

Insider Attack, Strategic Impact

Kabul, 27 April 2011

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Despite a vastly reduced US military presence in Afghanistan since the withdrawal of combat forces in 2014, by the end of 2018 insider attacks (also known as green-on-blue) continue to take the lives of unsuspecting American service members, usually in advisory settings with Afghan security forces members. While each incident brings fresh agony for one or more families, military units, and communities back home, as well as temporarily affecting the advisory situation while an investigation is conducted and perhaps new force protection measures are enacted, the phenomenon of such attacks usually is dealt with as a tactical matter rather than something with consequences at a higher level of warfare. In some cases, however, insider attacks may have effects at the operational or strategic level.

On 27 April 2011, an insider attack took place at the Afghan Air Force (AAF) base on the Kabul International Airport complex when an AAF officer shot eight US Air Force members and one American contractor, and all nine victims were air advisors. The details of the attack have never been explained adequately, perhaps in part because the initial US Army-led investigation in 2011 became the victim of inappropriate command pressure at the US three-star level. As documented in *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005–2015*, the commanding general of the US-led Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan pressured the *Army Regulation 15-6* investigating officer regarding certain lines of inquiry that might have led to the conclusion that institutional corruption was responsible for the attack. Moreover, the act of treachery that day constituted the worst insider attack on US forces, in terms of American loss of life, since 2001 and most likely well before that.¹

But aside from those disturbing aspects, the attack itself produced operational-strategic outcomes with respect to the AAF's command and control (C2) of its aircraft. In 2001, following the capture of Kabul by Afghan Northern Alliance and US coalition forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, the US-coalition

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partners were slow to develop a plan for the rebuilding of an Afghan air arm. A handful of Afghan aircraft remained intact and flyable, but none were deemed safe by Western standards. Beginning in 2007, a US-led coalition force began training and advising the AAF on various functional areas required by a professional air force, but the single most important capability focused on the Afghans' employment of their Russian-built Mi-17 helicopters that the air force operated for decades under Soviet and Czech tutelage.² In the decade and a half since the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, the Kabul-based government or the Taliban from 1996–2001, as well as several competing warlords' air militias, were left mainly on their own to continue flying a decreasing number of available Mi-17s for airlift, resupply, and the transport of deceased and wounded soldiers. As cell phone technology became available in Afghanistan, the Afghans came to rely on its use for the assigning of Mi-17 missions.³

At least through 2015, the foremost air advisory objective was to enable a *professional* Afghan Air Force, for which a rational C2 system was a prerequisite. As the advisory mission became institutionalized between 2007–10, the AAF received more Mi-17s, the mainstay of its inventory.⁴

By 2010, if not before, the AAF used cell phones to task some, if not most, aircraft sorties. Air advisors noted the tendency for Afghan aircraft to be retasked from training or resupply missions, often mysteriously and at the last minute, and they used the term *cell phone command and control* to describe the Afghans' system. One lieutenant colonel air advisor reported on "a distinct lack of transparency in the way the Afghan Ministry of Defense . . . & AAF like to schedule and fly their missions. The [Afghans] don't like to plan ahead, [or] use a printed schedule. . . They prefer to use the cell phone to task aircraft for short notice 'emergency' missions." In many cases, Afghan senior leaders called a subordinate somewhere in the flying unit's chain of command—sometimes calling the aircraft commander directly—to request, or direct, a change in the mission. The cell phone taskings constituted a C2 system that meshed well with traditional Afghan culture: it was *personal*-, not *procedural*-based, and it allowed for senior leaders, mostly army generals who in some cases bore a resemblance to warlords, to exercise their considerable influence, clout, or *wasta* (in Dari) among their extended family or ethnic group by sending a helicopter to land at their own village, in direct response to their phone call, transporting whatever items and/or individuals the senior leader wanted delivered or picked up.⁵

The system worked, but it was wasteful and inefficient, and it was not professional. In late 2010 and early 2011, US air advisors led by a highly accomplished F-16 pilot, Lt Col Frank D. Bryant, who as a volunteer in the Joint Chiefs of Staff-sponsored Afghanistan-Pakistan (AFPAK) Hands program had learned

Dari and spent many off-duty hours practicing it with the Afghans on the Kabul base, drafted a C2 directive which, if implemented, was to rationalize the AAF's C2 system, changing it from personal- to procedural-based. What followed was five months of socializing the C2 "narrative," as it was called among Afghan senior leaders—some of whom, including AAF leaders, were known to disapprove of it. Finally, the Afghan chief of the General Staff, Gen Sher Mohammad Karimi, signed the directive and implemented it in mid-to-late April 2011.⁶

During March–April 2011, air advisors helped the Afghans to introduce gradual changes to AAF scheduling, mission tasking, and C2, all of which facilitated a more professional employment of its roughly 55 aircraft, including about 35 Mi-17 helicopters. Later, a number of air advisors attested to *Army Regulation 15-6* investigators the considerable improvements observed during that period. General Karimi's signature on the C2 document turned the narrative into a directive. The Air Command and Control Center (ACCC) on the AAF base at the Kabul airport was intended—at least by the US, coalition, and General Karimi—to become the nerve center of the Afghan Air Force, with clear oversight of all Afghan aircraft under the Ministry of Defense. A rational system for overseeing AAF missions in support of Afghan army corps battling insurgent forces throughout the country held operational-strategic import.⁷

Days later, on 27 April 2011, during a scheduling meeting in the ACCC, an Afghan pilot killed nine US air advisors, who became known affectionately as the NATC-A Nine (North Atlantic Treaty Organization Air Training Command-Afghanistan). Among them were Lieutenant Colonel Bryant and another stellar officer slated to succeed him in advising the ACCC, fellow F-16 pilot Maj David L. Brodeur. From that day through 2015—if not beyond—the AAF's C2 system largely reverted to the way it had functioned prior to March–April 2011. The most important features of General Karimi's C2 directive, namely, removing the opaqueness of what the various AAF aircraft were doing, where they flew, with whom, and what they were carrying, went by the wayside. And with it, the cautious optimism on the part of US-coalition air advisor leadership that the AAF might be moving toward a professional air force went by the wayside as well. Instead of a single nerve center for the AAF, there remained a number of nerve centers, housed in the brains of the Afghan senior leaders in Kabul who retained the ultimate aircraft tasking authority.⁸

Whether it had been intended that way remained a highly debatable and open question, but, regardless, the insider attack of 27 April had operational-strategic impacts. The Afghans' traditional, personal-based C2 system managed to survive, especially regarding Mi-17 helicopter operations. Perhaps a professional Afghan Air Force might develop someday; if so, it had been indefinitely delayed. ❀

Notes

1. Forrest L. Marion, *Flight Risk: The Coalition's Air Advisory Mission in Afghanistan, 2005–2015* (Annapolis, MD.: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 101–20, 213; Capt Christopher M. Mills USN, oral history interview (OHI) by the author, 27 April 2016 (audio-only, Air Force Historical Research Agency [AFHRA], Maxwell AFB, AL, call no. K239.0512-2751); Capt George H. Slook USN, statement, ca. 2011; Capt George H. Slook, USN, retired, OHI by the author, 26 April 2016 (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2749); Capt Christopher M. Mills, USN, telephone conversation with the author, 7 March 2017; Col Dale R. Buckner, USA, Army Report (AR) 15–6 *Investigating Officer Report Regarding Green-on-Blue Incident at North Kabul International Airport* Research Report AR 15–6 (original AR 15–6), 8 September 2011; and Sara Carter, “‘For the Record’ Investigation: It Was the Deadliest Insider Attack During the War in Afghanistan. Who Paid the Man Who Pulled the Trigger?,” *The Blaze*, 15 April 2015, www.theblaze.com.

2. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 44–55; and Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghan Wars, Revolutions, and Insurgencies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2nd ed., 2005), xxxii, xxxvi–xxxvii, xlv.

3. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 37–44; Maj Gen Mohammad Dawran, Afghan National Army Air Corps (ANAAC), OHI by the author, 20 April 2009, Kabul, Afghanistan (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K-WG-438-SU-PE DVD, 8–20 April 2009); General Dawran, discussion with the author, 5 May 2009, Kabul, Afghanistan; case file (CF) 02, Briefing, (air campaign plan) “Afghan National Army Air Corps, Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF), Brig Gen Walter D. Givhan, USAF CAPTF CG,” 9 October 2008, slide 6; Maj Gen Walter D. Givhan USAF, OHI by the author, 21 October 2013 (audio/transcript, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2708); and Forrest L. Marion, “The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989–2009,” *Air Power History* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2010), www.afhistory.org.

4. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 52–70, 200, 204–10, appendix 1. By December 2009, the 438th AEW/CAPTF mission was: “Set the conditions for a *professional, fully independent and operationally capable* Afghan ‘air force’ that meets the security requirements of Afghanistan today. . . and tomorrow”; see 438th AEW, History, January 2010, briefing, ANAAC/CAPTF Command Structure & Relationships, filed as “0419_20091213_(U)_ANAAC_Command_StructureV4,” slide 10 (emphasis in original) (AFHRA, call no. K-WG-438-HI (AEW) CD, January 2010). By March 2011 (if not earlier), the mission statement remained the same except for a change from “Afghan air force” to “Afghan Air Force” that reflected the redesignation of the Afghan air arm in June 2010; see 438th AEW, CFs, March 2011, narrative, 1 (AFHRA, 533.82, selected historical files). In September 2014, the wing’s mission was changed to “Train, advise and assist our Afghan partners to develop a *professional, capable and sustainable* Air Force”; see 438th AEW, History, September 2014, chronology, 19 September 2014 [emphasis added].

5. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 60–61, 80, 103, 145–46, 161, 182–83, 205–09; Lt Col John P. Conmy, USAF, OHI by the author, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22 September 2014 (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2726); Col Rhude Cherry III, USAF, OHI by the author, Shaw AFB, SC, 8 June 2017 (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2762); Maj Gen Michael D. Rothstein, USAF, OHI by the author, 18 January 2018 (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2771); and Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI), *Report of Investigation*, AFOSI report, 4 September 2011, 67, 331, PDF version under AFD-120111-051 report of investigation. Brig Gen Walter D. Givhan, USAF, used the term, *cell phone command and control*; see 438th AEW, History, May 2009, Chronology, 23 May 2009. An article in *Jane’s International Defence Review* in 2010 used the term *cellphone C2* as well; see Rupert Pengeley, “Waiting in the Wings: ANAAC Growth Advances Afghan Air Independence,” *Jane’s International Defence Review*, 9 June 10. Another term, *Roshan taskings*, named for the cell phone provider, also was used to describe the Afghans’ opaque command and control system.

6. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 81–83, 87–89, 115, 144; Lt Col Frank D. Bryant, USAF, OHI by the author, Kabul, Afghanistan Air Base, 22 April 2011 (audio/transcript, AFHRA, call number K239.0512-2681); 438th AEW, History, January–February 2011, Chronology/Narrative, “438 AEW Commander’s Priorities”; and 438th AEW, March 2011, CF 03, slide 5 (see note at bottom of slide), C2 VTC briefing (slides attached

to email, Lt Col Frank D. Bryant, USAF, to various NATC-A/438AEW personnel), Subject: “Today’s 1500 C2 VTC”), 7 March 2011 (AFHRA, 533.82, Selected Historical Files).

7. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 103–05, 115, appendix 2; email, Brig Gen (David W.) Allvin, USAF, to NATC-A ALL, “Commander’s Guidance,” email (with attachment, “NATC-A Commander’s Guidance.pdf”), 3 April 2011; Col James F. Turner IV, USMC, *AR15-6 Investigation, Green on Blue Incident at Kabul Int’l Airport*, Exhibit 011; *Afghan Airpower for Today . . . & Tomorrow: The Afghan Air Force Master Plan—Our Story 2013–2017* (NATO Air Training Command-Afghanistan, 13 May 2014), 15, 23–25, 62; and Brig Gen John E. Michel, USAF, retired, OHI by the author, 14 April 2016 (audio-only, AFHRA, call no. K239.0512-2748).

8. Marion, *Flight Risk*, 98–101, 204–09, appendix 2; Buckner *AR 15-6*, 3, 26; 438th AEW, History, September 2011, CF10, 438th AEAG (KAIA), 438 AEAG Daily Ops Summary, 8 September 2011, 15 September 2011, and 27 September 2011; 438th AEW, History, June 2013, CF15, Brigadier General Ray, USAF, “End of Tour Report,” memo, 15 August 2012; CF02, “Action Air Shura,” 7 August 2012, briefing, slide 2; and Col Rhude Cherry III, USAF, telephone discussion with the author, 15 September 2016.

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