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“During and After the Fall of Kabul: Examining the Administration’s Emergency
Evacuation from Afghanistan”

On August 12th, 2021, I received an automated call from an unknown number. My stomach lurched as I replayed the message. The alert arrived for the third time in my short Army

career. I knew that soon I would rapidly deploy to an unknown region in the world. Even if this had been my tenth time going, I still could not shake the dread. The engine on my second-hand Chevy Cruze roared as I raced home to get my bags -- which had already been packed for weeks -- and said goodbye to my girlfriend. She had never been through anything like this and I knew that this was going to be hard on us no matter how long this deployment would be. "Don't worry," I said, "The last time I deployed to Iraq, everything was fine and I was home in three months." I worried that she could tell I was lying. I had no idea what was about to happen, and I knew I could not hide my stress well. I sped back to work, thinking of what the day and night might look like for me.

At this point in my Army career, I worked at Fort Bragg as a Senior Medic in Charlie Company, 2-504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. A Senior Medic is the highest-ranking medical expert in an infantry company, which is typically made up of 120-150 people. In addition to handling my company's medical readiness, I led three junior medics, who were assigned to platoons of about 50 soldiers. My position is usually reserved for a Non-Commissioned Officer, or E-5 (SGT) and above. These NCOs usually have at least four years of experience; however, I was only lower enlisted as an E-4 (SPC). SFC Jesse Kennedy selected me for this position because we previously worked together in Bravo Company as a junior medic and platoon sergeant. 1SG Kennedy pulled me up to be his senior medic. He and I were a team when we rapidly deployed to Iraq in January 2020. Five weeks before we got the call to Afghanistan, I officially took on the role of Senior Medic.

Now, as I arrived at my company operations facility, there was a familiar feeling in the air of uncertainty, excitement, and terror. I went inside to my 1SG's office. We looked at each other and he immediately started laughing. "You ready for round two, Doc?"

I grinned at him, stating proudly, "The 82nd can't deploy if we aren't a team."

I woke up in South Carolina after being bussed down from Fort Bragg on August 14th, 2021. My thoughts exploded. Today we were supposed to fly to Afghanistan, or at least somewhere close. The plan changed every hour, and we never really knew what the truth was. We spent a day and a half in the tents in South Carolina, waiting for our airplanes to arrive. Once it was time to leave, we waited on the airfield, organized by company in large lines across the open, grassy field. I leaned against my rucksack and considered every scenario my junior medics and I would experience. After waiting for about five hours, it was time to load our bags onto pallets. We boarded a C-17 where I found a seat and settled in for the hellish ride across the Atlantic. As I got comfortable, I checked my watch -- I had forgotten that it was my 21st birthday. Soon after, the plane lurched forward. The wheels picked up off the ground and our journey to the other side of the world began.

My anxiety remained high throughout the flight. We stopped in Germany to refuel, and still no one knew where we would land next. Throughout our flight, the destination changed many times from Qatar, to Kuwait, to Afghanistan, and then back to Kuwait. We eventually landed in Qatar and waited to hear if we were going to get back on the plane. After waiting on a

bus with no air conditioning in 113-degree weather, we finally boarded the plane again, the cool air washing over my face.

The flight from Qatar to Kabul was about four hours, and it was on this flight that we learned that Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's president, had fled from the country. As we neared Kabul, the plane grew silent as everybody put their gear on, checked their night vision goggles, or stared off into space. I think I looked calm, but on the inside, my thoughts were moving too fast to understand. As the plane quickly descended towards Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), we had on our best stoic faces and prepared . Even as we descended into the country, we had been given no information on what the situation was as we landed. Even still, everyone was ready. I repeated the same questions to myself: Is the airport still held by American forces? Are there Taliban inside the airport? Are they going to shoot at our plane? Are they going to open fire on us as soon as the ramp drops?

I was terrified.

We stood in a silent, single-file line, and I watched members of my battalion exit the plane. As my turn to walk down the stairs approached, I could hear gunfire in the distance. I determined that it was not aimed at us and was likely far away. The cool night air was surprising, and it swept over my face as I walked off the ramp. Immediately, I began scanning the landscape. I saw 15-foot concrete walls lining the edge of the airstrip. Beyond that was a large cluster of building lights that towered so high into the sky I thought they were skyscrapers. It was beautiful in a way that I had never anticipated.

My gaze remained focused on the lights as we walked toward an opening in the wall of HKIA, which revealed a camp: Camp Alvarado. I walked on, trying to determine where the mountains separated from the city lights. How high did the buildings go into the mountains?

Suddenly, movement caught my eye. Lines of red tracers streaked into the sky from all different directions around the airport. This continued throughout the entire night. As we moved through Camp Alvarado, it appeared that the majority of buildings in this section of the camp were barracks. The formation slowed, and my company gathered to take accountability. Everybody was still quiet and had no idea if we were safe or if there were any enemies within the airport walls. My eyes continued to follow every line of bright red bullets in the sky until they burned out. My brand new Company Commander, Captain (CPT) John Folta, was in the middle of assuming command of Charlie Company (C Co.) when we got the call. We had spoken only a few times before this. I noticed him looking up at the tracers and asked, "Why do you think the Taliban are doing that?"

He responded, "I assume that they are either shooting at incoming planes or just having fun because now they have almost full control over their country's capital." I figured it was probably a combination of both.

The remainder of the night was slow as we settled into an abandoned gym. More 82nd paratroopers began moving into Camp Alvarado. We used this time to search for food, water, and necessities; all we brought into Afghanistan were the rucks we had on our backs, so any extra water we carried was more weight. Although the night was slow, no one slept in anticipation of what was to come the next day. All night we listened to the radios as reports came in about civilians who crowded the airfield. It concerned me, but I knew our sole responsibility was to man the towers that overlooked the North side of the wall and the highway that ran by the airfield.

As the sun came up on August 16th, my anxiety-fueled thoughts raced on the outcome of this deployment. 1SG Kennedy and I did not have much planned for ourselves, since our roles as 1SG and senior medic meant that we would not take part in manning the towers. Soon, we heard calls on the radio from our sister company, Alpha Company (A Co). They managed the civilians who tried to push through the walls throughout the night. They were tired, overwhelmed, and needed food and water. A vehicle was needed to bring supplies over to them, so we searched for one in the North corner of Camp Alvarado. After searching, we found an abandoned fire engine. We started it up and drove down to the airstrip to assist A Co. As soon as we started driving, I felt in my gut that something was wrong. The air felt different. Unbeknownst to 1SG and myself, Afghan civilians had clung to the landing gear of a C-17 and fell from the sky. We saw a large group of people standing on the airstrip and a group of 82nd soldiers. I looked a few feet in front of our fire truck at a smoldering pile of headscarves that were saturated with blood and dust. A large crowd formed around the bodies as Afghan men threw any spare clothing they had on the pile out of respect for those who had just died. This event immediately changed my mindset -- the evacuation would be unlike anything the US had experienced in the last 20 years. It was clear to me just how desperate the civilians were to flee. I understood now that they had to risk everything to escape the Taliban's control. The energy of the crowd dropped drastically after this. A Co., along with many other US forces, and Afghan forces were finally able to regain control over the crowd of Afghans and push them outside of the airport.

Someone from C Co. messaged over the radio that all available soldiers in our company would go help B Co. hold the line in a gap in the walls around HKIA. With this, we left the airfield and found our way to B Co's Area of Operations (AO). I was suddenly excited to meet with B Co., as I had served with them as a junior medic with 1SG Kennedy. We drove over and parked the truck away from what looked to be a 40-foot gap in the wall. I saw my roommate, SPC Carson, and some of my closest friends. They all looked tired, hot, disheveled, and wore defeated, blank expressions. They had manned this part of the wall for a while and were exhausted. We moved past them, walking closer to the wall. Here, we saw a huge crowd of Afghans held back by razor wire, also known as c-wire. I watched as B Co. soldiers stood behind the c-wire boundary and yelled at the civilians to push back. In the sea of hundreds of people was a mix of voices, some speaking different dialects of Arabic, some screaming from children, and others calling out to us with various phrases: "Water!" "Help!" "Americans!" Most people in the crowd looked scared. If you made eye contact with them, they zeroed in on you

and tried to get your attention, shaking their official-looking papers in their hands. We did not yet have enough soldiers to control a crowd of this size.

I stepped away from the wall as my junior medic, SPC Limbu, approached me and said, "A family has been pulled through the crowd. I need your help." Their child was injured and the family did not speak any English. Neither of us had ever treated anyone that did not speak English, and this was an enormous barrier for treating the child. We had not been given any guidance on the customs and courtesies of Afghanistan, which were imperative to know to provide treatment to Afghan men, women, or children. So we gestured and performed various charades to find out that the young girl had fallen off the wall and been trampled by the large crowd. We communicated mostly with her mom while she tried to care for her three other children -- a pair of twin boys and another young girl. We did our best to treat her injured daughter's back and ankle, while also trying to be as respectful as possible; we knew that in Afghan culture it is not appropriate for men to touch women who are not their wives. We did not know what to do with the family, so we sat with them in the shade and gave them food and water. The only sentence the injured girl spoke to us was: "We go to America today?" Not knowing what to say, I answered, "I hope so." As I spoke to her, I felt crushed. Had I just lied to her? I had no idea if she would be able to leave, and no idea how to even help her at that point. It seemed hard to fathom that evacuation operations could occur when we could barely control the crowd at this small hole of many larger holes in the walls.

After our company helped B Co. regain control of the crowd, we gathered again to get accountability and moved back to our AO. In typical deployment fashion, we smoked and joked. Everyone shared stories of what they had seen without really acknowledging the severity of the situation. I figured that we were all thinking about how this day might change us, although we did not know yet.

The next two days in HKIA were much slower. The airfield had finally been secured and the holes in the walls around HKIA were patched with C-wire and anything the soldiers could find to create a blockade. During this time, we slept on cots in the gym, and took showers. I wondered how long these luxuries would last.

On the 19th of August, our company moved to a Southern part of the airstrip to fill in security for a sister battalion that was still waiting for one of its companies to arrive from Kuwait. We linked up with the Marines there who we were taking security over for and saw where we would be living for the foreseeable future: "The Shit Shack." We called it this because a few of the Marines had used it as an outhouse. It was cleaned out, and we assessed our new AO and our mission there. The plan was to rotate the three platoons through one security position where they would spread out their squads to guard a 200-foot section of chain-link fence. This area was West of Abbey Gate and Airport Road. Separate from these manning duties were the headquarters elements of our company. This included me, and we were made up of about 12 to 15 people, depending on the shift. At first, all we did was man the radios to listen for information coming from within the company or above from battalion leadership. When I was not on shift, I went behind the Shit Shack to a tent that we had pitched to provide about 20 square feet of

shade. Here, in the dirt, I would sleep whenever I could. However, sleep was hard to come by when you were 100 feet from where C-17s take off every 30 minutes, 24 hours a day.

Until the 22nd of August, we spent our time rotating through security shifts, listening to the radios, and occasionally walking outside the wire to patch holes. These days were slow again but in far worse conditions. There was no more AC, or showers, just the unforgiving Afghan sun and the constant sound of screams, gunfire, and nonlethal stun grenades from Abbey Gate. We knew there were Marines nearby who worked on shifts like us to control the crowd that strained to push through.

The noise from Abbey Gate never stopped. Every time I heard a gunshot I hoped it was a Marine firing a warning shot and not a Taliban execution. After listening to this noise and the steady screeching of C-17s around the clock, we all felt that we were going insane. It seemed that CPT Folta and 1SG Kennedy wanted to do more. They decided that if we had to listen to the Marines' work at Abbey Gate, we might as well go down to see if we could help. The Radio Telephone Operator, SPC Blanton, and I followed the leadership pair to our main vehicle: a tan Ford Ranger that was previously used by the Afghan Army. CPT Folta sat in the passenger seat, and right at his eyes was a quarter-sized bullet hole in the windshield. I wondered if this had been a stray bullet or was meant for someone who sat there before us. SPC Blanton and I squeezed into the back of the truck with all of our gear. 1SG put the clutch in and drove us toward Abbey Gate. From our security position at the Shit Shack, the only way to get there was through a latched gate in the fence. This area was manned by Turkish soldiers, and every time we went through the gate I felt the tension between us. They usually gave us cold stares, but we waved at them and said thank you every time. A little further down past the Turkish gate, we parked our truck and began our quarter-mile walk down the corridor to Abbey Gate.

A couple of steps into our walk, we heard a man yelling at us, "82nd, 82nd, 82nd!" I looked over and saw an Afghan man walking towards us holding his young daughter and the hand of his very pregnant wife. He told us that he was instructed to wait for the 82nd who was going to take him to a location in the airport where he would get on a plane. We had no idea what this guy was talking about. We did not think that we were the 82nd soldiers he was looking for, and we figured that he had simply recognized our patches. CPT Folta and 1SG Kennedy tried to explain to the man that we could not just take him to the planes. He kept trying to hand his phone to the pair while pointing at the number on the screen, insisting that they call. The man was persistent, and his wife and daughter looked like they were struggling to stand. John told the man that we will check on him when we walk back in a couple of minutes; anything to break away from the family and discuss our possible options. We wanted to help the family, and it was clear that they were in pain and desperate. At the time, we did not know how to help them, so we continued our walk towards Abbey Gate.

No amount of mental preparation or military training could have prepared me for Abbey Gate. The closer we got, the noise that had been plaguing us all day and night grew closer. We walked through a long corridor with huge blast walls on each side. Before I saw any civilians, I could smell the human feces that covered almost every inch of the ground. The

stench was overpowering and haunting. On top of the feces was a thick layer of trash. Plastic wrappers from ready-to-eat military rations, empty plastic water bottles, discarded clothes, and cardboard boxes created a blanket across the ground.

We were almost at the Turkish tower next to Abbey Gate when I saw the first group of civilians who sat to the side to be processed. Next to them was a Navy Corpsman tent with a steady flow of civilians through it at all times. We walked past them, and through the gate. To my left, there was a chain-link fence with a four-foot wide hole cut into the bottom. On the other side was a canal that acted as a perfect barrier from the dense crowd on the other side. Inside the canal there was a slow, disgusting green sewage sludge that made the stink of feces exponentially worse, giving its name the "shit canal." Inside the sewage, there was debris such as pieces of razor wire, rocks, and trash. Through the fence, I saw a similar sight to the first day, but worse. The crowd moved like water, and arms shot out of the mass, official travel documents gripped tightly in their hands. The crowd pushed more forcefully as they neared the wall. I saw young women crushed between large men, and mothers cried and held their sunburnt, dehydrated babies.

I felt a shift in the crowd from the first day. Before, they seemed hopeful; however, after days of standing without water or food, their hope crumbled to desperation. The yelling and asking for help had turned into begging and pleading with every ounce of soul these people had within them. I am glad I had sunglasses on because the palpable pain and fear emanating from the crowd made my eyes water. The Marines who held this line for days were frustrated with the crowd. They wanted to help them, but the chaos made it so the civilians would not listen to anything except violence. They were forced to push, scream, and shoot warning shots into the sky in an attempt to scare them into listening. The overwhelming surge of sadness quickly turned into anger. Anger for whoever was responsible for putting these people in this atrocious situation. Anger for the Taliban's constrictive policies that forced these Afghan people to give up everything to get away from them.

We walked down to the end of the corridor where two shipping containers were positioned so there was only enough room for one person to fit through on each side. On top of these containers at all times were five armed members of the Taliban. I thought to myself, there they are -- the enemy, the bad guys for the last 20 years. The evil I had known all my life. I watched them swing the buttstocks of their AK-47s and rubber whips at anybody who tried to climb up the wall or on the containers. I watched them take money from people in the crowd in exchange for life-saving water. I learned later that they had little kids go down to the shit canal to fill up old water bottles and sell them back to the people. I was horrified to watch the enemy, and just as scared to be within an arm's length of them. It was surreal to think that two weeks earlier we would have been shooting at each other. I stared at them with hatred. Nearby, CPT Folta and 1SG Kennedy talked to some of the Marine leaders as they passed, trying to get a feel for how things were going. SPC Blanton and I lit up a cigarette, and a tired-looking British paratrooper asked us for one. We smoked together and swapped stories of the last week, which became a habit for troops on the ground. The consensus from both the British soldier we spoke to and the Marine leader from CPT Folta and 1SG Kennedy was that everything was shit. They were just

trying to make it to the next hour. We quickly realized that if we did not find a task, we were going to be of no help to anyone. 1SG Kennedy started a line and the three of us followed him back to the truck. I was happy to get away from the smell, but I never got used to it.

It couldn't have been more than an hour that we were at Abbey Gate that day, but the scene was so intense we all had forgotten about the family who stopped us earlier. However, the man and his family did not forget about us. We saw that they were seated near our truck in the shade. The man ran up to us with the same vigor as before. He spoke English well and explained that his wife was eight months pregnant and had been trampled by the crowd the day before. She experienced intense stomach pain and was extremely concerned for her unborn baby. I offered to the group that we should take her to the Norwegian hospital on the other side of the airfield. I think we all felt a little disappointed that we were unable to help more at Abbey Gate, so we decided to help this family. We figured that if they made it this far they had been vetted already, but we searched them anyway to be safe. As we drove to the hospital, SPC Blanton and I sat in the bed of the truck so the family could sit on the inside. During the drive, the man handed his phone to 1SG Kennedy, who drove with a sticky clutch. There were also two active airstrips to cross to get to the hospital. I could not hear the conversation between them, but after we got to the hospital we took a picture with the family and sent them in to check on her baby. On the drive back, 1SG Kennedy explained that the phone call was from Congressman Mike Waltz. The Afghan man we had met was Congressman Waltz's interpreter when he served in Afghanistan. He explained that the Congressman had thanked us for getting his guy out. I was shocked that 1SG Kennedy had just directly talked to a congressman while on the ground in Kabul. This was unknown to all of us, but that night, 1SG Kennedy and CPT Folta's phone number was spread through multiple group chats. Other operations like Operation Pineapple Express (OPE) were being initiated, full of people trying to get their Afghan friends out.

As the sun came up on August 23rd, the texts started rolling in. I never really knew what the texts said or exactly who they were coming from. All 1SG Kennedy would say was, "C'mon Doc, we got more people to save," and I would get in the truck.

From the morning of the 23rd to the evening of the 25th, we shuttled groups from Abbey Gate. We eventually developed a system as we went on more trips. We started using two trucks and bringing more C Co. HQ paratroopers that wanted to help. We were getting better at quickly identifying pineapple screens, or spoken passwords previously established by the shepherds. When we identified a person with a pineapple screen we would ask for their name and we would relay their names to CPT Folta. He would check the name and number of the party, and if it all checked out, we pulled them up and through the hole in the fence. We confirmed numbers and made sure the party had no strangers who snuck in with them. Then, we searched them and their bags and shuttled them to the pax terminal to get vetted again and manifested on a flight. This system did not work every time. There were many layers of communication that often failed. With all the trips I made to Abbey Gate, the smell and horrific scenes in front of me were never easy to stomach. The crowd's attitude got increasingly more desperate and erratic as we neared the evacuation deadline of August 31st.

On the night of August 25th, the crowds were more hectic than I had ever seen. I watched British soldiers and marines stand on the edge of the shit canal and shoot warning shots into the air, push people off the wall, scream at the crowd, and, in extreme cases, were forced to point their weapons to keep people back. Although I watched the marines do this from the first day I arrived at Abbey Gate, today seemed to be the worst of it all. It was clear to me by their demeanor that being forced to control the crowd in this manner was weighing on their conscious. We worked at Abbey Gate for a while and realized that the group of Afghans we were trying to locate was not there. At one point, everyone around me suddenly ducked behind the low wall at the edge of the shit canal. Following suit, I immediately ducked too. I asked the marine next to me what was going on. He told me that they had been receiving more improvised explosive device (IED) warnings. In a few minutes, we were given the "all clear" for now, and CPT Folta and 1SG gathered up the C Co soldiers and we moved back to the shit shack. CPT Folta decided that the increased threats of an IED attack were too risky for us to be there, especially since this was not our company's number one priority in HKIA.

The morning of August 26th, I woke up eager to continue working for OPE. Early in the morning, we completed a few runs outside the wire. Soon after, we got word that the gate would close at 5 PM that night. 1SG Kennedy and CPT Folta went to a leaders meeting, so we had to wait until they returned to us. They were the ones who had the information on who we would pick up. When they returned from their meeting, they were told that the gates would close at 7 PM instead, so we knew we had more time to continue to pull out Afghans through Abbey Gate. 1SG Kennedy asked if I would smoke a cigarette with him before we headed over, and I said yes. We finished our cigarettes and headed down to Abbey Gate, knowing that this might be our last run for OPE.

I stepped out of one of the two trucks we brought with us down to Abbey Gate. I took about ten steps before I felt a heavy punch in my chest. Startled, I looked up and saw a large plume of black smoke and debris shooting into the sky. My ears were ringing, but I do not remember hearing the blast. I stared at the smoke for what felt like an entire minute. In reality, within a few seconds, I was jolted back into reality by 1SG Kennedy screaming "DOC!" As soon as I made eye contact with him, he waved his huge arm in the air to follow him, and I sprinted after him toward the blast. It was not long before we ran up on the first injured marine. I quickly identified that he had shrapnel wounds to his face and shoulder. I remember putting my knee behind this marine's back so he could sit up and continue to talk to me. This is how I kept his airway open so he would not choke on his blood. As I propped him up, another marine worked across from me to put a tourniquet (TQ) on his arm. I helped to get the TQ as high and tight as possible on his arm. I began to cut the rest of this marine's clothes so I could identify any major arterial bleeding in areas where we wouldn't be able to place a TQ (his neck, groin, and armpits). At this point, I looked up and saw what remained from the blast. To my right was the wall, which was about 30 feet away. To my left, where most of the IED blast had occurred, were bodies piled in the canal and on the ground around me. Most were marines who were being treated by two or more people and some were Afghan civilians.

Suddenly a large group of bloody, dusty civilians ran through the gate toward us. They carried their children who were covered in shrapnel wounds. The marines were scared of a secondary IED blast, which was common in the Global War on Terror, so pointed their weapons at the crowd and screamed for them to stop running. The civilians stopped where they were, and we realized that they were not a threat. Throughout this, I could hear small arms fire coming from where the Taliban had been standing 100 meters down from where we were. I noted this and continued to work on the marine in front of me. He had no more major bleeding. At this point, a van had backed down the corridor and was asking for casualties. The marine who had helped me place the TQ also helped me pick up the injured marine and carry him to the van. We placed him in the back of the van. I continued my way down closer to where the blast had been. I identified injured marines and assisted where I could. At this point, a truck from C Co arrived to begin shuttling injured marines to the Norwegian hospital. I loaded two marines into the bed of the C Co. truck and laid a litter across the top of the bed with another marine on it. SPC Ortiz, a supply clerk in our company, was the driver, but he did not know where the Norwegian hospital was. So I jumped in the passenger seat and instructed another non-medical NCO, SGT Morrow, to get in the bed of the truck and hold the top litter in place. Then, I said, "Ortiz, I need you to drive fast, but carefully, because there are a lot of people in the way."

We hauled ass across the airfield and took off toward the hospital. As we neared the hospital, I was not sure if any other trucks had come yet or if they were prepared to take patients. I hopped out of the truck while it was still moving and began sprinting in front of the truck, yelling for people to get out of the way. When we approached the hospital, someone was standing outside, who I assumed was waiting for us to arrive. I screamed, "I've got three trauma casualties!" He turned around, went inside, and came back with a crew of doctors who were ready to treat the three marines we brought with us. As soon as we stopped, some doctors immediately took the top litter from the back of the truck into the hospital. Other doctors hopped in the back and saw that one marine had a TQ on each leg, which had loosened on our drive to the hospital. As they tightened the TQ, the marine screamed. I held his hand and reassured him, "It's okay, you're at the hospital now." He squeezed my hand and repeated, "I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die." I tried to reassure him while he wailed until they picked him up and took him inside. I looked at SPC Ortiz and SGT Morrow and told them, "We gotta go back." They nodded and hopped back in the truck. We drove quickly back to the IED blast site.

At this point, trucks were moving casualties out at a consistent rate so we could no longer drive through the corridors to the site of the blast. I told SPC Ortiz to park the truck near the Shit Shack so SGT Morrow and I could run back to where our company was. On the way down, I saw a litter being carried by two marines. It was covered with a hypothermia blanket, and the marine's face was covered. They took this litter into a bunker, away from everyone. This person was someone who was killed. I pulled my eyes away and continued to run down to where I found one of my junior medics, SPC Limbu. He treated an Afghan civilian. I checked on Limbu to make sure he was okay and did not need help and then moved the civilian onto the litter. I continued down and found my other junior medic, SPC Bowser, documenting medical notes for a patient he had assisted in treating earlier. The patient had severe shrapnel wounds

to the right side of his body. I watched this marine, who was leaning against a bunker, obviously still in shock. He was one of the last injured marines in the area, and still chanted something to the effect of "Get everyone else out before me." I helped pick him up and bring him to a truck nearby.

I walked down to where I had originally been with 1SG Kennedy. He was counting the soldiers in our company. All the casualties had been taken to the hospital, and the marines secured the area tighter than they had before. We gathered our soldiers up and got out of the way of the marines. We continued back to the Shit Shack and resumed our original mission of security on the chain link fence. Tensions were still high as we anticipated a possible second attack. We tried to decompress as much as we could by cracking jokes and telling stories about what we had just experienced. We must have smoked a pack of cigarettes each that night. There was never a secondary attack, and in the morning we moved out of the Shit Shack and returned to Camp Alvarado.

Over the next couple of days, I wondered how much August 26th would affect me and my life once I returned home. I think everyone was wondering the same thing, but no one addressed it. We were not home yet, and we still had to get out of this country. Our spirits were much higher since we could shower, eat better food than M&Ms and pop tarts, and watch movies. As the 31st came closer, we prepared a plan for our exit from HKIA. We rehearsed our movements from our security positions to the airfield where we would board the C-17s. 1SG Kennedy's and my job was simple: wait at the assembly area on the airfield and count everyone as they arrived and then as they boarded the plane. On the night of the 30th, all 82nd platoons were prepared and ready to one-by-one retrograde back to where 1SG Kennedy and I waited. We sat in a destroyed UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter as the platoons moved slowly toward us. As we waited, we smoked the last of our Afghani cigarettes, drank coke, and talked about our time here. I wondered if the last 20 years of war had been worth anything. It seemed to me that we had lost. I was born a year before 9/11, and here I was at 21, watching the enemy take over the capitol as the last U.S. troops left Afghanistan.

All the companies arrived and accountability was verified multiple times. Once we were ready to load the planes, we walked up the ramps and packed in as tight as possible. We threw our rucks down on the ground and sat shoulder-to-shoulder in the C-17. My knees were pressed into the back of the guy in front of me, and I sat anxiously as the remainder of the plane was filled. We were all dirty, uncomfortable, exhausted, and had zero personal space. The thought of getting shot out of the sky was also on everyone's mind. What would stop the Taliban from firing at us as we left? We wondered if we would be left behind in that event. The ramp closed on the C-17, the plane moved to the runway, and we began takeoff. C-17s are loud, but even if they were not, the plane would have been silent. We all kept our heads down. As soon as we lifted off the ground, the C-17 tilted to an angle that I did not think was possible and had never experienced on any commercial flight. The once-organized rows collapsed into a pile of gear, men, and weapons as we all tumbled into each other. The plane continued at this steep angle for about 20 minutes until we reached cruising altitude. As we regained our seating, we all sighed. We had made it out of Afghanistan.

After landing in Kuwait, we knew we would wait indefinitely until we could be flown to Europe and then to the states. During the day, temperatures reached up to 115 degrees, so all we had left to do was play cards, smoke cigarettes, and sleep in the open bays of about 50 bunks. During this time, I found it hard to think about anything but what had just happened to me. I still could not comprehend how suddenly the GWOT had ended. How could we be put into this situation? When we arrived, there was no enemy situation briefed to us. I also think that we were lucky to have found extra food and water at HKIA. I do not know if there was any official plan on how to get more resources out to us. At any point, the Taliban could have chosen to neglect their agreement in the treaty with the US and overrun us. We were severely outnumbered by the Taliban at all times. We were vulnerable.

I did not forget to think about the good things we accomplished, thanks to OPE. Seeing people's faces once they realized they were leaving Afghanistan is something that I will never forget. So many times, as we parted ways, the civilians would look at us, and place their hands over their hearts out of respect and sincerity. Although I had no cultural training before arriving, I did it in return, feeling that it was the right response. It was the government's decision that had brought me to Afghanistan, but it was OPE that created the opportunity to save people and make the deployment worthwhile. A lot of veterans that I have met who deployed to HKIA share that a lot of what they witnessed caused moral injury. There are things we wish we could have done that we will always carry with us, but it was OPE that enabled us to save others.

I hope everybody who was in HKIA can find something positive to hold on to like I have. We have to work harder to treat this huge influx of moral injuries that our Army has not seen in the last 20 years of war. If we do not, the suicide rate will never go down. The war will never end for the people on the ground like myself, and I cannot stand to lose any more brothers or sisters to this war.