

Final meeting: “We’re NOT going to apologize!”

(How a National Guard Special Forces unit worked through a tragedy that threatened to derail their mission training the first brigade of the New Afghan Army.)

By Chaplain (COL) Andy Meverden, USA, Retired & Master Sergeant Dave Martinez, USA, Retired

On December 14, 2002, four Afghan teenage boys were accidentally killed and one seriously injured in the first live-fire exercise conducted with a battalion of the New Afghan Army. The unit was being trained by US Special Forces (The Green Beret). The incident occurred after a group of ten local schoolboys from the nearby

village of Polycharky were chased from the area where the military exercise was to be held. The firing range was on the slope of Ghar Mountain, outside the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC). Apparently intent on recovering metal from expended munitions and semi-precious stones like lapis lazuli potentially dislodged from impact, the boys circled around the back of the mountain, climbed up and over descending down a draw, partially covered by a low cloud.

When the range was finally cleared, mortars fired onto an objective mid-point on the mountain slope, unwittingly, right where the ten boys had gathered. The first mortar volley struck, knocking down six of the

boys, injuring five seriously. The remaining four ran back over the mountain into the village, reporting the tragedy. A village man in a taxi, raced to the range, and ran through the checkpoint, causing the exercise to halt. Explaining that there were injured on the mountain, an immediate medical response occurred. Despite the heroics of the many medics on site and immediately called to the scene; by day’s end, four boys were dead and one seriously injured but expected to recover.

After the boys’ bodies were autopsied, cleaned, and returned to their families, the shock of what transpired that day settled in. The entire battalion of Special Forces Soldiers was struck a severe blow. As the chaplain, I was involved in the receiving of the male family members who came to retrieve the lifeless bodies of their sons, brothers or nephews. Following this, I spent time with the soldiers involved in the incident. In the midst of the chaos, I visited our senior Afghan interpreter, Colonel Sammy. I asked for words of condolence to share with the families, and wisdom on how to deal with the tragedy.

He told me of the Afghan custom of “Maharamona,” a cultural process with a ceremony used to facilitate reconciliation when unintended tragedies occur. It involved communicating with the offended parties, through the village elders, that this was an unintentional accident and that we wanted to make things right – do “Maharamona.” If the offended parties accepted the offer to reconcile, they would respond by hosting a meal – with salt in it. The offending party would come, eat the meal (with salt) and present a sheep to the family



who had suffered the loss. If the offended family accepted the sheep, “Maharamona” (reconciliation) would occur.

The Maharamona meal was set up by the Polycharky elders. In addition, Task Force 180 Commander, Lieutenant General Daniel McNeill, authorized funds to restore the Polycharky Village School. I was appointed coordinator and actions began.

As spring approached, and our deployment was drawing to a close, I was amazed that all the recommended projects at Polycharky were coming to pass. The Maharamona meal was eaten with salt, and the sheep were accepted, along with burial assistance. A death gratuity was processed expeditiously by the JAGs of Civil Affairs. School renovation was progressing nicely with newly built outdoor latrines. A well was sunk, the aluminum pump was installed and functioning well. The Medical Civil Action Program clinic treated over 1,200 local Afghan patients. In all six official meetings were held with the fathers of the boys killed. Still I felt there was one thing missing.

Having served during the Vietnam Era, I was aware of the emotional struggles of some returning veterans, especially those involved in close combat and “collateral damage,” with innocent non-combatants. Though I couldn’t see into the hearts and minds of my soldiers, I could look into their eyes and hear their words in private conversations. The death of the four boys was probably the most devastating incident of the deployment. It’s one thing to fire on and kill enemy combatants – those who are trying to kill you. It’s another, to accidentally kill innocent young boys hunting for scrap metal or semi-



precious stones. I pondered and prayed for a way to help those most closely involved with the incident process their personal pain and feelings of guilt.

Talking with one of our docs who worked in the Emergency Room on an Indian Reservation Hospital back home, he mentioned the benefits of debriefing – processing the incident by reviewing what happened and how it made those involved feel. Though we had done that with those involved immediately after the incident – within 24 hours, I thought we needed to do more. As we dialogued, the idea of a face-to-face meeting was brought up. Having our Soldiers who were leading the live fire exercise meet with the bereaved fathers to simply sip tea and express sorrow over the

loss of their sons lives, seemed like a “bridge too far.” Still, I felt like I had to at least try something for the sake of the Afghan fathers and our US Soldiers.

Later, I went to see MSG (Commander) Moses, one of the team sergeants. A stocky, olive-skinned Hispanic, he was a respected leader in the battalion. His reaction frankly was not surprising: “I’m not going to sit with those fathers and apologize for what happened! We didn’t do anything wrong. It was their fault for coming around back into the firing range. No one knew they were there. We’ve got nothing to apologize for!” I agreed. We *didn’t* know they were there. We DID chase them off. Still, they were accidentally killed during an exercise we ran. “I’m not asking you to apologize. I’m

simply asking you to sit, man-to-man, father to father, and tell them that you regret their loss – that’s all.” Then I said, “In the long run, I think it will do well for both you and your men and these fathers. Just think how you would feel in their place.” I knew I had said enough. Moses agreed to think about it and talk with his men, so I left. I had another team sergeant to visit.

SFC (Commander) Dave was the other team sergeant running the range with his team. A unique blend of discipline and sensitivity, he was initially more open to the idea, but still wanted to know the expected “end state” of the meeting. When I explained it was intended to help bring closure to both the Afghan fathers and the soldiers most directly involved with the incident – more conciliation than reconciliation, he agreed to speak with his team. Though I understood from my soldiers’ perspective, it was a totally unintended accident, resulting from the boys own natural curiosity, I believed that having tea with the bereaved fathers, would go a long way to bringing closure.

Why did I think so? Upon reflection, it probably came from the time my youngest brother, Luke, was hit by a car driven by a local farmer who had come to town to do business. Only four or five years old, Luke broke from our mother’s grasp and ran into the street in front of a parked car. I know because I was watching from our front yard across the street, when I heard the thud and our mother’s scream. The driver slammed on the breaks as soon as he saw Luke. After he stopped, he picked up my brother, put him in his car along with our mother and rushed them to the local hospital emergency room. A day later, the farmer stopped by to see how little Luke was doing. Though it was Luke’s fault, the farmer felt bad and cared enough

to respond, try to save his life, and even later check up on him. As a result, there was never any animosity or ill feelings between our families. Though linguistically and culturally different people, I had found the Afghans to be not that different from us in our basic humanity. The meeting would be as much for *our* benefit as *theirs*.

After a couple days, I checked with both team sergeants for their decisions. I knew I couldn’t force them, but I prayed they would participate. SFC Dave said his men were “all in.” They would have tea and express condolence over the death of the four boys and explain their efforts to save them afterwards. MSG Moses was less sure of the purpose and benefit of the event. “We’ll go.” He said. “But I am not apologizing for something that was not my fault!” I assured him that he was free to express his sentiment in any way he chose. I went back to the village elders, some of whom were members of the KMTC military staff, and they set up an afternoon meeting in one of their homes.

When the day came, we set up our departure time and location on our compound. Several Toyota pickups and my Land Cruiser loaded with two Special Forces teams, a public affairs officer, and a senior interpreter convoyed to the village of Polycharky. Arriving at the designated home, we left a couple of guards with our vehicles and proceeded to enter the home. We were led by a KMTC officer in civilian Afghan dress, followed by me and the team members. I took off my shoes at the door, as was custom. Inside, the fathers were waiting, as we shook hands, we placed our hands across our chests and greeted them in Dari and Pashtu. As we sat, I removed my body armor, as did my soldiers, most placing their weapons on the floor and then covering their long guns with

their body armor.

As was custom, a teenage boy came in with warm water in a tea pot, a basin and a towel. It reminded me of Jesus and the Last Supper; how Jesus washed his disciples feet, but when he came to Peter, he refused to allow Jesus to wash him. My men initially refused my proposal, but were now committed. How it would turn out, I would soon see. I prayed it would be positive for both parties.

The boy poured warm water over our fingers and offered the towel, as he went around the room. Cookies, nuts and Jalalabad oranges were already laid out on the floor before us. When all hands were washed, he brought out hot tea. For a few minutes we snacked, drank tea, grunted and nodded approval of the delicacies and hospitality provided. After a nod from our trusted public affairs officer, I explained the purpose of our visit.

“One day soon, we will be leaving to return to our homes. Before we do, we wanted to come, one last time to sit with you and mourn the loss and injury of your sons. As their chaplain, I am concerned about the burden my men will carry with them as a result of this terrible accident.” Our interpreter conveyed my opening remarks. All the fathers present nodded, acknowledging the hopeful intent of my words. I continued, “Many of us are fathers too, and if our sons were taken from us in this tragic way, we would be broken beyond belief.” I prayed for just right few words of transition. “We’ll never know what they might have grown up to be, a teacher, an engineer, a medical doctor, a general, a president; but we have come for a few moments to share your pain.” Looking over to Team Sergeant Moses, I saw a tear trickle down his cheek. His opening words broke the invisible dam of emotions in

the hearts of everyone in the room. "Please forgive us, we didn't know they were up there. We couldn't see them, and didn't know until it was too late!" Blurting out the very words he insisted he'd never say, caused the eyes of every man present, Afghan and American, to well up with tears.

Following his lead, Soldier after Soldier, every Green Beret team member present spoke similar words of sorrow, regret, and even apology for the incident that unintentionally claimed the lives of four of their sons, and wounded a fifth. The men of both teams who had primary responsibility for that live-fire training exercise, as well as the emergency medical response exposed their hearts. All spoke in gentle, humble words, conveyed through an interpreter, himself an Afghan medical doctor, specially chosen for this event because of our confidence in his linguistic skill, intelligence, and maturity. During much of the time, he, too, had tears in his eyes.

Up to this point, the Afghan fathers had said little, beyond the theologically correct Islamic assertion that "Allah had willed them to die as martyrs." When the last US soldier had shared his words, the fathers spoke. They thanked the men for coming and having tea with them. One confirmed that retaliation was never an option in their minds, as such an attempt would have been suicide on their part. They did express concern that no American official came to their homes during the mourning period, if it was, indeed, an accident. My previous fruitless conversation with the battalion commander came to mind.

Near the end of the hour-long conversation, the Afghan father-spokesman who had lost both his son, and his nephew, motioned with his hand that he wanted to speak a concluding

word. All eyes turned to him. "We know that you did not intend to kill our sons – that it was an accident. Allah willed that they should die as martyrs. You have done your jobs well. Now go home with no heaviness of heart. We forgive you." I let his words sink in.

Unsure of what would be the outcome of this risky encounter, I believed I had just heard the best words and sensed the best emotional responses possible. Though unimaginable at the outset, I witnessed humility, genuine sorrow, sympathy, brokenness and forgiveness – all the essential elements of not only conciliation, but reconciliation. In my pastor's heart I was satisfied that this was a healing moment for both our Soldiers and the bereaved Afghan fathers.

I thanked them for their time and hospitably, this and the many times prior – this was meeting number seven for me – and I asked if we could take a group picture outside to commemorate this special gathering. We filed out, put on our boots and leaving body armor aside, we took a group photo through the cracked lens of my digital camera. After many strong, lingering, culturally appropriate, manly Afghan hugs, and even kisses on the cheeks of these American warriors – including my own -- we boarded our vehicles and returned to base.

As part of our daily routine, I reported my significant actions in the Commanders Update Brief. No questions were asked and few comments were made, but I knew that one of the most important missions of our deployment had just been accomplished.

It's been twelve years since those events. When I saw the call for articles on moral injury, I thought of this incident and the Soldiers it impacted. I called "Commander Dave," now, like me, retired and living post-

military productive lives. I asked Dave to give his Warrior perspective on the incident and the follow-on event described above.

Master Sergeant Dave's input.....

"This was by far the most tragic incident in my military career. In a land of few resources and fewer opportunities the loss of a child is devastating. I had seen traumatic injuries and death before. It's never easy to see but it drives into your soul that you have to do everything you can to prevent tragedies and be prepared for what to do should it happen. In the 3rd world the concept of safety is drastically different than what would be normally acceptable to any military operation. You make detailed plans, review and revise them and do everything possible to make sure they are carried out efficiently and without incident.

Training and building the Afghan army was a huge responsibility. It wasn't possible to train in Afghanistan at the same level like US military ranges. We didn't own or control the land. We rolled in, posted guards and security, set up targets and conducted the days training. It was a constant struggle to keep the locals off the range. If they could have caught the hot brass directly out of the weapon they would have been there with a basket in hand. After training we rolled everything up and took it with us. Safety measures couldn't be the same - anything left in the area was gone 15 minutes after we left.

We experienced mixed feelings for locals who came to watch our every move. We wondered if they were gathering information for the Afghani's. We liked the children because they were happy and playful but we also had to be stern with them to keep them safely out of our training. With no school or jobs we were the entertainment. It was

common for the boys to be trusted to wander and explore their world - it is part of their culture to be curious at what they observed. The expended brass left after training was valuable to them, it could be sold by the pound in town.

The day of the incident was one I will never forget. The coordination and movement of a few hundred proud soldiers is something to see. We made sure the guards on the perimeters were in place and given strict orders to allow nobody into the area. The Ghar was a mountain ridge that dominated the landscape. The objective of the day was a combined arms assault of a compound at the base of the Ghar. Mortars, crew-served machine guns, and recoilless rifles would prepare the target then the ground assault would rush through the compound. This day was the day of live fire.

All seemed to go as rehearsed. The soldiers moved in line with discipline up to the compound. Once the mortar fire died, we could see a car racing across the valley floor. It drove past the posted guards and into the line of fire at the compound. A cease fire was quickly called. The driver stopped his car at the base of the mountain and ran up the mountain disappearing into the steep rocks. We followed him to the base of the Ghar from our observation point. Shortly after we learned why he would risk driving past the guards and in front of a live firing line. The boys had climbed over the Ghar from the backside to watch and be ready to rush down from the mountain after the assault. The concept of mortars firing at high angle and dropping down wasn't something they would have thought of. The mortars were going to be dropping danger close to the soldiers on the assault line, so they had to be knowingly

fired beyond the target and walked in to the target. Beyond the target meant distance but it also meant altitude. The boys may have thought they were safely above the compound but didn't know what was about to happen.

Seeing the bodies as we loaded them into the ambulance was heartbreaking. Young lives were ended, I was a leader and initially I felt personally responsible. Within hours an officer from the command was flown in to investigate. Myself and the three other leaders gave him the plans and explained everything that happened. He reassured us that we had done everything possible. That didn't stop the sorrow. It was then that we had to process the loss and gather ourselves to be capable of continuing our mission

There was no refusing a request from Chaplain Andy - he provided the means for good work that was more than the defined orders from our command. The meeting with the parents was after all of the official acts of reconciliation. Some time had passed and I still felt an honest remorse. These men had lost sons that they loved and expected them to care for them as they aged. I knew nothing I could have said would have changed what happened but I needed to look them in the eyes and express how sorry I felt for their loss. The words they spoke accepting my sorrow meant so much to me. I know that I am better today because of their forgiveness – "maharomona."

Looking back I can recognize that training and experience make all the difference in how an individual is affected by tragedy. It doesn't lessen your emotions but how you process them internally makes the difference between normal sorrow and a moral injury

that can result in PTSD. I can thank Andy for being part of my armor. He was there with encouragement, and to give you a look at a moral compass.

When I think about that day I can sleep at night because of training, past experience and the forgiving words the parents expressed. That is what prevented a moral injury to me."

Dave and I both agree that we have been able to sleep well since that day, due in large part to the opportunity we made to meet with the fathers of the boys unintentionally killed on 14 December, 2002.

Writers' Background Notes:

Master Sergeant (Ret) David L. Martinez, served with the 5/19th Special Forces Group, Airborne, ("The Green Berets") of the Colorado Army National Guard in Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other places around the world. A Special Forces Operator with six military specialties; he was qualified in weapons, intelligence, and operations. He retired in 2013 and was recognized as 2014 Outstanding Volunteer for *Trips for Kids* Foundation in Denver, Colorado.

Chaplain, Colonel Andrew C. Meverden, USA, Retired deployed with the 5/19th Special Forces Group, Airborne, ("The Green Berets") in Afghanistan in 2002/3. He retired in 2014 from the Colorado Army National Guard and now serves as Director of Chaplaincy and Endorser for CBAmerica, located in Longmont, Colorado. He resides in Aurora, Colorado, and continues to support the State's large veteran community.
