

STARS AND STRIPES

U.S.

'I left my soul behind': Afghan generals now based in Colorado reflect 20 months after leaving home

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U.S. Marines with Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Central Command provide assistance at an evacuation control checkpoint during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 21, 2021. (Victor Mancilla/U.S. Marine Corps)

(Tribune News Service) — As he stepped into a Royal Air Force C-17 transport plane on August 19, 2021, while chaos swallowed Kabul, Lt. Gen. Sammi Sadat had a thought: What if

he stayed behind and took his men into Kabul to kill as many Taliban fighters as they could?

The decision would likely have meant death for him and his troops.

Ultimately, he boarded the plane.

Sadat was among thousands of people airlifted out of Afghanistan that tumultuous and bloody month, when America ended its 20-year military presence in the country after the Taliban took control of Kabul following a swift and furious march across the country. The Afghan National Army disintegrated — much quicker than intelligence services assumed — and the NATO-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed soon after.

Sadat remembers being horrified and humiliated.

But, mostly, he remembers dragging the empty shell of his body into the aircraft.

"I left my soul behind," he tells the Denver Gazette.

Sadat was the commander of Afghan Special Operations and frequently fought alongside coalition special forces.

As he left Afghanistan for medical treatment in the United Kingdom, the Taliban moved into Kabul, undoing 20 years of NATO-led coalition work in the nation.

Of the 122,000 evacuated from Afghanistan in what's known as the Kabul Airlift, about 2,000 now call Denver home. Denver began welcoming Afghan refugees in December 2021, and, out of war, a vibrant community emerged half a world away.

"The best and happiest community of Afghans we have met so far were in Denver and Utah," Sammi says, a few days after joining a panel organized by Metropolitan State University of Denver.

"We are grateful, and Afghans will never forget the great welcome and the support that US

citizens provided to them in those dark times," he adds.

Veterans: Efforts to get allies out of Afghanistan lacking

Sgt. 1st Class Tom Kazka, a Special Forces engineer sergeant, known to the Army as an 18c, had to leave 17 of his soldiers behind when the NATO-backed government fell. Kazka was responsible for leading a team to clear improvised explosive devices.

To date, he has managed to get three of his men out through a nonprofit, called the 1208 Foundation, that offers aid and immigration assistance to surviving members of the National Mine Reduction Group and other Afghans who served with American special forces operators.

"Other Green Berets were successful in getting some of their guys out. I was not," Kazka tells The Denver Gazette. "(The rescues) have all been internally funded. These guys are eligible for the special immigrant visa. However, everything else we had to do for them was all on us."

The rapid fall of the NATO-backed government and the chaotic evacuation that ensued left thousands of Afghan allies stranded in the country.

Last year, a group that advocates for fast-tracking the work to get Afghan allies out to safety estimated that at least 78,000 were left behind. In its April 2023 report, the Association of Wartime Allies paints a direr picture, in which Afghan allies trapped in the country face years-long bureaucratic delays of processing of Special Immigrant Visa applications.

"There is a pervasive sense of betrayal and abandonment felt by many Afghans who feel that they have been left to fend for themselves in a very dangerous situation," the group says, citing testimonials.

As he watched 20 years of work in Afghanistan disintegrate over the course of a few weeks, Kazka couldn't quite comprehend exactly what he saw.

"In one aspect, it was simply just surreal," he said. "That sense of numbness just morphed into a lot of enduring anger over the last 20 months."

Kazka was critical of American leadership, saying they've largely abandoned Afghanistan to its fate, leaving it to nonprofits, such as the 1208 Foundation to try and pick up the slack.

But those organizations can't "do this forever," Kazka said.

Brig. Gen. Khosh Sadat — he and Sammi are not related — warned that many of the things that preceded the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and others are now again happening in Afghanistan. And he fears — though he hopes it won't happen — another attack may take place, recalling the bombing of the USS Cole and other terrorist activities in the 1990s.

"The U.S. got out because in the Doha Deal, the Taliban promised to them on paper that they will not allow anybody to attack the United States. I'm amazed how much trust is put there," he said. "The Taliban are not 10 feet tall, where they can just find out in which valley, in which village, any foreign terrorist group is planning attacks."

The Doha Agreement, signed by President Donald Trump and the Taliban in 2020, served as the first step in a peace agreement between the parties. It also required Afghan fighters loyal to the government to stop fighting the Taliban, something Khosh Sadat and others were none too keen to do.

Negotiations with the Taliban began in 2019, and Khosh Sadat said they were not offered a seat at the table.

"That's when the betrayal started," he said. "There's a lot of examples of the betrayal, but the most important one was putting pressure on us to not fight the Taliban."

Sammi Sadat agreed, saying the agreement removed the strategic deterrence in their region. Countries — such as China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan — knew not to interfere with the Afghan government, so long as coalition forces remained in the region, he said. Once the U.S. began to leave, "they started empowering our enemies," he said.

A 'golden era' lost, a generation deprived of a future

The immediate focus by veterans and refugees is how to get allies still trapped in the once-again-Taliban-occupied nation.

"The economy is in free-fall. Women's rights have gone back to the eighth century at best. Institutions are crumbled and there's a massive brain drain going on," Kazka said. "But we are trying to highlight to the world at large that there is a little ember that needs some care and attention but can still come back into existence."

Afghanistan's youth grew up in a world that was free of the Taliban, they noted. Sammi Sadat said the country's eyes had been opened, and it was connected to the rest of the world.

During the occupation, boys and girls went to school in Afghanistan, the country traded with other countries, and its citizens traveled to the outside world.

"This was the best thing that could have happened to us in the last 50 years," Sammi Sadat said. "Our era, compared to the Taliban, looks like a golden era. Although with the war and everything, there was freedom, there were jobs, there were people who had the work opportunities. ... You could live a decent life in Afghanistan."

Sammi Sadat acknowledged that, before the fall, there was fighting in the suburbs, countryside and remote villages, but the cities were largely becoming "metropolitan." The society of Afghanistan completely transformed for the better during those 20 years, he said.

The Taliban rolled all of that back as its forces steamrolled into Kabul and the Afghan government fled.

Khosh and Sammi lamented that this younger generation of Afghans was never given the chance to take the reins of their country's leadership.

The U.S. government spent a significant amount of money training junior officers, they

noted. But where the investment in young leaders and junior officers paid off, the investment in government leadership did not, they said.

Whether corruption, nepotism or incompetence, Khosh said certain political leaders hindered Afghanistan's progress.

"Some of the partners were not genuine partners toward the people of Afghanistan or towards the United States," he said. "That really resulted in breaking the morale on the frontline."

Both generals also lamented the tendency of the central government to appoint people, themselves included, to different roles at will. Often neither general was able to fully settle into his new role before being transferred to another. In contrast, they said, U.S. personnel can spend a significant amount of time in a role, giving them ample opportunities to get to know their unit before receiving a new assignment.

But the blame does not entirely fall on the Afghan government — the United States played a significant role as well, they said. Part of the problem was a disconnect between the White House and the Pentagon, where a new administration could come in and undo the work of the previous president, giving new missions to military leaders regardless of how much progress had been made with prior ones, they said.

Another, they added, was a general lack of attempted cooperation between service members and the indigenous population. This is something that sets special forces apart, Kazka said, as they place a high premium on working with and through the locals.

"There's a fundamental misunderstanding about the culture and how deeply entrenched some of these norms were especially within rural villages," he said. "We put an 18-20-year-old kid in people's backyards and didn't understand the impact of that offense, which came back to bite us in the long term."

Despite being exiles, the two generals look to the future of their country with a sense of

hope. Both want to return. The first big step in Sammi Sadat's mind is restoring Afghanistan's democratic constitution, which was adopted in 2004.

He sees a bright future for his country as a trade hub, noting Afghanistan has significant mineral deposits and oil and gas reserves that can make the country a worldwide player.

"We want to utilize that and make Afghanistan prosperous and return the lost respect to our country, so our citizens can feel this is their home," he said. "Nobody is running away, everybody can live at peace, make money, go to schools and live in our country."

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