

KABUL

THE UNTOLD STORY OF BIDEN'S FIASCO
AND THE
AMERICAN WARRIORS WHO FOUGHT TO THE END

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PROLOGUE

ABBEY GATE, HAMID KARZAI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT
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The crowd was packed shoulder to shoulder. Every man, woman, and child shouted and waved pieces of paper—their contents indiscernible—in frantic attempts to gain the attention of the US Marines and Air Force special operators standing on the wall above them. The promise of a new life lay just beyond the Americans guarding the gates. Sunset was less than an hour away, but the temperature exceeded 90 degrees F, and the air was filled with the stench of sweat and human excrement from the desperate souls who had been waiting outside for days with nowhere else to relieve themselves. There was no respite other than a dry wind periodically blowing from east to west, away from the gate and down the canal full of civilians struggling to shove their way to the front.

Most of the crowd had no reason to be there. They had no connection to the US government and no legitimate claim to US protection. Many had remained on the sidelines during the decades-long fight against the Taliban. But most of them posed no active threat, either. They knew that Afghanistan's US-backed government was no more and that sharia law enforced by the Taliban was on the horizon, and they desperately wanted to find a way out. Some had showed up because they

had sincerely believed social media posts saying that the Americans would take anyone who wanted to leave.

For men such as “Amir,” the others’ motives didn’t matter. He had a right to be there, and he was trying to push through the throngs to take his wife and four children to safety. He had served as an interpreter for US special operations units and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) for nearly a decade. As such, he had an advantage over the hordes holding up clearly forged “admission documents.” US troops were looking for him and had given him a call sign to confirm his identity. The US veterans and intelligence operatives he’d served alongside, now back in the United States, had arranged it.

Amir could see Abbey Gate. He took a picture of the troops standing on the wall, so they’d know where to look, and another of the call sign he’d been told to paint on a placard: PALE RIDER. Then he took one more of his two sons and two daughters standing below him in the crowd. His younger son stood on the far left of the frame, and his two daughters stood on the right. His older daughter, six years old with soft brown eyes, gazed directly into the camera with an inquisitive smile. His younger daughter, the baby of the family, was distracted by the ongoing commotion and blissfully unaware of the moment. Between his younger son and daughters stood his oldest child, an eight-year-old boy with large eyes, tousled hair, and a troubled expression. He seemed to be the only one who realized that things weren’t okay.

At 5:30 p.m., Amir sent the photos to his handlers in the United States, who in turn would relay them to the troops waiting for his family. His family was a hundred feet away from freedom. The US-based operatives acknowledged his message and replied with further instructions. But Amir’s transmissions went silent.

A few minutes later, 3rd platoon of Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines (known as “2/1”), gathered 1,250 feet away for a group photo. In less than an hour, they’d begin their final shift at Abbey Gate. Their platoon sergeant tried his best to capture a moment to commemorate

what they'd endured together. He took a few shots, then told the platoon to turn ninety degrees and face toward the gate, where the fading sunlight offered the best picture. The Marines first saw a flash of light, then felt the concussion of a blast in their chests. For a few seconds, everyone remained frozen in place while their brains attempted to process the sensory overload. Reality set in as body parts started raining down on the cement around them. The entire platoon sprinted toward the gate.

By nightfall, military officials announced that thirteen US service members had been killed in action in a suicide bombing at the entrance to the airfield: eleven Marines, a Navy corpsman, and an Army staff sergeant from a special operations unit. At least 170 civilians were killed in the blast as well. Amir's oldest son was among them.

The deaths of the thirteen American heroes of Abbey Gate—and those of the innocent civilians they were attempting to save—were neither inevitable nor the product of good-faith decisions poorly executed. The same goes for the thousands of Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan allies left behind in Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. Those outcomes were caused solely by the Biden administration's toxic combination of ignorance and self-assurance.

The wisdom of the overarching decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan is immaterial. Plenty of Americans—and plenty of Afghanistan veterans—hold differing views on that topic in good faith. No matter which side you choose in that debate, one thing is painfully clear: things didn't have to turn out the way they did.

And unlike the tens of thousands of Americans and Afghan allies abandoned in Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, the consequences of the administration's failures in Afghanistan have not remained in Kabul; they've unleashed a dangerous new global dynamic that will be felt for some time to come.

This book tells that story.

ONE

WRONG ABOUT EVERYTHING

Joseph R. Biden, Jr., was first elected to the US Senate in 1972, the year Richard Nixon won his second term as president. Over the subsequent half century, he adopted many public, and often paradoxical, personas, ranging from an apologist for Dixiecrat segregation to a purportedly lifelong civil rights crusader. But he has been remarkably consistent in one respect: he has been wrong on every major foreign policy issue he confronted, from Vietnam, Cambodia, and China to Afghanistan and Russia. And he has consistently changed his story, after the fact, to cover his failures.

“NO OBLIGATION”

Biden’s initial foray into foreign policy as a thirty-year-old senator ominously foreshadowed the crisis that would unfold under his watch five decades later. In April 1975, the South Vietnamese government was collapsing under a sustained offensive by communist forces from the North. Only a few thousand US soldiers remained in the country, and President Gerald Ford ordered a massive rescue effort to save thousands of South Vietnamese who had helped the United States during the war. Ford believed that the United States had a moral obligation to honor its commitment to its South Vietnamese allies, who “had been very

loyal to the United States” until the bitter end.¹ It was a foreign policy imperative as well: if the United States’ allies were to trust US leadership in the future, our government needed to keep its word.

Biden, a foreign policy novice, disdained Ford’s moral concerns and dismissed the potential damage to the United States’ relationships with her allies. Too late to play a prominent role in the antiwar movement, he made his mark by becoming the Senate’s most strident opponent of US assistance to South Vietnamese refugees. He strenuously opposed Ford’s evacuation plan and request for refugee resettlement funds. During a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on April 14, 1975, he declared, “I do not believe the United States has an obligation, moral or otherwise, to evacuate foreign nationals. . . . The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese.”² In a meeting in the White House later that afternoon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger protested that Biden’s posture meant abandoning the Vietnamese “to whom we are obligated.” Biden conceded that the United States would be abandoning its allies, but he doubled down anyway: “I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out. I don’t want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out.”³ Exactly forty-six years later, he would announce his Afghanistan withdrawal plan, which unfolded with similar, coldhearted indifference to our allies.

Rather than evacuating US allies, Biden sought “a negotiated settlement” with the North Vietnamese, naively trusting the North Vietnamese to guarantee that “endangered South Vietnamese” allies would be afforded “safety in place.”⁴ Wiser heads prevailed, and the Senate overwhelmingly approved Ford’s request for evacuation funds over Biden’s objections. Still, thousands of South Vietnamese allies were left behind when Saigon fell on April 30, 1975. Despite Biden’s rosy assumptions, the North Vietnamese had no intention of providing “safety in place” to any South Vietnamese who had fought alongside the United States. Most ended up in reeducation camps, where they were abused, tortured, and/or killed.

Biden similarly downplayed the related, looming disaster in Cambodia. In early 1975, months before Pol Pot launched a genocidal campaign that murdered millions and killed or exiled 40 percent of his nation's population, Biden declared that there was no reason to think that Pol Pot would be any worse than any other Cambodian leader. He opposed aid to Cambodia, saying "I may be the most immoral son of a gun in this room," but "I'm getting sick and tired of hearing about morality, our moral obligation."⁵

During the forty-six years from the Vietnam pullout to the Afghanistan withdrawal, Biden apparently learned little. The parallels between his glib assertions that the Taliban could be trusted and his naive willingness, decades earlier, to trust the North Vietnamese are impossible to miss.

A BLIND APOLOGIST

Vietnam was Biden's first foreign policy failure, but it was hardly his last. In 1979, the future commander in chief visited China, beginning a decades-long campaign of arguing that the totalitarian nation's rise would be a plus for the United States.⁶ Over the next forty years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) showed little interest in cooperation and outright hostility to any notions of freedom and self-governance. Ten years after Biden's visit to China, the CCP massacred thousands of pro-democracy protestors in Tiananmen Square. But his conviction was as unshakable as it was unfounded.

In a press conference with Chinese state media in Shanghai in 2000, Biden declared that "China is not our enemy" and there was "nothing inevitable about China and the United States not being as cooperative as other nations."⁷ As vice president, he lavished praise on China during a state visit in August 2011: "Let me be clear: I believed in 1979 and said so then, and I believe now, that a rising China is a positive development not only for the people of China but for the United States and the world as a whole." During the same visit, he refused to condemn China's brutal "one-child" policy, telling an assembly of Chinese students, "I fully

SIX

NIGHT OF THE ZOMBIES

The security situation melted down quicker than an ice chip in the blazing Afghan heat. Word of capitulation spread through Kabul even before the Russian-made aircraft carrying President Ashraf Ghani had exited Afghan airspace on August 15. Most members of the Afghan forces simply shed their uniforms and withdrew into the surrounding countryside. Of the entire Afghan military, virtually only two units of special forces commandos stayed to fight. They made their way to Hamid Karzai International Airport and asked US officers there how they could help.

Meanwhile, a number of Afghans who had served in the air force burst onto the tarmac of HKIA to commandeer helicopters and fly them north to the safety of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. But there were far more people than seats, and arguments quickly ensued. Disagreements often became physical, and several supposed compatriots turned their weapons on one another. Also during the mayhem, a group with an Afghan army general hopped into one of the Mi-17 helicopters, only to discover that it couldn't take off. Amid the fighting, apparently no one had noticed that the tank was close to empty. In total, nearly seventy Afghan air force planes and helicopters were flown out of the country by military crews more interested in finding a new homeland than defending their own—against an adversary that totally lacked any

form of airpower.¹ At least one of those planes was shot down by the Uzbek authorities reacting to a foreign aircraft entering their nation's airspace unannounced.

The Afghan ground forces didn't exactly cover themselves in glory, either. Hours before initially fleeing the nineteenth-century presidential palace in an Mi-17 helicopter (provided by American taxpayers), Ghani transferred control of the city to Kabul's chief of police, Major General Juma Gul Hemat, an obese bureaucrat with three days' worth of stubble perpetually stuck to his face. Despite his reputation for corruption—or perhaps because of it—he'd managed to fail upward from one provincial police appointment to another before he had been made top cop in Kabul in August 2020. Hemat held his post until Ghani left, but not a second longer. Once his boss was gone, he decided it was time to skip town, too.

That technically left Lieutenant General Afzal Aman in charge. Aman, a bespectacled, stout, bald middle-aged man with a toothbrush mustache, commanded the Afghan army's Kabul garrison. He was the only remaining official with authority over all the security forces in Kabul. But he beat both Ghani and Hemat to the punch, for he had already bolted without notifying anyone. Bottom line, there was not a single soul left in place to coordinate the defense of the capital of more than 4 million inhabitants.

Afghanistan no longer had a government. A night of mayhem was approaching.

THE EMBASSY EVACUATION

Until about two weeks before Kabul fell, State Department officials had categorically refused to consider the possibility of a full-scale evacuation. The US military had tried time and again over the course of four months to convince Chargé d'Affaires Ross Wilson and his staff of the threat, but the diplomats would hear none of it. In the words of

a military officer embedded with the embassy, the officials in Kabul had spent most of 2020 and 2021 “constructing a narrative supported by half-truths [and] decoupled from reality.”²

Now the State Department was in full-on panic mode. Executing an orderly evacuation of the largest US embassy in the world would have required months of meticulous planning under ideal conditions—and the conditions in Kabul on August 15 were about as optimal as blanks in a firefight. For one thing, the embassy had no contingency plan for destroying the tens of thousands of sensitive documents inside its walls. So its staff had started the process only forty-eight hours prior to Ghani’s capitulation. An August 13 memo instructing staff to destroy sensitive documents inexplicably stated that a “small consular staff” would remain in Kabul after the Taliban assumed control. In the end, officials left behind reams of material identifying Afghans who had cooperated with the US government, including key informants in the Taliban’s ranks. Given all that, it’s not surprising that the embassy had never gotten around to establishing an order of priority for evacuation. Most of the diplomats inside the \$806 million compound on Great Massoud Road simply had no idea what to do or where to go if the worst—which seemed increasingly likely—occurred.

The result was chaos. US military commanders at HKIA immediately initiated airlift operations once they received the green light from the Biden administration. CH-47 Chinook helicopters touched down at the embassy at roughly 2:00 a.m. local time on August 15. But due to the White House’s rigid ceiling on armed assets allowed to remain in country, the US military had only a limited number of Chinooks at its disposal. The State Department had several CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters—the smaller, Vietnam-era predecessor—but the total number of aircraft was still woefully insufficient.

Flight crews were forced to push their aircraft to the hilt. Under normal conditions, the maximum capacity of a Chinook is thirty-three fully equipped troops. But Kabul is more than a mile above sea level,

and the thin summer air made carrying heavier loads extremely dangerous. A downed helicopter would have all but doomed the evacuation before it began. Worse, it wasn't clear that the limited forces at HKIA could effectively rescue a downed aircraft without risking significant casualties. Despite these risks, Army aviators stripped their aircraft of nonessential equipment and lifted roughly fifty passengers out of the embassy compound on each flight. Even so, evacuating the nearly two thousand embassy personnel would ultimately require dozens of nonstop round trips over the course of twenty-three hours.

Complicating matters, embassy personnel were scattered across the fifteen-acre complex, and the State Department had no system in place to account for its people. Anxious embassy officials started pushing their colleagues toward the aircraft without keeping track of who had left and who was still on the premises. The newfound urgency did more harm than good. After a few rotations, the officers in charge realized that embassy officials had no way of knowing when the evacuation would be complete. The military leaders at HKIA were forced to corral the embassy personnel who had already arrived and do a head count to figure out how many people were still around.

To ensure that no one was left behind, special forces operatives and troops from the Army's 10th Mountain Division, which first distinguished itself in the Italian Apennines during the Second World War, conducted a door-to-door search of the complex's more than a dozen buildings and annexes, at times kicking in doors and bashing off locks. The search yielded several staffers. According to one of the officers on the ground, the staffers claimed that "they didn't know where to go." He and his men found that explanation unconvincing. Instructions had been blaring over loudspeakers for hours, and as another 10th Mountain officer later told military investigators, embassy officials had been found "intoxicated" and "cowering in [their] rooms."³

Getting embassy personnel on board the aircraft presented its own challenges, some of which should have been easily avoidable. Space was at

a premium, and with Taliban fighters already freely cruising the streets, the evacuation window was extremely short. Yet several staffers tried to board with multiple suitcases. The air crews were tasked with evacuating several thousand people; they were in no mood to trade lives for luggage. After confirming that the luggage didn't contain sensitive information or equipment, it was thrown onto a pile at the side of the landing zone.

The 10th Mountain still had a second group of stragglers to collect. The embassy employed a few hundred former Gurkha commandos as an outer security force for the sprawling complex. The Nepalese warriors constitute one of the most elite and feared units in the British military and are legendary for their bravery and unflinching discipline. In 2010, a private from the 1st Battalion, Royal Gurkha Rifles regiment was court-martialed for beheading a high-ranking Taliban leader killed in a fierce firefight. The British military declined to pursue charges after learning that the unit had been ordered to return with DNA evidence of the successful mission and needed to leave the kill zone in a hurry to avoid Taliban reinforcements. The young private, using his curved kukri, had followed those orders in their most literal sense.

As the sun was pushing fast toward Koh-e Qrough Mountain in the southwest and the last flights were about to depart, US soldiers conducting their final sweep of the grounds found the Gurkha guards still manning their posts along the embassy walls. One refused to leave his post without first reporting to his superiors. After his phone call went unanswered, he agreed, reluctantly, to evacuate along with everyone else.⁴

After twenty-three hours of continuous operations, US helicopters made their final departure from the embassy at 1:00 a.m. on August 16. The steady chatter of automatic gunfire was beginning to echo in the background.

THE MOB

While 10th Mountain was completing its sweep of the embassy grounds, a sea of humanity began descending upon HKIA. "Afghans heard that

[Ghani] had left the country, and they saw the embassy personnel starting to move north to HKIA,” Brigadier General Farrell J. Sullivan later told military investigators. “They saw all this, the [Afghan army] crumbled, and people just started to flood the airfield.”⁵ The courageous men and women who were at Hamid Karzai International Airport have branded what followed “the Night of the Zombies.”

As the night of the fifteenth bled into the morning of the sixteenth, nearly fifteen thousand Afghans pushed through airfield gates abandoned by the Afghan army and onto the tarmac. Only 350 troops stood between the mob that was desperately grasping for life and the airfield’s Joint Operations Center (JOC). The JOC is the nerve center of essentially every military operation. It’s staffed by a team of soldiers and filled with sensitive equipment, much of it classified, that commanders use to monitor operations and make decisions in real time. At HKIA, the JOC housed secure phone lines for communicating with the Pentagon and the White House, satellite radios for corresponding with other military bases in the Middle East, screens for tracking the locations of friendly and hostile units, and more than a dozen displays with live feeds from every reconnaissance asset the military had in the air. If the JOC were overrun, the entire evacuation would come to a standstill and almost certainly never restart.

Turkish forces were also at HKIA, but due to long-standing ethnic tensions with the Afghans, they remained firmly within their compound at the northernmost end of the airfield. In previous weeks, as the situation had been deteriorating, members of the Afghan security forces had started to pull their weapons on Turkish forces whenever they weren’t escorted by Americans. The Turks had opted for the “Alamo plan,” and they stuck to it. So they were MIA at the breaking point.

The best US forces could do was secure the JOC and ensure that it didn’t get damaged. Whatever else happened, the entire mission hinged on keeping US forces in control of that small sliver of territory. Nearly every soldier and Marine on the airfield was pulled to cordon off the

JOC, standing or kneeling less than an arm's distance apart to prevent the crowd from exploiting a gap in the line. In the mad scramble to form a defensive perimeter, the Marines grabbed whatever nonlethal weapons were in reach. Some carried riot shields; others used tear gas canisters and flash-bang grenades to stun the crowd. Those who had no time to grab anything else used the targeting lasers on their M4s to momentarily blind those who weren't getting the message. Only a handful of people were left inside the JOC to man the phones and the surveillance feeds.

The abounding crowd got to within 200 meters (650 feet) of over-running the JOC. And it might have done so if not for a fortunate twist of fate. As it moved toward the American-held portion of the airfield, people spotted Air Force C-17s and C-130s on the runways and instead headed toward them, hoping to snag a lift. Still, the situation was untenable, and Admiral Vasely was forced to accept the Taliban's offer to help clear the airfield. It was only the first in a series of events where the US military was placed at the mercy of the Taliban's "goodwill" due to the Biden administration's failure to plan.

The mob inflicted serious damage to critical infrastructure on the airfield during the anarchy. Both air traffic control towers were destroyed, forcing Air Force combat controllers—special operations personnel who hone their craft over ninety-seven weeks of training—to direct air traffic using handheld radios and mathematical formulas sketched on notepads. The combat controllers, supplemented by Marines from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and several airmen scrambled from Saudi Arabia on an hour's notice on August 17, spent the next two weeks manually directing air traffic for more than a hundred flights landing at and taking off from HKIA every day. They conducted the entire operation under a green pop-up canopy tent next to the runway. The White House falsely characterized the use of combat controllers as routine during increases in air traffic volume. It was an attempt to divert attention away from its own incompetence. The White House

didn't acknowledge the destruction of the control towers at the time, and it still hasn't.

Even though they faced a crush of people that outnumbered them forty to one, the soldiers and Marines guarding the JOC showed remarkable restraint. They used warning shots and nonlethal tactics only when necessary. When push came to shove, literally, they grappled with members of the crowd instead of opening fire.

Deadly restraint wasn't always an option. A few hours past midnight on August 16, Marines on the southern end of the perimeter observed two armed men with AK-47s moving through the crowd, using civilians for cover. Based on their movements, the Marines knew they were looking for just the right moment to strike. When the gunmen stepped into the open and raised their weapons, the Marines were ready. In a few short bursts, they dropped the attackers without taking any casualties or causing collateral damage.

IT "LOOKED LIKE THE END OF THE WORLD"

While the outnumbered soldiers and Marines at HKIA tried to hang on, the Pentagon was scrambling to send reinforcements to the airfield. That task was complicated by the White House's complete lack of contingency planning. There weren't enough C-17s or C-130s in theater to transport the necessary number of soldiers to Kabul in a few lifts or even in several staggered lifts. To insert desperately needed quick reaction force units, US Air Force crews flew ten-hour round trips from Qatar to Kabul and then immediately collected more soldiers for the next iteration until they were forced to ground for mandatory crew rest. The minute their rest period ended, they started the process all over again.

The military branches don't always play nicely together in high-pressure situations. The shortage of planes led to a "knife fight" between the Marines and the 82nd Airborne Division to get their respective people into the air and into the action. One of the 82nd units arrived at Al Udeid Air Base near Doha, Qatar, and learned that the flight they

were supposed to board had already left. In the words of their company commander, “When we got there, we found out the [Marines] took our plane.”

Platoons of paratroopers and Marines from various companies arrived piecemeal at HKIA in the dark on the morning of August 16. They were immediately thrown into the fight. They had no firm instructions about what to do when they landed and only a general idea of what they were about to confront.

A battalion from the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division got there first, landing at 10:00 p.m. on the fifteenth. The history of the regiment is replete with tales of its paratroopers surmounting overwhelming odds. When the men of the 504th learned that Nazi soldiers in the Battle of Sicily had started calling them “the devils in the baggy pants”—referring to their unbloused boots, which distinguished them from other infantrymen at the time—they proudly adopted the moniker.

Over the high-pitched whine of the C-17s still-spinning turbofan engines, the 504th crew chief delivered perhaps the most abbreviated “orientation brief” in US military history. “North is that way,” he said, pointing in the general direction of the Joint Operations Center at HKIA. When the cargo ramp dropped, the paratroopers ran off the plane and smack into anarchy. Before they even had a chance to program their radios, they were directed to sprint forward to plug gaps in the perimeter. In particular, they were instructed that the gate on the west side of the airfield was still unmanned and “leaking.” That didn’t mean much to the 504th paratroopers because they had been at HKIA for only minutes and were still trying to orient themselves. Marines quickly sent runners to guide the paratroopers into their defensive positions.

The first two planeloads of Marine reinforcements from the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines were only three hours behind. That night, they would live up to their nickname: “The Professionals.” One of the C-130s

carried 2/1's battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Brad Whited, and other members of the battalion headquarters. The second plane was packed with Marines from Echo Company, 2/1's 4th Platoon, and its company commander, first sergeant, and executive officer. The Marines hadn't received anything approximating a briefing about the situation, either. On the flight in, Whited had taken a seat at the front of the plane, directly behind the cockpit. Under the dim cabin lights, he reached out to the pilot over a headset. He wanted to know what his Marines could expect once they hit the ground. The answer: It wouldn't be a picnic.

Over the metallic hum of the engines, the voice on the other side of the headset informed Whited that the runways were surrounded by civilians who had breached the facility, but no one knew how it had happened or whether the Taliban had overrun the airfield. Regardless, it was clear that something had gone very wrong and that the guys on the ground needed help. Whited ordered his Marines to go to "condition one"—bolts forward and rounds in the chamber.

The first wave from 2/1 landed just after 1:00 a.m. on the sixteenth and taxied past the swelling crowd. Whited and a few staff officers immediately made their way toward the JOC to figure out the cause of the catastrophe. Before leaving, he told his Marines to move the aggressive crowd of young Afghan men in their twenties and early thirties off the runway. "We can't have an evacuation if we don't have an airfield!"

The Marines were prepared to fight their way out of Afghanistan. They had dedicated cargo space for mortar tubes and a significant number of rounds. But nobody had warned them that their mission would include serving as HKIA's riot police. They hit the ground without nonlethal weapons, so they, too, were forced to fight rowdy members of the crowd hand to hand. Cracks of rifle fire punctuated the deafening din of Pashtu yells and screams, and tracer rounds pierced the sky above them. The pungent combination of raw sewage and burning rubber from tires lit

by the Taliban filled their every breath. The scene, one of the Marine platoon commanders later said, “looked like the end of the world.”

THE DENTIST WHO FELL FROM THE SKY

Throughout the morning of the sixteenth, the 82nd paratroopers and the Marines from 2/1 waged a continuous battle with the mob for control of the airfield. Their immediate goal was to keep the runways clear so evacuees could leave and reinforcements could arrive. Above all else, however, they needed to protect the JOC.

By 5:00 a.m., they managed to clear the runways and push the crowd back to the southern end of the airfield. But they hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours or eaten a meal since they'd arrived, and the physical strain of wrestling with a seemingly endless stream of people was beginning to take its toll. They were also running low on water. Runners from the JOC had staged MREs (Meals, Ready-to-Eat) and packages of bottled water for them several hours before, but those had been devoured by the crowd when they had broken through the line hours earlier. To make matters worse, the mob was increasing in size and strength by the hour. The US troops were locked in a war of attrition, and they held the short end of the stick.

The runways at HKIA run east to west, splitting the airfield in half. The Marines and paratroopers now stood in a staggered line in the southern portion, with an increasingly agitated crowd in front of them, and the runways, the JOC, and hundreds of remaining State Department personnel behind them. By 10:00 a.m., the crowd was exponentially larger than the US force facing it. Holding the line in front of the runways quickly became impossible, short of opening fire on unarmed civilians. The troops had no choice but to fall back and keep themselves between the crowd and the JOC. HKIA's runways were flooded with people once again, this time with twice the volume.

A little over an hour later, a C-17 with the call sign “Reach 855” made its final approach toward HKIA. Reach 855 was loaded with supplies

intended for the exhausted units on the ground, including pallets of MREs. The plane touched down at 11:16; however, when it attempted to taxi away, there was nowhere to go. Hundreds of desperate Afghans gave pursuit on the asphalt behind them, and equal numbers sprinted across the grass baked dead by the sun on both sides of the runway.

In less than a minute, Reach 855 was surrounded. The crew radioed the JOC to request help. The command center responded that there weren't enough forces on the ground to escort them to a hangar. Any attempt to secure Reach 855 would require diverting forces from the perimeter around the last remaining square meters of Afghanistan still under American control. Seconds later, the crew received a follow-up message, this time from Admiral Vasely. The message was forthright: Take off ASAP and fly back to Qatar.

At that point, the crew of Reach 855 was more than willing to continue eastward on the runway and take off in the same direction in which it had landed. But that was no longer an option. Hundreds of Afghans had surrounded the C-17 while it was at a standstill on the runway. People in the crowd were latching onto the plane's landing gear and hoisting one another onto its wings. The crew had no good options—continuing forward would require running over civilians, but staying put for more than another few minutes would almost certainly lead to people trying to enter the plane. It asked for assistance a second time.

In response, the commanding officers at HKIA opted for the last tool at their disposal. Two Apache attack helicopters spun up from landing pads next to the JOC. They banked left and headed east—in the direction in which Reach 855 planned to take off—until they were past the plane and the crowd that surrounded it. Once they were several hundred yards past the scene, they made a sharp U-turn and headed back down the runway, staying no more than twenty feet off the ground and using the force of their rotors to try to disperse the crowd on both sides of Reach 855.

The tactic was largely successful, and Reach 855 had a clear stretch of runway to facilitate its escape. It wasn't entirely successful, though. One civilian had already climbed into the wheel well of the plane before the Apaches arrived. At least ten others, most of whom were teenagers or men in their early twenties, ran alongside the C-17 as it gained speed and prepared for liftoff. Several of them clung to Reach 855's landing gear as it took off.

Around noon, Reach 855 began its ascent. The events that happened next were captured on cell phone videos and watched by millions around the world within hours. As the aircraft gained speed, several people fell to the runway and suffered fatal injuries. Two managed to hold on a few minutes longer before plummeting from the sky as the C-17 disappeared in the distance. One of the two was a dentist in his midtwenties named Fada Mohammad.

The night before, Mohammad had excitedly sent his family members Facebook posts saying that the United States would accept any refugee who arrived at Kabul airport. At 8:30 the next morning, he left home without telling his new wife where he was headed. Less than four hours later, he plummeted from the sky and landed on the roof of a house a few miles away.

The other casualty was Zaki Anwari, a seventeen-year-old member of Afghanistan's national youth soccer team. Anwari, who had grown up in a middle-class family, was a standout athlete who dreamed of playing professional sports in the West. On the morning of August 16, he ran to HKIA with several classmates, hoping to find a way to the United States or even Canada. His first encounter with an airplane was the fateful moment he tried to escape on Reach 855.

FLYING BLIND

While everything at HKIA was falling apart, a US Air Force crew with a critical mission was trying to land at the airport. That C-17 was operated by a crew from the New York Air National Guard that had

been activated for a relatively routine rotation supporting military activities in South America back in April. The first few months of the rotation had been unremarkable, but on August 13, it had received an emergency mission: Fly a Chinook MH-47 with a crew from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and nearly two dozen of the Army's best special operators to Kabul.

First, the seven crewmen of Reach 824 from the 105th Airlift Wing had to fly from South America to Qatar to pick up their "cargo." The operators were members of the Army's legendary Delta Force; their mission was straightforward, but not exceptionally complicated: they were to locate stranded US citizens across Afghanistan and extract them to HKIA. They made up one of four special operations teams en route to Afghanistan to rescue Americans who couldn't travel to Kabul on their own.

Reach 824's first attempt to land at HKIA hit a wall. It approached Kabul on the night of August 15. There was no air control. Afghan planes were flying unannounced through the airspace on their way out of the country. Thousands of Afghan civilians were on the runways. Taliban small-arms fire was pervasive. The crew had no choice but to abort the mission and return nearly 1,200 miles to Qatar. It made a second attempt the next evening.

If pedigree-obsessed officials at the Pentagon were asked to choose an Air Force crew to execute this mission, with American lives hanging in the balance, the men of Reach 824 probably wouldn't have made the top of their list. On an average day, they lived ordinary lives no different from those of most Americans. Captain Matthew McChesney, the air crew commander and lead pilot, was thirty years old and spent most weeks flying domestic routes for Delta Air Lines. Reach 824's other pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Townsend, normally worked as a first officer (or "copilot," in layman's terms) on a Boeing 777 for United Airlines. The senior enlisted member of the crew, Technical Sergeant Joseph Caponi, was a stocky Italian American New York Police Department

officer assigned to the 120th Precinct on Staten Island. The other crew members included a sheriff's deputy from Putnam County, New York, and a longtime administrative employee at IBM.

But on the night of August 16, they were the perfect crew for the job. The Delta operators on the plane needed to find a way into Afghanistan. Through a combination of ingenuity and sheer grit, McChesney and his crew made it happen.

On their way, they passed roughly a half-dozen other aircraft that had already turned back due to Taliban small-arms fire or an inability to land. The crew still had no real-time intelligence about conditions on the runways, and there was no one to guide them in because the mob had overrun the air control towers. It resorted to initiating informal radio contact with a C-17 that had landed before the airfield was overrun. Reach 824 asked the crew whether a landing was possible under any circumstances. The answer, essentially, was "It's possible, but it won't be easy." They had to wait for a brief window for the airfield to open.

Reach 824 circled HKIA in a tight ten-mile radius for several hours. In the process, the plane was exposed to the anti-aircraft fire that had already forced several other planes out of the airspace. As midnight approached, it was running out of fuel and had to adjust course back to Qatar to abort the mission for a second night in a row. On their way out, the crew encountered a KC-10 refueling tanker on its radar and coordinated an impromptu air-to-air refueling operation. At that point, they had already received word that HKIA's refueling capabilities were next to nil, which meant that there was no guarantee that they would have enough fuel to return to Qatar after landing and completing their mission. McChesney asked the refueling tanker to accompany his aircraft to Kabul and top it off one more time before approach.

Reach 824 continued to circle for another hour before receiving word that the runways at HKIA had been cleared. The landing was unorthodox, to say the least. HKIA no longer had working runway lights

or a ground crew to guide them in. McChesney flew the C-17 in under cover of darkness, using night vision goggles and communicating with US Air Force special operatives on the ground, who were the de facto air control tower. As Reach 824 made its approach, its left wing was hit with small-arms fire. The final transmission they received before losing radio contact was a warning: "Land at your own risk." The crew was flying blind.

In pitch darkness, McChesney descended onto the first runway he could make out. It was on the commercial side of HKIA, which was temporarily controlled by Taliban fighters amidst the chaos. Fighters in a motley collection of a dozen trucks surrounded the C-17 as soon as it finished taxiing. The crew was able to defuse the situation and cross over to the US side, with the Taliban driving right alongside them all the way. In less than an hour, Reach 824 was back in the air. Ten days later, the crew returned to fly the remains of thirteen fallen US service members out of the country.

The special operators Reach 824 carried went on to successfully evacuate more than eight hundred people. McChesney received the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor, and five members of his crew received Air Medals with Valor.

CALLING THE HIRED HELP

The soldiers and Marines wouldn't be able to clear the runway of fifteen thousand people and reestablish control of HKIA on their own. The CIA recognized the grave state of affairs and swiftly stepped in. The agency operated its own compound, known as Eagle Base, close to the airfield. It was not only a well-concealed secret but also eminently more defensible; it was surrounded by ten-foot-high, blast-resistant walls and had only a single point of entry.

CIA personnel unilaterally formed an emergency agreement with members of the Afghan National Strike Unit (NSU): 1,300 fighters and 210 vehicles would immediately clear the crowds from the runways.

That was in exchange for the military evacuating the fighters and their families.

The NSU had operated in Afghanistan under a variety of official-sounding names for the better half of two decades. They were CIA-trained and -led paramilitary forces that conducted nighttime raids and other offensive operations against Taliban fighters in volatile regions—even across the Pakistani border—without any of the oversight that normally accompanied military operations. That provided the US government with plausible deniability. The NSU fighters were ruthless and tactically proficient, and their reputation for both attributes preceded them. Make no mistake: most NSU fighters were mercenaries of the purest sort. Uncle Sam was simply the highest bidder for their services. Still, every agency official we spoke to praised their abilities on the battlefield and during the evacuation.

Once the agreement was struck in the early afternoon of August 16, the CIA's once again retooled paramilitary force went to work clearing the airstrip. They started with warning shots and followed with butt strokes to the cranium for those who didn't comply quickly enough. The force also used its trucks to steer parts of the crowd away from the JOC and back toward the gates. The NSU's tactics were brutal but effective. More than two decades of experience had taught civilians that Afghan forces didn't operate under the same constraints as US troops.

US military leaders at HKIA had not been party to the CIA deal, so no one in uniform at first knew that accepting the NSU's help came with the condition of evacuating its members and their families. That suddenly required the military to find seats for an additional thirty thousand people. A cultural difference had been lost in translation. To Afghans, "immediate family" means not just spouses and children but also aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and grandchildren.

Senior military officials have since claimed that the lack of notification carried no practical significance. But the deal later complicated efforts to evacuate US citizens and Afghan SIV applicants. The Biden

administration's failure to evacuate all US citizens was baked in once the agreement was made. And although the decision may have been necessary at the time, it was necessary only because the Biden administration had failed to anticipate the obvious strategic consequences of its pullout plan. An after-action report conducted by the U.S. Central Command concluded that "the added responsibility. . . to include a previously unknown 30K NSU personnel" on the evacuation list had overwhelmed the military's airlift abilities.⁶

The CIA's deal with the NSU was one of necessity. If HKIA didn't remain in American hands, there would be no evacuation at all. The truth was that the military had no choice but to execute the CIA's deal once it was made. Failing to do so would have subjected the soldiers and Marines to reprisal attacks from the NSU. General Sullivan told Defense Department investigators that "the risk to not getting the NSU and their families out was that they would turn on us as we approached the end of the evacuation."⁷ In all, the NSU and its family members accounted for more than a fourth of the 120,000 people that the Biden administration bragged about evacuating.

"WHAT ARE WE WALKING INTO?"

Due to the shortage of aircraft and flight crews in Central Asia, several Marine platoons were scrambled from Saudi Arabia, spending twelve hours on "layover" at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar before flying to Kabul. They knew that no rest was in store because the Air Force officers in charge of the flight manifests informed them that their planes would arrive "in the next two hours." Two hours would pass, and the process would repeat itself. The delays—and clear lack of planning—frustrated the Marines no end. On less than twenty-four hours' notice, they had gone from executing training missions in Saudi Arabia to standing on a runway in Qatar, armed to the teeth and ready for combat. Actually getting into Afghanistan as the supposed "quick reaction force," they said, "took forever."

They weren't the only reinforcements forced to hurry up and wait. A company of paratroopers from 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division flew twelve hours from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, only to find itself stranded in Qatar alongside Marines, waiting as events unfolded.

In the early-morning hours of the sixteenth, before they boarded their flight from Saudi Arabia to Qatar, the noncommissioned officers of the three remaining platoons in Echo Company gathered in a command room that was off limits to anyone without a security clearance. Huddled in front of a computer screen, they watched live drone footage of their buddies in 4th Platoon wrestling hand to hand with a crowd of several thousand people only seconds after landing. That was the last information they received about conditions on the ground at HKIA before they landed.

The Marines waiting at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait to catch a flight to Kabul were given no intelligence updates about the situation on the ground. They resorted to using social media on their phones. "We were on all the random Instagram pages that were posting pictures and videos and seeing news outlets posting pictures of people falling off the planes and stuff," one of the Marines in the last wave told us. "We're looking for pictures of our boys and just kinda sitting there waiting to get over there. We were just thinking, what are we walking into?"

After watching the scenes on the airfield, the commanders of the three weapons platoons "tactically acquired" (i.e., borrowed without asking) several whiteboards from nearby buildings so they could brief their Marines about the tactics the platoons would use to maintain security against a swarm closing in on them from all directions.

At roughly 4:00 p.m. on the sixteenth, their transportation finally arrived. It was parked next to one of the C-17s that had taken off from HKIA earlier that day with Afghans clinging to its wings and landing gear. Parts of some of those men and women were still caked on the landing gear. The body of another Afghan civilian was stuck in one of the wheel wells. The Marines had watched videos of the plane taking

off from HKIA on social media only hours earlier. Now they watched the crew wipe blood off its fuselage while they lined up to board the aircraft next door.

The last platoons from Echo Company arrived in the early hours of August 17. No one told them that the airfield had been cleared in the meantime. “We sprinted off the plane thinking they had us surrounded in a three-sixty,” a squad leader in one of the platoons said to us. A few of the Marines got down on their stomachs in the “prone” position. “Then our first sergeant on the tarmac starts screaming at us, ‘Hey dickheads, get over here. You’re fine.’ And then we realized, ‘Oh, okay, we’re all good.’”

The “Night of the Zombies” might have been over, but the horror would continue.

EXCERPT ENDS HERE

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