

As September 11<sup>th</sup> approaches, I find myself once again in Afghanistan, this time for a year. This mission is different from the last. Instead of supporting missions to “seek out and destroy the enemy”, I am here to train members of the Afghan Air Force on how to do my job, Aircrew Flight Equipment. I am also trying to teach them how to manage their people and resources as well as how to solve problems on their own. I assure you, it is not an easy task with their lack of education and cultural differences.

Thinking back of where I was and what I was doing on 9/11, I am reminded of the pain and anger I felt at such a senseless act. On 9/11, I saw every one of “them” as the enemy. My anger was boiling over and I wanted all of them eradicated from this earth. I’m sure many others felt the same way as they watched the horrors unfold on the news, replayed repeatedly. What came to mind later as I calmed down were the millions of innocent men, women and children who had nothing to do with these acts of

terrorism. I slowly began to realize that 9/11 was not the work of *all* the people who are Muslims or from the Middle East, but the work of small extremist groups. I reserved my anger for the ones responsible, the factions and groups of extremist Muslims who hate Americans and wish to see us die. I consciously decided it was not right to judge them all on the actions of a few.

However, on 27 April this year, nine of my friends and coworkers were killed by one of the Afghans we were training. It was by far the single, most horrifying experience of my life. My reaction of rage and disbelief was very similar to my feelings on 9/11. I felt an overwhelming anger that sickened me. Why did my friends have to die so senselessly? I felt myself looking at every Afghan I saw with pure hatred.

After the shootings, I struggled to regain my enthusiasm for what I was doing here. How could I help these people, not knowing if their secret agenda was to kill me? On my first day back to work it

was clear that “my” Afghans had no such intentions towards me. The sadness and pain in their eyes told me what I needed to know. They feared I would hate them for their fellow comrade’s actions and decide to no longer help them. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t hold it against them. These men didn’t kill my friends. They were trying their best to do what any of us would want, to make a better life for them, their family, and their country.

Weeks later during a conversation with my Afghan interpreter, I asked him if he thought his country would ever be able to get rid of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and the war lords who ravage the country. Were we here for nothing wasting our time and money? He asked me if the U.S. has ever been able to get rid of all its “bad guys”; those who rob, rape, and murder? “No”, I said, “of course not, but we will always keep trying to make it better”. “That’s all we are trying to do as well”, he responded. His simple statement stuck with me. They should have the

chance to try and make a better world for themselves, for the good men who are weak to become strong and capable of fighting the evil men.

I see the innocent children smiling and waving excitedly giving us the “thumbs up” as we convoy down the dirty streets of Kabul. We are hope to them and their future. I visit injured children in the hospital and absorb some of their positive radiant energy they each have despite their injuries and constant struggles. These kids deserve to have a better life. The men I am training are trying to make this a better place for their family, the same thing we strive for every day and I am proud to be a part of it.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, on an Afghan air force base, we will be reading the names of the 3000+ victims who died on that day and raising our flag in their honor. Who would have ever thought we would get to this point? As we pay tribute and honor to those who lost their lives on that day, let us not forget how blessed we are to be citizens of the United States.

It is by the grace of God that we did not find ourselves born into a country such as Afghanistan where life is harder and more uncertain than we could ever imagine

In February next year will be on my way home to my family. I will leave the country behind and wish them well on the endeavors to become better, stronger country. Nothing can change what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, or bring back the loved ones, family and friends that were lost then or during the war that followed. All we can do is continue to honor their memory, to never forget and to keep fighting for something more; a better world so this never happens again. We will never be able to wipe out all of the “bad guys” in the world...but that doesn't mean we should ever stop trying.

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