
*The Royal Canadian Air Force and the 2021 Kabul Air
Evacuation: Lessons from an ad hoc mission*

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In the summer of 2021, the world watched in shock as the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan crumbled and the resurgent Taliban swiftly seized control. Intelligence had indicated the possible fall of the government, but no one was prepared for the speed at which it happened. The gains achieved during a decade of war were lost in an instant. Amidst the chaos, the focus shifted to the urgent task of evacuating people before it became too late. Nations from around the world, led by the United States, moved quickly to accomplish this task. Operation Aegis, led by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), played a crucial role in the Canadian government's mission to evacuate Afghan nationals and Canadian citizens from Kabul in August 2021.

This article offers a preliminary Canadian perspective on Operation Aegis and the Kabul Airlift. It is not meant to be a definite or exhaustive account but rather to serve as a work-in-progress overview of our current understanding of the Canadian Armed Forces mission. It will also discuss the current opportunities and challenges in researching this event and offer some preliminary observations and suggestions for future research and writing.¹

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¹ This article is based on a presentation made at the workshop The Past, Present, and Future of Canadian Military Air Power hosted by the DRDC Centre for Operational Research and Analysis and the University of Calgary's Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies (CMSS) held in Calgary, 27-29 September 2023. The author wishes to thank Dr Brad Gladman, Operational Research and Analysis Branch Head and Dr Rob Huebert, CMSS Director, along with all the others who made the workshop possible, for the opportunity to take part in this important conference.

To date, little has been written about Op Aegis. The event was front-page news when it was happening, and various brief summaries may be found on Canadian government websites. However, since the operation concluded, the only significant published accounts of the event are a short glossy article in *RCAF Today*² and a series of four short profiles of CAF members who participated in the mission published in *The Maple Leaf*.³ A senior Department of National Defence official mused that while the RCAF/DND story is overwhelmingly positive, studying it might open the door to uncomfortable questions about the end of the Afghanistan mission and the legacy of a decade of war. Fears about what an in-depth analysis of the entire Afghanistan mission might reveal should not prevent a parallel and independent study of Op Aegis. Along the same vein, the reluctance of the CAF and RCAF to share these stories widely with the Canadian public, as they perhaps seek a perfect narrative, may partially explain the limited understanding and support of the military in government circles and the wider Canadian public.

Other nations have not shied away from examining and marking this important event. Discussions of the Kabul airlift may be found in books, documentaries, and the popular press. Coalition partners have willingly participated in these retrospectives by providing information and making personnel available for interviews. They have also publicly honoured those who took part in the mission. The highlights of this coverage are discussed below.

In September 2022, the US cable network HBO released an 82-minute film titled *Escape from Kabul*. Its tagline stated, “This deeply immersive and emotional documentary

² Chris Thatcher, “Last Flight out of Kabul,” *RCAF Today: Canada’s Air Force Review* 12, 2023, pp. 34–39.

³ *The Maple Leaf* bills itself as “the national, online source for stories about the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the Department of National Defence (DND).” The four articles are: “Looking back on Op AEGIS: Corporal Mathieu Mageau-Martin’s Story,” 20 October 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/10/op-aegis-corporal-mathieu-mageau-martin.html>; “Looking back on Operation AEGIS: Corporal Mackenzie Birch’s Story,” 16 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/looking-back-operation-aegis-corporal-mackenzie-birch.html>; “Looking back on Op AEGIS: A Platoon Warrant Officer’s Story,” 22 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/op-aegis-platoon-warrant-officers-story.html>; and “Looking Back on Op AEGIS: Major Mathew Wilson’s Story,” 28 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/op-aegis-major-mathew-wilsons-story.html>

combines never-before-seen archival footage from those on the ground at the airport, with exclusive interviews with people who were there throughout the period, including Afghan citizens attempting to flee, US Marines tasked with managing the evacuation, and Taliban commanders and fighters who had recently taken the city.”⁴

The US Air Force named one of their C-17s *Spirit of Allies Refuge* in honour of the operation and has publicly awarded dozens of gallantry medals to their personnel.⁵ In just one public ceremony 96 airmen were presented the Distinguished Flying Cross and 12 received the Bronze Star for their part in the evacuation. In addition, the 621st Contingency Response Group received a Gallant Unit Citation.⁶ At the awards ceremony, General Mike Minihan, the command of Air Mobility Command remarked, “The world witnessed history during that airlift, borne on the shoulders of mobility heroes. This recognition is long overdue for what our heroes did during those historic 17 days.”⁷

The United Kingdom has been even more open to recounting the events of Operation Pitting. In 2022, the Imperial War Museum, funded by the Office for Veterans Affairs, launched a program to collect the recollections of British personnel who took part in the mission. Their website for this program states, “Over 1,000 military personnel were involved in Operation Pitting, including large elements from 16 Air Assault Brigade. Members of the Brigade were interviewed soon after their return to the UK and in their own words, describe their role in the wider operation.” They aim to collect 120 interviews by the end of the project in 2024 and expect to create a small online exhibition as one of the main outcomes. Many of these accounts are already available online as both audio files and textual transcripts and they continue to solicit interviews

⁴ HBO – *Escape from Kabul*. <https://www.hbo.com/movies/escape-from-kabul>

⁵ “Allies Refuge” was the American name for the evacuation. “Allies” was an acronym for Averting Loss of Life and Injury by Expediting SIVs (Special Immigrant Visa). Eric Durr and Master Sgt. Patrick Espeut, “Air Force Chief of Staff to honour 105th Airlift Wing National Guard Airmen,” *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, 28 March 2023. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/441333/air-force-chief-staff-honor-105th-airlift-wing-national-guard-airmen>

⁶ Greg Hadley, “Nearly 100 Airmen to Get Distinguished Flying Crosses for Afghanistan Evacuation,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 24 October 2022. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/nearly-100-airmen-to-get-distinguished-flying-crosses-for-afghanistan-evacuation/>

⁷ Air Mobility Command Public Affairs, “AMC leaders to present 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 12 Bronze Star Medals and Gallant Unit Citation for Operation Allies Refuge,” 21 October 2022. <https://www.amc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3196675/amc-leaders-to-present-96-distinguished-flying-crosses-12-bronze-star-medals-an/>

with civilians, civil servants, and members of the armed forces who were involved in Operation Pitting.⁸

In 2023, the British public broadcaster Channel 4 produced the three-part documentary “Evacuation,” about Operation Pitting. Combining contemporary news footage and cell phone camera video with drone imagery and interviews with British military personnel and Afghan evacuees, the documentary showed the successes and failures of the mission. One reviewer observed that the “hard-hitting” documentary presented “the tragic scenes in Kabul over those chaotic days [where] the military evacuation operation is seen as a remarkable success.”⁹ Another reviewer stated that “Evacuation tells the stories of the British military personnel who carried out the operation at Kabul airport. The soldiers, pilots and medics involved speak with admirable candour and honesty; a necessary tonic to the sunny optimism trotted out by ministers.... [It] perfectly captures how indecision at the top of Government led to chaos on the ground.”¹⁰

Two books looking at the airlift from American and British perspectives have been published as of the end of 2023. The first to appear, only a year after the fall of the city, was *August in Kabul: America's last days in Afghanistan* by Andrew Quilty, an Australian journalist. He remained in Kabul through to the end and the book offered his personal perspective on the unprecedented collapse.¹¹ In March 2023, the UK publishing house Hodder & Stoughton released *Escape from Kabul: The Inside Story*. This book was written by Levison Wood and Geraint Jones who are both former British soldiers turned journalists. Their book tells the “harrowing true story of Operation Pitting and the Kabul airlift.”¹² One reviewer noted that the book chronicled “the efforts of British and American troops [sic] on a daring mission to evacuate their supporters and Afghan

⁸ Email, Natalie Lynch to author, 19 December 2023. This project was first led by Megan Joyce, Senior Curator, Cold War and late twentieth-century conflict team The project is now led by Natalie Lynch. Imperial War Museum, “Afghanistan: Operation Pitting.” <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/afghanistan-operation-pitting>

⁹ Universal Defence and Security Solutions, “Channel 4’s ‘Evacuation’: Opening Old Wounds,” 10 July 2023. <https://www.universal-defence.com/blog/channel-4s-evacuation-opening-old-wounds>

¹⁰ Daniel Keane, “Evacuation on Channel 4 review: a heartbreaking catalogue of failures,” *The Evening Standard*, 2 July 2023. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/tvfilm/evacuation-on-channel-4-review-b1091409.html>

¹¹ Andrew Quilty, *August in Kabul: America's last days in Afghanistan* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022).

¹² Levison Wood and Geraint Jones, *Escape from Kabul: The Inside Story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2023), dustjacket.

families from the clutches of insurgent Taliban troops who were hell-bent on punishing the Afghan traitors (as perceived by the Taliban for supporting NATO forces). The book is a vivid portrayal of fears and astounding bravery in managing the chaotic scenes at the airport and giving all their best to help the maximum.”¹³

We are still waiting for a significant documentary, book, or other retrospective on the Canadian role in Op Aegis. This will be difficult given the difficulty in accessing information about the operation as well as the amount of time that has passed which will make it more difficult to collect the stories of those who were now that the events are no longer fresh in their minds.¹⁴

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Op Aegis began on 30 July 2021 when General Wayne Eyre, Chief of the Defence Staff, issued a CDS Directive as it was clear that events in Afghanistan required an immediate response.¹⁵ The goal of the mission was to evacuate Afghans who had significant and lasting connections with the Government of Canada along with their family members. This included translators and others who worked closely with the CAF during the decade-long Canadian mission in Afghanistan. General Eyre explained what constituted an enduring relationship:

it was generally a witness statement from somebody who had served with a member. I, myself, received many emails from Afghans I had served and worked with, and I would vouch for their credibility. Yes, they did serve with Canadians. Yes, they did serve with the Canadian Forces. You would say, ‘I served with this individual for this period,’ and

¹³ Preeta Chag, “BOOK REVIEW: Escape from Kabul by Levison Wood and Geraint Jones,” [Online Blog], 7 August 2023. <https://preetachag.com/2023/08/07/book-review-escape-from-kabul-by-levison-wood-and-geraint-jones/>

¹⁴ The Canadian War Museum is currently undertaking an oral history project with the objective of recording the post-service experiences of Canadian veterans. This exceptional project is collecting many essential interviews with Canadian Afghanistan veterans, some of whom have commented on how they felt watching the airlift take place. However, the scope of the CWM program generally precludes interviewing serving members of the military which includes most who participated in Op Aegis. Email, Michael Petrou, Historian, Veterans’ Experience, Canadian War Museum to author, 17 December 2023.

¹⁵ Comment by General Wayne Eyre at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

that would form the basis of the validation—that coupled with the employment records we had.¹⁶

The operation also supported the closure of the Canadian embassy and the need to bring home Canadian consular staff and other Canadian nationals in the country. To aid these efforts, the CAF committed a total of 555 personnel to the mission – 305 members deployed from Canada while another 250 members already deployed to the region with Op Impact¹⁷ and Op Foundation¹⁸ were re-tasked to support the evacuation efforts. Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), under Vice-Admiral J. Robert Auchterlonie, maintained overall command of the mission. Among other CAF elements, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) provided strategic airlift capabilities, the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) provided security and other support in Kabul, and the Health Services Support (HSS) element provided medical care for evacuees and the Canadian mission in Kabul, Kuwait, and Germany. The Canadian whole-of-government approach meant that the CAF worked in conjunction with the consular staff of Global Affairs Canada (GAC) as well as Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to screen and process the thousands of Afghan evacuees.¹⁹

Op Aegis was part of a multinational effort to evacuate people from Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of the country. The large-scale airlift was led by the United States (Operation Allies Refuge) and the United Kingdom (Operation Pitting) while 36 other nations conducted operations to evacuate their diplomatic staff and nationals who remained in Afghanistan. During the two-week period (roughly 15-30 August) while the Taliban permitted evacuation flights to take place, an estimated 173,000

¹⁶ Comment by General Wayne Eyre at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

¹⁷ Operation Impact is part of Canada's whole-of-government approach to the Middle East. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-impact.html>

¹⁸ Operation Foundation sees the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) work with the United States and other countries to counter terrorism. The CAF has personnel located in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia as part of Operation Foundation. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-foundation.html>

¹⁹ "Operation AEGIS - Canadian Armed Forces." <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-aegis.html>

people were airlifted from the country.²⁰ The two biggest contributors were the US Air Force (123,000) and the Royal Air Force (15,000). Five other nations each evacuated over 3,000 people (Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, France) while another 16 nations each carried between 29 and 2,500 people to safety.²¹ A full list of the nations may be consulted below.²²

United States ²³	123000
United Kingdom	15000
Germany	5347
Italy ²⁴	5011
Australia ²⁵	4100
Canada	3700
France ²⁶	3000
Netherlands	2500
Spain ²⁷	2168
Belgium	1400
Turkey	1400
Sweden	1100
Denmark	1000
Poland	900
India	800
Ukraine	600

²⁰ Nicole Gaouette, Jennifer Hansler, Barbara Starr, and Oren Liebermann, "The last US military planes have left Afghanistan, marking the end of the United States' longest war," *CNN*, 31 August 2021.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/30/politics/us-military-withdraws-afghanistan/index.html>

²¹ Ganesh Rao, "How many people have been evacuated from Afghanistan?" *SkyNews*, 30 August 2021.

<https://news.sky.com/story/how-many-people-have-been-evacuated-from-afghanistan-12395265>

²² Unless otherwise cited, all the data in the chart was derived from Rao, "How many people have been evacuated from Afghanistan?"

²³ Nicole Gaouette, Jennifer Hansler, Barbara Starr, and Oren Liebermann, "The last US military planes have left Afghanistan, marking the end of the United States' longest war," *CNN*, 31 August 2021.

²⁴ <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/portolano-operazione-aquila-omnia-e-stata-uno-sforzo-operativo-mai-sperimentato-prima/>

²⁵ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/crisis-hub/afghanistan-crisis-and-response>

²⁶ <https://imagesdefense.gouv.fr/fr/operation-apagan-evacuation-kaboul-retrait-afghanistan>

²⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10094144/>

Hungary (540); New Zealand (400); South Korean (390); Russia (360); Switzerland (292); Austria (89); Bulgaria (29)	
TOTAL	173,126

The CAF, led by the RCAF, was a major contributor to the international efforts and evacuated 3,700 people. This monumental task involved the use of CC-130J Hercules, CC-150 Polaris, and CC-177 Globemaster aircraft, aircrew, and support staff. Chartered civilian aircraft were used for two flights from Kabul as well as many additional flights to transfer people from Kuwait to Germany and Canada.²⁸

The operation began for Canada on 3 August 2021 when a CC-130J Hercules flew a round trip from Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait to Kabul International Airport (then known as Hamid Karzai International Airport) and transported 40 Afghan nationals out of the country. By the time Op Aegis ended on 28 August, the RCAF had conducted a total of 18 flights. Six trips were conducted by Hercules aircraft while the remaining 12 flights were made by Globemasters. The RCAF used three of its five CC-177 for these missions.²⁹ The majority of Canadian personnel during this operation were based at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, at Ali Al Saleem Air Base in Kuwait, and at the Cologne Airport military terminal in Germany, but small numbers of Canadians could be found at various other locations throughout the region, primarily in liaison positions with coalition partners.³⁰

²⁸ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

²⁹ Steffan Watkins, “Royal Canadian Air Force Flights In and Out of Afghanistan 28 (July 2021 – 31 August 2021): An Open Source Analysis of Op AEGIS, and other flights,” 24 October 2021 and House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

³⁰ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

The Kabul evacuation was led by the United States which provided security troops (6,000 personnel) and air traffic control. This mission does not happen without the Americans doing the heavy lifting. In addition, Canada's defence relations with allies and regional partners were essential to ensure the success of the evacuation. One example of this cooperation took place at Ali Al Salem airbase. Corporal Mackenzie Birch, a technician crew member on a CC-177, was effusive in his praise of the support provided by American service members: "Their maintainers and ground operations personnel went above and beyond to help maintain our aircraft and support us — we were all flying the same mission. It didn't matter which flag was on the aircraft, the machines were all working beyond their limits to evacuate as many people as possible before the withdrawal deadline."³¹

The evacuation from Kabul took place in two distinct phases. The first lasted from approximately mid-July when the seriousness of the situation was recognized, until the fall of Kabul on 15 August when Afghan security forces fled the capital and control was ceded to the Taliban. The second phase occurred with the acquiescence of the Taliban who permitted evacuation operations at the airport to continue until 30 August. During this period, Taliban security forces maintained an outer security perimeter around the airport while Coalition forces secured the inner perimeter.³²

Early in the Op Aegis, each Canadian Hercules flight carried approximately 40 to 50 people. As it became clear that the window to evacuate people was short, CC-177s were added to increase the carrying capacity. The first flights by these aircraft were limited to no more than their rated passenger maximum of 134 people who could be carried in approved seating. The increasingly tense situation on the ground forced the RCAF to adopt emergency measures based on the practice and success of partner air forces. The

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>; "Looking Back on Op AEGIS: Major Mathew Wilson's Story"; "Operation Aegis: Technical Briefing – 26 August 2021," Department of National Defence. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-aegis/technical-briefing-08-26.html>

³¹ "Looking back on "Operation AEGIS: Corporal Mackenzie Birch's Story," *The Maple Leaf*, 16 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/looking-back-operation-aegis-corporal-mackenzie-birch.html>

³² James C. Kitfield, "Remembering the Largest Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation in US History," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 29 August 2022. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/remembering-the-largest-non-combatant-evacuation-operation-allies-refuge-in-u-s-history/>

US Air Force had already increased the number of evacuees transported on each aircraft. A palletized seat was dispensed with so that the maximum number of people could fit in the aircraft. Their measures reached a zenith on 15 August 2021 when a USAF C-17 from the 816th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron fit 823 Afghan citizens on a departing flight setting a record for the aircraft type.³³ Soon thereafter, the RCAF adopted similar practices after official approval by the theatre commander, Brigadier-General Timothy Arsenault, the Commander of Joint Task Force-Impact.³⁴ The period between 19 and 26 August saw RCAF aircraft evacuate 2,700 people or approximately 75 percent of the total Canadian effort. On five successive days beginning on 22 August, RCAF Globemasters made daily flights carrying no less than 436 people. Their maximum was attained on the 24th when 534 people were safely flown from Kabul to Kuwait.³⁵

The daily number of passengers carried by each RCAF flight was determined by a variety of factors including weather, fuel, cargo, and weight concerns which were different for each aircraft type and each trip. Early in the mission, the number of passengers was limited by external factors such as security screening and the time to process paperwork. The numbers, however, steadily increased as the process was streamlined and urgency increased.³⁶ A staid government explanation of this process stated, “Our aircraft were configured to carry the maximum number of people, and we updated this configuration to accommodate additional people whenever possible.”³⁷ This passage does not capture the urgency to fit as many people on the flights as possible. As with the experience of the US C-17 crew above, CAF personnel weighed the need to follow established safety protocols with the situation they faced. As a result, seats were removed, normal passenger limits were ignored, and the safety risk of carrying hundreds of passengers

³³ Brian W. Everstine, “Kabul Evacuation Flight Sets C-17 Record With 823 On Board,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 20 August 2021. <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/kabul-evacuation-flight-c-17-record/>

³⁴ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.

³⁵ Watkins, “Royal Canadian Air Force Flights In and Out of Afghanistan,” and House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

³⁶ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with the author, 17 January 2023.

³⁷ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

sitting on the floor of the aircraft with only an ad hoc safety strap to secure them was judged acceptable.

Another restriction on the Canadian operation was the limited landing slots in Kabul. As a partner in the US-led multi-national air bridge, Canada was granted one landing time a day. The overcrowding of the airport further restricted the Canadian flight capacity as there were strict limits on the length of time an aircraft could be on the ground. This left little time to load passengers. In some cases, the Canadian flights departed with empty seats or took on passengers cleared by coalition partners as they were the only people ready to go in the available window. To help maximize the number of evacuees, CAF personnel worked closely with their Allied partners to quickly fill aircraft and optimize the turnaround time for aircraft when they arrived in Kabul.³⁸

A detailed breakdown of the Canadian flights leaving Kabul is shown in the chart below.³⁹ Note the three-day pause that took place after the Taliban completely overran Kabul.

3-4 Aug	CC-130J	40 Afghan nationals
7 Aug	2 x CC-130J	90 Afghan nationals
8 Aug	1 civilian flight	167 Afghan nationals
11 Aug	1 civilian flight	163 Afghan nationals
12 Aug	1 civilian flight	76 Afghan nationals
13 Aug	2 x CC-130J	100 Afghan nationals

³⁸ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

³⁹ The main details for this chart have been found the report to the House Standing Committee.

Additional details including aircraft type were found in the Watkins report. Note that Watkins includes three additional flights to Kabul that do not appear in the official government reports including flights on 9, 12, and 27 August. It may be surmised these flights were not evacuating people from Afghanistan but rather supporting the arrival and departure of CAF personnel supporting Op Aegis. See House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html> and Watkins, “Royal Canadian Air Force Flights In and Out of Afghanistan,”

14 Aug	CC-130J	141 Afghan nationals
15 Aug	CC-130J	69 people – Afghan nationals and diplomatic staff
19 Aug	CC-177	188 people: 175 Afghan nationals and 13 foreign nationals
20 Aug	CC-177	106 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their families, and a permanent resident. Also, Allied military assets and personnel
21 Aug	CC-177	120 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their family members. Also, Allied military assets and personnel
22 Aug	CC-177	437 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their family members
23 Aug	CC-177	505 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their family members
24 Aug	CC-177	534 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their family members
25 Aug	CC-177	451 people: Afghan nationals, Canadian citizens and their family members
26 Aug	CC-177	443 people destined for Canada
27 Aug	CC-177	Last flight to remove CAF personnel from Kabul

It is difficult to describe the conditions faced by the Canadians in Kabul. Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie recalled that “the conditions on the ground ... were tenuous, chaotic, and desperate.... Our forces were working on the ground in that chaotic environment.”⁴⁰ A platoon warrant officer with the CANSOFCOM high readiness ground force recalled his arrival in Kabul: “The nature and complexity of the task was like nothing anyone had ever experienced before. There were rows and rows of coalition planes with engines turning, waiting for evacuees to be loaded and Afghan nationals waiting to be processed or board the next available flight out of Afghanistan. Most of these families were suffering from dehydration, hunger, and pure exhaustion from the chaos they had just survived.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Comment by Lieutenant-General A. D. Meinzinger (Commander, Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence) at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

⁴¹ “Looking back on Op AEGIS: A Platoon Warrant Officer’s Story,” *The Maple Leaf*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/op-aegis-platoon-warrant-officers-story.html>

Corporal Mathieu Mageau-Martin, a radio operator with the Canadian Forces Joint Signal Regiment, worked 16-hour days with personnel from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to process the visa applications of Afghan nationals so they could travel to Canada. He then had to travel through the city in an unmarked armoured SUV after he helped consular officials to shutter the Canadian Embassy.⁴²

As dangerous as the situation on the ground was, there remained a great deal of uncertainty about who was to be evacuated. General Eyre told a Parliamentary Committee while the CAF's mission was to evacuate Afghans and Canadian citizens, "it's interesting to note that those listed on the ROCA, the Registration of Canadians Abroad, went up exponentially in the days after Kabul fell.... We were dealing with what we thought was a certain number, and that number went up exponentially, in terms of those who wanted to get out."⁴³

Canadian military personnel went above and beyond to help the Afghan evacuees in a time of great need. A CANSOFCOM platoon warrant officer remembered a teenage boy who appeared at the airport gate. He had no documents and his family had just been killed by the Taliban so the Canadian soldiers took care of him. For the next 48 hours, the CANSOFCOM team looked after him while liaising with Global Affairs Canada to get him permission to leave. "He ate with us, he slept on a foam pad next to us, and he would share stories with team members as they took a few minutes to rest. He acted with such calm and waited so patiently for his turn and yet, he asked for nothing in return." The platoon warrant officer remembered that the boy was all smiles as he boarded the CC-177 and kept repeating, "Thank you, mister, thank you."⁴⁴ Corporal Birch confirmed the role of the CANSOFCOM personnel: "One thing that stayed with me for the duration of the mission was that no matter how fatigued the members of CANSOFCOM undoubtedly

⁴² "Looking back on Op AEGIS: Corporal Mathieu Mageau-Martin's Story," *The Maple Leaf*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/10/op-aegis-corporal-mathieu-mageau-martin.html>

⁴³ Comment by General Wayne Eyre at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

⁴⁴ "Looking back on Op AEGIS: A Platoon Warrant Officer's Story," *The Maple Leaf*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/op-aegis-platoon-warrant-officers-story.html>

were, they always showed the utmost compassion and professionalism when someone who was weak or elderly needed assistance.”⁴⁵

Major Mathew Wilson, a Critical Care Nursing Officer, was deployed with only a day’s notice and had to quickly make arrangements for his family to cope with his departure. He later recalled one of his flights when an anxious father was very concerned about his newborn daughter. “I was concerned about her health; she was born less than 48 hours ago at the Kabul Airport. The father said to me that his daughter had lost weight and was not doing well. I conducted a wellness assessment and mom was reporting that baby was eating but that she (mom) was exhausted.” Wilson comforted the parents and made sure the baby was looked after on the flight. For Wilson, this child encapsulated the overall purpose of the mission: “She would have the opportunity to get an education and be whomever and whatever she wanted to be. That, right there, was the purpose driving the CAF to help evacuate so many people.”⁴⁶

Major Bradley Wylde is an example of a professional CAF personnel supporting Op Aegis from outside of Afghanistan. In July 2021 he was posted to Kuwait and the Joint Task Force-Impact Headquarters as the J4 Logistics Officer. When Op Aegis began, Wylde and his small team were directed to support the evacuation. Their role was to ensure those conducting first-line support had what they needed to get their job done. Wylde’s J4 section was responsible for supplying all the Canadian missions in the region and much of this work was put on hold during Op Aegis. For example, a new rotation of personnel in Lebanon had to wait nearly a month to receive their personal luggage and clothing as all available transport aircraft were tasked with the evacuation. Much ad hoc work was done during this period. Extra rations for the mission were brought in from the Canadian battlegroup in Latvia (Op Reassurance), unique items such as the long straps used as seatbelts were procured from Canada, and the food, bedding, baby food, diapers and

⁴⁵ “Looking back on Operation AEGIS: Corporal Mackenzie Birch’s Story,” *The Maple Leaf*, 16 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/looking-back-operation-aegis-corporal-mackenzie-birch.html>

⁴⁶ “Looking Back on Op AEGIS: Major Mathew Wilson’s Story,” *The Maple Leaf*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/11/op-aegis-major-mathew-wilsons-story.html>

other items needed to run the improvised refugee camp at Camp Canada were found locally.⁴⁷

Upon arrival in Kuwait, the Afghan evacuees were initially given a small, boxed lunch and immediately put on a flight to Germany. As the number of refugees grew, this smooth flow was interrupted and there were often lengthy delays between the arrival of people at Ali Al Salem Air Base and their transfer out of the country. This created a host of issues, not the least of which was where to keep these people safe. Kuwaiti officials were supportive of the mission but were insistent that control of the evacuees needed to be maintained the entire time. When delays occurred, the refugees were bussed to Camp Canada which had been prepared for a couple of hundred people. At its peak, the camp hosted over 1,300 people who needed to be fed, sheltered, and have access to washrooms and medical care. Wylde's team procured everything needed for this from local sources. This meant sending someone into Kuwait City in a truck with a credit card to purchase food, bedding, and other necessities. This was often done while the evacuation flight was in the air inbound from Kabul.⁴⁸

As the volume of people increased the complexity of the operation also increased. RCAF transports were used to take some people to Germany and Canada, but the large numbers required the contracting of numerous civilian airliners to complete the journey. The delays and uncertainty in the arrival of these aircraft created a backlog in Kuwait that resulted in the creation of a de facto refugee camp.⁴⁹

Sourcing food was a major challenge. The Americans in Kuwait did not have the capacity to share so the Canadians locally sourced food to feed the Afghan evacuees. Help with this task was obtained from their Muslim interpreters to ensure that the proper Halal food was found. It was soon discovered that the Afghans would not eat the Kuwaiti food which they found too spicy compared to their native food which was generally much blander. There were also serious concerns about food safety as the daily temperature was rarely below 40 degrees Celsius.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.

⁴⁸ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.

⁵⁰ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.

One of Wylde's strongest memories from his Op Aegis experience was how it contrasted with Op Persistence, the Swissair Flight 111 recovery mission. In September 1998 a McDonnell Douglas MD-11 crashed near Peggy's Cove, NS on a flight from New York City to Geneva, Switzerland with the loss of all souls. The Canadian military was initially mobilized for the search and rescue mission but within hours it transitioned to a search and recovery mission. Wylde, serving in the Royal Canadian Navy at the time, arrived at the crash site early and spent long days on the water retrieving bodies and debris. Wylde recognized the important work they were doing but was haunted by what he witnessed as well as their inability to help the 229 people lost in the crash. Fast forward 23 years and Wylde found himself in Kuwait as part of Op Aegis. "This is my opportunity," he thought to himself, "to actually be part of an extraordinary team that has a real possibility to save and/or change people's lives and allow them to live free. I thought about this every single time I walked by the refugees or handed out a meal in Camp Canada and it made me visibly smile when I thought about it."⁵¹

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There have been other significant airlifts in history but nothing quite like Kabul in 2021. The Berlin airlift in 1948 and 1949 was the first major crisis of the Cold War and required a massive use of air power to keep the lines of communications open to West Berlin. Air-dropped supplies were key elements of Second World War battles such as Operation Market Garden (British 1st Airborne Division), Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge (US 101st Airborne Division), and British and Indian forces at Imphal and Kohima. Later air power interventions occurred at Điện Biên Phủ in French Indochina (1954) and the Fall of Saigon (1975).

The 2021 Airlift was also not unique in Afghan history. Nearly 100 years earlier a similar set of circumstances led to the first significant aerial evacuation in history. In December 1928 Habibullah Khan,⁵² a challenger to the throne of Afghanistan, advanced on Kabul with over a thousand men. By the 14th he had captured the Koh-i-Noor Forts outside the city and effectively trapped the British Legation. The original plan was to use Royal Air

⁵¹ Email, Major Bradley Wylde to author, 20 January 2023.

⁵² This is how he was identified by Sir Geoffrey Salmond in his after-action report. He was more properly known as Habibullāh Kalakāni or colloquially as Bacha-ye Saqao, a Pashtun slur meaning "son of the water carrier."

Force (RAF) aircraft to evacuate British women and children. Trials in late December proved the feasibility of the operation despite the limited performance of the aircraft available. This was compounded by challenges of distance, weather, and the need to cross the Hindu Kush mountains to reach Peshawar, India (present-day Pakistan). As the situation in Kabul deteriorated, Air Vice-Marshal Geoffrey Salmond, the Air Officer Commanding, RAF (India), ordered the complete evacuation of British personnel in Afghanistan commencing on 23 December. Over the next two months, RAF aircraft carried out a total of 86 sorties to evacuate 586 people from Kabul including European diplomats and their dependents, as well as King Amanullah Khan and the rest of the Afghan royal family.⁵³

Salmond concluded his report by stating, "I submit that the history of these evacuations constitutes a record with which the Royal Air Force can be justifiably satisfied. The efficiency and determination of the officers, non-commissioned officers and men were well tested, and I am proud to record that they were not found wanting."⁵⁴ He also remarked that:

The uses of heavy transport aircraft are so many that they could be adapted to practically every difficult situation which may arise. No one in the early days of December could have visualised the state of affairs which arose in Afghanistan in December ... Once difficulties of any nature arise, it is impossible to foresee clearly their solution beforehand. I am, however, strongly of the opinion that, as was proved in Afghanistan when heavy transport machines provided a solution of the difficulties, so in any other serious situation, the possession of heavy transport aircraft by the Royal Air Force in India, would be found to be invaluable.⁵⁵

These words could equally have been written about events in Kabul in 2021.

⁵³ Air Vice-Marshal Sir Geoffrey Salmond, "Report on the Air Operations in Afghanistan between 12 December 1928, and 25 February 1929," London: HMSO, September 1929, UK National Archives, AIR 5/857. See also Anne Baker and Air Chief Marshal Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman, *Wings over Kabul: The First Airlift* (London: William Kimber and Company, 1975).

⁵⁴ Salmond Report, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Salmond Report, p. 25.

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The overall cost of Op Aegis is not known but a DND report for Fiscal Year 2021-22 noted an expenditure of just over \$21 million which contained an expense line for “Other - Includes small missions, Strong, Secure, Engaged and Operational Support Hub costs, AEGIS, ALLIED SOLACE, Canadian Deployable Mission Network (CDMN), and SCYLLA.”⁵⁶

In March 2023, DND reported to the House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on their efforts to study from the experience of Operation Aegis. They reported “Lessons learned exercises are a regular practice within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and [these lessons] mainstreamed throughout the organization. This includes lessons learned by teams and experts at all levels of the CAF, including within environments (i.e. Army, Navy, Air Force), operational and strategic headquarters, as well as learning and training centres such as the Peace Support Training Centre in Kingston.” The learning also took place at higher levels. In September and October 2022, a thorough examination of the mission was conducted at multiple levels throughout the CAF. This included an examination of lessons learned at the operational level by the Canadian Joint Operations Command and the Canadian Special Operations Command while a strategic level assessment was conducted by the Strategic Joint Staff and Assistant Deputy Minister Policy. The following month National Defence participated in a government-wide, whole-of-government lesson learned exercise run by the Privy Council Office. National Defence has not released the results of these lessons-learned exercises due to “operational security reasons.”⁵⁷

In the aftermath of Op Aegis and the entire Kabul evacuation, the issue of Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) took on an increased international profile. As a result, the CAF has conducted both internal and external exercises to practice techniques and continue to learn how best to conduct these potentially difficult and dangerous missions.

⁵⁶ “Incremental Costs for Major Canadian Armed Forces Operations, FY 2021-22,” National Defence. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/departmental-results-report/2021-22-index/supporting-document/costs-major-caf-ops.html>

⁵⁷ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

In March 2023 the CAF took part in “Exercise Noah’s Ark in Israel to exercise interoperability between allies and partners for the conduct of a NEO in this region.”⁵⁸

The importance of these exercises was clearly seen in the recent deployments of CAF resources to evacuate Canadian citizens from war-torn regions. In April 2023 the outbreak of a civil war in Sudan prevented civilians from leaving so the international community mounted a smaller version of the Kabul operation. The CAF conducted six flights from the Wadi Seidna Air Base north of Khartoum, Sudan to transport over 400 Canadian citizens and permanent residents and 140 US citizens to safety.⁵⁹ A similar situation developed in Israel in the aftermath of the 7 October attacks by Hamas terrorists. The cancellation of flights by regularly scheduled airlines required the military to again support the evacuation of Canadians. The RCAF evacuated 281 Canadians from Tel Aviv to Athens on 12 October aboard two CC-150 Polaris aircraft and more followed on subsequent days.⁶⁰ While the security environment of this operation was much different from Afghanistan or Sudan, the organizational demands were similar.

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Takeaways

The evacuation of Kabul in August 2021 was a complex and challenging operation, marked by significant difficulties. These obstacles applied to the entire evacuation program and were not specifically Canadian. At the top of the list were the chaotic, deadly, and constantly changing conditions. The evacuation process was confusing for all and often deadly for those trying to escape. The US plan for an orderly evacuation, under President Joe Biden’s administration, unravelled when Kabul fell to the Taliban in a matter of days, setting off a frenzied, last-minute global mobilization.⁶¹ The situation

⁵⁸ House Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (CIMM) – Regarding the Government’s Response to the Final Report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan – 29 March 2023.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/proactive-disclosure/ccim-29-march-2023/committee-recommendations.html>

⁵⁹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/sudan-canada-evacuation-flights-1.6827327>, *CBC News*, 30 April 2023.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/sudan-canada-evacuation-flights-1.6827327>

⁶⁰ Rachel Aiello, “First two military evacuation flights airlift Canadians out of Israel,” *CTV News*, 12 October 2023. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/first-two-military-evacuation-flights-airlift-canadians-out-of-israel-1.6598348>

⁶¹ <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/afghan-evacuation-crisis/>;
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/us/politics/afghanistan-evacuation.html>

was further compounded by a horrific terrorist attack. On 26 August, a suicide bomber targeted the Abbey Gate, one of the main entry points onto the airport grounds. The attacker was sent by the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP), an ISIS-affiliated terrorist group which opposed the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. The suicide bomber waded into a crowd of Afghans where US officials were screening people before their admittance to the airport. The attack was devastating. The initial blast killed dozens and was immediately followed by other IS-KP insurgents firing into the crowd. By the time it was over, at least 170 civilians lay dead along with 11 US Marines, a US Navy Corpsman, and a US Army soldier. Another 150 people were seriously injured.⁶² Just 24 hours earlier, CANSOFCOM personnel had been part of the security team at the Abbey Gate and were still in the vicinity at the time of the attack. Canadian personnel were among the first on the scene after the attack and according to General Eyre “were able to provide rapid combat first aid to those who were wounded by that attack.”⁶³

Crowd management was a difficult task prior to the suicide bombing as overwhelmed consular officials struggled to identify and verify those who had valid claims to be evacuated. The situation at the gates around the city’s airport was described as desperate, with crowds so frenzied that officials worried they could slip “into a mob at any given moment.”⁶⁴

Canadian CC-177 Globemasters did not conduct air-to-air refuelling during Op Aegis. This meant that they needed to carry a substantial load of fuel to take them from Kuwait

⁶² “Kabul airport attack: What do we know?” *BBC*, 27 August 2021; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58349010>; Sayed Ziarmal Hashemi, Lolita C. Baldor, Kathy Gannon, and Ellen Knickmeyer, “American forces keep up airlift under high threat warnings,” *AP News*, 27 August 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/bombings-evacuations-kabul-bb32ec2b65b54ec24323e021c9b4a553>; Ivana Kottasová, Barbara Starr, Kylie Atwood, Nick Paton Walsh, Sam Kiley, Zachary Cohen, Amy Woodyatt, Jennifer Hansler, and Nectar Gan, “Evacuation from Afghanistan in final phase after deadly Kabul airport attack,” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/27/asia/afghanistan-kabul-airport-attack-update-intl-hnk/index.html>; “Defense Department releases names of US service members killed in Afghanistan,” *CNN*, 28 August 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/afghanistan-kabul-taliban-us-news-08-28-21/h_675be4324156edc80ef667536defe716

⁶³ Comment by General Wayne Eyre at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

⁶⁴ Michael D. Shear, Lara Jakes, and Eileen Sullivan, “Inside the Afghan Evacuation: Rogue Flights, Crowded Tents, Hope and Chaos,” *New York Times*, 3 September 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/us/politics/afghanistan-evacuation.html>

to Kabul and back again. This limited the number of passengers who could be carried. Canadian Globemasters can conduct air-to-air refuelling, but it is not a mission regularly practiced by RCAF CC-177 pilots. During the Kabul airlift, if this capability had been available to the RCAF, CC-177s could have been loaded with more passengers (think USAF maximum of 823 people versus RCAF maximum of 534 people) and then take on the needed fuel once airborne. The potential to transport more people in a shorter period of time would have been a great asset during Op Aegis. In the future, airlift operations will be more flexible as the new CC-330 Husky, a militarized version of the Airbus A330-200, becomes operational in the RCAF's strategic tanker transport capability (STTC) role.⁶⁵

Security threats were directed at the airport during the entire operation. Coalition forces faced significant security concerns, particularly from ISIS-K, which posed a tremendous risk along the perimeter and at the gates where the Afghan evacuees gathered. Logistical challenges were ever-present. The capacity of the Kabul airport was severely limited, by size, by time, and by other obstacles ranging from armed Taliban checkpoints to paperwork problems. Coalition forces struggled to speed up the pace of foreign national and Afghan evacuations at Kabul airport. Communications issues, exacerbated by mixed messages sent to foreign nationals and Afghan allies, made it difficult for people on either side of the fence to understand exactly what was going on at any particular time. This issue was made worse by the shortage of Coalition consular officers who were terribly overworked trying to process the tens of thousands of people desperate to leave the country.⁶⁶ Despite these challenges, over 173,000 Afghans and foreign nationals were

⁶⁵ "Canada takes delivery of the first CC-330 Husky aircraft," *Skies Magazine*, 6 September 2023.

<https://skiesmag.com/news/canada-takes-delivery-first-rcaf-cc-330-husky-aircraft/>

⁶⁶ Tim Willasey-Wilsey, "One Year On: The Aftermath of the Kabul Evacuation," *Royal United Services Institute (UK)*, 15 August 2022. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/one-year-aftermath-kabul-evacuation>; Claire Hills, "Evacuation of Kabul happened in 'chaos and confusion' with 'tragic yet avoidable outcomes', damning report claims," *SkyNews*, 15 August 2022.

<https://news.sky.com/story/evacuation-of-kabul-happened-in-chaos-and-confusion-with-tragic-yet-avoidable-outcomes-damning-report-claims-12673426>; "Comparing strategies and challenges of evacuating Afghanistan with Vietnam exit," *PBS NewHour*, 27 August 2021.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/comparing-strategies-and-challenges-of-evacuating-afghanistan-with-vietnam-exit>; Sadikshya Nepal and Hannah Tyler, "Afghan Evacuation Crisis, Challenges to Processing Refugee and SIV Holders," Bipartisan Policy Center (US), 31 August 2021.

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/afghan-evacuation-crisis/>; Michael D. Shear, Lara Jakes and Eileen Sullivan, "Inside the Afghan Evacuation: Rogue Flights, Crowded Tents, Hope and Chaos," *New York*

evacuated by the US and its allies during the mass evacuation (an average of 20,000 people per day) before the Taliban closed down the airport on 30 August.⁶⁷

The sources available for a project of this nature need to be discussed. In no particular order, researchers can exploit the following channels:

1. Official military and government documents: Not an accessible source for recent operations. Most official sources remain classified and/or difficult to obtain and use.
2. Interviews with participants: This is an important source. Some interviews are available online, especially for Coalition partners. More Canadian participants need to be interviewed before memories fade, but interviewers face the challenge of tracking people down as well as interviewees not ready or not permitted to speak freely for various reasons (aspects of their experiences remain classified, or they are unclear if they are permitted to speak of them; interviewees still in uniform and fearful of career impacts if they say too much or the wrong thing; and lingering personal trauma from the experience which make it difficult to speak about those times).
3. Official published sources: This is a valuable source and there is much useful information available on government and military websites.
4. Media and other published sources: Ditto.
5. Social media: Perhaps one of the most valuable, untapped sources to explore. Social media was used extensively during the operation for communications, coordination, and dissemination of information. Social media channels, both individual and official, were also used to crowdsource aid and support for evacuees and to document the crisis. The challenge is to sift through the mountains of data to find useful nuggets.
6. Open-source intelligence (OSINT): Another new source for researchers. OSINT methods can monitor and track military aircraft movements as well as be used to fact-check traditional official and media sources to gain a better understanding of

Times, 3 September 2021, updated 12 November 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/us/politics/afghanistan-evacuation.html>; Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "5 Desperate Days: Escaping Kabul," *New York Times*, 23 December 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/23/world/asia/kabul-evacuation-afghanistan.html>

⁶⁷ Nepal and Tyler, "Afghan Evacuation Crisis."

events. The work being done by Steffan Watkins to track the movement of RCAF aircraft using open-source methods is a perfect example of the value of OSINT.

7. Coalition partners (US/UK/NATO/etc.): In many ways, this is a repeat of (3) above but it is deserving of its own mention. While Coalition partners do not focus on the Canadian experience, valuable information can still be gained through triangulation and extrapolation to gain a better understanding of the Canadian role as well as provide the necessary context to place the Canadian mission in the bigger picture.

As mentioned at the outset, this paper is a discussion of the current state of our understanding of Op Aegis rather than a definitive account. Much work remains to be done. There are opportunities, challenges, and some preliminary conclusions that may be drawn from this mission.

Opportunities

The Canadian role in the Kabul evacuation is overwhelmingly a good news story that needs to be told. While there were flaws and issues, the overall success of the Canadian whole-of-government operation needs to be celebrated. It is an important and essential story that needs to be widely shared.

As it was a recent event, it is still relatively fresh in the minds of those who were there. Both in uniform, in government service, and those who were evacuated and have found a new life in Canada. All these stories need to be collected before they are lost.

Challenges

Classification and access to official source material is an issue. There is no easy way around this. It means that parts of the story, such as the full role of CANSOFCOM personnel on the ground in Kabul, will remain closed. The issue of classification makes access to people and documents problematic as real or imagined security concerns often result in closed doors. In a similar vein, interview subjects are often reluctant to share their full story out of security concerns.

The full scope of the Op Aegis story is complicated and expansive. The whole-of-government framework means there were multiple actors – the Department of National

Defence/Canadian Armed Forces/ Canadian Joint Operations Command/ Royal Canadian Air Force/Canadian Special Operations Forces Command/etc.; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada; Global Affairs Canada; and others. Each of these groups has their own story as well as their own viewpoint for telling their story. This can help or hinder the telling of the overall narrative.

There are also privacy concerns/issues for participants and evacuees that must be taken into consideration.

Conclusions

It is clear from this study that the Canadian Armed Forces and Royal Canadian Air Force are modern, agile, and highly competent organizations. The ability to successfully undertake an operation such as the Kabul airlift on short notice speaks very highly about the capability of the service members. They are well-trained, highly motivated, and willing to make personal sacrifices to get the job done.

Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie was effusive in his praise: "The folks on the ground were working tirelessly, 24-7, for over a week, to make sure we got as many folks out as we could after the fall of Kabul. They should really be commended for the effort they did on the ground, not only the special capabilities but my task force on the ground, as well as our aircrews, who worked tirelessly to save as many Afghans as we could."⁶⁸ Lieutenant-General Meinzinger offered similar sentiments: "I would just like to add to the comments made about the team. I couldn't be more proud of the crews and of the maintenance personnel who were back in Kuwait and who worked largely 24/7, surged over a two-week period, to keep that mission going. It was an all-hands-on-deck effort, and I think we should all be proud of that."⁶⁹

Procurement remains a major issue for DND and the process is often cast in negative light. The problems of the Sea King and Hornet replacement programs, to name a couple,

⁶⁸ Comment by VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

⁶⁹ Comment by Lieutenant-General A. D. Meinzinger (Commander, Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence) at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

are well known but the success of the CC-177 program must be acknowledged. When the need for a new strategic lift platform was identified in the early years of Canada's Afghanistan mission, the government and military worked together to quickly acquire and put into service the Globemaster. Both General Eyre and Lieutenant-General Meinzinger consider the aircraft's introduction to have been a "game-changer." General Eyre went as far as to say "Fifteen years ago, when we didn't have this capability, we could not have done this operation." Lieutenant Meinzinger further elaborated, "I think the investment we made 10 to 15 years ago in acquiring a C-17 [CC-177] fleet has really contributed to our ability to be a global military. I reflect back on the mission in Mali where we were able to project a task force into the desert of Mali largely by utilizing our C-17 fleet. I think the strategic lift, as we saw play out in this context, proved to be invaluable."⁷⁰

Operation Aegis was a significant operation that showcased the capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces and the commitment of the Government of Canada to protect its citizens and those with significant ties to Canada. Despite the challenges faced, the operation was successful in achieving its objectives and played a crucial role in the larger multinational effort to evacuate people from Afghanistan.

The verdict on Operation Aegis must be that it was a complete success. The month-long operation demonstrated a high level of professionalism, competency, and effectiveness in the personnel, equipment, and procedures of the Canadian Armed Forces. This was not a mission that anyone had specifically planned for, but the expertise of CAF personnel allowed them to draw on their extensive training and experience to make this operation work. On very short notice the military conducted a high-tempo, complicated operation in a confused and hostile environment where the parameters of the mission kept changing and expanding. Through it all there was confusion and uncertainty but also measurable success. The ability to transport 3,700 people to safety was an impressive accomplishment for an ad hoc mission. Major Wylde recalled "No matter how much stress came on us, we kept level heads. We made not have always agreed on everything

⁷⁰ Comments by General Wayne Eyre and Lieutenant-General A. D. Meinzinger at the Special Committee on Afghanistan, Number 012, 1st Session, 44th Parliament, 9 May 2022.
<https://www.ourcommons.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AFGH/meeting-12/evidence>

[and] the decisions that were made, but at the end of the day we left with a plan and we executed it and it usually went as planned. It was pretty awesome to see.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Interview, Major Bradley Wylde with author, 17 January 2023.