

## A Prisoner Release Stuns 2 American War Widows

An Afghan police officer who killed two American military advisers in 2012 is released early from his 20-year sentence.

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Eight years ago, Peggy Marchanti and Holly Loftis were told that their husbands, serving as military advisers in Afghanistan, had been fatally shot by an Afghan policeman.

This week, the two military widows received another shock: Abdul Basir Salangi, the police officer who admitted murdering their husbands in Kabul in 2012, was freed from prison last week after serving less than four years of a 20-year sentence.

“I got off the phone and I called my son and just started crying,” Ms. Marchanti said after learning of the prisoner release from a journalist.

Her husband, Maj. Robert D. Marchanti, 48, of the Army National Guard, was shot and killed while working as an adviser in a small room inside the Afghan Interior Ministry complex in February 2012. Lt. Col. John Loftis, 44, an Air Force military adviser working nearby, was also shot and killed.

The incident was an insider attack often referred to as green-on-blue: Afghan soldiers or police officers killing or wounding American and NATO service members who work with the Afghan security forces.



The Interior Ministry in Kabul after the attack in February 2012. S. Sabawoon/EPA, via Shutterstock

Ms. Loftis said she and her family were dismayed to learn that Mr. Salangi had been freed. “We are also saddened for the Afghan people, who have a murderer walking among them,” she said.

Colonel Loftis, who went by Darin, his middle name, left behind two children, and Major Marchanti four.

Mr. Salangi, a noncommissioned officer and police driver also known as Abdul Saboor, has said that he shot the two Americans in retaliation for the accidental burning of copies of the Quran, the Islamic holy book, by NATO personnel at Bagram Air Base a week earlier.

Mr. Salangi was one of about 160 prisoners freed Friday under a three-year-old political agreement between an Afghan insurgent group and the government of President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan, said Farhad Bayani, a spokesman for the Department of Prisons in Afghanistan.

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Under the 2017 agreement, the government agreed to a phased release of prisoners belonging to Hezb-i-Islami, an extremist group and related political party led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a warlord and former Afghan prime minister. A spokesman for Hezb-i-Islami said Mr. Salangi was a member of the group.

Mr. Bayani, the prison spokesman, said the Hezb-i-Islami releases were not related to the releases of Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government as part of a troop withdrawal agreement between the United States and the militants. Zalmay Khalilzad, the American peace envoy, told reporters Monday that between 2,400 to 2,500 Taliban prisoners had been released as part of the agreement, signed Feb. 29.

Mr. Salangi was able to flee unimpeded from the heavily guarded Interior Ministry compound just after the 2012 shooting. He was arrested in Afghanistan in 2016 and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

At a court hearing in Kabul, he admitted killing Colonel Loftis and Major Marchanti in retaliation for the burning of the Qurans.

"I could no longer control my normal situation and I went to their office with the gun I had," he testified. "Both of them were there and I killed them both."

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He added: "Thank God I succeeded. After this, even if I lose my head, I don't have any fear. I thank God a thousand times."

The NATO military command in Afghanistan responded to the killings by pulling all its advisers from Afghan ministries.

Saifuddin, a tribal elder in the Salang district of Parwan Province in eastern Afghanistan, said Mr. Salangi returned last week to his home there and was greeted warmly by residents. Mr. Salangi declined an interview request.

Ms. Loftis said her husband and Major Marchanti were "loving husbands and fathers, exemplary officers and wonderful men."

She said she and her two daughters missed her husband and their father every minute of every day.

"We remember his sense of humor, his wit, his gift for languages and his genuine concern and efforts to improve the lives of people, especially the oppressed and downtrodden," she said. "We honor his memory by striving to live our lives with the values that he held dear."

Ms. Marchanti said, "A murderer is free to harm again after taking the lives of two innocent men as they sat at their desk working."

"My family will persevere and be stronger for it because Major Marchanti was a man of integrity and love," she added. "Through the love of God his legacy will last forever."

"And now I leave Salangi to that same God," she said.