

House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing 3/8/2023
Tyler Justin Vargas-Andrews

Good morning Chairman, Ranking Member Meeks, and Members of Congress. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you all about my Marine Corps Scout Sniper Team's experience during the evacuation in Kabul, Afghanistan. This is my perspective. This is my account. Not the DOD's.

I'm Sgt. Tyler Justin Vargas-Andrews. I am 25 years old and from Northern California. Professionally Instructed Gunman and Radio Operator for my team.

My Sniper team was Reaper 2 ([slide 1](#)), Victor 2/1 Weapons Company, attached to Echo Co. 2nd Battalion 1st Marines from Camp Pendleton, California. In June 2021, after having just left Kuwait, we were deployed to Saudi Arabia as a show of force. We practiced a few small scale Noncombatant Evacuation Operations in the event we were needed in Afghanistan. August came and two weeks later we left for Kabul.

Reaper 2 and Echo Company had a close relationship with the Colonel of the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force. He kept us informed of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and we were ready to go... so we thought.

An infantry platoon of roughly 43 Marines and my assistant team leader left for Kabul on August 15th. They eventually faced the Afghan civilian crowd that overran the Hamid Karzai International Airport.

The rest of us arrived on August 16.

All the marines linked up and staged inside a gym in HKIA, not far from the airfield. We connected with our command and received our first mission later that night.

From August 17th to 18th, we surveilled and reported on Taliban activity from the top platform of a satellite/radar tower near the civilian airport terminals in HKIA. We reconnected with another sniper team and moved back towards our staging area that night. (slide 2).

Our team traveled to Abbey Gate forward in the afternoon of the 19th and setup a position in the tower as Marines, in riot gear, were sent through the crowd to cordon off a couple hundred people to try to begin some form of processing people. Hundreds of people came in waves surging through to the gate multiple times and physically fighting us.(slide 3)

Living out of our tower, we conducted 24/7 operations at the gate. (slide 4). The next seven days were surreal. Nothing prepared us for the ground experience we were about to encounter. It was chaos, but we worked together to figure out our next best steps.

Tens of thousands of people descended upon Abbey Gate. We were looking for anyone with a blue passport first and foremost. People were suffering from extreme malnutrition, dehydration, heat casualties, and infants were dying. Afghans brutalized and tortured by the Taliban flocked to us pleading for help.

Some afghans turned away from HKIA tried to kill themselves on the razor wire we used as a deterrent. They thought this was merciful compared to the Taliban torture they faced. Countless Afghans were murdered by the Taliban 155 yards in front of our position day and night. (slide 5)

With only shipping containers between us, the Taliban would routinely murder people under our observation at their checkpoint. We communicated the atrocities to our chain of command and our intel assets but nothing came of it.

The troops on the ground had to tirelessly work to control the crowd every minute, every day and night.

The Department of State staff in HKIA would completely shut down processing Afghans every evening and into the morning leaving ground forces with a nightmare. They did not work in reasonable rotations and very much presented an unwillingness to work other situations too.

No matter our health or condition the Marines stood watch and engaged the disorderly and dangerous crowds. State was not prepared to be in HKIA.

In fact, State would not want to deal with the Afghans unable to be processed. Weakening the security of the perimeter, State would take us away from our mission to walk Afghans out to meet the fate of the Taliban, condemning them to death.

The Taliban grew in numbers and strengthened their position around HKIA with gun trucks while having occasional visits by Taliban leadership.

On August 22nd, an improvised explosive device, IED, probe took place down the canal running along the perimeter of HKIA. This was ISIS or the Taliban performing an IED test run. We reported this to our chain of command.

Days later we received word to be on the lookout for two vehicle borne IEDs. Described as a gold or white Corolla and a green Mazda convertible.

Around 2am on August 26th, intel guys confirmed the suicide bomber in the vicinity and nearing Abbey gate. Described as clean-shaven, brown dress wear, black vest, and traveling with a companion. I asked the intel guys why he wasn't apprehended sooner since we had a full description. I was told the asset could not be compromised.

Throughout the entirety of the day on August 26th, 2021 we disseminated the suicide bomber information to ground forces at Abbey gate. (slide 6)

He was spotted, somewhere from noon to 1pm, by myself, then-Sergeant Charles Schilling (Chas), and another. The anomaly in the crowd, who was clean-shaven, and fit the description exactly traveling with someone. This individual was consistently and nervously looking up at our position through the crowd. The older of the two wore a black silky hijab that was covering his face most of the time.

They both had obvious mannerisms that go along with who we believed him to be. They handed out small cards to the crowd periodically. The older man sat calmly and seemingly coached the bomber.

Over the communication network, we passed that there was a potential threat, and IED attack imminent. This was as serious as it can get.

I requested engagement authority while my team leader was ready on the M110 Semi-Automatic Sniper System. The response, "leadership did not have the engagement authority for us. Do not engage."

I requested for the battalion commander LT. Col. Brad Whited to come to the tower to see what we did. While we waited for him, Psychological Operations Individuals came to our tower immediately and confirmed the suspect met the suicide bomber description.

He eventually arrived and we showed him our evidence, the photos we had of the two men. We reassured him of the ease of fire on the suicide bomber. Pointedly, we asked him for engagement authority and permission. We asked if we could shoot. Our battalion commander said, "I don't know."

Myself and my team leader asked very harshly, "well, who does?" Because this is your responsibility, Sir." He again replied, "he did not know

but would find out.” We received no update and never got our answer. Eventually the individual disappeared. To this day, we believe he was the suicide bomber.

We made everyone on the ground aware. Operations had briefly halted but then started again. Plain and simple we were ignored. Our expertise was disregarded. No one was accountable for our safety.

About 1730 SSgt. Darin Hoover, (friend and mentor) came to get me from the tower to go help find an Afghan interpreter in the crowd in the canal. We found the interpreter and his brother, both with American passports. They told us of five family members still in the canal.

I stayed there waiting for the family members standing against the 2 foot canal wall. 10 minutes past. Then a flash and massive wave of pressure. I'm thrown 12 feet on the ground, but instantly knew what had happened.

I open my eyes to Marines dead or unconscious around me. A crowd of hundreds immediately vanished in front of me and my body was catastrophically wounded with 100-150 ball bearings now in it. Almost immediately we started taking fire from the neighborhood and I saw how injured I was with my right arm completely shredded and unusable.

I saw my whole lower abdomen soaked in blood. I crawled backwards 7 feet because I thought I was still in harm's way.

My body was overwhelmed from the trauma of the blast. My abdomen had been ripped open. Every inch of my exposed body except for my face took ball bearings and shrapnel.

I tried to get up, but could not. Laying there for a few minutes, I started to lose consciousness when I heard Chas, my team leader, screaming my name as he ran to me.

His voice, calling to me, kept me awake.

When he got to me, he dragged me to safety and immediately started triaging me. Tying tourniquets on my limbs, and doing anything he could to stop the bleeding and start plugging wounds with the help of other Marines.(slide 7)

I was awake through most of it. Screaming, moaning, and cursing.

Please ask me about getting shot at in the tower at Abbey gate and how no one wanted my report post blast.. Even NCIS and the FBI failed to interview me.

Ask me to elaborate on my ordeal post blast.

Ask me about this one little girl and her family I reunited.

Our military members and veterans deserve our best because that is what we give to America.

The withdrawal was a catastrophe in my opinion and there was an inexcusable lack of accountability and negligence .The eleven Marines, one Sailor, and one Soldier that were murdered that day have not been answered for.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak.

Slide 1- team photo

Slide 2-satellite tower video

Slide 3-Riot gear video

Slide 4– Cooper on ground photo

Slide 5-Taliban on containers photo

Slide 6-video from tower

Slide 7-tower window bullet impact