

Allies Ep. 3: Ongoing Threat FINAL

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MJ/BK

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

[Fred: "I've been in more than 500 combat missions with the troops."]

This is Fred. He worked as an interpreter for more than a decade during the War in Afghanistan.

[Fred: "I've been in more than 100 attacks. Every day was a new ... the one that changed my life. I want to tell you that one..."

[MUSIC]

Back in 2007, I was in the eastern part of Afghanistan, a province called Laghman province. It's L-a-G-H-M-a-N."]

Fred was in Laghman to help U-S soldiers search for Taliban leaders.

One day he was standing outside this base... chatting with a bunch of Americans and other Afghans. It was a nice spring day... and Fred says they had this gorgeous view. It looked down on a valley with a small town nearby.

A mountain and green forests were on the horizon.

[BIRDSONG... PHOTO SHUTTER]

[Fred: "So then the troops said, 'let's take some pictures.' We did it, just for fun ... So we took some pictures. I give it to the Lieutenant. You are supposed to print it for me and give me a copy."]

Fred didn't think anything of the pictures. Until hours later... in the middle of the night... when his company commander knocked on his door.

[DOOR KNOCKING]

[Fred: “I woke up. I said, ‘why, do you have a mission?’

He said, ‘No, do you know this guy? .’”]

In the background of one of the photos... they could clearly make out someone... a high-ranking Taliban member. A man they had been looking for.

[Fred: “There are two guys, they are walking behind us, just accidentally they came into the picture.

The main Taliban leader that you are looking for, they're in the background of that picture.”]

Now Fred knew their target was close to the base... in that town. So the next morning Fred called a few of his sources nearby. He told them there was a reward on the Taliban leader's head.

[Fred: “... one of my sources, he called me back. He said, ‘Well, if you guys want to come to arrest him, he's in town right now.’”]

[FOOTSTEPS ON DIRT...]

Fred and a small team of Americans headed into town. They found the Taliban leader where Fred's source said he'd be.

Fred was the point of contact... and approached him...

[Fred: “He was 100-feet away from me, I called him ‘hey! Stop!’

He turned around.

I say ‘come here.’ So he walk towards me, when he get close to me, I said, ‘What's your name?’ He didn't use his complete name.

I said, ‘okay, just walk with me.’ He said, ‘where?’ I said, ‘don't worry about that. Just walk with me and don't say a word,’

I said, ‘If you move, you're gonna die. I said ‘Look at the troops around me, they're locked and loaded. They're going to kill you, but walk with me.’”]

[FOOTSTEPS]

So Fred walked him through town and back toward the base.

[Fred: “When we get close to the base, I told him, ‘put your hands in the back,’ I had cuffs on me, I cuff both his hands. So we brought him to base, they call helicopter, helicopter, show up, pick him up right away.

So he was gone.

[HELICOPTER, MUSIC FADES... with crowd SFX...]

Like 30 minutes, he was out of that town.”]

But then... crowds started to gather outside of the base. Within a few hours it had swelled to hundreds of people protesting... yelling at the Americans. The man Fred had arrested was a local leader. His friends and family wanted him back... and they were *angry*.

They didn't recognize the Americans who took him away. But the crowd *did* remember the Afghan who was always around town talking to them.

They remembered the Afghan who put their friend in handcuffs.

[Fred: “Since he was close to that base, all of his family, brothers, sisters, wife, kids, they saw me. And they said, ‘oh, okay’ they used to call me Fred, ‘oh, Fred got him.’

Next day our Intel told me his brothers and family is trying to capture your life.

So being an Afghan translator, I was not allowed to carry a gun.

...

After that, they give me a gun.”]

[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 you'll hear about Fred... an Afghan interpreter who served for more than 13 and a half years during the War. Fred will describe his work for defense contractors and how that work put him in the Taliban's crosshairs. You'll learn about his fight to get a Special Immigrant Visa, the program that we told you about in the last episode.

This is Episode 3: 'Ongoing Threat'

[ALLIES THEME FADES]

Fred was born and raised in Kabul and he speaks five languages.

[Fred: "My main language is Persian, which is Farsi or Dari, they're all the same. I speak Pashto, which is second language of Afghanistan. I speak a little bit Urdu and Arabic and English."]

Fred has known *war* for most of his life. He remembers the Soviets fighting the Afghans in the 80s... the violent Taliban rule in the 90s... and the U-S invasion in 2001.

[Fraidoun: "I thought it's going to be another war.

Like Mujahideen, and Taliban dead, Mujahideen and Soviet dead, This is going to be a third one. I never thought about, my life is going to get changed one day.]

Before the U-S invasion... Fred says he wandered through his life...

[Fraidoun: "Half of the day I was in school and a half of the day I was jobless, just not doing anything. I was kind of bored sitting at home. That's why we had the private classes to go and learn English.

[MUSIC]

I went to college for a month. Only one month.

I told my dad one night, I remember I said Dad ‘I don’t want to be in the college, I’m not a college person. I would actually do something maybe better than the college.’

Then he said ‘okay, you can choose, you wanna work for one government, or you wanna work for two government?’

I ask him, ‘what do you mean by that question?’ He said that if you want to work for your government, join Afghan national army. If you want to work for two countries: United States and Afghanistan, since you know English, then go ahead and be a translator. Be with these young soldiers and help them out since they’re in your country.”]

Fred had never met an American before. He’d only seen them in action movies like *Rambo*. And now he heard American troops were at Bagram Air Base about 90 minutes away. Apparently they were hiring Afghans.

So Fred drove to the base... and just walked up to the front gate.

[Fraidoon: “I saw a few soldiers watching the gate and they asked me ‘why you’re here?’ I said, ‘I heard somebody who’s hiring people who speaks English, I would like to be a translator.’

‘Oh, you have to wait,’ There was a company – an American company, it’s called Titan. They’re hiring people.”]

The *Titan* Fred is referring to was Titan Corporation... a defense contractor. Fred worked for three different contractors while he was in Afghanistan. These companies hired lots of Afghan interpreters... they did the vetting and handled their paperwork.

Noah Coburn is an anthropologist who spent years in Afghanistan studying the war. He did a lot of research into these defense contractors.

[Coburn: “I think historically Iraq and Afghanistan are going to be remembered as these contracting wars – wars that were fought primarily by US contractors. Yes, it was the Marines. It was U-S military personnel that were oftentimes leading the missions, but behind them, the people delivering the fuel, the people guarding the bases, the people who are doing the labor of war itself were either Afghans or what they refer to as TCMs third-country nationals.”]

Defense contractors in war were not new. Coburn says the U-S relied on them in some form or another in past conflicts. But they were always a small part of the mission.

By the midpoint of the War in *Afghanistan*...

[Coburn: "... you had one contractor for every military personnel. So we had an equal number of contractors who are working for the U-S government as we had soldiers.

And there are a lot of translators that were involved in the war efforts who were put in particular danger because oftentimes they were the face of the war itself."]

[MUSIC]

After Fred went to Bagram looking for work... company reps put him through the ringer. *Titan* took Fred's fingerprints and got pictures of him. He went through a medical exam and all sorts of health screens.

[Fred: "So then they took me for investigation ... They talk to me a couple of hours. Because they asked you tons of questions from everything.

And I was just graduated from high school, being one month in college, I say whatever I had in my mind. I didn't hide anything, I said, 'If you want to hire me, you can, if you don't, it is your decision, but I'm telling you the truth.' So I told him everything.

And I remember after two hours, they said, 'you pass, just wait right here, we're going to give you a badge.']

Fred was glad to have a job... but he admits he was nervous around all these Americans. He didn't know what their intentions were in his country.

[Fred: "But then after spending a week, then a month, two months, we realize, soldier and myself, that no, we have the same idea.

When the troops, young troops left their wife, brother, sister, mom, and dad, they came to Afghanistan and they were trying to help my country. Being an Afghan, that was my job to keep them safe, secure and send them back home.

We were like family, brothers."]

[MUSIC FADES]

Fred was hired in 2004 when the War in Afghanistan seemed to be going well. The Taliban had been pushed to the outskirts by international forces. The U-S backed government had grown... Afghans just elected their first president. The previous Spring... Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld even told reporters that major combat operations were over.

[Rumsfeld: “The bulk of this country today is permissive, it’s secure, it is clear that that’s the case by virtue of the fact that we see people returning to their country from all across the globe.”]

Fred was sent to Ghazni Province near the Pakistan border... where he passed *another* background check.

Most days at work Fred ended up on patrol, driving around in a motorcade of sand-brown Humvees. He went province-to-province with 6-or-7 Americans. There were some skirmishes... some close calls with IEDS – roadside bombs.

But overall... Fred says those years felt safe.

[Fred: “My job was to wear uniform, wear vest, helmet, walk with the troops in the first line of the war. If you see somebody suspicious investigate them, ask them question. If they want to talk to the villager yes, yes, take them to talk to the villager. Make sure to translate the right word to right person.

Teach the troops about the culture of Afghanistan. It’s completely different culture over there.

The food, what should they eat? What should they shouldn't eat?

Do not shake hands with the woman if you see them. Cause here, no one cares right? Over there, no, if you talk to the female you’re gonna get in trouble. If you shake somebody's hand with a female, if you put hands on the female, that's a big problem. It's going to be a big fight.

How they should be when they’re in the village. I used to tell them, I say, ‘Hey, whenever you're going to town, make sure do not step to the mosque, Muslim mosque, don't do that.’ If you want to go, you have to ask permission. If they said

yes, make sure to take off your boots. It doesn't matter who you are, when you're coming, but if you want to be with the people to get some support from people, just follow the rules.

I move around the country. And I've seen many places, even most people, I'm sure they never seen in their dreams.

That was fun times. I miss those days.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

Most of Fred’s work was translating conversations in Dari, Pashto and English. But he says as the war dragged on... his job got harder.

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In the mid-2000’s... The Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and mounted a huge counter-offensive. By 2006... their attacks increased nearly five-fold... and Ghazni province got a lot more dangerous. Fred says villages and towns that had previously welcomed the Americans in the past started to change.

The Afghan government just hadn’t made inroads where the Taliban now had a foothold.

[Fred: “Since the Taliban got more powers, they came through the villages and they told people, ‘if I see you working for American or talking to them, we will come to kill you.’ And they keep coming to the villages, teaching the people, and then people change their mind.”]

But Fred kept patrolling... kept talking. He went on combat missions week after week... developing a reputation as one of the best interpreters... or terps as the Americans called them.

Fred was actually eligible for a promotion. After 2 years on the front lines... interpreters could apply to work *inside* U-S bases... which was much safer. But Fred had a strong bond with the Americans he fought with... and he worried about letting them down.

[Fred: “That was a big shame to tell the troops, ‘I would like to work inside the base, I don't want to go outside, I'm scared.’”]

[MUSIC]

It was around this time when Fred arrested that Taliban leader we told you about earlier. Now the Taliban were on his trail. Fred was working on the front-lines when they came to his father's home...

[Fred: "They come to my house, they search my house, they couldn't find anything. They drop a piece of paper in the yard. So the next morning my wife was cleaning the yard, she saw a piece of paper, and turn it to my dad.

I still have the paperwork with me, here. One part says, 'we know you're working for American. If we catch you alive, you are dead, it's gonna be example for those who are working for Americans.'"]

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Fred received a 'threat letter' from the Taliban. They were a common form of intimidation during the War. And after that... Fred was a marked man. He was sent to another province while his family was relocated.

But after Fred got reassigned... he was told they didn't have any work for him. So... he was sent back to Kabul. His employer told him to wait for a phone call. And that's what he did... literally. Fred sat next to the phone day-after-day waiting for his next mission. He called the company now and then for updates... but he didn't hear anything.

So Fred started looking for a way out of Afghanistan. Some of the Americans told him about the Special Immigrant Visa program or SIV.... for interpreters just like him.

He did some research online. At the time Congress had allocated 1,500 SIV's a year for Afghans. And the process to get one seemed easy. An applicant just had to get a letter of employment... approval from command and some evidence you're in danger... and they would package that up and send it to the U-S Embassy. But the U-S embassy in Afghanistan wasn't processing SIV applications... so Fred had to send it to the embassy in Pakistan.

He pulled all his documents together and put them in the mail. But they got lost in transit... twice. Fred was running out of options. He couldn't stay in Kabul long with the Taliban looking for him. So he started looking for more work.

[Fred: “I was told by my mom, my mom and dad, ‘do not come home.’ ... There was no other option for me. If I go home, I will be easily killed by Taliban.”]

So Fred took a job with another defense contractor.

The War was about to enter one of its most violent chapters. The Taliban still had reinforcements and weapons coming over the border from Pakistan. Suicide bombs... IED explosions... and civilian casualties spiked. In 2009... a leaked report to the Pentagon said the war could be lost within a year.

Newly-elected President Barack Obama announced a troop drawdown in Iraq... and ‘The Surge’ in Afghanistan. Now thousands of additional American soldiers would join the fight against the Taliban. The US’ main objective was to train and equip Afghans to fight.

[MUSIC]

[Obama: “As commander-in-chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan ...

I make this decision because I am convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11 and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak.”]

General John Allen took over command of U-S and NATO forces in 20-11. He was the fourth commander of the war in as many years.

[Allen: “When you think about that, waging a war that way, where every single day people are fighting and dying, people are fighting and killing. And swapping out the commander every year for four years, is a problem.

If you're going to wage a war that way you have to be prepared to provide stability in other dimensions of the conflict.”]

The Obama administration had also set an end date for major combat operations. The US would start to withdraw in July 2011.

[Allen: “Of course, there's always this conversation about victory and the victory parade and the moment of victory. And there was never going to be a moment of victory in Afghanistan.”]

Instead, success would now mean...Afghans would pick up the fight against the Taliban and insurgents. To do that... General Allen says they need to have a stable government, an inclusive economy and a capable security force.

[Allen: “Those three things had to happen, they weren't going to happen in short order. ... the end date now accelerated everything.”]

One factor that made the mission harder was the rotation schedule for American forces. Since the beginning of the war... a Marine Corps or Special Forces officer might be in Afghanistan for a few months. Army Units would typically go for a year and then be replaced.

General Allen says by the 10-year mark of the conflict... that deployment schedule was leading to some problems.

[Allen: “You may get to become very intimately familiar with the people and the terrain and the, and the environment. And about the time you're very comfortable you're, as they say, ‘ripping out,’ you're going to pull out, another unit's going to come in.

The unit that was on the ground knew, in essence, what the profile of the enemy was, they knew how to react to the local population. Often a new unit coming in wouldn't have that kind of situational awareness ... So now the Afghans have gotta get used to another unit, this units gotta get used to them.

And often there were early casualties among the Afghans and, civilian casualties, et cetera, that came from our forces, not really knowing the operational environment.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

So American soldiers cycled in and out of the battlefield... but Afghans like Fred stayed in the fight. In 20-11... the US embassy in Kabul started taking SIV cases. So Fred sent his documents in again. He heard back a few months later. Denied.

Fred was confused... he couldn't make sense of the paperwork. Command DENIED his application but he couldn't tell why.

[Coburn: “The process is a complex and confusing one.”]

That's Noah Coburn again.

[Coburn: “So it really favors applicants who are well-educated, already established, have some money, have some resources to maybe pay someone to help them with it. So ultimately those that were most vulnerable were the least likely to succeed.”]

A big part of the problem was the defense contractors themselves. These companies were supposed to have paperwork like proof of employment.

But Coburn says... many of them were bad record-keepers.

[Coburn: “Particularly if you worked for a smaller company and a lot of these smaller contracting companies went out of business left and right, Sometimes for rather nefarious reasons of they couldn't fulfill a contract or something. And what you would see is these contracting companies sort of close up and then reopen with a new name, but the exact same personnel in it.

If you work for one of those contracting companies and they just didn't exist anymore, you were just completely out of luck.”]

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During the Surge... interpreters like Fred were liaisons between the American presence and the Afghan populations. But that relationship was deteriorating.

[Fred: “You know, we had 46 countries involved, international security forces in Afghanistan. And everybody was doing their own jobs. As humans, we all make mistakes. Sometimes they made some mistakes that pissed some people off.”]

In 20-12... Americans at Bagram Air Base burned copies of the Quran they had confiscated from Taliban prisoners. That sparked huge protests and violence across the country.

[Anchor: “The burning of Qurans has ignited a fire inside Afghanistan, one that's proving hard to douse. In eastern Afghanistan, a man in an Afghan army uniform shot and killed 2 U-S troops then ran back into a crowd of anti-American protestors who crowded outside their base...”]

[SOUNDS OF PROTESTS]

More than 200 people were injured and 40 were killed.

[Allen: “It was a really dangerous moment.”]

That’s General Allen again. He says this is when the interpreter he worked with stepped up. General Allen couldn’t use his name... but this interpreter was a former Mujahideen fighter. He knew high-ranking people in the Afghan government.

[Allen: “... and I asked him to go speak to them, to try to change the environment within which we could easily find ourselves. I mean, my troops were already being killed by Afghans over this issue.

I could make the case that he saved the campaign because of the connections that he had in the moment that he worked. And the things that he said that ultimately set the conditions for me to take the steps necessary to rescue the moment.”]

With the war effort on shaky ground... the interpreters became even more essential. But the troop Surge had made the backlog of S-I-V applicants grow. Congress had created the program in 2009... just a few months before the Surge. After that... thousands more Americans were in the fight. So the demand for Afghan interpreters like Fred was at an all-time high. But there was nothing new in the law... like more visa spots... to account for the surge.

So Fred... unable to get his visa... still had the Taliban on his trail.

[Fred: “Afghanistan is a small country. 34 provinces. Maybe somebody work for government and so spying for Taliban. They have people all over the places. Same way we had sources in that town, they have some sources too.

I moved my family from location to location three times, there was no option for us. Some days they are gonna find you.”]

[MUSIC]

Fred says 2010, 2011, those were the worst years for him. One day Fred was driving around in his car... delivering supplies to a base when the Taliban set off an IED right under him.

He came to in the driver's seat with blood streaming down his face.

[Fred: "I don't remember anything ... I was trying to push the gas. I saw big holes. There's no gas pedal, just hole.

They actually, they miss one second because they blew up the engine. They couldn't wait, take one more second to blow up under the vehicle to kill us.

When I blew up an IED, I didn't say nothing to anybody in my family. I just call my dad. I said, 'this is what happened.' I said 'make sure don't tell my wife, don't tell my mom.'

After two weeks, when I went home for vacation, then there, I told my wife.

She starts crying, my mom was crying, my sister was crying.

My wife said, 'I made a mistake.' I said, 'what do you mean you made a mistake? She said 'to marry you.'

She said 'you're going to die one day and you're going to leave me and your son.'"]

The chaos was starting to get to Fred. He'd lost friends in this war. And he'd spent countless nights listening to his radio... translating Taliban plans for surprise attacks. Blasts from rocket launchers would wake him up... and bullets rattled around his boots on the battlefield.

[Fred: "Every single day, we used to get attacked. Like we used to go with like 15 people, come back with 14, 20 people come back with 18, go with five vehicle come back with three vehicles.

Sometimes – trust me – sometimes even when I'm safe, when I remember the situation we had overseas with the troops, I can't sleep."]

[MUSIC FADES]

So... Fred reapplied for his visa.

[Fred: "So I process it, they complete it. They said to me, 'You're denied.'

Then I call all the troops I work with. I told them, ‘hey, you guys are telling me to apply and keep applying and they keep denying my case.’ Somebody said, ‘hey, ask them, what does they want? What do they want for you?’”]

[ALLIES SYNTH]

Fred says the Embassy asked for a letter of recommendation. Something written by a soldier he fought with. So he posted on Facebook asking for help.

Within 24 hours... 64 people sent him letters of recommendation. But The Embassy said they could only take one...

[Fred: “... and I turned it to in to US embassy. They denied my case again.

I don't know what to tell. I don't control the government. If they want to deny my case, it's up to them.

End of 2011 I was completely giving up. I said, ‘I'm done. I'm not coming to the United States.’”]

With no way out of the country... and no real explanation for his denial... Fred says he gave up on the SIV. He wasn't an outlier. Despite Congress's 2009 bill the State Department had only given out about 15 percent of the available visas.

So Fred accepted his fate.

[Fred: “I was thinking the troops is going to stay in Afghanistan forever. I will be with the troops forever. As long as I'm alive, I'm going to help these troops to bring peace and prosperity to my country.

That's why I said, ‘Okay, dying in the first line of the war is much better ... to die at home, let's fight them.’

Somebody is going to be the winner.”]

[ALLIES THEME]

We'll come back to Fred's story later in the season.

Next time on Allies... you'll hear about the bond formed between an American soldier and an Afghan interpreter on the battlefield. And how they tried to fix the S-I-V program.

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

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[ALLIES THEME]