

Allies Ep. 6: Allies Refuge FINAL

05-31-21

MJ

A warning for listeners. This podcast features stories of war, terrorism and violence. It's important to hear, but it can also be disturbing.

[Crickets... iPhone SFX... finger swiping a phone]

It's the early morning of August 26th... 20-21. The sun hasn't risen over Kabul yet. A young Afghan named Hakimi (Huh-KEY-me) is in bed... huddled over his phone. The 22-year-old is frantically deleting pictures of his friends and family.

And he's getting rid of anything that shows him with Americans.

[Hakimi: "I cleaned my social media. I mean, I deleted my post, tweets, texts, photos and everything from social media and also from my photo, because we had known that Taliban had checked the phones."]

[MUSIC]

Hakimi has to be quiet... he doesn't want to wake his family: the eight relatives who share one roof. They had been arguing for weeks. With the U-S leaving... Hakimi wanted to get out of Afghanistan. But his family said they couldn't.

The Taliban had checkpoints on the roads. And they were looking for people like him. Hakimi was a journalist and a civil society activist. And some of his family members worked for the Afghan government.

[Hakimi: "They told me that if you go to Kabul airport, Taliban will find you and they will arrest you.."]

Hakimi was 2-years-old when the U-S invaded Afghanistan. And he always liked the Americans. He even helped translate for them before. Not officially. But Hakimi says if he saw an American soldier trying to talk to an Afghan... he'd help bridge the language gap.

[Hakimi: “When the US air force or US Marines were in Afghanistan, people feel safe, feel security, they had hope, they were happy ...”]

But now U-S troops were leaving. The Afghan government had fallen. And The Taliban were walking around the streets of Kabul. They told reporters they’d be peaceful... and that no one would be killed.

[MUSIC FADES]

Hakimi... like lots of Afghans... didn’t buy it. He thought that there was no future under Taliban rule.

[Hakimi: “First reason that I left the home, there was no more hope for me there was no income, the schools shut down, university’s door closed.

Second, I was in risk in Afghanistan. So I had to go somewhere to be in a safe place...

And the third one is because of supporting my family. So I thought that I had to leave Afghanistan, go somewhere, complete my education and then support my family.”]

At home... Hakimi is careful to not delete *everything* from his phone. He needs to *keep* just enough proof to show the U-S Consulate that he’s in danger. That he *needs* to get a flight out.

He plans to tell them about his brother... who was an activist and politician. His dad... who worked for the Afghan government. He’ll tell the Consulate about the family... that he’s about to leave behind.

[THEME]

[Hakimi: “I woked up and saw that all of my family are asleep ... So I even, I didn’t see my mother, my father. And because I thought that if they will find out that I want to go to the Kabul airport.

So before sunrise, I left the home without any saying goodbye...”]

[ALLIES THEME]

From Lawfare and Goat Rodeo... This is Allies. A podcast about America's Eyes and Ears in the War in Afghanistan.

I'm your host Bryce Klehm.

In this episode we'll take you to the Kabul airport. Where 20 years of war collided with broken bureaucracy.

You'll hear lots of voices. They're Afghans... Veterans and Politicians. In the last months of the war... these people saw the huge backlog of Special Immigrant Visa applicants grow. They'll describe their small piece of the vast evacuation efforts that spanned the globe. You'll hear first-hand accounts of people fleeing Afghanistan. And how thousands more were left behind to face an uncertain future.

This is Episode 6: 'Allies Refuge'

[THEME FADES]

In our last episode... you heard about the deal between the Trump administration and the Taliban. The two sides agreed that US and coalition forces would leave.

But many observers in Afghanistan didn't think that would really happen. This is an Afghan we'll call Billy. That's not his real name... and we've altered his voice.

Billy thought the Americans would stay.

[Billy: "I still didn't believe that they will completely leave..."]

Billy says he had a couple of different jobs for the U-S during the war. He was an interpreter for a while... then became a contractor doing construction work at U-S bases.

Whenever the rumors of a withdrawal came up... Billy says he simply didn't believe them.

[Billy: "There was like zero chance that US government will completely leave Afghanistan after those million billions of dollars spent here ... It was something that, you know, I could not even believe 1%."]

Billy had applied for a Special Immigrant Visa in 20-11... but it was denied several times. So in the last years of the war... he fell into a familiar pattern. Billy would file appeals and he tried asking the U-S embassy for updates. All while the Taliban were taking control of Afghanistan.

[Billy: "... My life, during these years was basically like living in a cage. I spent most of my time at home ... going outside ... it was scary any minute anything could happen ... there were explosion suicide attackers, and you didn't know, like there was not a single location that felt safe and it was getting worse as time went by. It was getting worse and worse and worse."]

After the deal between the Taliban and the Americans... Billy still held out hope. He thought the Americans might not leave. And maybe there would be another peace agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Maybe he'd be safe.

[Billy: "... everybody believed like that until, you know, everything just fell apart..."]

[SONIC TRANSITION... press conference...]

When President Donald Trump left office... some thought his successor might change course. That President Joe Biden might not withdraw....

[Biden: "Good Afternoon... I'm speaking to you today from the treaty room in The White House. The same spot where on October of 2001 president George W. Bush informed our nation that the United States military had begun strikes on terrorist training camps in Afghanistan... *fades under"]

But in Spring 20-21... he announced that the Americans would in fact be leaving Afghanistan. The last troops would be out by the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

[Biden: "The United States will begin our final withdrawal on May 1 of this year. We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it responsibly, deliberately and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners who now have more forces in Afghanistan than we do... *fades under"]

President Biden's announcement immediately raised questions. Would all American personnel be able to get out before the deadline? Would the Taliban hold up their end of the deal? Could the Afghan government keep standing without American backing?

But many veterans of the war were asking... what's going to happen to our partners? The Afghan interpreters, translators, and others who fought alongside us?

[Purdy: “We immediately recognized that this was a population who was not covered in either President Trump or President Biden's kind of withdrawal planning...”]

That's Chris Purdy. He's a veteran of the Iraq War. Chris is the director of outreach for Human Rights First. That's one of many non-profits who advocate for SIV applicants.

The evacuation announcement brought a new urgency to their work. Thousands of Afghans like Billy were still waiting for an SIV to come to America. Now there was only a few months to get them processed.

[Purdy: “There was no real plan for the, at that time, 18,000 principal applicants in the pipeline ... and so what we saw was at that point in Taliban making real gains. At the very minimum we anticipated civil conflict that would put the vast majority of these people's lives in danger.”]

It was clear they were headed for a crisis. So Chris says tons of groups – like No One Left Behind... I-RAP... and the Truman National Security Project – they started advocating for a plan. They called it the “Guam Option.”

[Purdy: “We wanted to airlift all of the SIV applicants in the process – every one of them, all 18,000 ... we wanted to airlift them to Guam, process them for initial processing in Guam, then split them up into the different bases around the country ... and then process them into the U-S that way.”]

This idea had been around for a while. It circulated a decade earlier during the US withdrawal from *Iraq*. The Guam Option was based on past military evacuations of Vietnamese and Kurds.

Chris says they knew this plan might be a tough sell for the White House. So they explained how it could be done.

[Purdy: “... we even put a chart out for them and how many you'd have to fly out each day ... we kind of laid out for them: you need to get X number of people on Y number of planes, Z number of times a day ... ”]

But after they went over the plan... Chris says they didn't hear anything back from the administration. Meanwhile... the U.S. was inching closer to what many thought was becoming a chaotic withdrawal.

[Purdy: "The pushback that we got was, one: people just didn't take our calls. You know, we had meetings with the NSC, DHS and state, to kind of like outline this plan. ... we submitted memos to them on how this could work. And we heard crickets..."]

[MUSIC]

Congress pressured the White House too. There's a bipartisan coalition called 'Honoring Our Promises' working group. It's full of lawmakers who wanted a safe withdrawal from Afghanistan. You'll hear from two of its members throughout this episode.

One is a Republican Congressman... Pete Meijer. He used to work for an N-G-O in Afghanistan.

[Meijer: "If we have a set date for withdrawal we know that the SIV program has been neglected ... but it wasn't like it was a functioning program to begin with. So it was something that had to be stood up or accelerated pretty significantly."]

Meijer says they were in touch with the Biden administration that Spring. With the humanitarian crisis getting worse... they worked together. Congress increased the number of SIV spots in the last days of the war.

[Meijer: "... I mean every time the administration came and said, 'We need to raise the SIV cap,' we got more votes to raise the special immigrant visa cap for Afghan interpreters and others who served alongside US forces. We got more votes for that then to award Capitol police congressional gold medals for their actions on January 6th."]

Expanding the number of SIVs was a good start... but it didn't amount to a robust plan to get all the U.S.'s *partners* out. And as Spring turned to Summer... there still didn't seem to be much urgency from the White House.

In June... The Defense Secretary and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs testified at a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee.

[Smith: Gavel, “Good morning ... we are honored to be joined by the Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley... we look forward to your testimony...”]

This is where Democratic Congressman Seth Moulton comes in. He’s another member of the Honoring Our Promises working group... and also an Iraq War veteran. At that hearing... Congressman Moulton had questions about the withdrawal. And an evacuation plan that was similar to the “Guam Option.”

But Moulton wasn’t getting much clarity.

[Moulton: “... We have 80 days until our formal withdrawal date. It takes 800 days or more to process a special immigrant visa. So it's too late for the special immigrant visa process. Secretary Austin, why have you not started an evacuation yet?”]

Austin: “We are working with a department of state who has the lead on this along with DHS ... I am confident that we will begin to evacuate some of those people. But again, I would defer to secretary Blinken to really outline what the, what the -”

Moulton: “-- Mr. Secretary, I don't need to tell you this, but these brave Afghan partners ... The Taliban will kill them if they can.

Chairman Milley, if the service chiefs were ordered to evacuate our Afghan allies today, is there a plan in place to get that started immediately?”

Milley: “We have the military capability to do whatever’s directed by the President of the United States with respect to our allies and those that have worked with us...We are prepared to execute whatever we are directed.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

In the meantime... the news coming *out* of The White House seemed like everything was proceeding as planned. In July... President Biden gave an update on the withdrawal. He said it was being done in an orderly and secure fashion. And that the US would be out of Afghanistan by the deadline.

[Biden: “And this starting this month ... we're going to begin relocation flights for Afghanistan, SIV applicants and their families who choose to leave.

We have a point person in the White House and at the State Department led task force coordinating all these efforts, but our message to those women and men is clear:

[MUSIC]

There is a home for you in the United States, if you so choose. And we will stand with you just as you stood with us.”]

In the speech ... Biden said the administration was expanding their evacuation. He announced Operation Allies Refuge. It was an ambitious plan to airlift Afghans out of the country.

The first flight from the Operation landed a few weeks later on July 30 at Fort Lee... Virginia:

[anchor: “More than 200 interpreters from Afghanistan and their families arrived in Virginia today...”

anchor: “They can wait safely while they finish applying for the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program... the first flight of evacuees landed at Dulles International Airport this morning...” FADES UNDER]

Chris Purdy was happy to see that Afghans were finally getting out.

[Purdy: “I got the text that the plane had landed and so everyone kind of lit up. We were all very excited. So we thought this is it, I mean, this could be the start. At least now there's a pipeline going...”]

[MUSIC FADES]

Then Chris and other advocates took a closer look at *who* the White House was flying out. Tens of thousands of Afghans were trying to leave... but these planes were only taking a few hundred.

It turns out... Operation Allies Refuge was taking Afghans who were just a few steps away from getting their visas.

[Purdy: “What they were doing is they were taking people at the end of the SIV process ... and they were taking them to Fort Lee, Virginia.”]

So while 200 or 300 people might have been a good start... the plan wasn't moving fast enough.

Remember... there were around 18,000 principal applicants. But if you include their family and dependents... around 80,000 people actually needed evacuation. So Chris says the administration's plan wasn't going to cut it.

[Purdy: “You don't get to just like essentially front-load people who were already flying out anyways to Fort Lee and call that in evacuation because that's not what it was.”]

Chris says – at this point – everyone could see the situation in Afghanistan deteriorating. They were hearing from tons of Afghans still waiting for SIVs.

And everytime they brought these concerns to the White House... they heard the same refrain.

[Purdy: “...and the kind of the back channel conversations we were getting was that the administration was concerned about optics...”]

That's because while American soldiers left... The U-S backed Afghan government was still fighting the Taliban. And the Afghan President – Ashraf Ghani (OSH-roff GAWN-ee) – was still desperate for the White House's support. The Biden administration thought the Ghani government could survive for a year – maybe two...

[Purdy: “... And that by relocating tens of thousands of Afghans...it would be a sign of a lack of confidence in the Ghani government ...

And they didn't want to see a Saigon moment. ... They thought that if they started an evacuation, that people would, I think someone said, you know, run for the exits...”]

[MUSIC FADES]

[SONIC TRANSITION]

Back in Afghanistan... The Taliban was moving *fast*. The group waged a major offensive against the country's last line of defense: The Afghan Army and Security Forces.

[Purdy: "... As the Taliban continued to make gains in May, in June and July, we became increasingly concerned ... I could not comprehend that the military that we had invested 20 years, trillions of dollars into would collapse with such spectacular fashion."]

[Anchor: "As the US military winds down its operations in Afghanistan, an emboldened Taliban is seizing more territory across the country..."]

[Anchor: "The Taliban's advance across Afghanistan is unprecedented. The hardline Islamists who once harbored Osama Bin Laden are gaining ground fast as they sweep through the country..."]

The speed of the American withdrawal matched the pace of the Taliban's advance. In July... American forces had left Bagram Air Base... a symbol of the U.S.'s mission in Afghanistan. And They did it nearly overnight.

[Anchor: "... with little fanfare the massive airbase that served as the anchor of America's two-decade long war is now in Afghan control..."]

[Anchor: "The US is leaving very, very quietly... all of the troop movements are practically state secrets ... it gives the impression that American troops are leaving here in a hidden way ... that they are quietly going toward the door."]

[SONIC TRANSITION... MUSIC FADES]

Billy... the Afghan interpreter you heard from earlier... followed the Taliban's advance on social media. And he was in touch with other interpreters who had SIV applications in the pipeline. He says if the Taliban took over... people like him would be threatened or killed.

[Billy: "... things were getting crazy everyday, And I had no other option, but just go ahead and apply again with my SIV documents."]

Billy got in touch with the non-profit IRAP and his old American supervisors. They helped him file another SIV application. By this point tons of Afghans like him were flooding the U-S embassy with pleas for help.

[Billy: "... So as the situation was also getting worse, this was the, the only, the only window of opportunity for me to just go ahead and apply again..."]

So Billy sent in his application. While he waited... Billy worried about the paperwork in his home. He needed it for his S-I-V case... but it also identified him as a U-S hire.

With the Taliban on the march... these employment documents could put his family in danger.

[Billy: "I started burning all those contracts, all those copies ... I still have a few letter of recommendation letters ... that I have hidden ... under the ground."]

[MUSIC]

By early August... The Taliban's victory campaign was nearly complete. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ... the Taliban had captured all but one of the country's provinces in a 10-day window.

And The U-S had abandoned almost every airfield in the country. So the Afghans who wanted to leave would now descend on one place: The Kabul airport.

Billy thought about going there too...

[Billy: "Everybody rushed to the airport back then but ... I was following the social media and the news channels and they kept making these announcement that those who does not receive a specific email from the department of state should not approach the airport. 'It's scary and we will not let you in, you will not be allowed. So just keep checking your emails and wait.'"

And that's what I did. That's what I did. I was, uh, I kept checking my emails and I was hoping that I will get the email..."]

So Billy waited for updates on his S-I-V...

[MUSIC FADES/RESET]

Let's take a step back here. For the entirety of this series... we've told you about a very specific group of U.S. allies: Interpreters and translators like Fred... Janis... and Billy.

Afghans who worked *directly* for the U.S and were SIV eligible. Those Afghans went through a slow-motion evacuation from Afghanistan for over a decade.

But during the withdrawal... many more were trying to leave:

The members of Afghan society who tried to build a better Afghanistan since the U-S invasion. They were officials in the Afghan government, soldiers in the Afghan security forces. They were politicians, lawyers, athletes, activists, and journalists. Afghans who might not be eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa... but still faced an uncertain future under Taliban rule.

Jawad Sukhanyar (Juh-Wodd Soo-ken-YARR) is one of them. He worked as a journalist... writing for the New York Times. By August... Jawad had applied for visas for his family. But he hadn't heard back from the US embassy...

[Jawad: “I was just trying to see how I could hide myself and my family in case we don't make it ... you just could see and feel that the Taliban were coming from all directions.”]

On August 15th... The Taliban made it to Kabul. At this point... the Afghan Army and Government were in complete disarray. The Taliban took the capital City with little resistance. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani even fled the country.

[Anchor: “The NBC team has confirmed that the president, President Ghani of Afghanistan has left the country...”]

[Anchor: “ ... by day's end Taliban fighters were sitting at the desk in the presidential palace ...”]

With the government gone... Jawad decided that his family just needed to get out. They would head to the airport and hope for the best. So they packed up a few belongings and drove to the airport.

[Jawad: “We just leave the home for the airport without knowing what's our flight and where is our destination ... make that 25 minute drive...”]

But this is not the Kabul I saw like, days before, like years before. It has just turned to a city that's already shattered. You see abandoned military vehicles on the roadside, armored vehicles...”]

[MUSIC]

Jawad was in touch with his colleagues at the New York Times. They were trying to arrange flights for their reporters. Jawad got to the airport... and his family joined a growing crowd of Afghans trying to get inside.

[Jawad: “The airport is already overcrowded outside the airports. 10s of thousands of people are waiting, some of them with documents, some without documents. They all think that if they make it to the airport, they’ll be flown out. They’ll be evacuated. You know, people are afraid, afraid of what’s going to happen, the Taliban are in control.

You see the people are rushing in, to get into the terminal all the way to the tarmac. But then there is no hope.”]

The security situation at the airport was getting worse. Crowds had forced their way through the gates and started running onto the tarmac. Jawad saw people crowd around departing planes. Some were clinging to C-17s as they took off... and falling to their deaths.

[anchor: “ ... desperate crowds had been rushing the runway... trying to get on board planes. Even clinging to aircraft as they taxied for takeoff...”]

[anchor: “... thousands crowded onto the tarmac... no visible security or semblance of order...”]

Jawad and his family waited in the crowds. The Americans at the gate were trying to sort through everybody... but it was a slow and tedious process. So Jawad and his family sat in line for *two whole days*. Just for a *chance* at leaving the country.

[Jawad: “We ran out of food, we ran out of water ... there's nothing to sleep. You just have your bags and you're sitting in a corner with other families ...”]

By this point... The Taliban took over crowd control. They were beating people back with whips. They fired their guns in the air. So Jawad and his family left the airport. They went to a friend's house to regroup.

Jawad would wait for updates from his colleagues in New York. His family would try to make it out again in a few days.

[MUSIC FADES W/ TRANSITION... PHONES RINGING]

Back in Washington... Congressional offices were inundated with requests from Afghans and Americans. People who saw the doors closing. Congressman Seth Moulton and Pete Meijer, the two congressmen you heard from earlier, along with their staffs, they spent hours on the phone.

Here's Meijer... followed by Moulton.

[Meijer: "Congressional offices are being overwhelmed. The state department's overwhelmed. The people on the ground are being overwhelmed by random requests coming in every which way ..."]

[CROSSFADE W/ Moulton: "... and this is following months of letters and private conversations with The White House with administration officials, the state department, and DOD saying you have to get these people out and you can't wait till the last minute."]

So Moulton and Meijer were advocating for the administration to extend the August 31st deadline. They thought the military should have more time to get people out.

So the Congressmen decided they'd fly to Kabul. They wanted to show the administration why the military needed more time.

Meijer: "... And, you know, our immediate focus was just on being able to figure out if there are things that Congress can be doing or things we need to be raising attention to...

And number two, how can we push this this August 31st deadline back"]

[PLANE TAKING OFF... MUSIC]

The two arrived in Afghanistan on August 24th. They went to the airport and headed to an entrance... a place called Abbey Gate. Marines had locked down the tarmac to keep the crowds at bay. Now they were trying to funnel people *through* the gates.

Moulton was stunned by what he saw.

[Moulton: “When I went out to Abbey Gate with Peter, we saw this extraordinary sea of humanity – thousands and thousands of Afghans pressing against the gate....”]

The processing that had previously taken years... was now being done rapidly.

This image, of Afghans packed into crowds, waving documents in the air... it crystallized the decades of broken U.S. immigration bureaucracy.

But now, instead of a state department official inside an Embassy office deciding who gets to leave... it was a group of Marines at a gate... that decided who made it through.

[Moulton: “What the Marines would have to do is go out and find someone who met the description of a report they were getting ... perhaps through a friend of a friend on a cell phone who's saying ‘This was my guy that I worked with five years ago out in Helmand province, you gotta save him. He's wearing an orange cap. He's waving a red flag. This is where he's standing. He just sent me a grid, go and find him.’

... Grab that Afghan, take them by the hand, put his kids on your shoulders just to get them through the crowds. And he's dragging his wife, the Marines got two young Afghan kids on their shoulders and they bring them closer to the base ... where they would meet with young state department diplomats, young consular officials who were doing everything they could to try to screen these individuals, check their paperwork, make sure it was correct, make sure we were actually bringing the right people out, making sure that no Taliban or terrorists got through.”]

[Meijer: “... get an American through the gates, get a permanent resident, get an interpreter, get, you know, vulnerable Afghan journalists, or female rights activists or others who are under threat and get them through those gates...

And other times they have to walk out ...you know, a woman with an infant in her arms. I mean, pregnant women have to walk out, old men on walkers who had gotten through the gates, but who didn't pass the state department screening with the consular officials...”

[Moulton: “I spoke to one Lance Corporal, right? I think he was 18. And I asked him how this was going. He looked me in the eye and he said, ‘You know, sir, ... it's pretty tough when the state department tells you that, that older sister, because she's 20 years old, she doesn't qualify to go with her family. And they ask me ... to take that Afghan young lady by the hand and lead her back out ... splitting up a family.’

I mean, just imagine that. Imagine how unbelievably traumatic that is for the family. And that's what we were asking these incredible young Marines to do. They should never have been put in that position.”]

And just outside Abbey gate... they saw The Taliban... who was now *partnering* with the Americans in the last days of the war.

[MUSIC]

[Meijer: “The fact that the success of our operations were entirely contingent on the cooperation and the Goodwill of the Taliban, which. A staggering thing for folks who had up until a few weeks prior, been dropping bombs on the Taliban...”

Moulton: “Think about the irony that these Marines, after going to Afghanistan for two decades to fight the Taliban, to fight the terrorist organization that harbored the attackers of 9/11 after two decades fighting the Taliban, we had to rely on the Taliban for security.

The Taliban was literally screening people coming into the checkpoint. And we just had to – on some sort of good faith – trust that they didn't want to get blown up either. So hopefully they were stopping people who were coming with bombs.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

Moulton and Meijer hoped what they saw on the trip... would convince the administration... to push the withdrawal deadline back.

But the Congressmen had changed their minds. Representative Meijer says The Taliban had been repeating the August 31st deadline to their troops for months. If the Americans changed course at the last minute... the news might not reach some Taliban fighters.

[Meijer: “There was concern that if we tried to extend that, all it took was one foot soldier who thought that things were being changed and that the agenda was shifting to really cause an incidence of violence.

I mean, imagine what would have happened if one of those C-17s with 700 Afghan civilians and a dozen American soldiers got shot down.”]

So... the Congressman got on a flight out of Afghanistan.

[SONIC TRANSITION]

Throughout the evacuation... anyone with a connection to Afghanistan rushed to get their Afghan friends out. Veterans and civilians created groups like Digital Dunkirk and Operation Eagle. They were full of private citizens who tried to coordinate flights over apps like Signal and WhatsApp.

Elliot Ackerman is a former Marine recon officer. He had advised Afghan commandos. During the withdrawal... his phone was ringing nonstop. Ackerman was in a text thread with Afghans trying to leave. Plus Americans looking to get them out.

[Ackerman: “I would imagine for many veterans, and this is certainly my case, you know, we moved on, like the war was over for us. We had gone and we had made our lives in other ways. ... And then suddenly it's like, you're, you're just thrown back 10 years and you're right back in Afghanistan ... trying to make some good out of what was happening at the end.”]

Everyone was bouncing messages around to coordinate flights out of Kabul. They were tracking down Afghan friends... directing them to the airport... and looking for personnel to get them through gates.

[Ackerman: “How wrong is it too that, if you're an Afghan, whether or not you're going to live or die, whether or not you're going to get out or not get out at the end of the day, basically comes down to what's the contact list in your phone?

And you're asking veterans to sit there and each person played this sort of Schindler's list game. And there were literally just lists circulating. Put this guy on the list, put them on a list, put them on a list. Yeah, it's a total collapse.”]

Ackerman was on vacation with his family... when an Afghan interpreter named Ali got in touch with him. The two fought together back in Afghanistan. Now Ali was trying to get through a gate in Kabul. He was with his wife and child.

Ackerman was in touch with some marines at the gate who were trying to help. They were actually members of Ackerman's old company.

[Ackerman: "We had him at the north gate and he was ready to go. And I was in communications with the Marines at the north gate. They were ready to pick them up. They had a photo of him and a photo of the sign he was holding. They were saying, 'let us know, we'll go get him.'"]

But Ali wanted to leave with a group of eight others... and he refused to go without them.

Ackerman hadn't heard anything back in a while. He was nervous that something went wrong. Then... he got a message from one of the marines. It was a photo of everyone smiling. They made it inside the airport.

Ackerman's head was racing. It looked like Ali would get out... but he thought: how did it come to this? How was *this* the way the war was going to end?

[Ackerman: "It's like on the one hand, it makes you feel very proud. You know, I'm very proud that I know these guys and I think they're heroes ... on the other end you're so angry that it came down to that and all these other people just walked away.

And at a certain point, there are so many of those people, you can't respond to all of them. You're then saddled with the emotional cost of having to ignore people begging for help at a certain point ... the country just walks away and the veterans are left holding the bag. It's it's, it's really dispiriting, you know, it's disgusting. It's a betrayal."]

[SONIC TRANSITION... plane leaves crossfaded w/ car engine]

On August 26th... the young Afghan Hakimi... who you heard from at the top of the episode... left his home at the crack of dawn. Now he was in a taxi driving through the packed streets toward the Kabul airport.

Hakimi had never come face-to-face with the Taliban... until that day.

[Hakimi: "... On the way, there were a great deal of Taliban checkpoint. They checked us, 'Do you have guns? Who are you? Did you work with US? Are you a journalist? Let me check your phone. Let me check your pocket.']

Luckily... Hakimi had deleted incriminating evidence from his phone. So he made it past the Taliban checkpoints and got to the airport. He stepped out of the car and saw thousands of people.

[Hakimi: "Kabul airport had 4 or 5 gates. So around all the gates, something like 5,000 people... The Taliban fired on them, fired on the sky, 'get back! If you don't want to get back, I will fire on you.']"

Hakimi got in line at one of the gates. He asked a Taliban guard if he could get through.

[Hakimi: "But instead of giving permission to me, they beat me. They whipped me, they tried to beat me with the bag of guns or something that they had on their hand.']"

So Hakimi left the gate... and started searching for another way into the airport.

[SONIC TRANSITION... crowds at airport...]

Afghan journalist Jawad Sukhanyar was waiting out the chaos. After their first attempt to get into the airport failed... Jawad and his family were staying at a friend's house in Kabul. Then he heard from his bosses at the New York Times.

They had a plan. 'Head to this address, and we'll get you processed for travel...'

[Jawad: "... We all get to that address and they make a list, register all our names and whatever documents we have ...

... This time we get on two big buses head to the airport ... and then we spend the whole night waiting inside the bus...']"

The bus got in through a gate. Jawad and his family stepped inside the airport... where they spent another day and night waiting to get a flight scheduled. Eventually they were loaded onto a packed military plane with other Afghans.

[Jawad: “We are asked to be seated on the floor cause there aren't any seats and they need to evacuate as many people as they can. But it's a difficult flight because it's cold. And then there is no space. And I have my little kids who are falling asleep, they're exhausted.

But we make it.”]

Jawad and his family spent the next few days bouncing between planes headed for the U-S. Even though they were safe... Jawad and his family had tons of questions about their future. Questions... that even today... he still can't fully answer.

[Jawad: “What's going to happen to us? You know, we never thought that we'll ever leave our country ...

We did our best to, you know ... do as much as we can in support of democracy freedom of speech ... But now things didn't go the way we thought it should.

Now we are here, you know, what's going to happen to us in terms of our careers. Like, what am I going to do here in America?”]

[SONIC TRANSITION...]

The young activist Hakimi was still in Kabul. After being turned away by the Taliban... Hakimi made his way to another gate controlled by U-S marines. There he desperately tried to get the attention of the marines manning the gate.

[Hakimi: “... so it was hard, but I did, I pushed other people, so after something like fighting, I was able to go near to the gate ... I was able to go close to the U-S force ... and then I speak very loud and show my passport, show my cards and also show my documents ... and then they accepted that, 'okay, we will let you in to come.'”]

Hakimi was finally let inside the airport. But he was still worried. Rumors had been flying around Kabul. Hakimi heard that the terror group ISIS was planning to attack the airport.

[Hakimi: “... because hourly I mean, minute by minute we heard on social media ... that ‘get away from that gate,’ because it's probably a bomb will explode.”]

Hakimi went inside and got in line for the U-S consulate. He had to show his travel documents to the officials... then get on one of the departing planes.

[MUSIC]

But just then back *outside* the airport... a man stepped into the crowd around Abbey Gate. He was with ISIS... and had a 20-pound vest of explosives strapped to his chest. Once he was in the crowd surrounded by Afghans and US service members ... he detonated it.

—

Hakimi heard the explosion.

The blast killed 170 Afghan civilians and 13 American service members. It was the single worst loss of American troops in a decade. Despite the assurances of an organized, steady withdrawal... the bombing at Abbey Gate became a tragic marker of the chaos that had taken hold.

Just one day before the explosion... one of the Marines killed in the blast, Sgt. Nicole Gee (G), had posted a photo of her holding a baby at the airport. The caption read “I love my job.”

These would be the last American casualties of the war in Afghanistan. Hakimi saw some of the dead and injured soldiers get carried into the airport for treatment.

[Hakimi: “Why they died? They died because of me, because of my family, because of Afghan people.

... they could go to the United States and don't care about me ... but they came to Kabul airport to help us. And they died because of us.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

After a few hours... the Consulate re-opened... and Hakimi showed them his documents. Then he packed into a military plane where he flew to Qatar.

Hakimi waited for a few days while his refugee paperwork went through more processing. Finally... he got on a commercial flight bound for Washington, DC.

Hakimi thought back to his family. He left Kabul days earlier without saying goodbye. He realized they likely had no idea where he was. So Hakimi texted his brother. He said ‘... guess where I am right now...’

[MUSIC]

[Hakimi: “ He said that ... you are in some European countries or you're in Dubai, for example, or in Germany?’ I said that ‘no, I'm texting you from Washington DC, United States!’”]

Hakimi’s brother got the rest of the family together to celebrate the good news.

[Hakimi: “they were very happy and they had each other. And also my mother.

... she cried when she find out that I'm in the United States. And so it was very filling and emotional time for me and for my family.

... and then my mother took the phone ... we spoke with each other. And I apologized ... ‘I'm sorry. I left the home ... without saying goodbye.’”]

[MUSIC FADES]

In the last days of the evacuation... Billy... the Afghan interpreter... was still waiting on his SIV application. At one point Billy thought about just making a go of it and heading to the airport...

[Billy: “I was in touch with some friends who even got the airport passage email from the department of state and they went to the airport and I was following them to see what it was like ...”]

But on TV and social media... Billy saw the massive crowds... the Taliban beatings... the explosion at Abbey Gate. And he still hadn’t heard back from the Embassy about his visa. So he stayed home... and waited for an official green light.

[Billy: “...and I was sure that they won't let anyone without the gate passage, until I found out that there was a total mess and those who pushed and wrestled farther in the crowd – even without SIV cases or SIV documents – made it through and were evacuated ... by then it was too late for me”]

[MUSIC]

Billy watched as thousands of Afghans like him packed into flights. He did what the US government told him to do. He followed the rules.

So Billy waited and watched... as he got left behind.

To this day... he still hasn't gotten any updates on his visa. Billy and his family are in Afghanistan right now... still waiting. He has no idea what the status of his application is... and if it's even being processed.

Billy remembers August 30th vividly. That was the day the last American flight left the Kabul airport.

[Billy: "You know, I never cry but that moment, you know, my eyes were just tearing. And, you know, I'm a father of two sweet kids and I would look at them and I don't know what will happen because ... after that when the final flights left, you know, things were like..."

I don't know how to explain it to you, but it was bad. It was bad. But I'm happy that I'm still alive."]

Since the Americans left... Billy says he rarely leaves the house. He's terrified that The Taliban are waiting for people like him to come out of the woodwork.

[Billy: " ... Honestly, I will never trust the Taliban and I will leave Afghanistan if I can as soon as possible ..."

But the problem is, all embassies in Afghanistan are closed. All borders are closed. And I just don't know how to get out of here.

I will just go ahead and stay low-key and still wait for my SIV, which hopefully will happen even though there's very little hope. But eventually I will have to take the migration path ... I will have to walk, walking mountains with my family and just keep going until I make it somewhere safe ... but I'm not staying here because this life is like dying gradually every single moment and I cannot take this..."]

[MUSIC FADES]

For all the chaos in Kabul that summer... Operation Allies Refuge was one of the biggest airlifts in U-S history. The numbers are a bit disputed... but most estimates say around 80-thousand people made it out during the last two weeks of August.

According to recent reporting from the Washington Post, ... over 30,000 of them are eligible to apply for an SIV. In total... only 3,000 Afghans who were flown out actually had SIVs at the time of their evacuation.

But the majority of SIV applicants like Billy... were left behind.

For people who had made it out but never worked directly for the United States, like Hakimi and Jawad... their legal path to permanent residency is uncertain.

[ALLIES THEME]

We've spent the past six episodes telling you about the war in Afghanistan. The interpreters. The SIV program. But what happens now? Now there are thousands of Afghans in the U-S. But many have no idea what their citizenship status is or how long they can be here. And even more are stranded in Afghanistan.

So what's going to happen to them?

That's next time on the final episode of Allies.

[ALLIES THEME]

Allies was created, written and produced by the show's Lead Producers Max Johnston... and me, Bryce Klehm.

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Senior Producers at Goat Rodeo are Megan Nadolski and Ian Enright.

At Lawfare... editorial support from Natalie Orpett, Katherine Pompilio, Claudia Swain and Scott Anderson.

A special thanks to Chris Purdy, Congressmen Pete Meijer and Seth Moulton, Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area, Elliot Ackerman, Jawad Sukhanyar, Hakimi and Billy.

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