

# Introducing Special Mission Wing

The most modernized unit in Afghanistan

by Capt Abdul Rahman Rahmani

**O**n a foggy night in October 2016, the Taliban shot down a Mi-17 helicopter in Baghlan Province, northern Afghanistan. Two pilots, two crew chiefs, and nine ANA (National Army) soldiers died instantly. Ahmad Shah Shirzad was one of the crew chiefs. Shirzad started his service as an Afghan Commando in October 2002. Having served for sixteen years, Shirzad was one of the best crew chiefs. He traveled to the United Kingdom for crew chief and flight engineer training in 2009. He was then sent to the United States for pilot training in 2013, but because of his lack of English language, Shirzad did not pass the English Comprehension Level exam and had to return to Afghanistan. Unlike many Afghan Armed Forces members who came to the United States during these last sixteen years—and escaped to Canada—Shirzad loved his country and the people of Afghanistan. Therefore, he returned to his unit, SMW (Special Mission Wing), and served the country with courage and honesty until he sacrificed his life for peace, stability, and a better future for the next Afghan generation. With Shirzad in mind, you will be introduced to SMW's capacity and the capability of its fleets, the challenges that the unit faces in its daily missions, and the solutions to those challenges.

The history of SMW begins in 2006 when it was called the AIU (Air Interdiction Unit). The core mission of AIU was counternarcotics operations. The official opening ceremony of SMW took place on 12 July 2012. Currently, SMW is responsible for counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions in Afghanistan. The unit primarily works with ANA commandos and ASF (Af-

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ghan Special Forces), providing them close air support, air assault operations, resupply, casualty evacuation, and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance). The main objective of the unit is to destroy the enemy's headquarters, kill or capture the enemy's leadership, disrupt the enemy's maneuvers, and demolish drug smuggling networks in Afghanistan.

Currently, SMW has more than 750 personnel, 28 Mi-17 transport helicopters, and seventeen PC-12 fixed-wing aircrafts for reconnaissance operations. SMW has fifteen qualified Mi-17 aircrews and fourteen qualified PC-12 aircrews. The unit has four squadrons:

two are based in Kabul along with its headquarters; another is in northern Afghanistan in Mazar-i-Sharif; and the last squadron is based in southern Afghanistan in Kandahar.<sup>1</sup>

SMW is one of the best units in Afghanistan. It was the first unit that had the capability to take responsibility for night flights from the coalition forces at the beginning of the transition process in 2014. SMW pilots are highly trained in countries such as the United States, the Czech Republic, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates. Recruiting standards are high in order to maintain personnel readiness and professionalism. SMW provides the ASF and ANA commandos



**Ahmad Shah Shirzad during graduation ceremony, Lackland AFB, San Antonio, TX, 2013. (Photo by author.)**

with the ability to conduct day/night surveillance, intelligence gathering, and quick reaction operations.

For instance, the Taliban attacked one of the military hospitals near the United States' embassy in Kabul on 8 March 2017. In a quick reaction plan, up to 120 ASFs descended to the roof of the hospital by SMW in less than one hour to defeat the attackers. On 24 April 2016, at 2200, Mohammad Belal Kohistani, an Instructor Pilot and the commander of 4th squadron in Mazari-i-Sharif, received a secret concept of operation on his official email from headquarters. The concept of operation had only a grid and a name. Kohistani was directed to arrest a Taliban commander by 0400 the next morning. The pilots, who came from another mission in Maimana, informed him that there was no illumination. Kohistani called aircrews in the planning room, issued the concept of operation, and said,

I know you all are coming from a mission, and there is no illumination at the time of our operation, and we have limited time to coordinate with the American mentors to provide flare[s]. But still this mission is important. Conducting such missions is our daily business. We have to prove ourselves that we are above the best. With this said, I rely on you, and I want you to take your time and make a decision, whether you do this operation or deny it.

The pilots, flight engineers, and crew chiefs discussed the issue, and a final decision came out. "We are willing to do the mission," one of the senior pilots said to the commander. The crew chiefs and flight engineers went to prepare and preflight the aircraft, and the pilots sat down to plan on the computers. Using an old version of the TolanView (a computer map program), the pilots were able to finish the planning in two hours. With 36 ASFs onboard, three Mi-17s took off at 0100 and landed near a village in Buen Village of Khan Abad district of Samangan Province. It took the soldiers one hour to capture the Taliban commander. The helicopters landed in the Mazar-i-Sharif airport just prior to 0330 in the morning. Later, the media announced that Qari Salim, one of the



**Belal Kohistani participating in a shooting exercise in Logar Province, 2015. (Photo by author.)**

Taliban's most senior commanders in northern Afghanistan, was arrested. He was the provincial chief of the Taliban for Kunduz Province, and he was the mastermind of the Taliban's Kunduz campaign in December 2015.

While SMW remains a doer of the challenging and demanding day/night missions, currently, it faces several challenges. First, a lack of air support, especially for the night operations, prevents SMW from chasing targets before they

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escape. For example, RS (RESOLUTE SUPPORT) provides SMW with C-130 and Apache air support, but this support is limited and requires more time because there are limited C-130s available in Afghanistan, and RS does not provide C-130 support unless it is requested 48 hours prior to the requirement.

Second, multiple command and control links significantly hold SMW back to provide best support for the ASF. For instance, there are three different

branches that task SMW: the General Chief of Staff of the MoD (Ministry of Defense), JSOCC (Joint Special Operations Coordination Center), and National Operations Center of the MoD.

Third, SMW's personnel security is a great challenge. They are forced to travel with uniforms on out of their military base, on their way home and back to work.

Fourth, SMW obtains little attention from the MoD and the Afghan Government because it is isolated by the commanders of AAF (Afghan Air Force) in the MoD. For example, President Dr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah have never met SMW, while both of them, with the influence of AAF commanders, have appeared in several ceremonial functions with similar units.

Finally, and most importantly, SMW lacks social services, logistics, and supplies. For example, the pilots don't have life insurance or proper healthcare. They are living in rental houses. Their annual income totals less than \$10,000 dollars. They only get 100 grams of beef, one apple, a glass of water, and a little rice as their meal once a day. Also, the utility uniform is issued every two years, but sometimes, no boots are issued for three to four years. There are no class C or class A uniforms for the pilots.



To overcome the first challenge, SMW must have its own air support. An excellent recommendation is to provide the unit with A-29 fighter jets for close combat operations and MD-35 helicopters for close air support. These assets are already provided by the U.S. Army to the AAF. All that is needed is to transfer these assets from AAF to SMW.

To prevail over the second challenge, SMW must be tasked through one chain of command. Three branches frequently task SMW without going through proper procedures or following SMW's SOP. For example, the helicopter that crashed in Baghlan, killing Shirzad, was directed by the MoD Chief of Staff although JSOCC was against the mission. This mission was delayed for several days because of poor weather and dangerous situations in the area of operations. The Taliban was 200 meters away from the target, and the landing zone (LZ) was hot and in a red zone on the map. Moreover, the LZ was not wide enough for two aircraft. Therefore, one aircraft had to land while the other had to circle the area. Unfortunately, the sleepless crew, while landing in the LZ, got shot by an RPG, and the aircraft was completely destroyed. After two days, when the next crew went to retrieve the bodies of their friends, they couldn't find anything except pieces of meat and burned bones.

As for the third challenge, the old regulations and laws in the MoD need to be amended. The pilots and security forces should be given an alternative choice of travel and weapons for their own protection and that of their families. A recommendation is to provide government-issued vehicles along with an M-4 rifle.

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To succeed in the fourth challenge, the MoD and higher command are encouraged to visit SMW periodically and provide moral support to its personnel.

Finally, it is important that the MoD and the Afghan Government motivate the pilots to continue their efforts. In doing so, the government must provide pilots with housing. According to the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, more than 6,000 apartments are to be built in Kabul by the end of 2020.<sup>2</sup> As a recommendation, the Afghan Government can provide housing for the pilots from this great source of housing. For the short term, there are already more than 2,000 apartments built and ready to use in Qasaba (a mile from SMW headquarters). Each pilot

should be issued an apartment. In return, they ought to sign a contract of five to ten years with the Afghan Government to serve in the military. This plan will provide security for the AAF and SMW headquarters, their personnel, and for the Kabul International Airport. It will also provide the pilots the physical, mental, and moral strength to plan, concentrate, and execute missions successfully. While supporting SMW logistically, before it is too late, there should be a plan in place for the pilots' life insurance. For instance, Shirzad had three daughters, two sons, and a mother. He had no brother, father, or uncle to provide shelter and support for his kids. Who is going to take care of his children? Are they to become street beggars in the near future? Can they go to school? What about their future? These questions should be asked about every pilot, and there have to be proper and concrete answers for them.

In conclusion, the capacity of SMW's fleet and its capability meet the needs of AFS and the commandos if it has its own air support. The Afghan Government and the United States, as the main provider of resources to the Afghan Military Forces, have to consider two things: the SMW should be tasked through a central command in Kabul, and the security and safety of its personnel should come first. Furthermore, higher commands in the MoD have a responsibility to visit the unit and address its issues. Housing, healthcare, logistics, and life insurance for the SMW personnel to carry out their daily missions remain vital and need to be addressed by the Afghan Government.

### Notes

1. Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2018 Budget for Afghan Security Forces, (Washington, DC: Fiscal Year 2018), available at <http://comptroller.defense.gov>.

2. Urban Development Support Project, Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, available at <http://mudh.gov>.



**The SMW has Mi-17s in its inventory.** (Photo by SSgt Todd Pouliot.)