

To our Families and Friends,

We have now crossed the 5-month mark and the team here continues to make steady progress in a difficult part of Afghanistan. Progress is not always quick and not always apparent, but I have never seen our young men and women discouraged. They push hard every day. Along with our Coalition partners, your Marines and Sailors have done everything I've asked of them and much more. Everyone has rolled up their sleeves and is pulling in the same direction. It is working and I remain extremely proud of them.

As part of the Presidential directed surge recovery, thousands of Marines will be returning home over the next couple of months. I know that this has raised the question of "why is my Marine or Sailor having to stay when so many others are coming home." It has been difficult to decide who will stay and who will redeploy as every individual that deployed has been important to the mission. The decisions were made based on the fact we cannot exceed a specified number and that we have to maintain the required skills needed to accomplish the mission we have been assigned. We have also redeployed a large number of Marines that continue to support us twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week from Camp Pendleton. I truly appreciate the dedication and sense of purpose that every Marine and Sailor has brought and continues to bring to Regional Command (Southwest).

Throughout June and July, the Combined Team made considerable progress developing our Afghan National Security Force partners as well as expanding governance and development throughout the Helmand and Nimroz Provinces. Additionally, we celebrated the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in June and our Independence Day in July by hosting celebrations for each event aboard Camp Bastion and Camp Leatherneck. Finally, we continued to retrograde and redeploy Marine Forces and equipment across the battlespace to meet our force drawdown requirements.



We are very encouraged by our Afghan National Security Forces' (ANSF) continued progress in RC (SW). Since 2009, the Afghan National Army has grown from one brigade to three brigades, with a fourth brigade scheduled to arrive in the future. Additionally, the Afghan Uniformed Police has grown from the ground up to a force of more than 8,500 in just a few years. The ANSF are demonstrating improved capability and confidence as they continue training and operating with their Coalition Partners. Furthermore, the Joint Sustainment Academy Southwest (JSAS) and the Lashkar Gah Training Center continue to professionalize our ANSF in RC (SW).

Of note, between June and July, JSAS trained the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in multiple mission-essential skills. The I MEF (FWD) JSAS team, supervised 9 graduation ceremonies totaling 170 students with over 1257 hours of formal instruction. Specifically, JSAS graduated the following courses:

- Explosive Hazard Reduction Course 12-8, 19 graduates
- Anti-Terrorist Force Protection 12-6, 17 graduates
- Protective Security Detail 12-2, 13 graduates
- Generator Mechanic Course 12-9 and 12-10, 33 graduates
- Afghan-Small Arms Weapons Instructor Course 12-4, 11 graduates
- Basic Driver Course 12-2 and 12-3, 22 graduates
- Preventative Medicine Training 12-2, 5 graduates
- Improvised Explosive Devices Awareness 12-8, 6 graduates
- Operations Coordination Center 12-2, 25 graduates
- Basic Administration Course, 19 graduates





The Provincial and District Governments continue developing the capacity and the capability to provide basic services for the people in Helmand and Nimroz Provinces. The Regional Platform, Helmand Reconstruction Team, and the RC (SW) Staff continued to enable sustainable growth and development. Throughout June and July, the Combined Team focused on Rule of Law, Agriculture Value Chain development, and education. These initiatives are improving the Human Capital in Afghanistan and strengthening GIROA's connection to the people.

The Regional Platform and the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team are working hard to spread Justice and Rule of Law throughout the region. Of note, four courtrooms that were closed for 34 years re-opened in Nimroz Province. Additionally, a number of legal professionals from across Helmand province attended a two-week training course aimed at improving the relationship between the police and prosecutors. We are encouraged by the Afghans' efforts to improve the Rule of Law across the region.



The South Carolina Agri-Business Development Team continues to assist in supporting Agricultural Value Chains, which are critical to improving the local economy. The team is working with the Afghan Department of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock at a number of demonstration farms across Helmand Province and introducing them to new techniques and technologies designed to improve yields and introduce new crops which will provide income for local farmers. One example is soy beans, which produce oil that can be sold for cooking and provide a rich and cost effective source of protein to improve livestock feed.

The wheat harvest has been exceptionally good in Helmand Province this year and the Provincial Governor commented that he wished to see Helmand return to being the wheat growing center of the country. We are also encouraged by farmers moving their goods around the province to market. Transportation is made considerably easier and the security situation is enhanced as a result of the Combined Team's road improvement plan. Furthermore, this freedom of movement allows farmers to get the best possible price for their produce in the region which stimulates the local economy.



The Combined Team made considerable progress pursuing sustainable development projects across the region. Work on schools continues and, following years of neglect by the Taliban, the Afghan government recently released figures stating there are 121,000 students attending school in Helmand Province (a 155% increase since 2005), which includes 28,000 females (over 5 times as many as there were in 2005). Additionally, there are 164 schools across Helmand province which is three times the number that existed in 2007. Education also continues at a higher level – 31 students graduated from Helmand University this month. Education is recognized as a foundation block for improving the prospects of the region. It is one of the highest priorities for the local population.



In June, the Redeployment and Retrograde in support of Reset and Reconstitution Operations Group (R4OG) commenced operations. This organization was troop-to-task organized to facilitate the redeployment and retrograde of units coming off the battlefield by providing subject matter experts to properly identify and account for equipment entering the Marine Corps' reset and reconstitution plan. Their skill sets and mission allow us to focus more on training the Afghan National Security Forces as we transition to Security Force Assistance (SFA). Within their first month, the R4OG hit the ground running and assisted with the redeployment of two Marine Corps Infantry Battalions from Afghanistan.

Sadly, we have lost Marines, Sailors, and Coalition Partners during this fight. Please keep the families and loved ones of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in your prayers. They will always be part of our Marine family and I am asking you to reach out to them when possible. It is our responsibility to make sure they are never forgotten. Please do the same for the wounded and their families while they undergo the process of healing. Let's keep faith with our fallen and our wounded.

I try to always remember the sacrifices that each of you make daily so that your Marine or Sailor can perform his or her duties out here. I am grateful for the support that you continue to provide—it really does make a difference. I have told you before and will tell you again, you are just as important to our team as those wearing the uniform. Thank you.

Your Marines and Sailors are making a difference in this war-torn land. The vast majority of the people in Helmand Province are happy that they have Marines and Sailors on their side. The insurgents do not share the same level of enthusiasm over our presence.

All the best and again, thank you.

C.M. Gurganus