



Long haul: America's war in Afghanistan ran from October 2001 to August 2021.

Making it right



Afghan aviators and ground staff received identical training to their US counterparts.

Russ Pritchard of the Afghan American Development Group has a tale to tell of betrayal, debt to an ally and making good on a promise. One that may also provide a partial solution to the shortfall of trained and experienced pilots and ground engineers plaguing the industry.

When coalition allies entered Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda, the Taliban and other terrorist organisations, they found an Afghan Air Force (AAF) decimated by the Soviet invasion of 1979, civil war, and subsequent Taliban rule.

The AAF had very few viable or "Full Mission Capable" (FMC) aircraft, but over the course of two decades, the coalition built a new Afghan Air Force and formed the Special Mission Wing.

Airframes included the fixed wing C208, AC-208, PC-12, A-29 and C-130, while the helicopter contingent included Mi-17, Mi-34, MD 530 and UH-60.

To build the AAF's stand-alone

capability, hundreds of pilots and maintainers from Afghanistan came to the United States over the course of more than a decade to train on a variety of military bases.

Many came from the Air Force Academy of Afghanistan and the National Military Academy of Afghanistan – modelled after the US Army's West Point.

Most came to the United States on multiple deployments comprising years away from their families.

Funded by US taxpayers, the Afghan aviation personnel received the same training as their American military counterparts.

They lived on the US bases and travelled around the country during time off from their busy training schedules.

The AAF and Special Mission Wing also broke through cultural glass ceilings, with women taking on a variety of roles including piloting fixed and rotor wing aircraft.

Doing their duty

Lieutenant Colonel Safia Ferozi was the first female Fixed Wing Squadron Commander and participated in the historic first all-female Afghan piloted flight on 1 June 2020.

This saw her and co-pilot Captain Marzia Salahshor fly a C208 transporting weapons and various military and official passengers.

Captain Salahshor says: "I had been flying as co-pilot transporting wounded during the first part of the day. It wasn't anything planned – Covid had a lot of people out sick. It was out of convenience. We never gave any

thought to making history. We were simply doing our duty.”

At their peak, the AAF had a strength of more than 10,000 men and women and the Special Mission Wing over 1,200.

In February 2020, the United States and its coalition allies signed a peace agreement with the Taliban known as the Doha Accord which promised the full withdrawal of all coalition military forces from Afghanistan within 14 months.

The United States also committed to closing five military bases in the space of 135 days.

The Government of Afghanistan, under President Ghani, a 20-year ally fighting against the Taliban, was not invited to participate in the negotiations.

Last flights out

Despite the promises made by the Taliban, attacks against Afghan Security Forces surged after the signing of the agreement, and thousands were killed.

The subsequent drawdown of coalition forces over the next year led to the collapse of the Afghan military, with the Taliban advancing faster than the coalition forces could withdraw.

The Taliban commenced an offensive

on 1 May 2021, coinciding with the final drawdown of coalition forces.

By 14 August, most of the provincial capitals had fallen to the Taliban and the Air Wings on bases around the country had been captured, with the various aircraft relocating to the Kabul Air Wing.

The few remaining coalition forces were conducting a final and flawed exodus from Hamid Karzai International Airport, a civilian/commercial airport not designed for defence.

By nightfall of 14 August, the Taliban had surrounded Kabul, and the country was on the brink of collapse.

The following day, the Taliban entered the capital city of Kabul, taking control of the country.

In a final act of heroism, the surviving elements of the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing, under the direction of their American military advisers, flew out under fire, towards the countries of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

They left in as many aircraft as possible so that the weaponry could not be captured by the Taliban and used against a civilian population or against the withdrawing coalition military at the civilian airport.

This action meant leaving their wives, children, and loved ones in Afghanistan – behind enemy lines. The American military advisers promised rescue.

The personnel of the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing who made it to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were placed in detention camps. Their phones, smart watches, and money stolen, they were unable to contact their families to let them know they were alive. They were kept hidden from the media and denied medical treatment.

Eventually, the Afghan aviation personnel were transferred to another camp in the United Arab Emirates.

Another group of Afghan Air Force student pilots and maintainers (including females) came from Slovakia – and were left stranded when Afghanistan collapsed.

Some of the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing who remained behind were able to get on the final US flights out of Kabul until the last plane left on 30 August 2021, ending America’s longest running war.

From evacuees to refugees

Arriving in the United States, the Afghan aviation professionals were housed in hastily assembled refugee camps on military bases around the country as part of Operation Allies Welcome during the late fall of 2021 through to the spring of 2022.

From there, refugee resettlement agencies relocated the former men and women of the AAF and Special Mission Wing around the country.

Without the choice of where they could live, they were placed on public assistance and in subsidised housing.

There were many problems with food and clothing as many of the AAF and Special Mission Wing personnel were in the same clothes they were wearing the previous August.

One Afghan pilot was placed on a bus from Texas to New York in December 2021 wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt, shorts and sandals. Many were placed in hotels without money and access to food.

After assisting with the US military evacuation of Afghanistan in August 2021, surviving members of the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing were unable to return home.



Another pilot sent to a hotel in an industrial sector in southern Pennsylvania went four days without eating until volunteer assistance arrived.

It was a degrading and chaotic time as these former military aviation professionals popped up around the United States with no warning, no possessions, no money and no clothes.

Harsh transition

During this period of harsh transition, the Taliban pursued the families of the former Afghan aviation professionals.

Unable to live in their homes because personnel records and the Automated Afghan Biometrics Information System (AABIS), now in the hands of the Taliban, revealed where they lived and who was related to whom, families went into hiding as the Taliban sought to exact vengeance on anyone who had supported the United States.

Family members were arrested, tortured and executed – a practice that remains ongoing.

When the officers and enlisted men and women of the AAF and Special Mission Wing sought employment in the United States, they found their US taxpayer-funded training, under the supervision of the US Air Force on US military bases was not recognised by the FAA.

Despite receiving identical training as American pilots and maintainers and having thousands of hours of experience in combat and extreme environmental conditions, the former personnel of the AAF and Special Mission Wing, armed with logbooks and certificates signed by American military officers, found their training was not even eligible for “military competency” recognition.

Per the FAA, “military competency” applies to foreign pilots who were assigned to fly “operationally” with the US military, and not those trained by the US military who then returned to their country to fly under direction of US military advisers.

“Afghanistan is one of the most demanding operational environments on Earth for helicopters,” explains



Helicopter pilots in Afghanistan had to contend with a number of challenges.

Lieutenant Colonel Cory “Epic” Fale, USAF, who was an MD 530/Mi-17 Instructor Pilot in Afghanistan.

“High altitudes, talcum powder-like dust and operations at maximum gross weight all present unique challenges, but when presented together, these environmental factors will challenge the best helicopter pilots in the world. Afghan helicopter pilots were raised in these conditions and performed valiantly.”

Hundreds of former fixed and rotor wing pilots and maintainers – military

career professionals from Afghanistan who flew and maintained aircraft like the UH-60 and A-29 single engine turboprop attack plane are relegated to working in industries like rideshare, food delivery and packaging to support themselves and send money back to Afghanistan to support their families. Most work two or three jobs.

Manpower shortage

The shortage of pilots and maintainers in the United States is reflected in mass flight cancellations, mechanical issues, and increased fares.

Covid exacerbated an already existing shortage whereby airlines sought to alleviate financial constraints with early retirement packages.

With the average age of a commercial pilot being north of 45 years old, there will be a tsunami of pilot retirements in the coming years.

The major airlines quietly dropped the college degree requirement to become a commercial pilot to stimulate interest in aviation careers and hiring.

John Jones, US Navy (ret), Afghan Pilot Training Site Lead for Raytheon Technologies, recalls: “I was part of the

Afghan Air Force pilot training programme from July 2013, both in country and abroad.

“As a former US Navy flight instructor, we trained the Afghans in aviation, military leadership, and officer development.

“I found the Afghan student pilots assigned to me were more eager to learn and more willing to listen than most of my US military students.

“They are a tremendous resource, trained at the expense of US taxpayers, who bring great value to the US aviation industry that is in need of pilots and maintainers.”

‘Zeroes to heroes’

Within the aviation industry, the larger airlines have formed or acquired their own schools to develop pilots.

United Airlines opened United Aviate Academy; Delta Air Lines commenced Propel Academy in August 2023; Alaska Airlines has the Ascend Pilot Academy; American Airlines operates the AA Cadet Academy; Southwest Airlines developed the Destination 225 programme.

Other initiatives, known as Zero to Hero programmes, are designed for students who wish to become commercial pilots but do not hold a private pilot’s licence.

Many programmes advise that one can achieve a commercial pilot’s license and all flight instructor ratings in eight to 10 months.

Yet hundreds of US-trained and combat-tested Afghan pilots with years and thousands of hours of flight experience now work minimum wage jobs in the United States.

“The day-to-day resilience of the Afghan Air Force members was unmatched – they were dedicated professionals,” says Major Matthew “Smokey” Clayton, USAF (ret).

“They quickly learned technical skills, in a second language, in a foreign land, under a different culture. And they excelled.”

In recent times there have been a handful of efforts around the country to



Full spectrum: Afghan Air Force pilots were trained in aviation and military leadership.

get the former Afghan aviation personnel into jobs commensurate with their former training.

A few of the US-trained Afghan pilots and maintainers are working in commercial aviation. They fly for feeder airlines servicing cargo carriers like FedEx and UPS, another works for an aerial forest fire-fighting unit, and one is a Flight Training Procedures Instructor for Delta Air Lines.

The Afghan American Development Group (AADG), a non-profit organisation in the United States, assists the former men and women of the Afghan Air Force and the Special Mission Wing throughout the country with resettlement assistance, job training, and family reunification efforts.

Starting in the autumn of 2021 and formally organising in 2022, the AADG met with Alaska Airlines and Delta Air Lines to identify job pathways for former Afghan aviation professionals.

Inroads have been made with positive results. Alaska Airlines donated 300 iPads for the Afghans to use for pilot and study. FedEx donated the shipping for the iPads and has implemented Afghan pilots into their feeder systems.

Delta Air Lines formed a special unit to

hire Afghans, while Sheppard Air agreed to offer former Afghan aviation personnel discounts on their study programmes and a free endorsement letter to allow testing with the FAA.

Most recently, American Airlines has reached out to learn more.

The former personnel of the AAF and Special Mission Wing living in the United States represent a tremendous resource for commercial aviation.

Their talents, paid for by the US taxpayer to begin with, are being wasted to the detriment of their families and the airline industry. We owe it to them to redirect career paths and bring their families back together.

Separation no more

The AADG’s focus in 2024 is twofold – raise money to assist the former Afghan aviation personnel in the United States with the necessary transitional training and check rides to enter commercial aviation and to facilitate family reunification for these long-term allies and heroes through a media campaign called “Separation no more, reunification in ’24”.

“The men and women under my command acted honourably and heroically to save Afghan and American lives in those final hours,” says Major General Abdul Shafi Noori, former Deputy Commander of the Afghan Air Force now residing in California.

“I have travelled across the country to help support jobs in aviation, but there is nothing I can do to ease the pain and anguish of more than two years of separation.

“Family reunification must begin immediately, and we must get these pilots and maintainers working in jobs they have been trained for and in which they have performed admirably for years under the worst of conditions as allies to America.” ■

If you would like more information about the work of the Afghan American Development Group, visit its website at www.aadg3.org or email CEO Russ Pritchard directly at Russ@aadg3.org.