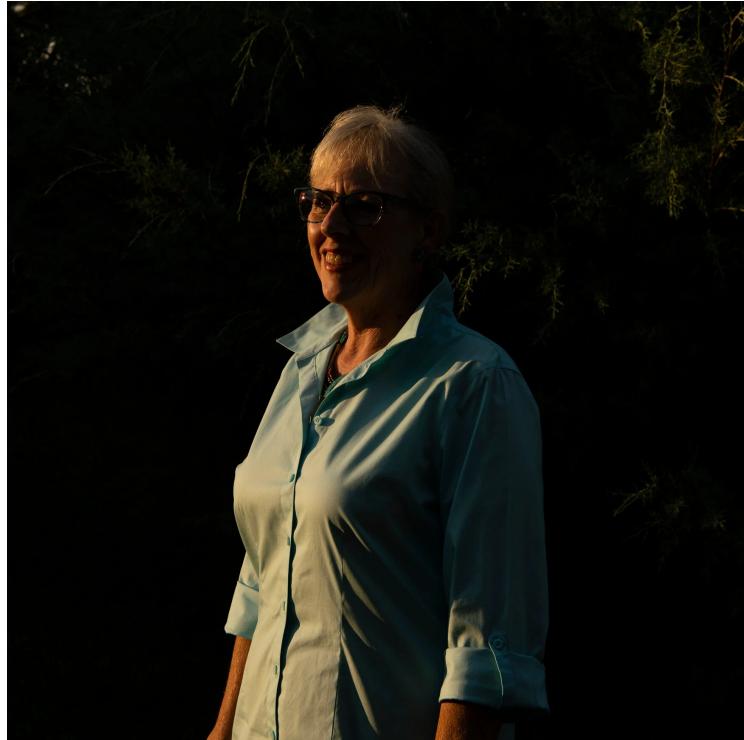


These U.S. Veterans Won't Rest Until They've Kept a Wartime Promise



These people are among those in a group laboring to rescue Afghan allies after the American withdrawal. Clockwise from top left: Rex Sappenfield, Jack Britton Jr., J. Kael Weston, Bruce Hemp. Kiana Hayeri, Ilana Panich-Linsman and AJ Marino for the New York Times

An informal network that includes former government and military officials is working around the clock to fulfill a pledge to save Afghans who put their lives on the line for America.



By Roger Cohen

Oct. 19, 2021

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FREDERICKSBURG, Va. — Rex Sappenfield does not sleep well. A former Marine who served in Afghanistan, he is tormented by the fate of his interpreter, an Afghan with a wife and three young children to whom Mr. Sappenfield made a battlefield promise: We will never abandon you.

Now a high school English teacher who tries to instill a sense of rectitude in his students, Mr. Sappenfield has thought about his pledge every day since the United States pulled out of Afghanistan on Aug. 30.

“We broke a promise, and I just feel terrible,” Mr. Sappenfield, 53, said. “I said it to the faces of our Afghan brothers: ‘Hey guys, you can count on us, you will get to come to the United States if you wish.’”

But if America has withdrawn from Afghanistan, Mr. Sappenfield and many other veterans have not. He is part of an informal network — including the retired general who once commanded his unit, retired diplomats and intelligence officers and a former math teacher in rural Virginia — still working to fulfill a promise and save the Afghan colleagues who risked their lives for America’s long fight in Afghanistan.

So far, the network has evacuated 69 people from 23 families from Afghanistan since mid-August. But 346 people from 68 different families remain on its list of endangered Afghans, including the interpreter, whom Mr. Sappenfield regards as a brother. He says the interpreter kept his unit alive in Helmand Province “by telling us where to go, and where not to.”

Every day, Mr. Sappenfield is in contact with the interpreter, who went into hiding after the Taliban took control of the country in mid-August and for security reasons is being identified only as P, the first letter of his given name. He hid in Kabul for nearly a month, before the network managed to shepherd him, in a harrowing 15-hour bus ride, to another city in Afghanistan.



Mr. Sappenfield has a video call with his interpreter in Afghanistan at least once a day. They exchange videos of their children but more often they talk about fear and frustration. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

As of this week, P is waiting for a possible charter flight out as he is shuttled between safe houses. “The Taliban can easily spot us in this area because we are not from this part of Afghanistan,” he wrote to Mr. Sappenfield earlier this month.

In pulling out of Afghanistan, President Biden declared that he would not pass the conflict to another president and another generation. He would bring closure. But the shambolic withdrawal and the failure to evacuate thousands of now threatened Afghans whose help was essential to the American effort has only deepened the alienation felt by many veterans.

Mr. Sappenfield’s emotions rise and fall with each message from P, who tried and failed three times to reach the Abbey Gate, one of the Kabul airport’s main entries, during the American evacuation.

“I tell my students in 11th grade that they are the only ones who can betray their integrity,” Mr. Sappenfield said. “It’s theirs to give away if they choose to lie or cheat. But in this case, someone else broke my word for me. It just irritates the heck out of me.”

If Not Me, Then Who?

Did our service matter?

The question gnawed at Lt. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson as he drafted a letter in August to the men and women with the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade who fought alongside him in Afghanistan. “Nothing,” he wrote, “can diminish your selfless service to our nation.”

Nothing — not the Taliban’s sweeping takeover after two decades of war, not the desperate Afghans falling from planes, not disbelief that Afghanistan had fallen overnight to the same enemy that the Americans had vanquished 20 years ago.

“I felt I had to say to the guys, ‘Hey, get your heads up,’” said General Nicholson, who retired as a three-star in 2018. Recalling the 92 Marines who died under his command in Helmand Province, the 2,461 American service members overall who died in Afghanistan and the untold treasure lost, he wrote to his fellow Marines:

"You raised your hand and said, 'IF NOT ME, THEN WHO?'"



Jack Britton Jr., a former Marine officer, in Austin, Texas. He worked to help evacuate people from Afghanistan. Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

The letter was dated Aug. 17. Soon after, one of the recipients posted it on LinkedIn, and it quickly circulated onto veterans' chat groups, where anguished questioning was already being aired about how the American withdrawal could be squared with a core Marine creed: Leave no one behind.

General Nicholson's letter ended with a hint that, in fact, some Marines were honoring that code. "You may be interested to know we are working through several channels to provide safe passage out of Afghanistan," he wrote.

One of the channels was run by Jack Britton Jr., a retired Marines intelligence officer who served with General Nicholson in Iraq and had gone into corporate security in Texas. On the encrypted messaging app Signal, Mr. Britton had set up a group called "Support-HKIA" — an acronym for Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport.

"#DigitalDunkerque," he wrote.

Quickly, an informal rescue operation came together, sometimes interacting with other such informal networks. "Jack was the master facilitator," General Nicholson said.

The master coordinator, though, was Bruce Hemp, 67, a retired math teacher and grandmother who lives with her husband on a farm in Staunton, Va. She had met General Nicholson in 2007 and soon was organizing friends to put together care packages for his Marines. From 2011, she began organizing an annual party — or muster, as the Marines call it — at her farm.



Bruce Hemp spends her days alternating between calls and updating spreadsheets used to keep track of Special Immigrant Visa applicants and their families. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

Now the same people who gathered there were the nexus of an Afghan evacuation network.

"The key takeaway," Ms. Hemp said, "is just how let down they feel by the government not helping these people who saved American lives umpteen times."

Working with the Signal group, Ms. Hemp compiled a manifest of 400 at-risk Afghans, which included passport and visa application details, the names of American sponsors as well as phone numbers for Afghan mechanics, interpreters and translators.

Her farm became a command center, with phone calls and messages pouring in. From the fall of Kabul on Aug. 15, the network worked with soldiers and intelligence officers on the ground in Afghanistan. She showed The Times a list of Afghan names, including large families, a few marked in purple with the words "GOT OUT!!!"

"She is the den mother with her Cub Scouts," Mr. Sappenfield said.

A Cup of Milk Tea

For the American service members trying to evacuate Afghans and others at the Kabul International Airport, the low point came on Aug. 26, when a suicide bombing killed 13 American service members and 170 Afghans.

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That day, an Afghan man, Matiullah Matie, his wife and their six children stood near the Abbey Gate holding a sign that read "Chesty Puller." For Marines, that seemingly odd name was not odd at all; Chesty Puller was a Marine Corps hero for his exploits in World War II and Korea.

Mr. Matie was a businessman in Helmand Province who for several years worked as a facilitator and fixer for General Nicholson. Now he held the Chesty Puller sign aloft — an idea from Maj. Mike Kuiper, an active-duty Marine who had served in Helmand.



Matiullah Matie in the United States. Mr. Matie and his family were evacuated to Germany, where they were housed for more than a month in a tent with other evacuees before being flown to the United States. Matiullah Matie

Spotting that sign, a Marine stationed at the airport pushed Mr. Matie's family through the gates to safety. Later, Mr. Matie and his family were evacuated to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where they were housed for more than month in a tent while awaiting transport to the United States.

"When a Marine approached me in the crowd, I had the password on my phone, which that day was a photo of a cup of milk tea," Mr. Matie said in a phone interview. "My Marine brothers saved me."

On Oct. 14, Mr. Matie and his family were flown to Philadelphia from Germany. "Reached Philadelphia airport safely thanks to my American brothers and sisters who helped me," he wrote in a jubilant message.

In a leafy subdivision in Knoxville, Tenn., General Nicholson has been working closely with an Afghan American, Par, whose mother, brother and pregnant sister had just arrived after a terrifying journey from Afghanistan coordinated by the Marines network.



Ms. Hemp and members of her church discuss plans to welcome and host Afghan refugees. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

Par had worked for the U.S. Defense Department in Kabul, gotten to America in 2014 and then joined the Army, where he is now a sergeant in the army reserve. When Kabul fell, General Nicholson helped arrange for his family to reach the Kabul airport after a 20-hour bus ride from Herat in western Afghanistan.

At the airport gates, Par's brother held up an agreed-upon sign: "MY BROTHER WORKS FOR THE U.S. ARMY." An American quickly waved them inside, where they spent four days before being flown to Qatar, then to Bulgaria, then to Germany and finally to Dulles International Airport near Washington. Par was waiting.

"Paroled," reads the American entry stamp on their Afghan passports.

Par asked to be identified only by his given name because he still has four sisters and a brother, as well as his father, stuck in Afghanistan. He laughed when asked about the Taliban 2.0 theory, the idea that time and diplomatic experience had mellowed a movement known for its harsh repression of women and mass executions.

"They are playing us. I cannot believe there are some people who actually believe them. My brother, who worked for the United States government, will probably disappear and never be seen again."

The United States evacuated more than 100,000 Afghans before withdrawing from Kabul, but many had never worked for the United States while thousands who did remain. Many veterans remain fixated on why generals or presidents have not been held accountable for a lost war. They asked whether their buddies gave their lives so that the Taliban could march unopposed into Kabul.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

One Marine, who requested anonymity because he is still in the service, put it this way: You lose two rifles at the Camp Lejeune Marines training base and the entire chain of command is relieved. But you lose tens of billions of dollars' worth of weapons now in the hands of the Taliban, 13 service members (10 of them Marines) in the Aug. 26 terrorist attack at Kabul airport, and you lose America's longest war, and there seems to be no reckoning.

"Among Americans there is no shared scar tissue from the wars," said J. Kael Weston, a former State Department official who served in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside General Nicholson and has been part of the network. "A culture gap opened up."



"Among Americans there is no shared scar tissue from the wars," said J. Kael Weston, a retired diplomat who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and has been part of the evacuation network. AJ Marino for The New York Times

In rural Virginia, Ms. Hemp and others are still working to save more Afghans. She has three young grandchildren and doesn't have to do this, given that many Americans have already forgotten Afghanistan, or scarcely paid attention to it before.

"I was raised with the Golden Rule, an honor code," she said. "You do not lie to people. You honor your promises."

She looked out at her crab apple tree and the rolling green fields. "People today don't want to take responsibility for their actions. 'Choices have consequences' is now 'choices have consequences for everyone but me.' People are just so angry."

Bureaucratic Hell

On many days, Mr. Sappenfield speaks on Zoom with P, the interpreter. They exchange videos of their children but more often they talk about fear and frustration. The fear is about the Taliban. The frustration is with the State Department, which has been slow walking his visa application for many years.

"They are not taking any action," P said in a Zoom call. "I feel hopeless. I feel I will be killed in front of my kids."

For more than a decade, P has been caught in the Catch-22 labyrinth of the State Department's Special Immigrant Visa, or SIV, application process. He has already had two visa interviews — on March 3, 2020, and April 6 of this year — at the now closed U.S. Embassy in Kabul.



A crowd of Afghans trying to gain entry to the airport in Kabul in August after the Taliban took control. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Yet in a Sept. 21 email to Ms. Hemp, a foreign service officer wrote that P still needed another interview. “Obviously,” the officer added, “that will not be happening in Kabul.”

He concluded, “Sorry this is so murky and chaotic.”

Ms. Hemp responded bluntly. “In this day and age of online meetings, zoom conference calls, FaceTime calls, Messenger video chat, why can’t they do an online interview?” she wrote.

The foreign service officer checked with a colleague in Washington, who confirmed that, given the closure of the embassy in Kabul, there was no way for P to get another interview unless he managed to leave Afghanistan.

“Then the SIV case can be transferred to that country,” the officer wrote. “So, it seems to be a Catch-22 situation.”

Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the homeland security secretary, said on Capitol Hill last month that only about 3 percent of the Afghans evacuated to the United States during the American withdrawal actually have special immigrant visas.

P’s application was first submitted in April 2010, when Mr. Sappenfield’s unit was rotating out of Helmand. Had the process not been so labyrinthine, P would have gotten out of Afghanistan before it fell to the Taliban. Now he is trapped.

In an email, a State Department spokeswoman said the effort to help people like P was “of utmost importance” but acknowledged that “it is currently extremely difficult for Afghans to obtain a visa to a third country” in order to have a visa interview.

P has not given up. Every day there is a different word on flights. So far, none have had a spot for him.

Ms. Hemp, Mr. Sappenfield, Mr. Britton and General Nicholson haven’t given up, either.



"I just feel terrible," said Rex Sappenfield, a former Marine who served in Afghanistan. He says he is tormented by the fate of an interpreter left behind when America withdrew from the country. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

"Since the weather is changing, people are asking me to find blankets and warm clothes for their families in Afghanistan," Ms. Hemp wrote recently. "Of course, they continue to ask when their loved ones will be evacuated. No clue, probably never, but I don't dare tell them that."

Mr. Sappenfield, a religious man, also recently wrote: "Haunted by the promises I made but my government wouldn't allow me to keep, I ponder my own Judgment Day.

"Irreverently, perhaps, I am hoping for a front row seat when that day of reckoning comes for those responsible for these crimes against humanity."