

# Just Do Something

One nurse's combat journey to define and heal from moral injury

by LCDR Joseph R. Strahan, USN

As I landed at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 16 August 2021, I had no idea of the challenges ahead. Our team had spent months preparing for noncombatant evacuation operations, unaware of the ultimate costs some would pay to end our Nation's longest war. On 24 August 2021, I asked LT Jarrett Darrah, our dentist assigned to CLB-24, if he was ready to do something. Our goal was to help even one person among the throngs of Afghans in desperate need. It had been almost two decades since I had worn a greenside uniform, serving as a second-class FMF corpsman individual augmentee in Bravo Company, 1/4 Mar during the initial invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. Despite being older and wiser, I had to confront the emotions buried in my previous combat experience while navigating new ones.

A radio call requested medical support for the north gate early on 17 August. The crowd was large and desperate to flee Taliban rule, so they became unruly. Mission safety halted most operations. We had gunshot wounds, laboring women, dehydration, concertina wire lacerations, and trampled bumps and bruises. Morally, returning an injured Afghan outside the gate was the worst. I knew it would cost him his leg or kill him from blood loss or infection. The line-pulled interpreter argued for the patient. "Please, sir, he is poor and will not get the care he needs; he is scared he will die if you send him back out!" I am not criticizing leadership. Your mission determines how you treat patients. We must struggle and rationalize our response after that day. Our Marines, sailors, soldiers, airmen, Department of State, and allied military partners

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**Hamid Karzai International Airport, August 2021. (L-R, LT Jarrett Darrah, DC, USN; LT Joseph Strahan, NC, USN; Lt Cmdr Ashley Griggs, MSC PA, USN; LT Matthew Jordan, MC, USN; LT Andrew Chambers, NC, USN.). (Photo provided by author.)**

displayed unmatched composure and professionalism. They performed under the harshest conditions I have seen with grace and humility.

It is frustrating that I cannot recall her name. My recollection of her is fading as I begin writing this down. It is worth noting that most of us had been putting in twelve-to-eighteen-hour days since we arrived. With everyone's stamina stretched thin, we were all trying to complete our mission to the best of our abilities despite facing overwhelming challenges. I learned about her plight from one of the Marines stationed at the terminal. She had already made three attempts to reach one of the gates to

retrieve her child. She had already completed the processing formalities and was waiting for her flight to freedom, but she could not depart without her child. Perhaps it was my paternal instinct, but I could not let this go. I was tired of feeling powerless and had to *just do something*. I enquired which gate, and she replied, "Black gate, I know."

As we approached the hole in the wall, we spotted a small hand poking out. I asked for confirmation, and she nodded in response. Across the street, two armored military vehicles were parked, and my friend Jarrett and I decided to approach them for assistance. I explained my situation, making it clear

that I had no operational authority but was simply seeking help as a human being. They momentarily hesitated before a member of the BLT 1/8, known as “Gunner,” stepped forward to help. He said to give him a few minutes to gather an appropriate number of forces to open the gate and rescue the child.

While we were focused on the logistics, the mother climbed a ladder to reach the exterior wall. I quickly ran over and up the ladder to ensure her safety. Meanwhile, the crowd below passed the baby up to her. As the mother grabbed the baby, I held her steady to prevent her from falling onto the concertina wire. It felt great to be of help in such a situation. When we returned to the airport and walked from the ambulance, she said, “Thank you, I love you, I love you!”

Our final rescue was a challenging but rewarding operation that took four long days of careful planning. On 26 August, we successfully helped Mr. Mohibullah Mohmand get his sister, Shabnam, and her child, Kalai, out of Afghanistan. In collaboration with Virginia Senator Abigail Spanberger’s office and Laura McGlocklin from Re-Establish Richmond, we successfully coordinated and executed the mission in Afghanistan with the utmost efficiency and professionalism under challenging circumstances.

Shabnam was in a difficult situation, as her husband and extended family had already left Afghanistan, leaving her and her child behind. She had to rely on a neighbor to accompany her in public, as the Taliban required females to be accompanied by males. To extract her from the country, we devised a signaling plan where the individuals would place their left hand on their head, which allowed us to identify and locate Shabnam. Despite the language barrier, we communicated with Shabnam through her brother and helped her navigate the crowds of desperate families trying to flee the country. It took several hours of careful planning and execution, but eventually, we got Shabnam and her child to the front of the gate and safely extracted them from the country. I remember feeling proud and relieved as we completed the mission, knowing we



**HKIA August 2021: Mother’s love knows no boundaries.** (Photo provided by author.)



**HKIA August 2021: Incredibly happy after family reunification.** (Photo provided by author.)



**HKIA August 2021: Exhausted and traumatized, Shabnam and Kalai were less than a minute past the gate.** (Photo provided by author.)

had helped make a defining difference in someone’s life.

Later in the evening, we received news of an explosion at the Abbey gate—a sudden and significant shift from what had been a relatively non-violent operation. It was a devastating sight, and I hope none of you ever witnessed such destruction. Fortunately, I was safe inside the airport at the time. However, some team members reported to the Role 2 hospital, assisting the Norwegian, Australian, and U.S. Army medical staff with casualty receiving and trauma intervention. LT Jarret Darrah and a few corpsmen drove to the Abbey Gate to set up a casualty collection station and transport the triaged to the appropriate locations. My team cared for the walking wounded and spared most of the visible trauma. Nevertheless, the event had a profound impact, and it was evident that even those who were not present were affected somehow. Sadly, among the thirteen casualties was Sgt Nichole Gee, a Marine from our unit.

Moral injury is defined by Drs. Sonja Norman and Shira Maguen, as the aftermath of events that go against our deeply held moral beliefs that can cause psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual distress.<sup>1</sup> Betrayal from leaders or those in positions of power can also be a factor. I first truly understood the concept when a Navy chaplain spoke about it during a warrior transition briefing. He was part of a team sent to assist us, which included a psychiatrist, a mental health nurse practitioner, and two Navy behavioral health technicians. Their goal was to help us adjust to civilian life, provide tools to cope with potential challenges, acknowledge the uniqueness of our experiences, and give names to our emotions. They also provided safe spaces to unpack our thoughts and feelings if necessary.

It is a profound experience to finally have a name for what I have been feeling all these years. Once you can define what you are going through, you can start to process and move toward true healing and forgiveness. In HKIA, I had to deviate from my usual nursing path to face myself in the mirror. Since the fourth anniversary of the most prominent noncombatant evacuation

operations in history passes, I want to share my perspective on how I have begun to process what we saw and did to complete our mission successfully. In October 2024, I finally took the brave step of seeking professional help for my healing journey, and in hindsight, I wish I had made this decision much earlier. The transformation in my life is nothing short of astonishing. I now navigate each day without the heavy veil of anger and anxiety that once clouded my vision. My relationships with family are feeling a renewed warmth; they are stronger and more vibrant than ever. My wife and children are beginning to relish the time we spend together again, their laughter filling our home like a long-missed melody.

The combination of medication, individual and group Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, thorough assessments at a Traumatic Brain Injury Clinic, and dedicated case management has helped me discover a sense of balance that I had thought was lost forever. I wholeheartedly encourage you to embrace

the resources available to you; they can be a guiding light on your path to healing. I do not believe this chapter is fully closed, as I know I will continue to process these events for years to come, much like the seven stages of grief. The best way to honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, especially those we knew personally, is by living our lives to the fullest. We should forgive ourselves for not doing everything we thought we could have and live without guilt or shame. Above all, we should live our lives to the best of our abilities.

I want to share a poem written by Dr. Schuyler Geller, a retired Air Force colonel, Medical Corps chief flight surgeon, and staff hospitalist at Louisa Johnson Veterans Administration Medical Center, Clarksburg, WV. He served 24 consecutive months as the command surgeon for NATO's training mission in Afghanistan, commander of the Medical Training Advisory Group, and special staff to GEN David Patreus:

*I don't see myself as powerless.  
I place one foot in front of the other*

*and walk the paths open to me.  
I do not try to carve a cave or tunnel out  
of a rockface  
with my bare hands anymore.  
Some paths, unseen, just appear  
as you take one more step.  
Keep going,  
you may be just one step away from triumph.*

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#### Notes

1. Sonya Norman and Shira Maguen, "General Information," *VA.Gov*, n.d., [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral\\_injury.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp).

> *Author's Note: The views written are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of DOD or its components.*

