



by Ryan W. Pallas

The fading light of the setting sun in Afghanistan marks the end of each day and the recent official close of a two-decade war along with it. The announcement of U.S. forces withdrawing from Afghanistan fosters feelings of solace and bereavement. Yet, when amalgamated, a void of numbness emerges for many service members. What to think? What to feel?

Taking pen to paper is purely selfish, yet cathartic. Ultimately, it is my way of telling my story, reflecting, and sorting through the detritus for a war I spent half my life preparing for and eventually partaking in.

Afghanistan has been a fixture in the daily lives of service members and others, including spouses, families, and friends. It has occupied a seat at dinner tables filling the void of loved ones called away to serve or summoned to Fiddler's Green. It has become the hallmark of our lives, replacing a time existing only "before the war." The graveyard of empires voraciously fed on broken marriages, broken bodies, broken minds, and broken bonds. It

took far more than it gave—the “place where empires go to die” took the lives of men and women as dowry—devouring almost all who dare test their mettle.

I can’t explain what war does and doesn’t do, but my endeavor was to bestow the gift of a better life, a gift given to me, to someone in hopes they, too, would find something better in their lifetime. As the sun sets on Afghanistan, the one memory I cling to over all others centers around a daily, often taken for granted, occurrence—the setting sun.

The helicopter landed facing northwest, the carmine gibbous sitting softly on the horizon, illuminating the dust from the downwash of the rotor blades. A cool autumn breeze, reminiscent of college football in the fall, abated the dust, pushing it slowly behind the helicopter, revealing the setting sun moving further below the horizon.

A single column of dust-covered Marines materialized adjacent to our aircraft, with languid gaits, following one another mindlessly from exhaustion. Amongst the floating dust, vibrant color erupted from the crowd.

A young boy, six or seven, stood amid the combat-laden Marines and contractors in silent juxtaposition as three 4,000 horsepower engines roared over the valley below. The boy seemed unaffected when compared to the faces surrounding him, worn by months and years of war that raged since the day of his first breath. He was born into and had always lived in conflict.

Kajaki remains one of the most beautiful places I’ve flown in my life, competing with Southern California, Japan, Korea, and Hawaii. The lake is a piercing glacial blue, a shade I have not seen before or since. The lake stands in sharp contrast to the surrounding dun landscape. The forward operating base was toward the northern end of the southwest area of operations, where a desert landscape violently erupts into jagged snow-capped mountains. Yet, the unforgiving terrain was forgiving only to the eye, radiating sheer

beauty—a landscape riddled with strife for decades if not centuries, long before, and what will undoubtedly exist long after our ephemeral presence is written into a chapter within the complete history of Afghanistan.

The boy stood amongst the gathering crowd in the landing zone, a pinnacle offset a short distance from the Kajaki Dam. His bleach white tunic exacerbated his tan skin tone. Worn black sandals covered his leathery feet, the only thing separating him from the desert floor. His eyes, a brilliant green, almost mystic, filled with a youthful innocence left unmoved by the continuous presence of death.

I thought of my family. A woman stood nearby. His mother? A parent or guardian? I was unsure.

Of all the reasons I went to war, they suddenly washed away with what seemed a tangible objective—to give this boy a chance at something better. A better life. A better future. A better world.

War calls to people in different ways, and at that moment, a reasonable goal materialized in front of me as quickly as the boy had through the dust. I fervently cling to this memory a decade later.

That boy is probably now in his late teens or twenties, or perhaps another youthful chapter ended prematurely—an all too familiar ending from two decades at war. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic, perhaps naïve, that my being there, in some fashion, has given that boy something better.

We took off shortly after seeing the young boy emerge from the dust, never to see him again. Yet, as the sun sets in Afghanistan and this chapter ends, I think of him often and see his face staring back at me on that brisk autumn day in the setting Kajaki sun.

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