



Issue 8  
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# The Canopy

North Central Florida All Airborne Chapter

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Connecting sky  
soldiers, past  
and present.

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Photo by Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla / DoD

## Afghanistan 2021 NEO, Veteran Response

The Canopy speaks with Lt. Col. (Ret.) Scott Mann, author of *Operation Pineapple Express*, about his efforts to evacuate at-risk Afghan partners during the 2021 noncombatant evacuation operation at Hamid Karzai Int'l Airport **page 4**, interview starts **page 7**.

## From the chapter

February Meeting; U-2 pilot talks about patience, **page 12**.

## Airborne Unit updates

DIVARTY conducts readiness testing, **page 14**. 7th SFG trains VBSS and a variety of weapon systems, **page 16**.

## Directory & Chapter Calendar

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### Upcoming Events

Saturday, Mar 9<sup>th</sup>, 1300 hrs Chapter Meeting at VFW Post 8083

### From The Editor

This month's issue shaped up nicely with a special feature and a lot of content from the 7th Special Forces Group PAO. I want to thank LTC Scott Man (Ret.) for giving The Canopy the opportunity to speak with him.

He's an inspirational person.



On a separate note - I very much want to write up a story on the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG). This was a very unique unit within TRADOC that only existed for a few years. If you know anyone that served with the AWG or maybe worked alongside them during a deployment, please reach out. The story of the AWG's mission and its intent is a story worth telling.

Get in touch with me at <ronald.dahlgren@gmail.com>.

Airborne All The Way!

*Ron Dahlgren*

Editor, The Canopy

<https://www.the-canopy.org>





# Afghanistan 2021 NEO, Veteran Response

by Ron Dahlgren



Photo by Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla / DoD

**In the late summer** of 2021 images from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), pronounced "aitch-kai-uh", started appearing in national news outlets in the United States. Videos and images of Afghans clinging to the landing gear of a C-17 were seen far and wide. Although shocking, these did not capture the full situation in Kabul during the evacuation operation. The news cycle moved on to the next story. The noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) was to be the largest airlift operation in history. Such a large operation would not be without its own complications.

*"From the time TRANSCOM received orders to commence deployment, initial force elements critical to securing HKIA were airborne in less than 3 hours. We immediately commenced NEO operations and continued around the clock over the last 17 days to assist with the safe evacuation of over 120,000 people." – General Stephen Lyons, Commander, U.S. Transportation Command*



## 2021 Timeline

**April:** A rehearsal of the Afghanistan Retrograde is held. Previous agreements had reduced troop levels to about 2,500 and released 5,000 Taliban prisoners, but the timeline for withdrawal had been pushed back from the original goal of May 1st, 2021.

**May:** Senior leaders conducted an official "rehearsal of concept" drill.

**June:** An Interagency tabletop exercise is conducted on the NEO plan. In Afghanistan, over 100 districts (24%) are under Taliban control.

**July:** United States forces depart from Bagram Airfield. Over 200 districts (48%) in Afghanistan are under Taliban control.

### August:

- **6 August**, Senior officials conduct an interagency NEO tabletop exercise focusing on both a semi-permissive and a non-permissive environment.
- **14 August**, Ambassador Wilson declares a NEO and the Secretary of Defense orders the commander of US CENTCOM to execute the NEO contingency plan.
- **15 August**, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani flees the presidential palace and the country of Afghanistan.
- **17 August**, the 82nd Airborne Division Immediate Response Force arrives at HKIA to facilitate the evacuation.
- **22 August**, the Secretary of Defense orders USTRANSCOM to activate Stage I of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet.
- **25 August**, the Joint Chiefs decide that no military forces should be maintained in Afghanistan beyond 31 August.
- **30 August**, Major General Christopher Donahue, Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, is the last troop to board the last C-17 from HKIA.



REACH-871, a C-17, filled with 823 Afghans departing from HKIA. The C-17 is typically used for up to 102 troopers or up to 18 pallets of cargo. Photo courtesy US Air Force.

During the two weeks from Tuesday, August 17th through Tuesday, August 31st, over 120,000 people would be loaded and evacuated by air on 387 US military sorties and 391 non-US military sorties. The people to be evacuated were American citizens, lawful permanent residents, locally hired embassy personnel, special immigrant visa applicants, and at-risk Afghans. The existing lists were not complete, with many at risk Afghans overlooked.

One of those overlooked Afghans was Nezamuddin Nezami, or Nezam for short. Nezam had worked closely with US Special Forces in Afghanistan over the years. He completed the US Special Forces Qualification Course at Ft. Liberty and was awarded the coveted green beret and "long tab". After 12 years with the Afghan Army, Nezam was honorably discharged and worked with other government agencies for a while before becoming a security contractor guarding a power plant in the northern part of Afghanistan.

With the security situation deteriorating, Nezam and others like him reached out to friends and colleagues back in the United States to get help. Their families were at risk and they were at risk.

### Operation Pineapple Express

Leading up to the events of August 2021, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Scott Mann was in contact with Nezam and several veterans about the developing situation. These veterans, largely from the special forces community, saw a clear need. Scott drew on his extensive experience running operations, many remote, to help organize the effort. They communicated using Signal chat rooms. They reached out to state department contacts and others, eventually connected with the first sergeant and company commander of C 2-504, one of the 82nd Airborne units facilitating the evacuation.

The team determined near and far identifiers to guide highly-vetted Afghan partners and their families to a hidden side-entrance, near Abbey Gate, marked by a VS-17 panel. Part of this challenge and authentication scheme involved a picture of a pineapple. The team would come to be known as Task Force Pineapple. It would include more than 100 volunteers, "a mix of retired and active-duty U.S. special operations forces, foreign service officers, a Biden political appointee, and more". The story of Task Force Pineapple is captured in Scott's book, *Operation Pineapple Express*. His book is thorough, detailed, and compelling. The Canopy was fortunate enough to speak with Scott about his experiences organizing and executing Operation Pineapple Express.



Afghan evacuees board a C-17 at HKIA. Photo by Master Sgt. Donal Allen, US Air Force.



## Interview with Lt. Col. (Ret.) Scott Mann

**The Canopy:** *What first alerted you to the situation on the ground during the NEO?*

Nezam [pronounced "Neh-ZAHM"], passenger #1 on Pineapple Express, started sending texts in the Spring of 2021. It was almost a district by district rundown of events. He started to get texts from the Taliban and other Afghan Army and police were getting similar texts. It looked like a psyop campaign from the Taliban. It started coming in heavy by April or May. Other SF folks were communicating among each other saying, "hey my terp is saying things are really falling apart, are you hearing that?"

There was a growing sense of urgency to getting SIVs.



Photo by Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla / DoD

**The Canopy:** *Describe the moment when you stopped and thought to yourself, what the hell is going on? How did I get here?*

Well, it was really three things. First, I called the aide-de-camp of USASOC, and explained Nezam's situation. I said here's a guy that went through our Q Course. He's an 18B in our regiment. I told the major this, and said surely someone can do something. The major says, "Absolutely, I've got a list of special allies that need to get prioritized and it sounds like your guy qualifies." That call left me with the impression of kind of, "hey thank you for calling, we appreciate your concern, we'll add him to a list".

The second time was the 15th of August, maybe the 16th when the Taliban captured Kabul. I had a voice call with Nezam, which was kind of a rare thing. I had been trying to stay out of it, I didn't want to get wrapped up in it and dragged back into Afghanistan. I told him, "We're gonna get you out of there... gonna get you out". I thought what the hell did I just promise this guy? At this point I'm a corporate trainer, a storyteller, an amateur playwright. I'm not the first pick for doing a rescue operation. I just realized that nobody is coming, I have to help Nazem.

The third time was when Nazem got out on the 19th. My phone started blowing up from people that heard about Nezam. They were desperately trying to help their friends. That magnified and grew. I was talking to an active duty SF guy who told me, "nobody is doing anything. These guys are on their own". At this time I had 250 NMRG [National Mine Removal Group] personnel and their families - these guys worked with SEAL Team 6 and helped protect us. Nobody was coming to get them. We were really going to abandon the commandos. That laid me low. I thought, they're gonna figure this out. We'll just keep it warm until the cavalry comes. I'll build a manifest on my Mac, and just keep it warm until SOCOM comes to get their guys.



We were there, *Shana Ba Shana*, shoulder to shoulder with these guys. I really believed, with all sincerity, that this was just temporary. We were like a hot-plate keeping things ready for SOCOM, USASOC, whoever. There's the concept among the SF community, and the airborne guys have it too, "paratrooper for life", "operator for life", and I felt like "ok, here we go". I was filling in for SOCOM. But there's the question, like, how can we do this? Are we allowed to do this? Is this even legal?

There was a point later on, after the fact, when the State Department looked at the volunteer groups, like Operation Pineapple Express, and said the veteran's groups slowed the process. I talked to troops on the ground and every person, to the man and woman, will tell you we were looking at a sea of thousands of faces with no vetting mechanism, no way to get people in.

The decision was made that we would organize these guys and we can tell you who they are, where they are, and they trust us to move them into position. The mission was very limited: to responsibly present highly vetted individuals and their families to guys at the wire that were expecting them.

We wanted to maximize OPSEC and force protection. The White Devils weren't on the line really, but went out and tried to do more. We connected with ISG Jesse Kennedy and CPT John Folta as they were helping a pregnant woman get to the clinic.

**The Canopy:** *What was the catalyst to organize the effort to the degree you did?*

Most of my work in Afghanistan was in ops.



Female Marines calm infants passed over the wire by family members. Photo by Sgt. Isaiah Campbell / DoD

I was the S3 at the battalion, group, and so on, with tons of experience managing remote operations. I was used to not being able to see the operation and coordinating remotely.

**The Canopy:** *So your head was already in that space from the beginning?*

Right. Our job was to responsibly present highly vetted individuals and their families to guys on the wire that wanted to see them. Even at the small scale I was looking at it this way. There are two levels in Signal, there's the macro level, like a holistic picture through that soda straw. For instance you've got a shepherd in Michigan with 8 terps [*interpreters*] and their families who says "North Gate just opened, Abby just closed" and you get this real time information.

The other part was the shepherds with pre-existing relationships with their flocks. So they would have a separate channel with them on Signal to distribute information to them in a compartmentalized way. With a 4,000 person manifest, you had to be glued to your phone 18 hours a day. The way Signal works is the messages just go and if you're not watching, you'll miss it. I'm not gonna let this turn into a Reddit dumpster fire. We vetted the people we added and kept the group down to about 140.

**The Canopy:** *You had an effective group. How did they find you? Do you think coming from the SOF community helped make it a success?*

SOF and the 82nd. We had people from the TOC with the 82nd back at Bragg. We had people from Marine Central, guys in Iraq. We had this understanding from the special forces mindset - if you're not relevant to the problem at hand, be quiet. We enforced that. We went back through the log later on and we had tens of thousands of chat entries, but here's the thing, you only had Biden said once and Trump zero times. We kept the political bullshit out of it. I wish we could run more things that way.

**The Canopy:** *Operation Allies Refuge claims 123,000 people evacuated. In your book, you mention the CIA forces were all slated for evacuation. Do you have any insight into how that selection process was made? Why were the SOF partners not included?*

There was a memo from the National Security Council the day prior to the collapse (the 14th) describing a priority exfil for the NEO, all embassy employees (even ground keepers), paramilitary for the agency. To the CIA's credit, they had people in country in April working on SIVs for their people. SOCOM, USASOC, and SF leadership fell short. They did not put together a cohesive plan to recover their personnel. Why were there no ODAs there to help them? To help them resist if they needed to? To lay caches and make UW plans. None of that. That's our bread and butter in SF. There has been no responsible AAR of the partner abandonment. The special forces organization is supposed to be a rapidly learning community that crystalizes the lessons learned. This was wholesale abandonment.

MG Donahue was the most gracious and honest person I worked with on this. He was very open about things. MG Donahue allowed access to 1SG Kennedy and CPT Fulta. The story would not have been told if not for his permission to speak freely.

Major General Christopher T. Donahue was nominated for Lieutenant General in February of 2022. In March 2022 he assumed command of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Liberty, where he continues today.

After the bomb [26 August suicide bombing at Abbey Gate] went off, it was just gutting for me. The girls we were trying to rescue didn't make it and that brought back a lot of baggage from my time in Afghanistan that never really went away. I didn't know if Jesse [JSG Kennedy] and John [CPT Fulta] made it. They had a lockdown on the compound - for good reason. Signal went down. I had a long talk with my wife, prayed on it, and decided to ask the shepherds in Pineapple Express what they wanted to do. They were mostly burned out and mentally exhausted at this point as well. We started a non-profit, TF Pineapple, that failed spectacularly after a few months. The life was drained out of the volunteers, mental health was a problem. We were trying to send guys through Pakistan, then Pakistan was locked down. There was no appetite to help in the US. We ended up sending our manifest to a larger organization to continue the work.

**The Canopy:** *Why write a book?*

I didn't want to write it. I had written a few books before, but I didn't want to go back to this. I felt so disgusted. I thought nobody would care. My wife and father pushed me to write it. They said if you don't, someone else will write it. The two things I tried to focus on with the book were: What does a promise mean to you? How far would you go to fulfill it?

**The Canopy:** *How can my readers help the ongoing efforts today?*

Operation Pineapple Express Relief ([operelief.org](http://operelief.org)). This is a relief fund. The funds are used to help the thousands of people in those manifests trying to get out, to help those afghans that are here trying to resettle, and to help veterans that need it. It helps our pineapples and our shepherds deal with the aftermath. Some of these guys spent their savings working on the problem.

Call your congressman and make Afghanistan an election issue regardless of party. Tell them you care. Reports are saying more than 20 violent extremist organizations are operating in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda is alive and well.

Call resettlement groups in your community and see if you can help Afghans here. See REACT DC ([reactdc.org](http://reactdc.org)) for a great local resource.

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*Scott Mann will be performing his show, Last Out, in collaboration with Tunnel to Towers on April 9th at the Saint George Theater in New York City. It is being performed in honor of the NYC firefighters and police that worked ground zero.*

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## From The Chapter

**VFW Post 8083, Saturday February 10th:** The chapter met at the usual time and location. There was an outstanding turnout with a few new faces showing up to join as members. This was the second meeting in a row with new members joining. Each introduced themselves to the group. During the meeting, the annual budget was reviewed in detail. The assembled members requested several small changes to the proposed budget. The merits of the changes were discussed with the result of one material change. In previous years, the website hosting fees were paid as a multi-year agreement in one payment. To accommodate the upcoming bill, the members agreed we should allocate a third of the three year agreement price each year rather than waiting until it comes due to pay the entirety.



Photo by Ron Dahlgren



The chapter had a guest speaker during the February meeting - Don Hatten. Don was a U-2 pilot during the 1970s. He described the particular challenges that are unique to the platform. Don was sure to tell us that "anything over 70,000 feet is classified." The very high-altitude at which it operates requires the pilot to prepare for the flight by breathing pure oxygen and then wearing a pressure suit during the mission. Don stressed that missions can be quite long, repeating that "anything over 12 hours is classified". The unique shape of the aircraft causes special considerations for takeoff and landing. One piece of equipment is the "pogo". These are used to keep the wings off the ground during taxi and takeoff. Don described some of the missions typical of the aircraft - primarily recon. One of the photos Don shared showed a black sky above and the blue below.



Photo by Ron Dahlgren



Above: Chairman presents a certificate of appreciation; Below: Don expresses gratitude. Photos by Tony Alger.



Above: Christopher Michel in a Lockheed U-2 at 70,000 feet. Photo by Christopher Michel. CC BY 2.0; Below: Public Domain photo







## 82nd Airborne's Division Artillery Readiness Training

Black Falcons conduct battery level training during their DART.



Photos by Sgt. Jazmin Cameron, 82nd Airborne Division. In the distance, another unit drops into a nearby dropzone.



**Ft. Liberty, NC** - 2 Battalion, 319<sup>th</sup> Airborne Field Artillery Regiment paratroopers conducted their division artillery readiness training (DART) on the night of February 7th, 2024. It was a clear and cold night with temperatures dipping just below freezing. Lunar illumination was zero, as the moon would not rise until 6:30 the following morning.

The DART is a training exercise that occurs annually and is mandatory for leaders and master gunners. By demonstrating tactical movements to multiple firing points and handling multiple firemissions the artillery unit shows its readiness to provide effective fire support.



Photos by Sgt. Jazmin Cameron, 82nd Airborne Division

The DART was battery-level training using M777 howitzers during a nighttime field exercise. During this exercise, B/2-319 AFAR performed their battery qualifications. Over the course of 72 hours, the battery moved seven times - twice at night and five daytime emplacements. The guns were evaluated on several tasks beyond timely and accurate fires. Some of the additional evaluations included:

1. Nighttime tactical movement;
2. React to indirect fire / counterfire; and
3. Triage, treat, and evacuate casualties.

In addition to an annual requirement, training circular TC 3-09.8 C1 mentions several disqualification criteria based on loss of critical personnel. The TC also supplies several example progressions of qualification and evaluations. Following the artillery tables II-V is a table VI event to qualify the gun crews.

Specialist Peter Kennel, a 13J with the fire direction center that participated in the DART had this to say, "It's a test to ensure the battery, at the DIVARTY level, is able to go out and push out to our brigade maneuver units and be able to provide them with accurate and timely fire."





## 7th Special Forces Group Training Events

During the last several weeks, 7th group has done a variety of training events.



Photos by Staff Sgt, Ryan Jenkins, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne)



**Ft. Walton Beach, FL** – Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces group and elements of the 6th Ranger Training Battalion trained on visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) tasks. Dive teams conducted a nighttime raid on a large watercraft. This exercise allows the dive teams to train their particular tasks, while also training the use of night vision devices for raiding claustrophobic interiors. This training operation was conducted as part of Elgin Strike. Elgin Strike is an annual multinational exercise in and around Eglin AFB, Florida.





Photos by Staff Sgt. Ryan Jenkins, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne)

**Camp Shelby, Mississippi** – Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group take part in live fire exercises including mounted and dismounted maneuvering. The soldiers trained with a variety of organic weapon systems including the Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle and the 60mm mortar system. During the week of January 18th, Camp Shelby included lows regularly below freezing with light precipitation happening on three of the days. Lunar illumination grew from 35% and 70% with moonset happening around midnight each night.

In the image above the heat from discharging the Carl G. is causing steam to rise from the ground. The heat can be seen distorting the treeline in the backblast area as sparks fly backward.

To the right, a special forces soldier manipulates his whip antenna while communicating with mortar fire observers.







Photos by Spc. Craig Carter, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne)





**Eglin Air Force Base, Florida** – Soldiers with Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group trained at the mortar range on Camp "Bull" Simons. This range was used to prepare the soldiers for an upcoming live fire exercise that would use the 60mm mortar system.

The teams have access to organic 60mm mortar systems for use as the mission dictates. Indirect fire from the mortar system will be observed by the green berets or their attached Joint Terminal Attack Controller. In other cases, when the ODAs are working with conventional units, indirect fire may be observed by the conventional unit's FISTers.



Photos by Spc. Craig Carter, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne)





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