



On that day, at that time,
we did not know what
would happen to us...

LT. COL. MOMOAND
AFGHAN AIR FORCE A-29 PILOT

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY RUSS PRITCHARD & ALLIÉ MCGUIRE

A-29 SQUADRON ROOM IN KABUL ON AUGUST 15, 2021

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

This is one of the most iconic and historic photographs I have ever seen. The emotion conveyed in the body language is overwhelming - if one understands the context behind it. It's August 15, 2021 in Kabul, Afghanistan. It's 1:20pm in the afternoon, 08:50 Zulu time as shown by the aviator's clock on the wall forever documenting the moment. The country of Afghanistan has collapsed. The Taliban have taken the capital of Kabul and are advancing through residential areas. Hours before, President Ghani fled the country by helicopter with \$167 million in cash and four luxury cars. This is the squadron room of the A-29 Afghan Air Force pilots. They are, to coin an American phrase, the "best of the best" and spent years in the United States training to achieve maximum levels of proficiency and professionalism. At the time this photograph was taken, many Afghan pilots had flown their aircraft to adjacent countries to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Taliban. This is the last of the pilots, in their flight suits prepared to fly missions, but there is no country. The internet is down. The chain of command is broken, and communications have ceased. The airport tower and runways are controlled by Taliban. It is the end, and there is nowhere to go.

With us today is Russ Pritchard and three of the Afghan Air Force A-29 pilots in this photograph who managed to escape and are now in the United States. I wish to welcome Lieutenant Colonel Momand, First Lieutenant Stanakzai, and First Lieutenant Amiri.

ALLIÉ: Lieutenant Colonel Momand, can you give us the background from your perspective as to what was going on at 1:20pm on August 15th, 2021?

LT. COL. MOMAND: When I see this picture, I go back to that day. I still remember those hours, minutes, and seconds we endured with the aircraft mechanics and intelligence officers. It is a very historic photograph because it captures the desperation. We were professional Afghan Air Force pilots who fought terrorism from the air for six years. On that day, at that time, we did not know would happen to us, nor our families, and our friends.

The chaos began about twelve hours earlier with the collapse of other provinces. Three of our A-29 planes in Mazar e Sharif had been lost to gunfire and sabotage. We were all in disbelief as to how quickly things were collapsing around us, and we were trying to consolidate the remaining planes. On the morning of August 15th, we received a verbal order from Air Force Commander to prepare to defend Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. By the time this photograph was taken, the Taliban had entered Kabul. We had lost communication with our mission planning unit and with the Ministry of Defense. All communications were down and gunfire could be heard in the distance.

ALLIÉ: Lieutenant Stanakzai, you are off to the side in this photograph with your head buried in your hands. Can you tell me how you were feeling? What was going through your mind?



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1ST LT. STANAKZAI: It was like a nightmare. It just couldn't be real. In such a short time, the entire country fell to Taliban control. Our last hope was the capital city of Kabul. It was where I was born, where I had gone to school for twelve years, where I lived. I was thinking about my time at the Air Force Academy, training in the Czech Republic for 15 months to earn my wings, then two years training in the United States to become a Afghan Air Force pilot. While in the U.S, I lost one of my sisters and two nephews. Was it all for nothing? At the time this photograph was taken, we couldn't reach anyone. It was just us in the squadron room talking to two of our maintainers not knowing if we would be alive in an hour.

ALLIÉ: I understand the internet was down and communication almost nonexistent. One of the men in this photograph is married to an American citizen in Texas, and he had just tried to call her unsuccessfully. How about you, Lieutenant Amiri? Was it hard to reach your families at this moment? What were you telling the people you could reach?

1ST LT. AMIRI: As Lt. Col. Momand mentioned, at that moment everyone was in shock. It was hard to accept things were going to get worse. We were ready to fly and protect Kabul, and then we realized the Taliban had already taken the city. Everything had fallen apart. We lost all communication, the networks were down, and the chain of command was broken. I was looking to find a way to pass my last words on to my wife and tell her to stay strong and tell my family I love them.

ALLIÉ: Please tell me what was going on outside the walls of the squadron room. I understand the Taliban were close by. Could you get in your planes and fly at all at this time?

LT. COL. MOMAND: We had received a verbal order around noon to defend Kabul, and our airfield was close by, but we were hearing constant gunfire, and social media earlier in the morning showed Taliban throughout the city. Two of our aircraft were supposed to be moved to the maintenance field, but we couldn't accomplish that because the security guards did not receive the order. They said, "The Air Force commander is not answering his phone. The communication has fallen." So, we couldn't even get to our aircraft to fly them. The system we used no longer existed. We were inside our squadron room, but at the time of this photograph, we were not able to reach our aircraft.

ALLIÉ: How did you get out of Afghanistan and how did you get to the United States?

LT. COL. MOMAND: Eventually, later in the day, some of the high-ranking military were able to communicate on the feasibility of defending Kabul. We could not bomb the Taliban or fire at them from the air because of the risk to civilians and hospitals. The Air Force commander and our American Advisors instructed the pilots of all aircraft to fly all Air Force assets out of the country so they would not fall into the hands of the Taliban - which meant leaving our families behind.

ALLIÉ: Is there anything that anyone else would like to add to that?

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: It is important to understand the role of the A-29 pilot and why there were so few of us. You can build airplanes; you can buy airplanes, but you can't train every pilot to be a Afghan Air Force pilot. It requires a certain mentality and specific abilities. You can find guys with great body strength but who throw up in a Afghan Air Force jet cabin or have a fear of heights. If the Taliban captured us and our planes, they would use our family and friends against us, to control us, to make us bomb and kill innocent people. This is why we were forced to leave.

ALLIÉ: It's interesting what you shared. The fact of the matter is that not only is the aircraft a value and a weapon for the Taliban to use, but you as pilots with your skillsets and your training are of huge value to them. For that reason, you had to get out and away. Thank you for sharing that. I understand that two of you have immediate families that are left behind in Afghanistan. How hard has it been for them? Are your children able to go to school? What is their reality right now?

1ST LT. AMIRI: First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our friends and allies who are working hard day and night, standing beside us shoulder to shoulder in these hard times. More than anything else we hope to have our



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1ST LT. AMIRI: (continued) families here. The Taliban regime are enemy of education, economy, religion, and humanity. They're looking to kill every individual who stands against them. Currently schools are closed. My family left the house we used to live in. They change their location every month because the Taliban is searching house by house for people with military backgrounds and specifically the families of A-29 pilots. For most families, their only supporter is now out of the country. For nine months, there has been no income, and families suffer severe financial problems. We are grateful to those who are working day and night to find a path to evacuate our wives and children from Afghanistan. Families need to be reunited. There's no future for anyone living there under Taliban rule.

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: Our families are only safe if they can remain hidden. They are going through very difficult times. We thank our friends and our advisors we have here. For children there's no future in Afghanistan. The Taliban set off bombs in schools killing hundreds. It's called terrorism for a reason. It inflicts terror into the hearts and minds of innocent people.

1ST LT. AMIRI: Families won't allow their children to go to school in a war zone. Taliban suicide bombers go into schools, mosques, on any street corner. There's no work and no education. The Taliban's goal is to destroy the infrastructure of Afghanistan.

ALLIÉ: Thank you for sharing that reality. So many people don't see and don't understand the severity of the situation. They don't see what's really happening there now. I understand that Russ and private donors delivered food and wood and to your families over the winter. Was this critical to their survival?

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: Yes Ma'am. Russ is doing a great, great job. He gets 1000 - 1500 text messages a day, and yet he is always available to us. Beyond that, he helps a lot of people in Afghanistan. There are people with serious medical issues, people with severe economic issues and don't have anything to eat. Pregnant women no longer can see doctors or afford the proper care. Russ is helping all of those people. He coordinated deliveries of food, wood, and clothing this past winter for many families in Afghanistan. They fed thousands each month who were starving, and they continue feeding people even now. Over here, he is taking care of us. Every week he will call or message us two or three times to see if we need anything. He is working hard to provide pilots and mechanics with careers in commercial aviation. Russ does a really a good job. He's always supportive, and he takes care of everyone as best as he can. If Russ hears me, I would like to tell him thank you so much for everything you do for Afghans.

LT. COL. MOMAND: I would like to thank and recognize Russ and his partners for all their support. Last winter was different than any other winter for us - especially for my family because I was out Afghanistan. I have a brother who is also military, and he was out of Afghanistan as well. I have a wife and my kids are very young, five and three years old. Since the Taliban seized control Afghanistan, women can't go outside to buy food and other necessities. So, we thank and appreciate Russ because he and his partners provided my family with food and wood that kept them warm during the cold winter. Somehow, he managed to deliver all these things right to the door where my family is in hiding in Afghanistan. It was very tight security, and I really appreciate that.

Russ is working hard to reunite us with our families. They are the only ones requesting and submitting the proper paperwork. And as Lt. Stanakzai said, Russ is always available. I mean we call Russ twenty-four hours a day. We called him when we were in UAE and now here spread across three time zones. It's like, whenever we face anything, okay, let's call Russ. And he's always saying that - I'm available twenty-four hours a day, please call me. I think it's unique. I am very grateful for him and his family. He's an example that I hope to be in my future. He's a great example that everyone should follow. Thank you, Russ.

ALLIÉ: It's my understanding that the three of you are in the second class of ground school to pursue careers in commercial aviation. How do you feel about that? How do you feel about being able to continue flying for your career again?

LT. COL. MOMAND: I think starting a new life is hard, especially in a foreign country. Our careers as Afghan Air Force pilots developed in Afghanistan. In the U.S. our situation is different. We are lucky that we trained here for many years but living and making a future is something else. I thought that we would be starting from zero, but Russ is



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LT. COL. MOMAND: (continued) helping us with flight school. I will be able to continue with my career and able to support my family when they come here.

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: Every challenge or a hard time you go through strengthens you. We are looking forward to flying again and focusing on our careers. When someone is telling you that he can help with what you love and want, it makes you feel better and stronger. The most important thing I would say is that no one should give up, no one should quit. So, thanks to everyone that's helping us in this project to rebuild our flying careers.

ALLIÉ: In addition to getting you back in the sky, we also must focus on getting families back together. I imagine that is a huge priority. How hard has it been being separated for almost ten months now?

1ST LT. AMIRI: Family is first, and family is everything. Although we were able to follow orders and get out our planes out of Afghanistan, we are incomplete. Wives, children, families remain in hiding in Afghanistan. They suffer because there is no work, no job, nothing. Getting jobs here allow us to send money home to pay for food, medicine, and clothing, and also the required passports. There's a lot of things going on to help us. Russ works with us every day to help reunite us with our families so that we can be complete. That's a goal we all share.

LT. COL. MOMAND: I have a hard time sleeping nights, because of what's going on in Kabul, and in all of Afghanistan. The Taliban is looking for our families. We have intel reports they are especially searching for the families of A-29 pilots because we were the force that did the most damage to the Taliban. I live in fear of my family being captured and tortured. I hope the Department of the State expedites our family reunification process. I cannot live without my family.

ALLIÉ: For all of you, that was your last day in uniform for the Afghan Air Force. If you could sum up that photograph in one sentence, what would it be?

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: For me, it's not one sentence. It is one word – nightmare. We were all wondering what the Taliban would do to us and our families. I had received mental and emotional scars from them more than a decade earlier and knew of their capabilities.

In 2013, I visited my cousins in Herat for two weeks after I graduated school. On the ride home, the bus I was riding in exploded because a bomb had been planted before we boarded. A lot of innocent people were killed. I was knocked unconscious and received injuries to my eyes, face, and upper lip. Every time I look in the mirror, I see those scars, and I am reminded of what terrorists do – they inflict terror.

I am looking at this photograph of us in the squadron room. I can recall the absolute dread I was feeling. My whole Air Force career was gone, and I knew we would be hunted. I knew our families, if found, would be killed.

It's been hard since this photograph. While we survived, many more did not. Most of us are separated from our families who live in hiding and endure the terror of house-to-house searches. Friends and colleagues going missing all the time. They find them days later shot in the head or at the bottom of ponds with rocks tied around their bodies.



AwareNow Podcast

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Exclusive Interview with Lieutenant Colonel Momand
First Lieutenant Stanakzai & First Lieutenant Amiri

<https://awarenow.us/podcast/the-beginning-of-the-end>



TAP/SCAN TO LISTEN

AWARENOW



1ST LT. STANAKZAI: (continued) There are no jobs; people are starving; girls can't go to school, and the boys that do are blown up by bombs. The media doesn't report this because the Taliban forbids media in Afghanistan so while the rest of the world watches the horrors in Ukraine, the fires in Afghanistan rage silently.

ALLIÉ: Thank you for sharing such a personal story. I can't imagine being in that room after the story you just shared about and the experience you had on that bus — going through what you went through, feeling that you were past that, all the work that you had done, the sacrifices you have made along the way to help make your country so much safer. And then this... Thank you for sharing.

LT. COL. MOMAND: On that day and in the moment of that picture, only one word describes my feeling. It was of feeling completely and overwhelmingly hopelessness — a black curtain. I couldn't believe that darkness defeated the light. It was incomprehensible to me how things had fallen apart so fast. I hope one day the Taliban are held accountable for what they have done to the Afghan people and the coalition forces who fought for a better Afghanistan.

1ST LT. STANAKZAI: Our goal was to serve our country and our people for the sake of humanity. That's what we did on the ground and in the air. I will continue doing it to the end of my life. Most humans are beautiful people.

ALLIÉ: Thank you so much. To each of you, thank you for sharing as you have. Thank you for your service and all that you've done for so many. Is there anything else that any of you would like to share at this point? Russ, I believe we have you with us. Is there anything that you would like to add? Anything you would like to share?

RUSS: These guys, the A-29 pilots, they're like family to my wife and me. We talk to them all the time. My wife is already planning a reunion next summer for the A-29 pilots and families. They're just a great group of guys. They've been through a lot. They've sacrificed more than most will ever understand. Our goal now is to get them up in the air — to get them careers in commercial aviation and get their families over here. These guys deserve everything in my opinion, and we're working really hard to make that happen. We have a unique insight as we are raising a fifteen-year-old boy from Afghanistan. All these A-29 pilots are surrogate uncles to this boy. We live a life without labels. There are no "Afghans." There are no "Americans." There are only humans trying to adjust to a new life. ■