

David Scott Mann
Founder, Task Force Pineapple
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Afghanistan Withdrawal Hearing

Oral Testimony

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks, and Committee Members, I am here to relive August 2021 with all of you. Not as a Democrat or a Republican but as an American Veteran, representing 800,000 Afghan Combat Veterans, and their families, but with my own Point of View. I am a Green Beret and retired Lt. Col. with nearly 23 years in service and 3 combat tours in Afghanistan.

I'd like to start with a question.

What does an American Promise mean today?

There is a promise in the military that is both explicit and implicit.

"I have your back."

We were trained that way. It's in our blood.

But, in August 2021, the leaders who held us to that standard went silent while our Afghan Allies were left behind. The U. S. Government may not have had the backs of our Afghan Allies.

But our Veterans did.

For as long as we've been a nation, our veterans have been a moral compass for doing the right thing, especially in hard times.

You won't find many veterans who relish being involved in this Afghan Evacuation. We paid our dues and moved on with our lives.

Jumping back into the quagmire of Afghanistan was not part of my military retirement plan.

But, like thousands of other veterans across the country watching Kabul collapse on August 15, 2021, I received a phone call from a friend that absolutely crushed me.

“I am not afraid to die,” he told me. “I just don’t want to die alone.”

Those were the words that dragged me back into Afghanistan.
(Insert Picture of Nezam and Scott)

His name was Sergeant First Class Nezamudin Nezami, but I knew him just as Nezam. His father, a Mujahideen fighter, was killed by the Soviets when Nezam was only four months old. He had no family, money, or hope—yet he became an Afghan Commando, elite warriors trained by Green Berets to do 95% of the fighting in the war.

Green Berets, including me, who worked with Nezam, loved him like a brother. He volunteered for every mission, every day. He was family.

Despite numerous inquiries to State Dept, Congress, and Army SOF Command HQ, about his SIV status, Kabul was falling and Nezam was in terrible trouble - and no one was coming to help him.

This was a guy who was shot through the face in 2010 while protecting U.S. Green Berets from a Taliban ambush. A friend who despite being on the run from the Taliban, called me in my retirement every couple of months, just to check on my kids...And now we were just leaving him on the side of the road to be slaughtered.

Over the next few weeks, I assembled a small team of volunteers, mostly veterans from across the country that we called Task Force Pineapple to guide Nezam and hundreds more to safety.

No resources. No battlefield access. No time. But we had something that most didn’t. Relationships and trust. We used cell phones, knowledge of the terrain, and an encrypted chat room to guide at-risk Commandos and

their families at night navigating the suffocating crowd, through an open sewage canal, and into position to pass bona fides and tactically link up with known NATO service members operating near a four-foot hole in the airfield perimeter fence.

Pineapple wasn't the only group. There were hundreds of ad hoc volunteer groups doing similar work. From breakfast tables to basements across the world, Jane, a Gold Star wife who lost her husband in Afghanistan; Will, a double amputee fighting to save the interpreter who saved his life; and dozens more collaborating with warriors like Aidan who were staring across razor wire at an endless sea of desperate faces.

We helped hundreds of allies, but thousands were left behind, and at great cost to this vulnerable veteran population, who had already given so much.

My buddy Steve, racked with PTS and a Traumatic Brain Injury from an IED, pounded his bed, screaming into his pillow because his children were in the next room, as his former interpreter was detained at a Taliban checkpoint and was pleading over the phone: "Steve, they are beating my wife. My children are watching this for God's sake. Should I fight them? Why is this happening?!" (Pause)

Jay, A former Navy SEAL received a text on Signal from his Afghan partner: "My daughter has been trampled Sir,. I know we are going to miss our chance to escape, but she is unconscious and barely breathing. It's okay, my friend. Thank you for trying."

This whole thing has been a gutting experience. I never imagined I would witness this kind of gross abandonment, followed by career-preserving silence of senior leaders, both military and civilian.

I believe we are on the front end of a national security crisis as 27 violent extremist groups are now operating on former NATO Bases with Taliban top-cover. And we are about to experience a veteran mental health tsunami, as 73% of our Afghan War Veterans say they feel betrayed by how the Afghanistan war ended.

Calls to the VA hotline have spiked 81% 1 year after the Afghanistan Withdrawal. And the calls keep coming. (Insert Pic of Brad and his family snow skiing). My friend Brad was found dead a few months ago in a Mississippi hotel room. His wife Dana confirmed the Afghan abandonment re-activated all the demons he'd managed to put behind him and he just couldn't find his way out of the darkness of that moral injury.

America is building a nasty reputation for multi-generational, systemic abandonment of our allies that we leave as smoldering human wreckage from the Montagnards of Vietnam to the Kurds of Syria.

Our veterans know something else that this committee might do well to consider: We might be done with Afghanistan, but it's not done with us. The enemy has a vote. If we don't set politics aside, and pursue accountability and lessons learned to address this grievous moral injury on our military community; and right the wrongs inflicted on the most at-risk Afghan Allies, this colossal foreign policy failure will follow us home and ultimately draw us right back into the graveyard of empires where it all started.

Thanks and I look forward to your questions.