

# What Does an Afghanistan War Veteran Have to Say about Ending America's Longest War?

| By Kimberly S. Bouyer

Today's news cycle is largely focused on the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Retired military generals, politicians, media pundits, and foreign correspondents have been saturating the airwaves with their critique of the Biden Administration's exit strategy. But what does an Afghanistan war veteran, like Adam Ecker, have to say about ending America's longest war?

Adam Ecker, a 41-year-old United Parcel Service (UPS) manager and Army veteran, jumped into the fray to share his thoughts and opinions about these current events. The incessant coverage triggered Ecker's Afghanistan tour of duty memories.

Ecker, who served as an infantry sergeant in the Army National Guard and was stationed in Afghanistan, said that he remembered the eager Army recruiters during his high school years. These recruiters, according to Ecker, frequented the football games and wrestling matches, looking for athletic kids, such as himself, to enlist. He was not interested. However, after witnessing the strikes against the World Trade Center and growing concerned for his then girlfriend and her family's well-being, he signed up. In February 2002, Ecker, at age 21, enlisted in the Army National Guard. Ecker said he was motivated to enlist because his girlfriend was afraid the next attack might be in Clarksville where her parents lived. "That's where they manufactured munitions during world war. So, there was a lot of fear. Are they going to attack these places as well? And that was the main motivating factor which made me sign up for the army."

Ecker recounted being unaware in the initial moments of that day because he was rushing off to his first morning class. "Like any college student, I'm rolling out of bed at the last minute," he said. "I didn't turn the TV on or anything. I got to class and found that class was cancelled. I got back to my dorm and turned on the TV. And that's when, of course, they were showing video of individuals jumping out of the Twin Towers and burning." After Al Qaeda's attack on 9/11, Ecker, a college sophomore at Vincennes University in Indiana at the time, conveyed he needed to do something. That tragic day in American history galvanized Ecker into enlisting a couple months later. Thus, shortly after the collapse of the Twin Towers, he forged ahead, training in the United States Army Airborne School at Ft. Benning, GA.

As Ecker spoke, he articulated his words in a warm-hearted, soothing cadence. In his dulcet voice, he described the moment he got the notification for his deployment to Afghanistan, which occurred in spring 2004, while he matriculated at Purdue University. "I was just getting ready to finish up my second semester," he said. "I had been selected to go to Air Assault School, and that's when I found out I was no longer on the books where I was stationed." He was stationed in Frankfort, IN. The Indiana Army National Guard reassigned him to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 151<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment in New Albany, IN. The New Albany Infantry Unit deployed in two weeks to Afghanistan. "I didn't even get to finish my second semester at Purdue," he said.

Ecker trained at Camp Atterbury Army Base in Edinburgh, IN for his tour of duty in Afghanistan. When asked what his thoughts were at that time, he replied, "I was happier that I

was going to Afghanistan than Iraq because of the attack on 9/11. It was more of a privilege or honor to be part of something greater, you know, to rid the Taliban, and what not.”

In Afghanistan, Ecker’s unit was stationed near Kabul. His unit provided security for the presidential election and secured the traffic control points, ensuring that weapons were not being smuggled into the area. “We did some operations with the Afghan National Army as well, nothing real extensive,” he said.

Why was the mission primarily focused on security operations? In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials announced that Osama bin Laden, a Saudi international terrorist, was the prime suspect, hiding in Afghanistan. The Taliban—a prominent, Islamic militia who came into power of the Afghan government in the 1990s during the Afghan Civil War—refused to extradite Osama bin Laden to stand trial in the United States. Because the demands were ignored, on October 7, 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan, launching airstrikes against the Taliban. After weeks of intense fighting, the Taliban leaders were forced to relinquish control over the Afghan government. Hamid Karzai, an Afghan prime minister, was sworn in as the leader of the interim government on December 22, 2001. On October 9, 2004, the Afghanistan’s first-ever presidential election took place against the backdrop of threats from the Taliban and other extremist groups. “It was more about securing traffic control points, you know, things of that nature,” Ecker said. “Making sure that weapons weren’t coming through was the most extensive thing with the Afghan National Army, just training them.” Hamid Karzai won Afghanistan’s first-ever presidential election.

Ecker asserted that the U.S. military’s endeavors, while training the Afghan soldiers, proved what is evident today. “The one thing we found with the Afghan National Army is that those who had enlisted this was the best way they could provide a means for their families,” he said. “They made more money with the government than they could’ve made in their current jobs.” Ecker appeared steadfast, explaining his encounters with the Afghan soldiers. “I wouldn’t say that the soldiers were necessarily there to collect a paycheck,” he said. “But if something happened, they might turn and go the other way when conducting operations. As a result, some were very skittish because it’s not something that they necessarily wanted to do. It was a means to an end.”

According to Ecker, the U.S. military trained over 300,000 Afghan soldiers. “And recently, none of them stood up or fought back against the militants when we announced that we were leaving the country,” he said. “That seems very odd. But that speaks to the lack of unity amongst the 14 or more different ethnic groups throughout the country. We had no chance of true success in Afghanistan.”

When asked about his thoughts on America ending its 20-year odyssey in Afghanistan, Ecker extrapolated that it was expected. “It was something that we, as service members, even talked about while over there. If you look at history, it’s always been the unwinnable war,” he said. “Going back historically in time: Alexander the Great took a Persian bride to try to establish stability in the region to later be killed. The Mongolians, they were there and beaten. The British, twice and beaten. And the Russians, of course, we helped there, but beaten as well. I heard a saying years ago, and it rings true now. The U.S. controls the clock, but we got nothing but time. And that’s speaking about Isis and the Taliban. They were just going to wait it out, regardless. I don’t think they wanted to fight us. And I can see that, historically.”

Now, exactly two decades later—the eve of the 9/11 anniversary—Ecker, as an Afghanistan veteran, grappled with the decision for ending America’s longest war. Despite some of the positive changes seen throughout Afghanistan, the U.S. troops and allies’ unyielding position to stabilize the region was futile. “Yes, there were some advances,” he said. “But this is a task that can’t be completed long term without the stability of an army willing to stand up for the sovereign nation and its leaders.”

At the end of the day, was the Afghanistan war worth it? Ecker hesitated for a moment. Then he sighed and finally declared, “It was worth it to try to bring stability to the region. It was worth it because of how women were treated there. We opened their eyes to what it could be like.” Before the Taliban had surrendered to the U.S. Special Forces near Kandahar, Afghanistan, on December 5, 2001, their interpretation of the Islamic Sharia law was harshly condemned by the international community. They prevented girls and women from attending school, banned women from working outside the home, and required women to be accompanied by male relatives and wear a burqa—an outer garment which covers the body and face—in public. The women who broke those rules were publicly whipped or executed. “And for those things, I would say, yes. It felt like we contributed to the greater good,” he said. “I was glad to have the opportunity to be there.”

But what generated Ecker’s deepest contemplation was the final U.S. evacuation from Afghanistan on Monday, August 30. “I can’t even imagine what the service members are thinking or experiencing now,” he said, reflecting on the recent news about the U.S. hastily leaving the country. Of course, the reporting about the suicide bombers in Kabul killing at least 60 Afghan civilians, including 13 U.S. troops, on August 26, a few days earlier, contributed to his dismay about the 20-year warfare in Afghanistan.

Speaking with many fellow veterans over the years, he admitted, had been difficult. According to Ecker, some of them were negatively impacted by their experiences, suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While he reconciled with his service in Afghanistan, he clearly understood why some veterans struggled when they returned home. “In terms of acclimating back into society, it was interesting,” he said. “I took a job in manufacturing which was redundant work. Because of that, my situation was much better than others who may not have had something to come back to. At that time, we were building FEMA units because of Hurricane Katrina. After work, I was just dog tired.” His daily routine of waking up at 3:30 am and working all day until 7 pm consumed his life, leaving no time for idle thoughts or activities. “So, my acclimation process was different from others who weren’t as busy,” he said. “And of course, as a result, they found other ways to occupy their time, whether it be dependent on alcohol or drugs, or what not.”

Although Ecker does not suffer from PTSD, he may be feeling a range of challenging emotions, like many other veterans, who are reminded of their own deployment experiences, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. The National Center for PTSD state that these feelings of distress are a normal reaction to the negative current events, especially ones that feel personal. The National Center for PTSD’s recommendations for coping with the ongoing distress involve an array of strategies, such as engaging in positive, healthy activities, practicing good self-care, and limiting media exposure to name a few.

Presently, Ecker appreciates what has been suggested. He engages in quality time with his children—Caleb (16), Gavin (13), and Gisele (4)—and his wife, Amanda, in their hometown of Elkhart, IN. But more importantly, Ecker does not shy away from speaking his mind to anyone willing listen, particularly those who best understand what he may be feeling. “I do speak to my wife about the military,” he said. “She has been my rock and very supportive. She does tell me that I talk in my sleep about my time in Afghanistan. The statements are all positive.”