

International

Scars and trauma but no regret for Afghan campaign veterans

Veterans share complex range of sentiments about a two-decade-long conflict

PARIS: As international forces complete a pullout from Afghanistan against the background of a rampant Taliban offensive, campaign veterans remember with emotions veering from trauma to pride a deployment that has marked a generation of Western soldiers. American, Australian, French, German and Spanish serving and ex-soldiers who talked to AFP shared a complex range of sentiments about a conflict that has raged for two decades and from which no-one has returned untouched.

But remembering extraordinary comradeship and Afghanistan's landscapes and people, they often far from regret their deployment in one of the most dangerous military missions in the world. Their feelings as foreign troops pull out are even more acute, as the Taliban takes control of swathes of the country, including provincial capitals, that international troops were supposed to have secured for the Afghan army.

The withdrawal is due to be complete at the end of this month, in line with President Joe Biden's orders that US soldiers pull out ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The Al-Qaeda plane hijackings of September 11, 2001 sparked the invasion that toppled the Taliban, whose current offensive has reawakened doubts among some over what the deployment was worth. However, several soldiers emphasized that their own personal experience and the political outcome were two very different things.

'Always those images'

The cosy hamlet of Quentel in central Germany with just 500 inhabitants feels as remote from the mountains of Afghanistan as could be possibly imagined. But it is here on an old farm that Andreas Braeutigam, 58, tends to his four horses, lives with his partner and her child, cooks and reflects on the still burning memories of an eight-month deployment in Afghanistan from 2003-2004.

Braeutigam, who retired this year, came close to death when a shot pierced his ear.

He suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and needs to take pills in order to sleep.

"The horses help me when I'm pushed to the edge, when I'm restless, nervous or aggressive, sometimes just seeing the horses or being near them is enough to calm me down," he said. A battle-hardened serviceman in Germany's Bundeswehr, Braeutigam also saw action in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo.

But the memories of Afghanistan still loom so large. Every day brought mortal danger. "You don't know where to put your feet, because there might be homemade bombs, especially in the places where you least expect them.

"And there are the ambushes. You do not see anyone, then all of a sudden people surge out and disappear again without a trace." "It's no fun to think about this and I am always happy when there are days when I do not think about it," he said.

He reflected that personally "the experience was worth it, I got to know other countries, other peoples, other customs. We also received a relatively warm welcome from the population, we could feel that." But Braeutigam also wonders whether the NATO mission made any difference to Afghanistan, which remains mired in such instability that locals who helped foreign forces are now seeking refuge in the West.

"NATO was not designed to do a lot of things—we cannot make a state bend. "No one can do it, not even us, and as long as the Taliban are more numerous and supported by other countries. No matter which army comes in, there will be no chance of bringing peace to the country."

'A soldier's job'

French lieutenant colonel Jean Michelin, who remains in active service, has less time or occasion to reflect on his 2012 deployment to Afghanistan, as he prepares for a mission in September to join France's Barkhane force in the Sahel region of Africa. "We always carry the missions which we experienced deep within our-



QUENTEL, Germany: Andreas Braeutigam, veteran of the German army Bundeswehr who served in Afghanistan for eight months in 2003-2004 and whose last name was Roehrig before his marriage, shows a certificate he was given during his deployment, at his home in Quentel (Hessisch-Lichtenau), central Germany. —AFP

selves. But we also cannot live with the weight of Afghanistan forever. A soldier's job is also to be ready to go again. I cannot take Afghanistan in my suitcase when I join Barkhane."

He also insisted that it is not the job of the soldier to ask whether it was right for international troops to be deployed to Afghanistan. "The 'why?' is not a military question, it is a political issue." —AFP

Young Afghan general takes fight against Taliban to social media

KABUL: As a string of Taliban victories show Afghan government forces in disarray, a young general is advancing his reputation on the battlefield and on social media. Provincial cities in the north have fallen like dominoes this week—in some cases after government forces retreated or surrendered without a fight—but in Lashkar Gah, a Taliban heartland, the army appears to be providing stiffer resistance.

Leading them is Sami Sadat, 36, the highest-ranking army officer in southern Afghanistan, in an intense fight in defence of a provincial capital the Taliban are desperate to seize. And as the insurgents flood social media with images of surrendering Afghan soldiers and snap selfies with locals, the young general is also using Twitter and Facebook as a slick PR tool in the fight against the hardline islamists.

He and the 20,000 men under his command in the 215th Corps have garnered thousands of followers, with their Twitter accounts awash with images of the general among the troops, posing for selfies with young civilians, and meeting local shopkeepers. On Wednesday the defence ministry tweeted he had been promoted to lead the country's special forces, an announcement widely applauded on the platform.



ZARANJ, Afghanistan: Sami Sadat (right), commander of the 215 Maiwand Afghan Army Corps, shakes hands with a local man in the city of Zaranj in Nimruz province. — AFP

Sadat remains optimistic despite the Taliban's advances. "Because I know we are going to win," he told AFP in a phone interview from the frontlines of Lashkar Gah. "I know this is our country, that the Taliban are failing, that they will fail sooner or later."

Confident, and ruthless

But there is more to him than meets the eye, say fellow officers and friends. "He is anything but naive," said a security official who asked not to be named. "He has a very strategic vision and a very deep analysis of what is happening," said a general who was Sadat's colleague at the spy agency.

A graduate of the prestigious King's College in London, Sadat began his military career at the Afghan interior ministry. He received military training in Germany, Britain, Poland and the United States, and also served in the National Directorate of Security—Afghanistan's spy agency. Sadat prefers to talk about his men rather than himself and family—senior officers and their relatives are particular targets for Taliban hit squads—and declines even to say where he was born. But he is also keen to talk about the war, which he does confidently—and ruthlessly. "Any Taliban who comes to Lashkar Gah will die or leave disabled for life," he told AFP. Still, he admits it will take time to fully secure the city.

'Do anything for his soldiers'

On August 4, Sadat called on residents to leave Lashkar Gah so the military could launch an all-out counteroffensive. But he has still held back, saying he is fearful of hurting those who chose to stay behind. Sadat described how his forces were going house-to-house to secure neighborhoods that the Taliban had infiltrated in Lashkar Gah. "We still find civilians—especially the elderly and trapped women—who we take to safer places," he said.

NGOs and the United Nations have repeatedly expressed concern about the violence and the risks incurred by civilians—threats that include aerial bombardment of suspected Taliban positions in Lashkar Gah by the Afghan military. The loyalty and respect Sadat appears to command among the troops have been a key factor in the resistance to the Taliban in the city, despite their morale-damaging advances elsewhere in Afghanistan. "He is not someone who gives orders from the rear while hiding in the humvee," an Afghan security source said. "He will do anything for his soldiers". —AFP