



## Sasakawa USA Alumni Profile

### Brian Ferguson, CEO, Arena Labs

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Arena Labs is a collaborative of world-class performers who focus on “catalyzing human potential”. Most of our work is in High Performance Medicine, helping surgical teams understand how to optimize performance in the demanding environment of modern surgical medicine.

Our team is made up of proven high-performers who have had to work in the high-stress realms of special operations, elite athletics, the performing arts, and complex disciplines like finance and psychiatry. We leverage the “first principles of high performance” from each of these disciplines to build tailored solutions for surgical teams. This work often starts with simple solutions related to communicating under stress and breathing techniques to stay calm amidst chaos.

We then move into advanced surgical performance solutions that leverage 360 immersive video and virtual reality to capture high-risk, high-stress scenarios in heart surgery or brain surgery that can be used to train the physiology of fear and decision-making for new and young surgical staff.

Our team is also doing a lot of work related to Human-Machine Interface in medicine, exploring the question: “What does a high performing surgical team look like when there is a robot in the loop?” We collaborate with world-class teams in heart surgery, brain surgery, and trauma to explore how robotics and artificial intelligence are training the way medical teams select, train, and cultivate human talent.

#### **What is your expertise?**

I spent 15 years in national security. I began working in security policy within the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon. This early part of my career had me exposed to the formulation of policy during two wars and a new paradigm in global affairs. I was able to watch decision-makers wrestle with decisions of significant consequence and grapple with a world where technology was accelerating change and creating dynamism never before seen.

Later in life, I joined the military and spent 7 years serving in special operations. This provided me the unique opportunity of going from the “strategic realm” of Washington DC to the tactical level. I was struck by the fact that those two realms were increasingly becoming one, that the large gap between tactical and strategic thinking of previous eras had been compressed.

The latter part of my time in the military had me working in emerging technology and human performance. I spent a lot of time in Silicon Valley and in thinking about how things like 3D printing and artificial intelligence would impact national security.

After leaving the military, I founded Arena Labs with the intention of working at the intersection of technology and human potential.

#### **How did you become involved with Sasakawa USA?**

Although I now work in the private sector and run a company, I stay very involved in national security topics. It will always be a passion of mine. Dr. Dan Kliman at the Center for New American

Security reached out to be about this trip. He and I continue to have conversations around the impact of technology on international affairs.

Dr. Kliman has a compelling, emerging theory about nation-states with shared security interests and robust startup ecosystems. As we explored that conversation and how it might be tied to similar trends in the U.S. security ecosystem, he asked me to join the Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) trip that was co-hosted with CNAS.

### **What are you currently working on?**

At Arena Labs, I spend a lot of time thinking about the future of medicine and more importantly, what High Performing Medical Teams look like in the future. Our thesis is that the future of world-class health care is not in the regulatory environment or in insurance solutions. Instead, building high performing surgical teams is the bedrock of excellent patient outcomes and care.

That work is best done at the intersection of understanding human systems and human performance as well as emerging technology.

Our team works with institutions like the Cleveland Clinic Heart & Vascular Institute and MedStar Washington Hospital, the Level 1 Trauma Center in Washington DC.

This work, and the insights I am privileged to garner around technological change in a legacy institution like U.S. healthcare, provides me a lot of parallel insights for my continued passions in national security and international relations. I remain involved in the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [Singularity University](#) out of Silicon Valley, and the [Santa Fe Institute on Complexity](#).

I mention these three institutions specifically because I deeply believe that whatever field one works in today, there's a need to understand the global order, the impact of accelerating technology, and the complex environment that has arisen in an age of rapid innovation and information.

### **How has learning about Japan affected your work?**

The SEED program was my first trip to Japan. There were three profound areas of impact for me.

The first was the Government Start-Up Juxtaposition. I was impressed by the level of candor and openness across the board – from the Self-Defense Forces and the Foreign Ministry to experts in cyber security. The leaders we met with in government were all clearly well-educated, thoughtful, and thinking hard about the future.

And yet, just like in the U.S., there was a radical difference in culture when we met with startups or start-up focused organizations in Tokyo and Osaka. The nature of these smaller organizations forces an understanding of the world and an agility that is core to survival in today's economy. As a result, the presentation of ideas, critical thinking, and introspection felt very different. The cosmopolitan connections we hope for in government, especially among allies, was far more visible in these cultures than in the government. Again, I have found this phenomenon to be exactly the same in the U.S.

Second, I was inspired by the start-up focus in Osaka. Our visit to Tokyo's start-up ecosystem was short but as expected, highlighted some exciting rising ventures such as the Plug & Play accelerator. However, after a three-hour train ride to Osaka, I did not expect to find the inspiring spirit of innovation that we were exposed to at the Osaka Innovation Hub. Although far beyond the

global hub of Tokyo, I found the thinking and forward-leaning mindset here to be an example for many U.S. cities beyond traditional metro areas like San Francisco and New York.

Lastly, the legacy culture of Japan was deeply moving. I have a personal interest in meditation and Buddhism. On an early morning run in Kyoto, I heard chanting from the Buddhist Temple near the city square. I was beyond fortunate to spend 20 minutes in the back of the temple during this service. The history was palpable. Many of the sites we visited emanated a spirit of calm and inward focus that is so central to eastern cultures. I found it grounding. The Japanese culture is profoundly strong and clear in a way that makes visiting incredibly unique – as an American, one is immersed in something refreshingly new and different.

Each of these trends reinforced or challenged my evolving worldview on how technology is affecting governments around the world, how the startup culture can augment spaces previously occupied by government, and how in a world of change, culture is still a Nation's most valuable asset.

**What is your favorite aspect of Japan?**

I have been fortunate to travel a lot. Close to 50 countries and just about every economic and demographic population imaginable.

I can't remember the last time I was in a place that felt so different. From the food and language to customs and religious tradition.

For a non-Japanese speaker, it can be overwhelming. And yet, it still feels accessible, safe, and navigable.

On our first night in Japan, one of our hosts from Sasakawa USA took us to a soba noodle restaurant near the hotel. In the U.S., there's no way most people would frequent this relatively underwhelming, unmarked restaurant. I was skeptical. It turned out to be the best meal I had on the trip and I went back twice in a week. The food was extraordinary and while the setting was simple and unassuming, the culinary-cultural experience was precisely what I found to be so unique about the country.