



IDEAS

‘We Are Not Ordinary People’

The fight to get American allies out of Afghanistan continues.

By George Packer




Afghan refugees wait on a bus after arriving at Dulles International Airport in August 2021. (Olivier Douliery / AFP / Getty)

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THERE ARE FEW WAYS of escape from the Taliban's Afghanistan. One of them crosses the mountainous eastern border with Pakistan in a town called Torkham. Last September, Safia Noori; her husband, Fakhruddin Elham; and their four-month-old daughter, Victoria, traveled to Torkham and joined a throng of Afghans waiting to be allowed across by Taliban guards. The day was hot; the baby was crying; the crowd pressed in. Noori and Elham, in their early 20s, were carrying just two small bags, one with the baby's clothes, the other with their own. They had sold everything else, including the furniture and handmade curtains and bedspread that made up Noori's wedding dowry, to buy passports. They hadn't seen their parents since the fall of Afghanistan a year before. As former special-forces soldiers who had fought alongside Americans, and as a mixed couple—he is Tajik, she Hazara, a persecuted Shia minority—they were prime targets for revenge killing by Afghanistan's new rulers. They had spent the past year in flight from town to town, safe house to safe house. At times, Noori later told me, she'd considered suicide, even after she knew that she was pregnant. Only the baby's birth gave her the strength to keep going.

Border guards searched their bags and examined their documents. “Why is a Hazara married to a Tajik?” a Talib demanded. “You should have married a Hazara, and you should have married a Tajik. Why did you crossbreed? Why does this family exist?”

“In our eyes, we don’t see black and white,” Noori replied. All that mattered was whether someone was a good human being. Noori’s answer didn’t please the guards. “Why are you leaving?” they asked. “Why aren’t you happy here in Afghanistan?”

Noori showed them hospital documents requiring medical treatment for her C-section. The baby’s name caught a guard’s eye.

“Why Victoria? Why didn’t you give her a proper Islamic name?”

Noori dodged the question. It would have been dangerous, maybe fatal, to tell the Talib that she had named her daughter after a United States Army reserve captain named Victoria Marshman. Marshman had served in Afghanistan, where she trained all-women Afghan special-forces units called Female Tactical Platoons, or FTPs, and joined them on dangerous combat missions with male Afghan and American commandos. Marshman became close to several members of the FTPs. In August 2021, just before the fall of the Afghan government, one of them, a female commando named Mahjabin, was murdered in Kabul. As the Taliban took over, Marshman, working with other American military women, and texting from her house in Honolulu, helped guide more than two dozen Afghan military women and their family members into the Kabul airport and out of Afghanistan, heading to the U.S. (In my account of those events in this magazine, she was given the pseudonym Alice Spence.) Scores more women were left behind, including 32 FTPs, all thoroughly vetted by the U.S. military.

Marshman never stopped trying to get them out. Through the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Slap, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, Queen Elizabeth, Elon Musk, Mahsa Amini, the midterm elections, Sam Bankman-Fried, ChatGPT, earthquakes, floods, fires, two Super Bowls, six Trump investigations, dozens of mass shootings, and the return of Biden versus Trump, Marshman, on her own time, has worked single-mindedly to keep her network of Afghans alive and bring them to safety. She gives priority to single women and mothers with young children, and her list keeps growing as other Afghans hear about her and send desperate WhatsApp texts. The list now includes 206 people—90 principals, mostly former military or police women, and 116 dependents.

“I have to triage all the time who should get what amount of money based on need,” Marshman told me. “Who is in really bad shape, who cannot feed their children, whose child is going to die if they don’t get medicine, who is going to be executed if I don’t move them into a safe house in Afghanistan, who can be linked together. And honestly, a lot of it is preventing suicide.” When one of the women runs out of food, Marshman sends cash from her own funds. When Noori spent two weeks alone in a Kabul hospital waiting to give birth—because of her military background, it was too risky for her family to visit her—Marshman sent encouraging texts and then money for the C-section. When the Taliban raided a woman’s house, Marshman stayed awake to advise her:

“Dear Victoria, I’m in danger. Talib came to our house for inspection.”

“Are you ok? Did they hurt you?”

“I ran away from home.”

“Ok. Are you safe now?”

“My family is in great danger. The Taliban are looking for me and want to arrest me.”

“I am so sorry and I am very worried. Are you in a safe place now?”

“I have no place to be safe.”

When a woman reaches an extreme state—when Talibs have discovered a safe house, when a relative has been kidnapped or killed, when money has run out, when suicide seems imminent—Marshman, working with the undercover Afghan staff of two American humanitarian organizations, pays for passports, visas, and the overland journey across the border. Then she takes responsibility for supporting the women and their family through the process, which could stretch years into the future, of applying for refugee status and admittance into the country at whose side they once fought in a two-decade war.

A MYSTERY LIES at the heart of any obsessive commitment to strangers. It's hard but not impossible to understand why Marshman is spending every free moment trying to rescue these women. It's harder to understand why she's been joined in her efforts by four other Americans who have no direct experience of Afghanistan at all: her mother, Ann, retired from the corporate world, and three men working in law, business, and entertainment, scattered across the country, and connected to one another and to Marshman by ties so loose, they're difficult to explain.

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One of them, a lawyer named Tom Villalon, was so troubled by how the war ended that he quit his job at the white-shoe law firm Covington & Burling, cashed in his retirement fund, and devoted himself to rescuing a pro bono client's family still trapped in Afghanistan. He even taught himself Dari, the country's main language. Eventually, he found his way to Marshman and the others.

"I feel a deep, bizarre connection to this part of the world I never had any interest in," Villalon, whose professional work had focused on Chinese investment in Latin America, told me. "And part of it is the mystery of this group. I've never been exposed to people acting this honorably and to this nobility of character, which you don't see too much in our society. It changes you and makes you see it's easier to sacrifice things than it might have seemed."

The group calls itself Rescue Afghan Women Now. Its existence is entirely informal; the members constantly debate whether incorporation as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization would bring legal and financial advantages or simply result in time-consuming paperwork. It meets weekly by Zoom to discuss current emergencies, weigh difficult decisions, report back on meetings with U.S.-government officials, and worry about finances, which become more and more dire as RAWN incurs more expenses. The group raises almost all of its money through personal ties and at the moment has less than \$20,000 on hand. In the past few months, RAWN has moved several threatened families across the border to Pakistan, where the group continues to support them, and its monthly costs now exceed \$10,000.

In December, a family on Marshman's list received a phone call from the Taliban. Khalid Wafa and Sediqa Tajla, who have four children, are another mixed marriage of former commandos. (I have given them pseudonyms because their oldest son remains in Afghanistan.) Tajla, like most women who served in the Afghan special forces, is Hazara; Wafa is Pashtun, which makes him unusual both as a former special-forces soldier and as the husband of a Hazara woman. He still carries a bullet in his shoulder from a combat mission with U.S. Marines. Like Safia Noori and Fakhruddin Elham, the couple went into hiding after the fall of Kabul, traveling the length of Afghanistan and back, running whenever their whereabouts became known. When the phone call came, Wafa told me, they were in Herat, in the far west.

"Are you Khalid?" the caller asked.

"Yes."

"Where are you at the moment?"

"Jalalabad," Wafa lied—a city clear across the country, near his hometown.

"When will you come to Kabul?"

"Where in Kabul?"

"I'm calling from a military center."

Wafa grew tense. He thought he recognized the voice, familiar from media appearances, of Abdul Haq Wasiq, the Taliban's director of intelligence, a former Guantánamo Bay detainee. Wafa pretended not to understand, and the caller repeated himself several times.

“Why do you want to see me?” Wafa asked. “Is everything all right?”

“We all need to serve our homeland.” The caller made it clear that he knew Wafa’s home address, military record, and extended family’s whereabouts. He reminded him of the Taliban order for all former special-forces soldiers to return to duty—a trap that had cost a friend of Wafa’s his life. “We have received information that you are planning to leave the country. Is this true?”

Wafa denied it and claimed that he was about to start a new job with UNICEF. He said that he had debts to repay, or else he would happily report to Kabul and serve the new government. Before hanging up, the caller demanded that Wafa keep him informed of anyone he knew who had left Afghanistan or planned to leave.

Over the next two months, the family moved almost every night. At one point, Wafa considered fleeing through Iran and Turkey to Europe and earning enough money to get his family out. At another moment, he thought of killing himself. Tajla, his wife, wrote to Marshman: “Dear sister, we have many pains. We dare not even say it. Living among the enemy is not normal. We fought for 20 years. We are not ordinary people. We remain friends of America and NATO. We were fighting for the interests of America and NATO. America and NATO dominate the whole world. America and NATO can help in any way. Will the friendship be the same?”

Marshman now kept in daily contact with the couple, and RAWN paid undercover humanitarian workers in Afghanistan to provide a safe house in Kabul. But one night in late January, Taliban fighters were seen searching houses in the neighborhood. Wafa fled first, and Tajla afterward with the children. She spent hours wandering through the snow, unable to find a taxi that would stop for them or a guesthouse that wouldn’t demand her ID. In the dead of night, her father-in-law arranged for her and the children to stay with an old family friend. The next day they traveled to Jalalabad, where her husband was waiting for them in yet another hideout.

This fugitive existence finally ended when Marshman and her group decided to spend scarce funds to exfiltrate the family to Pakistan. A six-month visa, never easy to obtain, now costs \$1,700. But on the last day of February, Wafa, Tajla, and their three younger children were able to cross the border at Torkham to the relative safety of Pakistan (their oldest son is stuck waiting for a passport in Afghanistan). Since then, RAWN has brought two more families out.

On the last night of Ramadan, Wafa, Tajla, and their children traveled from Peshawar to Islamabad to celebrate the feast of Eid with Noori, Elham, Victoria, and another family of new RAWN evacuees. The Americans joined them over Zoom from Hawaii and Connecticut.

“After the fall of the state, this is the first place for us all to come together,” Tajla wrote to Marshman, her text accompanied by a picture of an American flag and the Statue of Liberty. “Thank you dear friend Victoria. All this is the blessing of you and your team.”

“Everyone lives for himself,” Wafa wrote. “But the good life is the one spent in the service of others.”

LAST MONTH, the White House released a 12-page report on the withdrawal from Afghanistan: key decisions, lessons learned. It’s an astonishingly self-congratulatory document. There’s no sign of an actual lesson learned, except that “we now prioritize earlier evacuations when faced with a degrading security situation.” This refers to the evacuation of American embassy personnel—who never faced any serious obstacle to their departure from Kabul—and not to the tens of thousands of Afghans who risked their lives as they tried to flee, and whose earlier evacuation would have done much to prevent the tragic scenes at the airport.

Meanwhile, the Republican-led House of Representatives, amid hearings that pile more blame on the Biden administration, refuses to take up a bill—the Afghan Adjustment Act—that would allow most of the 82,000 Afghans evacuated to this country to receive permanent status and begin living productive lives. Without such a bill, their presence here depends on a series of temporary presidential measures that can be revoked at any time. There is more than enough blame to go around.

The Afghans of this story are, in a sense, as mysterious as the Americans. One mystery is their abiding love for and loyalty to a country—this one—that abandoned them to their fate. Another is their belief in what Tajla called “equality.” She was referring to mixed marriage, but she might have been talking about gender. After all, the network is made up of women, and their survival depends on the strong bonds between them. The men seem to accept this, and during interviews they let their wives do most of the talking. These women and their families, including Victoria, who turned 1 a few days ago, should have been the future of their country. Instead, they’re fugitives with no home in sight.

Of the 206 Afghans on Marshman’s list, 23 are now in Pakistan, unable to work and dependent on RAWN for support. Nearly all of the others remain in Afghanistan under varying degrees of threat. Because they never worked directly for the U.S. government as interpreters, drivers, or other employees, they aren’t eligible for Special Immigrant Visas. (According to the State Department’s most recent report, more than half a million Afghan applicants and dependents are currently in the SIV line; the average wait time for a visa is almost three years.) Instead, the women must be referred—as Afghans who worked closely with American organizations in Afghanistan—to a U.S. program called P-1/P-2, which drops them into an immense pool of refugees around the world who stagnate there for years on end. Of the 50,000 Afghans who have been referred since August 2021, State Department officials told

Villalon, not a single one has completed the process and been resettled in the U.S. (The State Department declined to confirm this to me.)

Even worse, U.S. policy requires them to leave Afghanistan for another country in order to be considered refugees. This is expensive, dangerous, and bureaucratically almost impossible anyway: None of Afghanistan's neighbors, including Pakistan, currently allows the U.S. government to process refugee applications on its soil. The women are trapped whether they stay in Afghanistan or manage to escape across the border.

When I asked the State Department if Afghans like the women on Marshman's list could be treated as emergency cases—evacuated from Afghanistan to, for example, Qatar, where they could wait in safety while their applications were processed—a spokesperson replied: “The most at-risk among Afghans who need urgent protection” and have been referred to the refugee program “may be considered for relocation.” At the moment this is no more than a notion. It's hard to know whether the chief bureaucratic obstacle blocking the way for RAWN's 206 Afghans, and so many others, is lack of staff, pointless rules, or sheer indifference. In the absence of official action, private U.S. citizens are spending their time and money to bring endangered Afghan women to safety.

There are ways to motivate bureaucracy, and RAWN has brought the plight of female Afghan commandos to the attention of officials at the Department of Defense. “There's good movement from DOD, but blockage at State,” Villalon said at a recent meeting. “The women get their refugee numbers, but after that it gets stuck. The same randomness with which some of them got out in August 2021—it's the same now for P-1 processing.”

“I actually think it’s some intern with her coffee making decisions,” Marshman joked.

“The timetable means death, and they don’t get that,” her mother said. “The bureaucratic slowness is killing people.”

Last month, Marshman was invited, with other U.S. military women and the 30 FTPs already evacuated to this country, to a meeting at the Pentagon with top Army officials, including General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Most of the Afghan women had expressed a desire to join the U.S. Army, but their asylum applications are stalled, and they asked for the Pentagon’s help. At one point Marshman spoke up: “Sir, there are still 32 FTPs stuck in Afghanistan.” This was news to Milley. The bureaucratic gears began to turn, and within a few days some of the women on her list received emails acknowledging their refugee applications and setting up interviews.

Afghanistan is a painful, shameful memory, and most Americans have stopped thinking about it. Even people who worked feverishly to help Afghans escape from the Taliban in August 2021 have mostly moved on. Who can blame them? The need of those left behind in Afghanistan remains overwhelming, and so does the sluggishness of the U.S. government. It goes against human nature that an Army captain, from her post in paradise, is still at it night and day.

“Sometimes being here in Hawaii, at the ends of the Earth, is hard because you are surrounded by so much beauty and peace,” Marshman said. “But nothing really lasts in the end, except kindness. So I just do what I can do for them.”

