in Iraq and ongoing in Afghanistan. Screenings of the film to military officers was intended to “[offer] historical insight into the conduct of French operations in Algeria, and [were] intended to prompt informative discussion of the challenges faced by the French.” 56 *The Battle of Algiers* was among a number of films – which also included Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* – that were viewed by officers and staff noncommissioned officers of the MEU. The central theme of many of these films was the challenges faced during cross-cultural military operations where a predominately secular force deals with a religiously united population. In the case of *The Battle of Algiers*, Ponecorvo devoted a great deal of screen time to the role Algerian women played in their civil war and how the National Liberation Front exploited the French lack of understanding of Muslim customs and in particular how to interact with Muslim women, to their advantage.

Approximately 31 minutes into Ponecorvo’s film, an Algerian woman wearing a niqab approaches a French checkpoint where the soldier on duty brusquely begins searching the veiled Muslim woman for contraband. She protests loudly and violently and another French soldier is quick to admonish his comrade, saying “Never touch their women.”\(^\text{57}\) The woman is allowed through the checkpoint and moments later passes a hidden pistol to a male colleague who uses that weapon to kill a French policeman. Nearly four decades after Ponecorvo depicted this incident in his film, after-action reports from ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan stated that insurgents in both countries exploited Western hesitancy to interact with local women to their advantage. Women were being used to smuggle weapons, ammunition, and documents past checkpoints and there had been cases of male fighters wearing traditional female Muslim dress to avoid detection and stage attacks.

What was worse than these isolated tactical tricks used by the insurgents was the potential for long-term alienation of the population if Coalition, and especially American, forces ignored or violated Muslim traditions and sensitivities in dealing with women. A widespread procedure during the early days of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was for officers and SNCOs to interrogate or search females with the misplaced belief that higher-ranking or more experienced troops using ‘back-of-the-hand’ cursory searches would lessen the impact of non-familial males interacting with women and girls. To a degree, this was a reasonable assumption in Iraq because of its status as a more

developed country, economically and socially, than Afghanistan where the problems and pitfalls of dealing with women were far more acute.

Cultural traditions in Afghanistan, even in the less conservative urban areas, supported the seclusion of women even in private homes. Interaction with those outside the family is strictly monitored and “generally, women are not permitted to socialize with or entertain a guest who is not immediately related to the family or speak to a stranger.” These limitations, including the mandated wearing of the burqa and infringing on women’s freedom of movement and interactions, were furthered under the Taliban regime and last to this day. Women are second-class citizens who are “are treated as man’s personal property” and the “concept of women as a chattel is strong among most tribal communities.” A man’s ability to control his family and specifically the women in his life is directly tied to his personal honor, and the unapproved or forced interaction between a wife, daughter, or sister and non-familial male is a direct affront to his honor and status.

Robert Beljan wrote for the Small Wars Journal in 2013 that the “Afghan cultural context of segregating females from males results in the predominately male coalition security forces being prohibited from interacting with 50% of the population.” This created a significant hole in the counterinsurgency strategy from the outset because it denied Coalition forces access to possible intelligence and could have alleviated problems rising from Afghan hostility toward the

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treatment of and interaction with the female population. The Lioness Programs of the Army and Marine Corps in Iraq in 2005 are often regarded as the first organized attempts to embed female service members with tactical combat units. According to a fact sheet on the Web site for Regional Command Southwest – the headquarters responsible for operations in Afghanistan’s Helmand and Nimroz provinces – the “first concept of a FET [Female Engagement Team] was largely based on the Marine ‘Lioness’ teams of Iraq, which had been successfully utilized to search female Iraqis for concealed weapons and contraband items during a wide variety of missions.”

In her study of the Lioness Program and Female Engagement Teams for the Marine Corps Command and Staff College in 2010, Marine Major Ginger E. Beals wrote:

“It is not clear who initiated the creation of the Lioness teams, but in 2005, both the Army and Marine Corps trained and operated them. The creation of Lioness teams mitigated the security limitation identified at the control points and allowed an acceptable means of searching the local female populace. These teams were created in an ad hoc fashion utilizing women that were already deployed in-country filling other job requirements.”

The use of FETs in Afghanistan and the creation and employment of the Lioness Program in Iraq were promoted by the U.S. military and widely publicized by U.S. and international media. A common theme in these stories were that FETs were created as “ad hoc team[s] by U.S. Marine Corps to support military operations in 2009 based on lessons from Iraq” and that the FET concept was the “military’s latest innovation in its rivalry with the Taliban for

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In Iraq’s Lioness Program, the women were primarily used to search Iraqi women at entry control points, or ECPs, along main thoroughfares, and at border crossings. The FETs in Afghanistan operated in a slightly different manner and were used to “interact with the Afghan women building relationships, collecting information regarding village atmospherics, which in turn create[d] an accepting environment between the Marines and the local Afghan population.” Authors promoting the FET concept were quick to distance themselves from the Lioness Program, asserting that the static nature of the Lioness’ employment was not proactive enough to truly help engage the local population. Beals asserts that “Afghan culture has proven to be more flexible than originally though these realities would not have been discovered had it not been for the FET.” Specifically, the FETs disproved a number of misconceptions about the Afghans, specifically that the “presence of American women would outrage the Afghan males” and that “an entire village would be furious because some of their tribal members had been detained.”

There is truth to the statement that in the early years of the Afghan war, “the issue of having to reach out to and deal with Afghan females was not addressed and most likely not even thought of.” Unfortunately for the veracity of these reports, the Lioness Programs and FET were not quite the innovations

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63 Beljan.
66 Beals, 11.
67 Ibid, 10.
68 Beljan.
they were proclaimed to be. During Operation *Mountain Storm* the 22nd MEU embedded female Marines and sailors with its tactical combat elements, sometimes at the squad level or vehicle level, from the very onset of the campaign. Women assigned as ‘female searchers’ included engineering specialists, aviation mechanics, ordnance specialists, corpsmen, religious programmers, logisticians, and administrators.

Captain Maria Marte, an engineering officer assigned to the MEU’s operations section, was the senior of the approximately 25 female searchers who were divided among BLT 1/6’s ground maneuver elements. Marte drew an assignment to Alpha Company while the adjutant for MSSG-22, 2nd Lieutenant Melanie Stock, found herself with Charlie Company. Enlisted Marines and sailors ranging in rank from lance corporal to chief petty officer were assigned to platoons, rifle squads, engineering detachments, and individual vehicles.

Meanwhile, at FOB Ripley and later FOB Payne, females manned entry control points searching female workers entering the base for work or medical care. All of these activities were performed in addition to their regular duties such as driving trucks, serving with medical and dental assistance teams, gathering
intelligence, and so forth. While the modern battlefield is often described as one without front lines, the MEU was the first examples of females being assigned to combat-specific units like the infantry and artillery for extended periods of time.

“It’s a first as far as I know,” Marte said in mid-May, referring to the females’ prolonged assignments to the rifle and weapons companies. “We’ve been out here with the grunts [infantry] for nearly three weeks straight. We’ve climbed the same hills as the men, searched the same compounds, and gone through everything they have.” The female searchers who accompanied the maneuver elements of the 22nd MEU into the field were not given special titles or designations. They were simply noted as ‘attachments’ and assigned to the units at the company, platoon, or even squad levels. The women underwent combat marksmanship training, cultural awareness, classes I field craft specifically tailored to Afghanistan, and basic language instruction – training all Marine and sailors expected to operate ‘outside the wire’ completed.

The women’s primarily role in searching villages, buildings, or the nomadic tents cities was to be among the first into the area where they would remove their helmets to show the residents they were in fact females. Instead of keeping their hair short or in tight buns, Marte and the other women were encouraged to keep their hair down or in ponytails. Marte explained that keeping their hair down and visible made them instantly recognizable as women behind the body armor and weapons and “by having us here the locals are more

at ease with us round their children and wives, and we can conduct a thorough search of everyone, not just the men.” 70 The most common use for the female searchers was to segregate women and children from the males during interrogations and searches. The approach or presence of Coalition forces rarely went unnoticed. By the time the Marines were knocking on or kicking down a door, the females were already cloistered in a back room or corner, making it easier for the female searchers to do their job. According to Marte, “when they [the Afghans] saw us they would usually relax a bit. This eased the tensions of the women and also the men, and allowed the engineers and grunts to go ahead with the search.” 71

When segregating the women and children, the female searchers would look for clues that might indicate some type of nefarious activity. On more than one occasion, female searchers noted suspicious activity that prompted a search. During Operation Thunder Road, Sergeant Christine Greigo, a CH-46E Sea

70 Ibid.
71 Milks, “Female Searchers.”
Knight mechanic, was standing watch over a group of women and children when she noticed a suspicious bulge beneath a woman’s burqa. A quick search revealed belts of 7.62mm ammunition strapped around her body and several pieces of identification and government documents belonging to local men. These searches were always conducted in the presence of at least one other Marine or sailor, preferably another female searcher.

For decades, Department of Defense policy specifically prohibited women from “assignments to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.” The conflicts in Panama, Kuwait, Iraq, and Somalia in the late 1980s and early 90s had demonstrated that the nature of warfare was changing. In 1994, the DoD had determined that “the dynamics of the modern-day battlefield are non-linear, meaning there are no clearly defined front line and safer rear area where combat support operations are performed within a low-risk environment” and there was “no compelling reason for continuing [the] policy that precludes female Service members from being assigned to units or positions that are doctrinally required to physically co-locate and remain with direct forces.”

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ground combat units.” 73 This 2004 directive rescinded the so-called ‘Risk Rule,’ a policy that “stated that women were excluded from noncombatant units or missions if the risks of exposure to hostile fire were equal to or greater than the combat units they supported.” The 22nd MEU exploited the ‘mission’ phrase in the ruling which also lifted restrictions on allowing females to operate with and remain with ground combat units because these prohibitions “[had] been made irrelevant by the current battlefield framework and forward basing concept.” 74

There was some initial hesitation to Colonel McKenzie’s decision to embed women with BLT 1/6. Some of that hesitancy came from the women themselves who were unsure of what was to be expected of them and some from the commanders of HMM-266 (Reinforced) and MSSG-22 who had to divert personnel from their normal duties to support the female searcher initiative. There were some hiccups – primarily logistical and hygiene-related – but after Operation Rio Bravo, the kinks had been worked out. Some women had to be pulled from the program but were replaced by others so from the first reconnaissance into Oruzgan province until the end of Operation Thunder Road in mid-July, the female searchers remained in the field. “I couldn’t accomplish my mission without the female Marines and sailors,” Khan told the author in 2004. “They’re integral to our success here in Afghanistan.” 75

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73 Ibid, 3.
74 Ibid, 3.
75 Milks, “Female Searchers.”
The 22nd MEU had set a precedent that went ignored for at least a year, and in some ways, never duplicated. The Lionesses of Iraq were relatively static and did not engage the population outside established checkpoints or bases and the FETs were follow-on forces who usually moved into a region once it had been secured. The MEU’s 2004 female searchers combined the search component of the Lioness Program with the interactivity of FET, but in starkly different ways and at much lower organizational levels. The women were attached to the initial wave of combat forces moving into contested and insurgent-held regions alongside ground combat forces nearly a decade before the United States military lifted its ban on women in ‘frontline’ combat roles.

As with all the other activities of the 22nd MEU during Operation Mountain Storm, the efforts of the female searches went ignored except for scattered imagery, Marine Corps news stories, and a single dispatch from Agence France-Presse released in late May 2004. The author dubbed the six women attached to Charlie Company, BLT 1/6 ‘Charlie’s Angels’ and described their efforts as “part of a more culturally sensitive approach to detaining and
questioning Afghan women.” In late 2001, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission was formed and between its creation and March 2004, the commission had received 44 complaints about the treatment of Afghan women by male Coalition troops. Such incidents were undoubtedly underreported and threatened to further alienate an already hostile populace and give instigators ammunition to rile the Afghan people against the Coalition. Embedding females with combat forces served to bridge this cultural gap, yet it took military leaders in Iraq – already under fire for the alleged abuse of prisoners – another year to realize the potential of such endeavors.

CONCLUSION

Long-term success in a counterinsurgency requires establishing the credibility of the host nation, extending critical infrastructure and services, and divorcing the insurgents from the population on whom it relies for support. The 22nd MEU (SOC)’s role in Operation Mountain Storm lasted approximately 150 days, only 110 of which were actually used to conduct military and civil affairs operations. This amount of time is but a speck of that necessary to invigorate popular support for a government and pry an insurgency’s foothold loose from a contested region.

By all accounts, Operation Mountain Storm was a victory given its duration and stated objectives. The MEU sustained minimal losses (one dead and 15 wounded) while inflicting significant losses on ACM forces who had long enjoyed free reign in the northern Kandahar, Oruzgan, and Zabul provinces. The 22nd MEU (SOC) helped facilitate the assertion of government influence in south-central Afghanistan through the delegitimisation of ACM elements and the building of critical infrastructure. In an article for the November 2004 Proceedings, Colonel McKenzie admitted the long-term impacts of Mountain Storm were hard to measure at the time, but the MEU did achieve “decisive and measurable military effects – but, as with everything in Afghanistan, only time will tell if they have long-term benefits.” 77 The short term results were immediately apparent as the potential for the quality of life for many people in Oruzgan improved and attacks throughout the region declined significantly and

77 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps, 53.
in some areas, evaporated altogether. Voter registration efforts not only provided the people of south-central Afghanistan a means to have a tangible stake in their future, but also produced an rough census the government needed to devote resources to the region.

One of the primary reasons for the MEU’s success was that CJTFs-180 and -76 gave the unit its own battle space and allowed it to conduct operations in accordance with its doctrine, all while funneling supplies and resources into Oruzgan in line with Task Force Linebacker’s designation as the main effort for Mountain Sorm. According to McKenzie, senior commanders in Afghanistan “arranged a true ‘plug-and-play’ environment and worked constantly to enhance the considerable intelligence capabilities of the MAGTF” and “were dedicated to the effective application of individual service capabilities.” 78 The 22nd MEU (SOC)’s air-ground-logistical integration and doctrinal abilities were of indeterminable value in operating in such an austere environment. The latitude provided to McKenzie and his staff fostered the conditions for the innovations that contributed to the MEU’s overall success – integrating females with

78 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps, 53.
maneuver elements, tailoring equipment to the environment, and embracing tribal/ethnic leaders – long before they became commonplace elsewhere.

In hindsight, the MEU’s efforts during Operation Mountain Storm had little long-term effects for the region. In the years following Mountain Storm, Afghanistan truly became America’s ‘second forgotten war’ as NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) assumed duty as the senior combatant and reconstruction command in Afghanistan and focused their efforts on the Afghan-Pakistani border, major population centers, and the narcotics-rich Helmand province, the same inattention that allowed the ACM to make south-central Afghanistan a sanctuary in the first place. The Army unit that moved into FOB Ripley in August 2004 had neither the manpower nor resources to maintain Task Force Linebacker’s momentum, nor did the successive U.S. and international commands assigned to the region. The enemy was not pressed, Khan and his AMF became marginalized, and civil affairs and economic revitalization efforts were neglected or abandoned. One indication of the deterioration of the security situation in Oruzgan was the deployment of an Army Special Forces company to the region in 2008 during a break in the Dutch commitment. Six months of sustained combat operations resulted in approximately 350 insurgent casualties in a region where only years before, these forces had been driven away, killed, or abandoned their efforts.\(^79\)

The 22nd MEU (SOC)’s efforts in south-central Afghanistan were “nascent signs of long-term success,” but they were not capitalized upon and the

successes were fleeting. This was no fault of the MEU, but because of political indecisiveness, diversion of resources, and prioritization to other regions of Afghanistan. One area that does deserve criticism is the Marine Corps’ and the military’s willingness to ignore the tactics pioneered by the MEU. As early as the fall of 2004, there was tangible evidence that embedding female service members with tactical combat forces, invigorating tribal leaders, and tailoring equipment to the mission and terrain were crucial ingredients to succeeding during counterinsurgency operations in Muslim countries. However, the taint of Lieutenant Colonel Khan’s relief, the association with Governor Khan, and the other controversies surrounding the MEU’s service in Mountain Storm caused some to turn a blind eye to and set aside these lessons. These tactics and innovations were later deemed important enough to adapt and even celebrate and while long-term stability in Iraq and Afghanistan has always been a remote possibly, the delay in adopting any winning tactic may have speeded up whatever ‘successes’ the United States eventually enjoyed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere as it fought its war on terrorism and Islamic extremism.

80 McKenzie, Shea, and Phelps, 53.
Colonel McKenzie continued his career and in June 2014 was promoted to lieutenant general and assumed command of Marine Forces Central Command.

Lieutenant Colonel Khan retired from the Marine Corps in January 2005, avoiding punitive action. He went to work as a security consultant for firms with business interests in south Asia.

Lieutenant Colonels Powers and Braden of HMM-266 (Rein) and MSSG-22, respectively, were both promoted to colonel and eventually retired from the Marine Corps.

Jan Mohammed Khan was replaced as Oruzgan’s governor in 2006 and the region lost its most capable – in spite of his deficiencies – anti-ACM warrior. He was killed in 2011 when ACM fighters stormed his Kabul home where he served as an tribal advisor to Hamid Karzai.

FOB Ripley was renamed FOB Holland in 2006 when Dutch forces took over responsibility for Oruzgan. The Dutch contented themselves with securing Tarin Kowt and Dey Rawood but rarely strayed into the countryside. Without the support of ISAF combatant power, all other efforts in the region withered. Australian forces replaced the Dutch in 2010 and redesignated the base built by the Marines, FOB Davis.
APPENDIX 1: 22ND MEU (SOC) CHRONOLOGY – MAJOR EVENTS

2003
July 18  22nd MEU activates and begins pre-deployment training

2004
February 19  Expeditionary Strike Group 2 departs the United States
March 8-12  Albanian Amphibious Landing Exercise
March 16  ESG-2 transits the Suez Canal and enters CENTCOM
March 24  22nd MEU (SOC) begins offload in Qatar and Kuwait and movement into Afghanistan
March 27-31  Operation Ulysses I
April 7-12  Operation Ulysses II
April 13  HMM-266 (Rein) arrives in Afghanistan
April 15-20  Operation Ulysses IV
April 25  Operation Ulysses V, creation of FOB Ripley begins
April 27 - May 7  Operation El Dorado
May 4  First KC-130R flight into FOB Ripley,
May 9-28  Operation Pegasus
May 12-19  Operation Rio Bravo
May 25-26  Operation Bladerunner
May 27-30  Operation Thunder Ball
May 28  Operation Darlington County
May 31- June 2  Operation Cadillac Ranch
June 1-17  Operation Asbury Park
June 21-26  Operation Cadillac Ranch II
June 25  2/5 Infantry, U.S. Army, assigned to 22nd MEU (SOC)
June 27 - July 9  Operations Thunder Road and Asbury Park II
July 7  22nd MEU (SOC) begins retrograde to Kandahar
July 12 - August 11  Task Force Bronco relieves 22nd MEU (SOC), MEU retrogrades to ESG-2 amphibious shipping
August 21  ESG-2 transits the Suez Canal and enters EUCOM
September 15  22nd MEU (SOC) returns to Camp Lejeune
October 15  22nd MEU (SOC) decomposites
APPENDIX 2: 22ND MEU (SOC) CHAIN OF COMMAND/ORDER OF BATTLE

U.S. Central Command
General Phone P. Abizaid, U.S. Army

Combined Forces Command - Afghanistan
Lieutenant General David W. Barno, U.S. Army

Combined Joint Task Force 180 (mid-April redesignated CJTF-76)
Major General Eric T. Olson, U.S. Army

22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable)
Colonel Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., U.S. Marine Corps

- Battalion Landing Team 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment
  Lieutenant Colonel Asad A. Khan, U.S. Marine Corps

- Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 266 (Reinforced)
  Lieutenant Colonel Joel R. Powers, U.S. Marine Corps

- MEU Service Support Group 22
  Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin R. Braden, U.S. Marine Corps

- 2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry
  Division (Light), U.S. Army
  Lieutenant Colonel Terry L. Sellers, U.S. Army

- Detachments, Marine Aerial Refueler and Transport Squadron 252

- Engineering Detachments, Louisiana National Guard

- Embedded Training Team, 3rd Battalion, 172nd Infantry Regiment
  (Mountain), Vermont National Guard

- 1st Company, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Afghan National Army Brigade

- Afghan Militia Forces, Oruzgan Province
  Jan Mohammed Khan, Provincial Governor
APPENDIX 3: CASUALTIES

U.S./COALITION CASUALTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Jeremy M.</td>
<td>WIA, Rtd</td>
<td>June 8</td>
<td>BLT 1/6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezell, Christopher B.</td>
<td>WIA, Rtd</td>
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<td>BLT 1/6</td>
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<td>Hankins Jr., Thomas D.</td>
<td>WIA, Rtd</td>
<td>April 24</td>
<td>BLT 1/6</td>
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<td>Lasko, Daniel</td>
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Three Afghan Militia Force soldiers were wounded and returned to duty.
One contract interpreter was wounded and evacuated, status unknown.

ANTI-COALITION MILITIA CASUALTIES

101 confirmed enemy KIA; 40-60 estimated enemy KIA unconfirmed.
Nine enemy WIA, treated, and taken into custody.
116 enemy combatants captured.

Notes:
KIA – Killed in Action
WIA, Evac – Wounded in Action, evacuated to the United States for treatment
WIA, Rtd – Wounded in Action, Returned to Duty
APPENDIX 4: AWARDS

NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION
For exceptionally meritorious service during assigned missions from 25 March to 10 July 2004. The personnel of 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) and its attachments consistently demonstrated unparalleled success and performance during Operation MOUNTAIN STORM, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Afghanistan. Following U.S. Central Command’s decision to deploy its reserve as the main effort for MOUNTAIN STORM, 22d MEU (SOC) conducted detailed analysis, planning, and coordination at all levels to include interface with USCENTCOM, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, the Pakistani Joint Staff, other U.S. government agencies, and the Combined Joint Task Force in Afghanistan to effectively synchronize the MEU’s deployment and employment plans. Following a complex and rigorous deployment that include surface transport, strategic airlift, and the long-range self-deployment of the MEU’s Aviation Combat Element, 22d MEU quickly established command and control and integrated into theater combat operations. Task Force LINEBACKER excelled in combat, rapidly securing the Oruzgan Province, developing a robust Forward Operating Base, and relentlessly pursuing Anti-Coalition Militia forces. Effectively assembling joint and coalition assets into a 3,400-man task force, 22d MEU successfully conducted 15 named combat operations and six named stability and security operations. The net result of these operations was the seizure of 65 arms caches, capture of 116 suspected enemies, 100 confirmed enemies killed in action, nine enemies wounded in action, 175 cordon and search operations, 2,134 nationals provided medical and dental care, and 108 civil affairs projects. The result of the security provided to the region by Task Force LINEBACKER was the opening of 39 voter registration sites in four districts that registered a total of 58,357 voters. By their truly distinctive achievements and unfailing commitment to duty, the officers and enlisted personnel of 22d Marine Expeditionary Unit and its attachments reflected great credit upon themselves and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

PERSONAL AWARDS
Navy Cross: 1
Silver Star: 1
Bronze Star w/Combat ‘V’: 21
Purple Hearts: 16
Navy & Marine Corps Commendation Medal w/Combat ‘V’: 18
Navy & Marine Corps Achievement Medal w/Combat ‘V’: 16
Air Medal for Heroic Achievement: 15
APPENDIX 5: GLOSSARY

A-10 Thunderbolt II – the Air Force’s primary ground attack aircraft.
AC-130 Spectre – U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command close air support system built on the C-130 platform.
ACM (anti-coalition militia) – inclusive term that refers to any group or individual opposed to the central Afghan government and the U.S.-led coalition. Term most often used to describe Taliban remnants or al-Qaeda fighters.
AH-1W Super Cobra – Marine Corps’ primary attack helicopter.
AH-64 Apache – U.S. Army’s primary attack helicopter.
AK (assault Kalashnikov) – generic term used to describe the entire family of Soviet-inspired assault rifles.
AMF (Afghan Militia Forces) – gunmen employed by regional governments allied with the central Afghan government and Coalition forces.
ANA (Afghan National Army)
AO (Area of Operations)
AV-8B Harrier II – Marine Corps’ unique vertical/short take-off and landing (V/STOL) attack jet.
B-1B Lancer – U.S. Air Force strategic bomber.
C-17 Globemaster III – the U.S. Air Force’s strategic transport aircraft.
C-130 Hercules – Four turboprop-driven transport and refueling aircraft.
CA (civil affairs) – blanket team for missions used engender goodwill with the populace through projects such as the building of clinics, schools, and wells.
CAAT (combined anti-armor team) – Humvee-mounted platoon used in reconnaissance or screening missions.
CAS (close air support)
CE (command element) – headquarters of a MAGTF.
CENTCOM (Central Command) – unified command that encompasses the Horn of Africa, Middle East, and southwest and south Asia. Has headquarters in both Tampa, Florida and Doha, Qatar.
CH-46E Sea Knight – Marine Corps’ principal assault helicopter.
CH-47 Chinook – the U.S. Army’s primary heavy lift helicopter.
CH-53E Super Stallion – Marine heavy transport helicopter.
CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)
CJTF (Combined Joint Task Force)
CO (commanding officer)
COC (combat operations center)
CP (command post)
EKIA (enemy killed in action)
EOD (explosive ordnance disposal)
EPW (enemy prisoner of war)
ESG (expeditionary strike group)
ETT (embedded training team)
EUCOM (European Command) – unified command that includes Europe, north and western Africa, Russia, and parts of the Middle East.
FAC (forward air controller) – Naval aviator attached to ground combat unit to control air assets.

FARP (forward arming and refueling point) – an expeditionary airfield or landing site where helicopters, and in some cases aircraft, can be refueled, rearmed and have emergency maintenance performed. FARPs do not typically have aircraft permanently assigned there, and can be set up just beyond the forward edge of a battlefield.

FOB (forward operating base) – a base that serves as a combat unit’s forward-most command and control, logistics, and staging hub. Expeditionary in nature, FOBs are rarely designed to be permanent and are characterized by their relatively Spartan living conditions compared to rear area bases.

GAC (ground assault convoy)

GCE (ground combat element)

GWOT (Global War on Terrorism)

HE (high explosive)

HET (Human intelligence Exploitation Team) – Marine detachment used to conduct interrogations and locate and employ indigenous intelligence sources.

HLZ (helicopter landing zone)

HMH (Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron) – CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter squadron.

HML/A (Marine Light Attack Squadron) – UH-1N Huey and AH-1W Super Cobra helicopter squadron.

HMM (Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron) – CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter squadron.

Humvee – generic moniker given to family of utility vehicles that replaced the jeep in the early 1980s. Configurations include ambulance, communications, gun carrier (“hard-back”), or troop transport (“high-back”).

IED (improvised explosive device) – term used to describe any type of explosive device fashioned from several different components not used in their intended role (i.e. rigged artillery shells or rockets).

JDAM (Joint Direct Air Munitions) – inclusive term used for a kit that turns bombs into guided munitions.

Jump CP – mobile command post.

KAF (Kandahar Air Field)

KIA (killed in action)

LAR (Light Armored Reconnaissance) – unit of LAVs used for vehicular screening, raids and reconnaissance

LAV (Light Armored Vehicle) – six-wheeled armored vehicle primarily used in the reconnaissance and screening role.

LCAC (landing craft, air-cushioned) – hovercraft used to transport personnel and equipment from ship to shore

LOD (line of departure) – jump off point for operations

M-2 - .50-caliber heavy machine gun in constant use since the late 1910s and accurate to well over 2,000 meters.

M-16A2 – standard U.S. assault rifle chambered for the 5.56mm round. Modified versions include the M-4 carbine and the M16A4.
M198 – 155mm towed howitzer that fires conventional or rocket-assisted high explosive, illumination, or smoke rounds.
M-203 – single-shot 40mm grenade launcher attached to the M16 rifle.
M-240G – 7.62mm medium machine gun.
M249 SAW (squad automatic weapon) – belt or magazine-fed light machine gun that fires the 5.56mm round.
MAGTF (Marine Air-Ground Task Force) – unique Marine Corps war fighting organization that places ground, air, and combat service support forces under the control of a single commander and his headquarters. Can range in size from a few Marines to well over 40,000, depending on the mission at hand and task organization.
MCAS (Marine Corps Air Station)
MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) – MAGTF built around a reinforced infantry battalion and composite helicopter squadron.
MIO (Maritime Intercept Operation) – term used to refer to missions where Navy and/or Marine forces stop and search vessels at sea.
Mk-19 – 40mm heavy machine gun.
MRE (meal, ready-to-eat)
MSPF (maritime special purpose force) – unit used for direct action raids and reconnaissance.
MSR (main supply route)
NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)
NCO (non-commissioned officer)
NVG (night vision goggles)
ODA (Operational Detachment Alpha) – 12-man Army Special Forces team.
OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) – inclusive term for U.S.-led anti-/counter-terrorism missions.
OGA (Other Governmental Agency) – blanket term for various U.S. intelligence and para-military forces.
OTV (outer tactical vest) – ballistic vest worn by personnel that can deflect shrapnel. Inserts called Small Arms Protective Inserts (SAPI) plates can stop up to 7.62mm rounds.
P-3 Orion – Navy turboprop intelligence gathering aircraft.
PTP (pre-deployment training)
PUC (person under control) – term for detained enemy combatants.
ROE (rules of engagement) – legal standard for applying force in a combat zone. Covers topics such as when it is appropriate and not appropriate to engage enemy forces, the application of indirect fires, conduct in and around religious sites, etc.
RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) – reloadable, man-portable anti-tank weapon.
SOC (Special Operations Capable) – designation given to MEUs after they complete a rigorous 26-week training and evaluation process designed to prepare the unit to carry out 23 specialized combat missions ranging from full-scale combat to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.
SOF (Special Operations Forces) – military forces including Army Special Forces, Navy SEALS, and specialized transport and combat aircraft squadrons.
SPMAGTF (Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force)
Terp – interpreter.
TOW (tube-launched, optically-guided, weapon) – Anti-tank missile system.
UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) – unmanned, remotely-piloted drones used to orbit battlefields for reconnaissance and targeted missile strikes.
UH-1N Iroquois – utility, special operations, and command and control helicopter.
UH-60 Blackhawk – the Army’s principal assault helicopter.
UN (United Nations)
UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan)
VCP (vehicle checkpoint)
VMA (Marine Attack Squadron) – designation given to AV-8B Harrier II squadrons
VMGR – designation of KC-130 Hercules squadrons
WIA (wounded in action)
XO (executive officer)
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