



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Global War on Terrorism, 2001–2021

On 11 September 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists launched a devastating attack on U.S. soil, hijacking four airliners to strike symbolic American targets. Two planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City—an emblem of American economic power—causing their eventual collapse. A third plane targeted the Pentagon, representing American military strength. The hijackers' plans for the fourth plane—United Flight 93, which was likely intended to hit the White House or Capitol—were thwarted when courageous passengers fought back, forcing it to crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attacks resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths: 2,977 in New York, including 17 firefighters who were also Marine Corps reservists; 184 at the Pentagon; and all aboard Flight 93.

Following the devastating attacks, the United States Marine Corps responded swiftly and decisively, reaffirming its role as America's expeditionary force in readiness. Marine reservists assisted federal agencies in domestic security, conducting air patrols over Washington, DC, and activated the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Antiterrorism) to counter emerging global threats.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines and Irregular Warfare Training and Education, 2000–2010*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

Meanwhile, the invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power, known as Operation Enduring Freedom, began on 7 October 2001 with targeted airstrikes. The Marine Corps played a critical support role in the campaign. Elements of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (15th MEU) deployed to Pakistan to assist Air Force search-and-rescue efforts, while Task Force 58, under Brigadier General James N. Mattis, was formed in November 2001. This task force secured a strategic airfield in southern Afghanistan, established

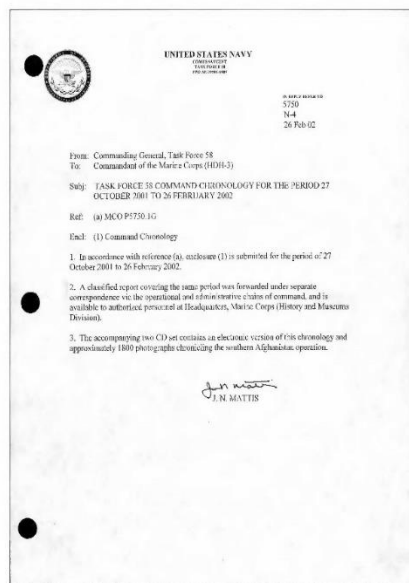
Collect

Preserve

Promote

Support





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infrastructure in southern Iraq and engaging in fierce urban combat, most notably in an-Nasiriyah. Despite harsh desert conditions and determined resistance, Marines advanced more than 500 kilometers in just 25 days, crossing rivers and cities en route to Baghdad, culminating in the symbolic toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. Task Force Tripoli extended the campaign northward, seizing Tikrit (Saddam's hometown) and rescuing U.S. prisoners of war. At its peak, I MEF commanded nearly 90,000 coalition troops, exemplifying the Corps' enduring effectiveness and professionalism in expeditionary warfare.

While Marines were deeply engaged in Iraq, the focus in Afghanistan shifted. In 2003, NATO assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force, overseeing nation-building and counterinsurgency missions, while U.S. Central Command directed counterterrorism operations under Operation Enduring Freedom. The Marine Corps maintained a

Forward Operating Base Rhino, and linked up with Pashtun allies, solidifying a southern front against Taliban forces. By early 2002, Marines had assisted in delivering a serious blow to enemy forces during Operation Anaconda. Although senior al-Qaeda leaders evaded capture, the Corps' rapid expeditionary response proved critical in the initial successes of Operation Enduring Freedom.

As the focus shifted, the Marines were soon called upon for a new mission in Iraq. In March 2003, the Marine Corps played a leading role in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) under Lieutenant General James T. Conway advanced swiftly toward Baghdad alongside U.S. and coalition forces, securing vital oil



National Archives photo no. 6634409



steady, though smaller, presence, securing the U.S. embassy and deploying infantry units near Bagram Airfield to support local security and rapid response, navigating operational complexities within the dual-command environment.



Photo by LCpl Ryan L. Jones

By 2004, Marines had deployed to Iraq once again to stabilize volatile regions such as Anbar and the northern Babil Provinces amid a growing insurgency fueled by Sunni nationalists, former regime loyalists, foreign jihadists, and criminal factions. They confronted a parallel Shi'a uprising led by Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf. Initial stabilization efforts in Fallujah faltered, prompting two

major offensives: Operation Vigilant Resolve in April and the intense Second Battle of Fallujah, called Operation Phantom Fury, in November. The brutal, house-to-house combat ultimately broke insurgent control but scattered fighters across Iraq.

Meanwhile, NATO expanded its role in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, extending security and reconstruction efforts through Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Marine battalions focused on eastern Afghanistan, supporting local governance and disrupting insurgents, most notably during Operation Red Wings. Marines helped build Afghan security forces through embedded training teams. Despite successes by units such as the 22d MEU (Special Operations Capable [SOC]), full Marine air-ground task forces would not return until 2008, as the Taliban resurged from Pakistan-based sanctuaries, escalating insurgent attacks.

Between 2006 and 2008, the Anbar Awakening represented a turning point in Iraq. Sunni tribal leaders, alienated by al-Qaeda in Iraq's brutality, allied with Marines in Anbar Province—particularly in al-Qaim and Ramadi. Marine leaders like Lieutenant Colonel Julian D. Alford helped pioneer new tactics focusing on securing local populations, building trust, and cooperating directly with tribal



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leaders to combat al-Qaeda insurgents. This approach was inspired by historical Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine, adapted to the unique challenges in Iraq. While conditions in Anbar improved, Baghdad remained volatile, prompting President George W. Bush to authorize a surge of U.S. forces in early 2007. The cumulative effect of these efforts helped degrade al-Qaeda in Iraq significantly, setting the stage for the gradual transition of security responsibilities back to Iraqi authorities. By early 2008, violence in Anbar had declined sharply.

Amid this shifting operational landscape, the Marine Corps also advanced its capabilities on a global scale. The establishment of U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) in 2006 marked a significant evolution, integrating Marines into U.S. Special Operations Command. Building on the successful 2003 deployment of Detachment One in Iraq, MARSOC fielded elite battalions that greatly enhanced the Corps' global counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities.



Photo courtesy of Sgt Scott A. Whittington

As Marine special operations capabilities matured, the Corps also responded to renewed challenges in Afghanistan. By 2008 and 2009, the Marine Corps significantly increased its presence in Helmand Province to counter a rapidly escalating insurgency and to support broader NATO

stabilization efforts in the region. Task Force 2/7 and the 24th MEU (SOC) led early counterinsurgency efforts before transitioning to Special Purpose MAGTF-Afghanistan. President Barack H. Obama's 2009 troop surge, which included the 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, shifted the operational focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. Marines launched Operation Khanjar in Helmand, seizing Taliban-held areas ahead of national elections. During this period, Corporal Dakota L. Meyer earned the Medal of Honor for extraordinary heroism in Kunar Province.



While the Marine Corps intensified its efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq's security situation began to stabilize. By late 2008, conditions allowed for coalition drawdowns and the transfer of security responsibilities to Iraqi forces. The 2008 Status of Forces Agreement set a timetable for withdrawal, culminating in the official end of combat operations in August 2010. Operation Iraqi Freedom transitioned to Operation New Dawn, emphasizing advisory roles. The last Marine headquarters departed Iraq in January 2010, and the U.S. formally ended its mission in December 2011, concluding nearly a decade of combat.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in Battle: Fallujah, November–December 2004*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2005: Into the Fray*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in Battle: An-Najaf, August 2004*](#)
 - [*U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*](#)

In Afghanistan, counterinsurgency efforts intensified under General Stanley McChrystal in 2009, prioritizing civilian protection and local support. A further surge of 30,000 troops, including significant Marine elements, reinforced Helmand Province. Marines played a central role in Operation Moshtarak, clearing Taliban strongholds amid complex urban warfare and insurgents blending with civilians. Coalition leaders, including Army General David H. Petraeus and Marine General John R. Allen, worked to strengthen Afghan forces and transition security responsibilities. Despite ongoing Taliban attacks—including the 2012 assault on Camp Bastion—coalition forces steadily transferred control, ending U.S. combat operations by late 2014. This transition marked Afghanistan's first democratic transfer of power and the formal conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom.



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The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from 2013 onward presented a new challenge. Declaring a caliphate and seizing key cities like Mosul, ISIS prompted the United



States to launch Operation Inherent Resolve in 2014. Marines trained Iraqi forces and conducted special operations, playing a vital role in the protracted Battle of Mosul (2016–17). Marine Raiders expanded global counterterrorism efforts, aiding the liberation of Marawi in the Philippines and conducting multiple operations worldwide. The 2019 killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a significant blow to the organization.



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Meanwhile, NATO's Operation Resolute Support (2015 onward) focused on advising Afghan forces amid a Taliban resurgence. After the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal, the Taliban launched a major offensive in 2021. The final chapter of the Global War on Terrorism came with the August 2021 evacuation from Kabul. In the withdrawal, Marines helped end America's longest war, closing a historic period of

sustained combat and reaffirming the Service's role as a flexible, resilient force in an unpredictable world.

- For more information, see:

- [U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2001–2009: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography](#)
- [DET ONE: U.S. Marine Corps U.S. Special Operations Command Detachment, 2003–2006](#)
- [Small Unit Actions, 2007](#)
- [Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment](#)

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