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A Stay in Afghanistan during *Resolute Support*: Recent On-the-Ground Experiences. A soldier's perspective

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Abstract

The return in late June 2021 of the last German soldiers from the Resolute Support Mission to Afghanistan remained as unnoticed by the German media as the topic Afghanistan itself during the last years. Only when Kabul fell to the Taliban did the decades-long friendly disinterest turn into a broad public discussion of German (military) efforts in Afghanistan. Though seemingly everyone, including politicians and the media, was stunned by the Taliban's swift progress, my comrades who had served in Afghanistan were not, no matter what rank they carried or when they had been posted there.

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A Stay in Afghanistan during *Resolute Support*:
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A soldier's perspective

X.

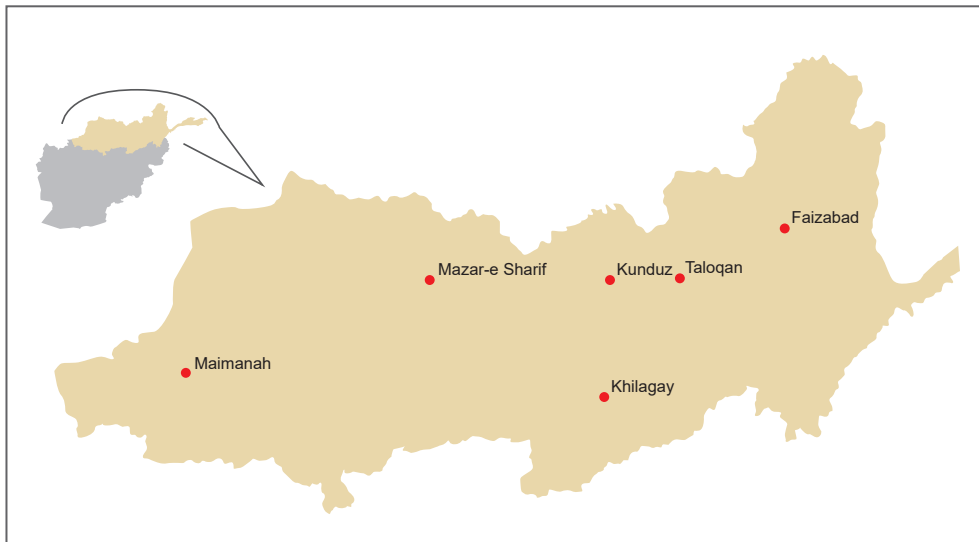
<i>Glossary</i>	
AOO	Area of Operations
eaP	Expeditionary Advisory Package
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JTAC	Joint Terminal Attack Controller
K 9	Explosive Detection Dog
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NRF	Nato Response Force
OMLT	Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team
RSM	Resolute Support Mission
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TAA	Train, Advise, Assist
TAAC-N	Train, Advice, Assist Command North
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

Introduction

When I was first asked to participate in this issue of *Ethnoscripts*, in August 2021, I was unsure whether I could contribute anything. The media was focused on the fall of Kabul – much to my surprise. During my seven-month stay in Afghanistan, only once did a journalist cross my path to write an article about the commander of the so-called Train Advise Assist Command – North (TAAC-N). So the sudden interest in Afghanistan and the German armed forces who were temporarily based there came as a surprise; usually interest is only shown in the Bundeswehr when there is a scandal to be reported on. What did not come as a surprise, however, was the fall of Afghanistan. I decided to contribute to this issue, though, for moral reasons: often sociologists, economists, and journalists are quick to analyse the failures of and ‘scandals’ in the German army, police, and administration. Writing for *Ethnoscripts* gave me, a soldier, the chance to share my experience of working with people who showed bravery, made sacrifices, and (even if this may

sound naïve) tried to make things better by acting rather than by complaining about the bad state of things they found on the ground.

Most papers in this collection have a scientific approach to the topic; this one is different. It presents a personal, idiosyncratic view of my last tour of duty during Germany's Resolute Support Mission¹ to Afghanistan. One can easily argue for or against my points, and fellow veterans might have experienced things differently. From my professional perspective as soldier, my stay in Afghanistan was a good one because every member of my unit returned safely without major mental or physical scars. This personal evaluation, however, does not reflect an overall assessment of the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. Views can also differ depending on a soldier's rank and level. I cannot speak for the TAAC-N as a whole² nor for the entire German army. My views stem from serving at the lower end of the military structure and reflect my perspective as a middle-ranked officer.



Places of military operations in Afghanistan. Map: © X.

The purpose of this essay is not to analyse the pros and cons of military missions in general, the strategies employed in Afghanistan in particular, or the political situation and suffering the mission there could not alleviate or eradicate. It rather serves to share thoughts and experiences from my seven months in Afghanistan as a Ground Force Commander. I focus on three top-

- 1 The Resolute Support Mission, which began on 1 January 2015, was the follow-up of the International Security Assistance Force Mission. Its primary aim was to provide training and advice to the Afghan security forces to enable them to take over the control of their country. The mission can thus be considered non-kinetic, that is, not a mission that inherently involved the use of force or weapons with the exception of self-defence.
- 2 As the name suggests, there were also TAACs in the south, east, and west of Afghanistan, and in the air.

ics that I noticed and that struck me as important when trying to understand the recent events in Afghanistan from a military perspective: the general setting of military advising and force protection in the vicinity of Mazar-e-Sharif; the temporary expeditionary advisory package³ in Maymana (also Meymaneh); and the airborne nature of advice-giving throughout the country. I do not mention specifics of names, tactics, and procedures, to retain military confidentiality; it is also likely that these details would be of little interest to the reader.

Getting there – equipment and preparation

Preparation is key for military missions; or, as General Suvorov⁴ put it: ‘Hard in training, easy in battle.’ Training sessions should allow soldiers to practice with all equipment that must be used when in battle, and should be repeated so often that they feel well prepared. This is not always the case in the normal Germany army where, for budgetary reasons, commanders must fight for every single piece of military equipment their soldiers required. But the preparations for the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan were even worse. Even though this mission would place the soldiers’ lives into direct danger (unlike other missions that were often more of a symbolic display of military potential), the company was ill equipped and unable to prepare itself well for what was coming. This stood in contrast to my previous experience in several German missions. For example, during my time in the NATO Response Force and the test-phase of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force in 2014 and 2015, I experienced what I would call military training heaven. We were provided with a fully equipped platoon – even with reserves in material – and had assets for training in all kinds of scenarios. There were night-vision goggles for every soldier, additional recce equipment,⁵ and enough vehicles to be fully mobile. But when we prepared and trained for the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, where we would have much more direct connection to military danger than in any other previous mission, we had too few night-vision goggles and vehicles – ironically, exactly those materials that we would especially need in the mission.

3 Expeditionary advisory package means a mission outside the usual ‘mission area’. In case of Germany’s, the mission area was the area of Mazar-e-Sharif and its surrounds.

4 Alexander Suvorov (1729–1800) was a Russian general famous for considering his soldiers as human beings and treating them much better than soldiers were treated at the time. He was a good writer and more hands-on than the famous military theorists Gerhard von Scharnhorst and Carl von Clausewitz. Citing a Russian general these days might seem strange. But I refuse to grant certain ill-acting Russians of the present the power to spoil my perception of persons who lived hundreds of years ago.

5 In this case, technical gadgets like sensors and additional optical equipment.

The lack of training before the mission had to be counter-balanced by training during the mission. Thus drivers had to get used to what night-vision goggles can provide and what not, and the team had to learn how it could support each other during the night with their various assets. The time to catch up on the lack of training was, of course, time that should have been used to recover or sleep. Though the company and the battalion gave their best to deal with these problems, help from outside or superior structures was at best⁶ ‘unlikely’. The Resolute Support Mission apparently had a low priority in the German armed forces, compared to other missions that took place with well-equipped and precisely trained soldiers. I am not sure why, but they sent us to Afghanistan with a deficient material base which could protect neither us nor the Afghans we were supposed to support.

I was in luck, though, as I had the privilege of having highly motivated direct superiors and subordinates, who pulled together to counterbalance our lack in equipment and external training. But I could never shake off the feeling that the mission in Afghanistan was of low priority to my government, unloved by politicians and the military leadership.⁷ Highly likely, it was also unloved by the vast majority of people whose land we, as foreign armed forces, entered.

Delivering force protection in Mazar-e-Sharif

The focus of the Resolute Support Mission was to enable the armed forces and various institutions of Afghanistan to take over their own country and provide an insurgent-free, secure environment. To support military leaders and other leading persons in this, a ‘train, advise, assist’ (TAA) approach was used and executed by multinational soldiers, mainly staff officers; taking part in the Resolute Support Mission was supposed to be part of an empowerment of the Afghan army. Whilst the TAA approach is sometimes presented as having been limited to security institutions, that was not the case. Locations of advising included not only barracks, police stations and schools, but also media centres and counter-narcotics institutions. However, everybody who wanted to conduct TAA was provided with force protection. This was our duty.⁸

6 The ‘at best’ relates to a very inspiring brigade commander who at least tried to give support.

7 How difficult it is to be a foreign military leader in Afghanistan even when acting responsibly, reasonably, and honestly was probably experienced by no one better than former Colonel Georg Valentin Klein, I would say. This topic is controversial, but the judicial statements that resulted from his case can provide an enlightening perspective: Generalbundesanwalt, 16.04.2010, 3 BJs 6/10-4.

8 This role was quite a paradox for us as armoured infantry: whilst usually all services are provided to fighting units, in this mission, fighting forces were service providers.

It is possible to debate, however, whether this advising always took part on the right level of command or concerning the right topics. Having been only a bystander and enabler of actual advising sessions, I have serious doubts on a few things. If I were to imagine myself in the situation of an Afghan staff officer, I certainly would not appreciate having an advisor checking up on me all the time. Time is usually the highest of all goods, and when whole days are spent discussing certain topics with an external advisor, it seems hard to get any work done. A second observation applies to the fact that all around the world military rookies are usually trained by experienced non-commissioned officers. As the Afghan national forces had suffered heavy losses in 2019 and 2020, one of their main concerns must have been training fresh soldiers for battle. This can hardly be done through the foreign supervision of high ranked officers. And whilst all training in general is fine, if foreign advisers do not go into combat with the Afghans they advise, their work will be tainted by a lack in credibility. It may thus be that the approach by the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team (OMLT) during the International Security Assistance Force (which preceded the Resolute Support Mission) had a higher impact and served its purpose better: OMLTs were small teams that advised down to the platoon and company level, shared the dangers with their Afghan counterparts, and served with them during military operations.

If advising in a security context⁹ should be to the point, it seems reasonable to advise on police and military work. It also seems reasonable to assist in media centres to help get the message across. What does not seem reasonable is to force a gender advisor on locals who not only possess a completely different gender concept than that held by a European gender specialist but who are simply not in the position to act on such gender concepts in an area where the lives of millions are threatened by malnutrition, terror attacks, and continuous conflict. Trying to educate war-torn and undernourished locals on gender norms through a top-down approach and enforced by military personnel has not empowered women; rather, it irritated locals and made them suspicious of the German agenda.

Finally, the heading of this section bears a point in itself. It does not say ‘from’ or ‘around’ Mazar-e-Sharif but ‘in’. Where Afghanistan, to my knowledge, has a quite open-minded population in its major cities, rural communities can hold rather different views. But there was no reach-out to these rural communities, no direct link was established. It is possible that this was the key weakness of the advising that took place as part of the Resolute Support

9 It is hard to define what makes up ‘advising’, as it depends on the personal effort put into it and on how good one’s social connections are. Advising can be discussing structures or progress on projects, or implementing new systems (for example, IT). It can also deal with the optimisation of the usage of combat support, such as indirect fire, or combat service support, such as logistics. It can even deal with how military forces can support civil lives, as through the fixing of roads by engineer units.

Mission; consequently, when the international forces retreated from these rural areas, the Taliban had no problems taking them over. So, considering the situation from a pessimistic point of view, it is possible to argue that the whole international TAA took place only in a few ‘happy islands’ that were not held by the Taliban. And without international military presence, it could have been asked much earlier how long it would take the Taliban to take what they had basically already encircled.

Maymana – hard realities

Talking about encirclement: the province of Faryab and its capital Maymana are an apt example for this. Maymana was declared as a temporary ‘expeditionary advisory package’ (eaP) by high command. This term referred to missions that took place outside of the usual ‘mission area’, with Germany’s mission area being Mazar-e-Sharif and its surrounds. That it was temporary was determined by the German mandate and meant that German forces were not allowed to be stationed there continuously. The issue was solved by relieving the German Forces a few times for two weeks by Dutch and Finnish troops.

The general task of the German’s mission’s eaP in Maymana was to provide force protection for advisors from the United States (US). For at least the first few months, the work was limited and dull, providing basic security to the US advisors as these had their own security systems too.¹⁰ The daily routine was marked by two weeks of three six-hour shifts: standing in battle position and watching, being there for unloading helicopters, doing maintenance of equipment or doing sports, and finally grabbing six hours of sleep.

In contrast, the various US operations conducted under the umbrella of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel were not as limited. The Resolute Support Mission and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel were two separate mandates. The latter included a kinetic effort,¹¹ which means it could employ military weapons and force up to lethal force, in the worst case killing persons and destroying infrastructure; the Resolute Support Mission, in contrast, was non-kinetic. A mixture of both would not have been in the interest of any European political leader as the whole point of changing from the International Security Assistance Force (2001–2014) to the Resolute Support Mission (2015–2021) was to enable European forces to withdraw from combat action. Yet, by proclaiming advising on brigade level as part of the US mission, there was at least a hypothetical reason to support with German Force Protection. Thus, the German mission served as a fig leaf: German troops provided security for US troops

10 I do not know why the German contribution was so limited. I think the US aim was more one of coordinating Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, their kinetic efforts, and providing a forward operating base in Maymana than of focusing on military training and advising.

11 This active military operating with all means of military force occurred also on own behalf and not only by Afghan request.

at occasions when US soldiers were formally ‘advising’, but actually engaging in kinetic action – that is, they were providing security for those who, for example were destroying Taliban Headquarters and killing them.

Talking of the kinetic approach, I want to cite one of my soldiers. Whilst the US troops were zeroing their mounted weapons, this soldier was in his battle position. They had not given him a pre-warning of what they were planning to do. But he, observing what they were doing, asked me whether the local population was aware that these big calibres would hit their fields. I replied that I did not know and that I was not even able to warn the Afghan side, by now equally concerned as he was. He, himself the son of a farmer, looked at the field and mumbled: ‘No wonder that most people here dislike us.’

Giving security to the kinetic activities of the US troops put us into the uncomfortable situation of knowing that we were working outside of – or at least bypassing – our mandate. But simply being stationed in Maymana already did the same. When we entered the province of Faryab, it was already under full control of the Taliban. Maymana was a lonely island still under control of the Afghan government or the coalition forces. Going in or out of Maymana could thus only be done by air. Even though the station in Maymana was heavily equipped with both US and German ammunition and arms, reserves can end quickly, and an immediate withdrawal of advisers, troops and material from Maymana would have required more storage space and seats on aircraft than the TAAC-N was able to provide. In such an emergency, Maymana would also not be able to rely on help from Mi helicopters¹² as it was not permitted for unprotected aircraft to land in a ‘hot’ landing zone, an area where combat actions can take place and enemy weapons can reach the landing area.

Similar circumstances also applied to the Kunduz area. Advising here was taken seriously and a well-structured routine was standard. However, the situation concerning the enemy power was no different: personnel could only reach Kunduz by air. Any ground moves, like in the times of International Security Assistance Force, were off limits as the Taliban controlled the highways and put high pressure on the Pol-e Khomri Triangle.

The point is that, if one looked beyond the safe bubbles, it was clear that the Afghan security forces would never be able to control the areas outside the major cities. The forces’ range and freedom of movement were already tightly limited when foreign troops were still in Afghanistan. Anyone leaving Mazar-e-Sharif would immediately have found themselves in enemy territory with clever subunits up to platoon level, often with night-vision capabilities and fighting from well-known battle positions. How can one blame people for not supporting the security forces that are clearly not capable of going where they want without being ripped apart by the Taliban?

12 The Mi helicopter is former Soviet helicopter model.

Advising outside of the mission area

To me the airborne, short-term advising missions that took place during the TAAC-N were my highlight from a military point of view. Planning and leading missions on the ground were a positive form of stress and gave me the freedom to use and show my military skills. However, the risk involved may not always have been on par with their necessity. It might have been valuable to meet a local politician, but did the rendezvous point have to be at an Afghan checkpoint in the backyard of the Taliban?

Things usually went as planned, but there was always some natural friction as soon as there were boots on the ground. The Afghan security forces always provided an outer circle of security on these occasions. But they were always met with a certain measure of distrust and so were never afforded insight into how security along the inner ring was ensured, ranging from explosive ordnance disposal to the use of explosive detection dogs. But this distrust seemed necessary as there had been a number of insider-threat cases where soldiers in the Afghan security forces supported the enemy and used their position to open fire, stage a suicide attack, or provide inside knowledge to outsiders.

Before boots reach the ground, the air move is the most vulnerable point. The lack of actual military aircraft in the TAAC-N has always been a problem. In some situations, the US forces were able to provide two Apache helicopters as an armed escort and, in the best case, would provide overwatch throughout the whole operation. If unlucky, and both cases happened, you will get to wherever in an unarmed, white Mi helicopter¹³ and the first 'boot on the ground' was the board mechanic in his sandals. There was some bitter irony to this: only after the soldiers in the unprotected aircraft exited and swept the potentially dangerous area would the armed and armoured type CH-53 transport helicopters touch down, as stipulated in the standard German operating procedures.¹⁴ Once all air vehicles were properly arranged, everybody was in position, and the area was swept, the entourage of important people (usually highly ranked military leaders) arrives. Often these were people that commanders like me would know, as many of us had fierce arguments with them about air space capability, arguing that Force Protection forces needed the lion share of seats as they are more important than this or that staff officer. Sometimes, an additional helicopter would arrive and people in suits, sunglasses, and with briefcases or laptops disembark for a separate meeting with the Afghan intelligence forces. It made us wonder whether we were re-

13 These helicopters formed the so-called 'white fleet': they were unarmed and mainly unarmoured helicopters, with a capacity of 15 passengers, provided by Ukrainian or Georgian contractors to provide air transport. They did prove to be reliable and easy for planning.

14 There are some pilots, however, who I value highly, who will tell you quite bluntly that they will ignore this rule if there is immediate danger to life.

ally protecting a *shura*,¹⁵ one of our tasks as Force Protection in the Resolute Support Mission mandate, or whether the whole purpose was not something quite different.

In which way advising was necessary and successful on these occasions is beyond my knowledge. What is in my knowledge, though, is the fact that the package of force protection and enablers – ranging from medical personnel to explosive ordnance disposal teams, from joint terminal attack controllers to signal support – with very few exceptions always did their job on point, reliably, and professionally.

Conclusion

Three aspects must be mentioned. First and foremost: for the most part Afghanistan was already out of the control of the Afghan security forces by 2019. Perhaps this did not seem obvious to everyone, as (in the case of TAAC-N) the advising took place at high levels and usually in vicinity of Mazar-e-Sharif. But outside these areas, the Taliban already had the upper hand. The fact that we could reach Kunduz or Maymana only by air illustrates this problematic situation. Second, the approach of the Resolute Support Mission – and I want to highlight again that I am looking at this from a worm’s eye perspective – did not help much to change that situation. And finally, if you ask me as an individual soldier, I do not feel that I failed: the mission failed; and, yes, maybe each individual foreign presence in Afghanistan during the last decades was a bad idea; but on a personal level, I do not feel that I did not do my job well. And this is what I want to share with all people who poured their efforts into Afghanistan, no matter whether civil or military, Afghan and non-Afghan, and especially with those who lost friends there or who carry marks on their bodies until today: you did your job with all your heart and you did it well, no matter to which nation you belonged or which rank you carried. There is a difference between a political and a military disaster. To my understanding, Afghanistan is the former.

Naturally, at the end of a mission one asks oneself what was achieved. I did not feel I could tell my soldiers that they contributed greatly to the national security of Afghanistan, because this would simply not have been true. We provided security for those who were supposed to support the Afghans in doing that on their own. The question that challenges me, though, is what we learnt from our time there. Maybe it is about being humble and thankful for the most basic things we own: the knowledge that our families are safe, that we do not have to live in poverty and can have a meal every day, that our houses are safe places and there is no threat to our lives. This lesson seems to be even more true when looking at Afghanistan now. Afghans we came to appreciate and bid warm farewells to may not be alive anymore. Whilst we

15 A *shura* is a council or referendum of important political, religious, and social leaders.

know all those who collaborated with us,¹⁶ we missed the chance of offering many of them a safe migration to a safe country. One could argue that this is only of concern on an ethical level. But if this approach forms part of our foreign and military policy, then it will certainly be difficult to find allies on future missions.

As a captain of a German task force, X. spent seven months in Afghanistan during the final phase of the German “Resolute Support” mission. For reasons of confidentiality, his real name cannot be mentioned here, but is known to the editors.

¹⁶ Local workers and service providers were all registered and usually carried an identification document.