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JEAN AKERS

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INTERVIEW

Background and Work Prior to Tour in Afghanistan

Q: It's May 10, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman. I'm speaking today with Jean Akers for our Afghanistan Project. Jean, welcome.

To start off, can you give me a brief description of your career up to the time you started working on Afghanistan?

AKERS: I joined the Foreign Service in January 2004. I joined originally as a public diplomacy officer. My first assignment was supposed to be Port-au-Prince, Haiti as a consular officer. That ended up changing because a position became open in Curaçao that required a Dutch speaker, and I spoke Dutch because I had lived in the Netherlands for a few years before joining the Foreign Service. I went to Curaçao. I served a two-year tour as a consular officer and as a GSO (General Services Officer). I did all the American citizen services (ACS) work, covering six islands and approximately two million U.S. citizen visitors every year.

I don't know if it's germane. One of the cases I worked on there involved a U.S. citizen, a teenager, who went missing in Aruba, which became a major news event and crisis. That was a major case. In the summer of 2005, I spent most of the summer in Aruba.

After Curaçao, my second tour was in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I went back to the Foreign Service Institute for language. I did a two-year consular tour in Phnom Penh and that confirmed my belief that what I really wanted to do was be a consular officer. So I applied to change cones.

My third tour was back in Washington. I served as a career development officer (CDO) in the entry level division of what was then HR, now Global Talent Management. That was during the Diplomacy 3.0 hiring surge. We increased the size of the Foreign Service at that time by almost 25 percent and the civil service by 20 percent.

I worked on a lot of different issues. I did traditional CDO work, counseling clients and assigning them, working on entry level bidding for first and second tours, going and talking to A-100 classes every six weeks. I also did a number of other portfolios. One was critical needs languages.

Because for a while I managed the Middle East Bureau (NEA) positions at the entry level, I worked with a colleague on a survey on what was then called AIP posts—Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan. I was asked to go as a staff assistant for HR with Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS) Steve Browning on his trip. This was in 2010.

It was the time of the full-on surge [in military and diplomatic staff] and PDAS Browning was going first to China for a week and then he was going to Pakistan and Afghanistan. I accompanied him. This was around March/April of 2010. I accompanied him to China for a week and then we went to Pakistan, to Islamabad, for a couple of days. Then we went to Kabul. I think we were in Afghanistan for three days.

As I mentioned, I had worked on a survey that was related to incentives for service in the AIP posts. Because at that time, recruitment was a challenge and there were more and more positions in those posts, and there was a concern that the department would not be able to staff diplomatic positions to support the mission.

PDAS Browning did what HR PDASes do —talk to a lot of people to hear from them about their experiences. We went out to one of the very remote provincial reconstruction teams, PRT, then also a DST, a district support team, which is even smaller and more remote, so that he could talk to and hear directly from those Foreign Service folks who were on the front lines of our work across Afghanistan.

At that time, in 2010, Ambassador Mussomeli was the Assistant Chief of Mission in Kabul. Ambassador Eikenberry was the ambassador, but I knew Ambassador Mussomeli, whom I met in Phnom Penh. Everyone I talked to—in Kabul, at the DST, and the PRT—they were so engaged in what they were doing. It was clearly meaningful and so impactful. It was different in Islamabad. There were a lot of complaints in Islamabad.

I was trying to decide what to bid on for my next assignment. I had been thinking seriously about serving in an AIP post. I felt that it was time for me to do that. That trip crystallized for me that what I really wanted was the job of ACS chief in Kabul, which was a fairly newly created position. I thought, that's the job for me. That's what I want. I came back and I bid on it and lobbied for it and got it for the following summer.

In May of 2011—after some training, including one of the first training sessions on personnel recovery that were held, and a couple of other things, Afghan familiarization —I went to post in May of 2011.

American Citizen Services Tour in Afghanistan

Q: FACT training is counter-terrorism training?

AKERS: Yes, Foreign Affairs Counter Threat. That was back in the day when they still let you handle weapons and fire them. We did the driving techniques, learning about those basic concepts, like how to get yourself out of a precarious situation quickly. FACT has evolved significantly. Back then there were two days of classroom training, you did the medical training and then you went out to the facility in either West Virginia or western Virginia to do the driving portion and some of the other things.

Q: And can you explain what personnel recovery is?

AKERS: Personnel recovery is the whole mission effort to recover isolated persons—those who have been detained or may have become isolated in some other way, this can be people under Chief of Mission authority or private American citizens.

Q: In the following year, did that ever come up?

AKERS: Yes. I was part of what was called our personnel recovery working group, PR working group. As the ACS Chief and the de facto deputy in the consular section, we had many cases of times when we were informed that maybe a U.S. citizen was potentially isolated. There were no major kidnapping cases during my year, so we never had to completely go into action, although certainly there were cases. I remember one where a young man was backpacking, a tourist, in Afghanistan. At some point he got scooped up by the U.S. military because they were like, what are you doing here? And he says, I'm backpacking across Afghanistan. We actually had heard about him and were concerned that he had been kidnapped. Then we learned through our military counterparts that someone had him and he was safe and somehow we got him to Kabul, and he left. He was a U.S. citizen.

Q: There were other times of danger during that year?

AKERS: Yes there were. One of the biggest events within my first two weeks on the ground was a complex attack on a hotel. I think it was the Intercontinental Hotel. There were other parts of the city that were under attack. That was not an attack on the embassy itself. A U.S. citizen who was a justice on the Afghan Supreme Court, a dual national, was severely injured. There was a lot of additional threat reporting after the incident that made it difficult for us to provide services to him. But we did eventually, working with our military counterparts and with Washington, get him on a medevac flight from Bagram to Germany, and then eventually to the United States to get treatment for really severe injuries.

In September of 2011, I remember the week very well. We had commemorated 9/11, on the 11th. That was a moving and meaningful ceremony because of things in my life and also where we were. Then the next day, I don't remember the days of the week, but it feels like 9/11 was on a Monday—it was a workday. And the next day (9/12) we had asked the Senior Deputy RSO to come to our consular section staff meeting and just do a

brief on security reminders, where to go in case of some kind of attack, initiating a move to go to a safe haven, just general reminders. We even went upstairs to the office upstairs called IPA, inter-provincial affairs. The Deputy RSO said, This is your designated safe haven for the consular section.

The next day, September 13, was a beautiful day. The skies were clear, which wasn't always the case in Kabul. My consular section chief, Jayne Howell and a couple of our entry-level officers, we all went to the dining facility. The dining facility had an outdoor patio, so we decided to eat outside. It was really nice. Then we walked back to the consular section, which was in the old chancery building.

That afternoon we had scheduled some visa interviews, American citizen service interviews, visa printing, and visa pass back. And maybe twenty minutes or a half hour after we got back from lunch, we had people in the waiting room. Our staff were at the window doing document intake and so forth. We had a line waiting to pay the cashier and we had folks sitting in the waiting room. The duck and cover alarm went off, and we all got down where we were. I was in my "office", which was actually the privacy booth.

Q: Very small.

AKERS: Very small and it wasn't really intended to be an office. It had a weird desk area. I got down. Everyone got down. My team got down underneath desks. And it went on—the duck and cover alarm—for a little while.

I can tell you why I know the length of time. It was the amount of time that it took one of our entry level officers to peel an orange, and then there was a big explosion sound. None of us knew what had happened. The duck and cover kept going.

After a little bit, maybe half a minute to a minute, I heard Jayne say something like, "Jean, are you okay?" I said yes. I crawled out of my office, and I said to my staff who were to the left of me, "Are you all okay?" And they were. I said, "Okay, stay there." And I crawled into the main part of the section, and I looked up just enough to be able to see out of the consular interview window, and all I saw was smoke and dust. I don't know what it was. I wasn't close to the window. I was on the floor, and I could see it. My first thought was that maybe someone had blown themselves up in the waiting room and maybe there was some kind of breach. I really didn't know.

We called around to everyone. Everyone was okay. No one was hurt. Jayne said, "I think we should go to the safe haven." I said, "Yes, I agree." We told everyone, "Get your phone, we gotta go."

Q: You are talking about the consular staff, I think. Were there also people in the waiting room?

AKERS: Yes. There were clients in the waiting room—the visa applicants as well as U.S. citizens—and there was nothing we could do about them. The responsibility for them was

with the local guard force. This is our team, our consular team, the local staff and American officers, and we said, let's go. We crawled to the door. We opened the door out into the main area, the lobby. Jayne was first and I was last, or something like that, and we led our team up into that safe haven, which we had just visited the day before. We got everyone in. There was no one else there. I don't know where the people who work there were, but they weren't there.

We said, now we have to go to work. We have to send messages to U.S. citizens. We have to tell them to stay away from the embassy. We had no idea what was happening in the city, but we knew that obviously something happened at the embassy. I logged on to a computer that was there and started drafting a message. I had drafted many mascot messages, what used to be called warning messages, we called them mascot messages. So I knew what to say. Jayne and I talked it through. She texted Ambassador David Pierce who was our Assistant Chief of Mission that year. We needed him to clear this message, and he just said, it's cleared. Then I called the Operations Center.

In the meantime, I had our team who was in ACS, I had them log on to computers so that they could monitor the inbox and cancel appointments, respond to anything that came in. We had the duty phone as well. The Consular Duty officer was in the office with us, so we had that duty phone, and we would have that in case any American called and needed help of some kind. I called the Ops Center in Washington, and I said, "Hi, I'm the ACS Chief in Kabul." We were getting information from others, I don't remember who, from RSO, the front office. Somehow, information was flowing to us that there were multiple attacks, that it was a complex attack across the city.

Q: By the Taliban?

AKERS: Insurgents. I don't know. That would be the assumption, some kind of insurgent attack. I don't think we knew at that point where they were firing or where it was from. They said there was some kind of weapon that had caused the explosion at the consular section, so we knew it wasn't a suicide bomber. We had told the RSO staff there were people in the waiting room.

We called the Operations Center. I said, "Hi, I'm Jean. I'm a consular officer in Kabul and we need to send a mascot message." They were like, "We're hearing about this attack. Hold on." Then the SWO, the Senior Watch Officer, who was on duty at the time, got on the call. It's probably 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning in D.C., and it was a friend of mine. It was someone who had been in my orientation class. He was like, "Jean, are you okay?" And I said, "Yes, but we need to send this message." We got that done. We sent it out. Also we were all trying to notify our families that we were okay.

Q: Had there been any casualties in the waiting room? Did you find out?

AKERS: Interestingly we learned later on that what happened was this RPG had hit the waiting room, which had walls that were about three feet thick. It hit, and then that block of cement three feet thick shot through, hit a metal sign in the waiting room that had

consular information on it. The shrapnel had flown and injured a little girl. The little girl was there for an immigrant visa application with her mom, who was married to a U.S. citizen.

What we learned over the next two weeks was that in the case of that little girl, the petitioner was an American citizen of Afghan heritage. He was her biological father and because she had been born after he had naturalized, he had actually met the legal requirements to automatically transfer citizenship to her, but didn't realize it. That was critical because she required extensive medical care that was difficult to obtain locally. What that triggered was U.S. government support and funding, FBI Victims Assistance funding for her as the victim of a terrorist attack to get the medical care that she needed at Bagram and then eventually in the United States. That is the only injury in the waiting room that I know of.

We were in the area for several hours, and we just responded to Americans who were out in the community who didn't know what to do and we told them to seek safe haven. No private citizens during that attack that I can recall, other than that little girl in the waiting room, were injured or killed.

We also learned the next morning that there were private U.S. citizens on the compound that no one thought to tell us about until they called and said, "Jean, what should we do with these private U.S. citizens?" I was like, "who are you talking about?" They worked for an NGO or something and they had been there for a meeting, so they just stayed. I said, "How about I make a call and get them off the compound."

Q: Was Ambassador Crocker the ambassador?

AKERS: He was, yes. He had arrived, I think, in July or maybe August.

Q: This whole event, I don't know if traumatizing is the right word, but it must have had quite a large impact on you and everybody involved.

AKERS: I think so, yes, it did. It was traumatizing.

Q: This is in September, and you had just arrived that summer?

AKERS: Yes. I had been there for four months. I would say that the most notable other event—and probably the one that's remained with me as much—was later that year. The Shia, particularly the Hazara community, in Afghanistan, have a religious observance called Ashura. It's very important to that sect of Islam and there are a lot of gatherings associated with that event.

Jayne was out on R&R and I was acting section chief. When there's a big planned local event we send out a message to tell people, don't go to large gatherings. They're not always peaceful and they can turn violent. Just standard consular messaging. In Afghanistan, we send that kind of thing regularly. Always be mindful of the no double

standard rule. For an event like that where we knew there would be large gatherings of people, we sent that message out to U.S. citizens who were registered with us.

There was a massive suicide attack at a gathering that year on Ashura. There is a photo that was taken immediately after that event by an Afghan photographer of a little girl who is in green, and that was the front page photo about that event, and her whole family got killed, an Afghan girl. A U.S. citizen was also killed who was in Afghanistan for some kind of charitable work. He had approached the big gathering because he wanted to see what it looked like, to take photos, and he died. We got information that led us to believe that possibly he and his family, and the organization that he worked for were under threat. It was some kind of missionary group, and we were concerned for the safety of his family because they didn't want to leave. That one definitely stayed with me for a long time.

What also stayed with me was the number of times we worked closely with Diplomatic Security (DS), the Tactical Operations Center, and they worked with the intelligence threat information and there would be times when I would be provided information for what was called the tear line. It's an unclassified statement about a fairly specific threat to an individual or an entity, or a location, or what have you. Sometimes it was general but other times it was specific, credible, and non-counterable. Those are things we look for when we're evaluating a no double standard policy. I don't know if you want me to explain what no double standard is.

Q: Please.

AKERS: It means that if we hear information within the official U.S. government community about a safety or security threat that is specific and non-counterable (meaning we can't do anything about it), then we must also share that information with the private U.S. citizen community. Sometimes it was information that was very specific about a person or an organization.

I had one time in particular where I knew how specific it was. But even the general information that I was permitted to share was specific enough. And I called the director of an aid organization to inform them that we had received information that his organization’s clinics in a certain area might be targets. I wasn't permitted to share any more specific information than that. But I knew that it was specific to them. And this person said, "I don't know how I can trust that." And I said, "I'm calling you and I'm not calling everyone else. I'm calling your organization." And he said, "So, they're targeting my organization?" And I said, "I'm limited on what I can say, but I am calling your organization and I'm not calling anyone else. And I'm telling you there's information indicating that they may be targeting your organization." And this person was like, "If you can't give me anything more than that then we're just not going to do anything because that would be letting the terrorists win.”

The next day, a clinic of that organization was bombed. It was a maternal clinic, and women and children died. That was hard.

Q: That's awful.

AKERS: That happened another time. There was another time when we had a specific threat against a group of individuals in a specific house. We called them, and they were like, "What? Can you come and talk to us?" And they came to the U.S. Embassy. These were U.S. citizens. Again, we and they were surprised by what type of information or how severe this could be.

Q: This type of situation came up because you received this intelligence, you needed to try to protect people, but you couldn't say anything to compromise sources and methods?

AKERS: Yes. It was not my information. However the intel is gathered, I never know any of that. But we had this conversation with these three people and we persuaded them to leave town. We suggested, "Go to Dubai for a month." We're not saying this will exist forever, but we explained the no double standard. Just because something is unsafe today doesn't mean it will be tomorrow or a month from now, but right now you are not in a good situation and we really recommend that you leave. And they did. I don't know if they came back. They were rattled and they eventually took it seriously. I think at first they asked, "Do you all do this all the time?" And I said, "No we don't." "Are you talking to other people?" And I said, "No, we're talking to you."

Q: I guess it takes a little while for that to sink in with these U.S. citizens, because you have to be indirect. It sounds as if this was all a huge responsibility. How big was your Afghan staff?

AKERS: Our ACS team had two. Our visa team was nine, ten, maybe 15 EFMs [eligible family members]. The section chief was a 02 position. Mine was a 03. Then we had three entry-level officer positions. There was an ARSO [Assistant Regional Security Officer], an investigator. Then we had three EFM [family member] positions, then 10 local staff, maybe 12. It wasn't a huge team. On the ACS, American Citizens Services side, two and then an eligible family member who did ACS work as well.

Q: You went back later in 2021. I was wondering how extensively you got to know the local staff during your earlier tour.

AKERS: Yes. Most of our local staff, from 2011 and 2012, were already gone. All the ones who wanted to come or were eligible to come.

Q: They left after applying for special immigrant visas (SIVs)?

AKERS: Yes.

Q: I imagine that was another problem—high turnover—as the SIV was often the motivation to work in the embassy.

AKERS: And until we got there, until Ambassador Crocker arrived in Afghanistan, the entire Afghan SIV program under the Afghan Allies Protection Act was on hold because Ambassador Eikenberry didn't believe in it. So not a single SIV had been issued. The Afghan Allies Act is much broader—if you serve for a year, you're eligible. That was something that separately we worked on. Jayne had the lead on that, and we were developing a process to get the applications through the Chief of Mission review process and then get them eventually into the visa process.

We were being inundated by emails from congressional and military people. And all the people were asking, why can't my so-and-so get a visa. Ambassador Eikenberry did not believe in the program, so he ignored a law passed by Congress and that, in my opinion, created a huge backlog of cases that hadn't even been reviewed for basic eligibility for the program to say nothing of eligibility for a visa.

Q: So you all started off your tours with a huge backlog?

AKERS: Yes. I think the Act was passed in 2009. You can check that. Up until 2011, not a single SIV under the Afghan Allies Act had been issued, that I know of.

Q: Then with Jayne and you, the process started, but it was already backlogged?

AKERS: Yes. Ambassador Crocker learned, upon arrival, that that was the status. I believe his words were, "I'm appalled," or something to that effect. He was very determined and exhibited forceful, and necessary leadership, including with the interagency, all the partners that needed to clear, of his expectation that this program would start, and it did. It was slow, but we did. I think our team issued the first one while I was still there.

Q: When you said R&R, that's a type of vacation or time off that you get when you go to a post like that; you get usually three to five rest breaks. That meant that you were acting section chief much of the time you were there, because Jayne would be gone on her R&R. That must have added to the stress. How did you feel when you left the post? Did you still feel what you had seen when you had visited the time before?

AKERS: Sometimes people ask me what was the best tour, what was my favorite tour. It's such a hard question to answer. That tour was certainly defining for me, personally and professionally. Some of the relationships that I formed there have endured. And it also shaped me as a leader and as a consular officer.

Q: What were your chief takeaways on leadership?

AKERS: I only see this now. I think I had grown, but I was beginning to understand, and part of this was due specifically to Jayne and her leadership. She was the first really good boss I had. She was the first one. And of course we went back to Afghanistan together in 2021. We have also worked together three different times since then. She was the person who modeled the things that I wanted to emulate: how to support people, how to hold

people accountable while also being empathetic and supportive, and that those two things can coexist.

And that there is a responsibility as a leader for people. There is an ownership for, in some sense, their wellbeing. It doesn't mean you're responsible for everything, but the tone that you set and the behavior that you model -- people take their cues from their leaders about how to interact with others in the workplace and about how to treat each other. Workplace behaviors, work-life balance, and all of those things. I think that was the foundation and then many subsequent assignments continued to shape me. And I would say that I'm still figuring it out.

It was certainly transformative personally and professionally. It affected my career plan. After Kabul, I was supposed to go to Brazil. I was supposed to spend several months in language training and then go to Brazil.

How did I feel when I left Kabul? I did not want to go overseas again for anything. I did not want to do ACS work. I didn't want to do consular work. I didn't want to go through language training. I just wanted to be in D.C. and not go anywhere. The thought of dealing with U.S. citizen emergencies again—I just couldn't deal with it.

Work in DC After Returning from Afghanistan

Q: In the Department, were they offering some support for people? By the time I left Baghdad in 2014, they recommended that we (people departing from danger folks) go to see a psychologist at their next post for at least one check-in.

AKERS: The Deployment Source Management Program did exist. It was new at that time. The requirement was a half day out within a group setting with someone from the transition center as soon as possible, after one returned to Washington. I think they talked about potential signs of PTSD and sleep. They said, you can go to ECS [to request counseling services through the MED bureau] and that was fine. But I think it probably took me a decade to process that tour.

Q: When you went back to DC, what did you do?

AKERS: I went back to Washington. And instead of going to Brazil, Consular Affairs asked me to break my assignment and be in this new office that later would be called 1CA. Jayne was going to be a director of this new office that hadn't existed before, and it was a priority for the Assistant Secretary. They said, "We have a spot. Would you be willing to not go to Brazil?" And I was like, absolutely! I knew from being a CDO that sometimes things fall out of the sky that you don't expect. And it did. I worked in 1CA for two years.

Q: From this point, there were a series of tours where you were either training or developing staff. Is that right?

AKERS: Yes.

Q: Then where were you in 2021, as things started to get a little worrisome in Kabul?

AKERS: I was in Montreal. I was the Consular Chief in Montreal from 2019 until 2022. We dealt with Covid and the pandemic, and that was still very much part of what we were dealing with.

Q: This was your first overseas post since Kabul?

AKERS: Yes. We saw things start to deteriorate, starting in June, and then in July when Bagram closed, and then the Taliban started to take over. Everyone that I knew who had ever served in Kabul was devastated, for lack of a better word.

Q: Devastated because so much had gone into work with Afghans, the country?

AKERS: Yes. I can't speak for anyone else. I personally was disheartened by all the loss of life and the sacrifices that so many—including I and many of our colleagues—made. I can't help but think about things like all the broken relationships, all the mental health challenges that people experienced following their tours in Afghanistan. The trauma that people experienced, and then to have it evaporate, that's where my head was at. What was that all for if this was going to be the result?

I was lucky. I knew that most of my local staff had made it into the U.S. or at least had gotten their SIVs and left. There was one who was not eligible. I got a bunch of emails asking for some kind of intervention and obviously I knew they could not get a visa—and I could not intervene to help this person—but that was still hard emotionally.

I talked to Jayne several times. We talked regularly anyway, just sharing that sense of shock and dismay, and distress, wondering if there would be an evacuation of some kind. There was no messaging coming out. We saw what was going on with the SIV front. Ambassador Tracey Jacobson was put in charge of this effort to ramp up departures of folks with SIVs. I remember even talking with Jayne, when she was considering whether she should go. We both felt, no, it would be too hard. It would be too traumatizing. Then, on August 17th, I got an email from CA.

The day after, that was a Monday, August 16th. It was the day that the embassy evacuated to the airport.

Return to Kabul in August 2021

Q: Right. The day the Taliban entered Kabul and President Ghani left.

AKERS: Ghani left, yes. I got this email from CA, Consular Affairs, "We're looking for volunteers to go to Doha." That's what it said. And I was like, “I can go to Doha. I can do that! I don't have to go all the way to Afghanistan. I'm going to go to Doha. That's a way

to serve and still be useful." I spoke with my boss, the Consul General in Montreal, as well as my reviewing officer, who was the Minister Counselor for Consular Affairs in Ottawa, head of all consular operations in the country. And they both said, yes, we support you. And I said okay.

Then I wrote back to the person who'd sent the request for volunteers and said, "I'm volunteering. What do I need to do?" I also wrote to someone more senior who immediately put me in touch with the person organizing it, and she said, "Okay, great. You'll go to Doha and then be taken into Kabul via milair [military airlift]". And I was like, "Kabul?" She replied, "yes." And I said, "You know that email that your colleague sent says Doha." And she said, "We're going to need to fix that." And I responded, "Okay, yes, I can do that. I can go to Kabul." She asked, "Are you sure?" And I said, yes. So I did.

I called my family later that night, my brother and my mother. I told them I was going. And 24 hours later I was on a plane to Doha.

Q: Jayne went, too. Right?

AKERS: She did. I called her early the next morning and told her what I had done. She said, "That's it, I'm going, too." She was in Turkey at the time. Doha was much closer for her, so she got on a plane that afternoon or that evening.

I got to Doha on the18th of August with a number of other people from Washington, all of us went to the hotel. And a number of TDYers (staff on temporary duty) that had volunteered that were coming from Washington and from a couple of other posts as well, all consular staff, were there as well. We all met up. Jayne came to meet us and we all had dinner together. The next morning we got up at 6:30am and we went out to the military airfield.

Q: Thanks Jean. We have reached the point in the story that is the focus of this project. At the airport in Kabul, could you talk about what happened over the ensuing days? How were you all organizing yourselves? What was the work and how did you do it? Did you end up being part of the team focused on the evacuation with Ambassador John Bass?

AKERS: The work wasn't billed that way previously, but he was there when we arrived.

We [the consular staff] ran 24/7. Jayne was on during the day. I had the night shift. We each had, I think, each shift had anywhere from 12 to 15, and I had 12 officers. At shift change, they would all come in and we would tell them their assigned posts. That would be one of the gates or the passenger terminal. We did not manage perimeter security. The military was in charge of that. There was North Gate, South Gate, East Gate, Abbey Gate, and the passenger terminal, what we called the "Pax" Terminal.

We assigned our people out at various gates and at the Pax Terminal. There were different ways that people accessed the airport. Some were through the gates. A lot were through

the gates. We didn't decide who initially made it through the gate. People came and the Marines let them through. Then they had a short interview by a consular officer. They might have documents to show. They might not. The idea was to figure out, "Who are you? Do you have some nexus to the U.S. government?" The guidance, I assume you heard this, the guidance from the White House shifted somewhat and the days went on and shifted back. So every shift change there was a change in guidance.

Q: Can you explain what you mean by guidance?

AKERS: The guidance on who was eligible for evacuation on U.S. flights. It was not a typical consular operation, consular evacuation, in which the eligible people would be U.S. citizens, immediate family members, lawful current residents, green card holders, immediate family members, and maybe a family member who is accompanying a U.S. citizen child. That would be the traditional consular evacuation priority.

This was much more involving questions like, do they have an SIV? Have they applied for an SIV? Are they in the SIV process? Are they vulnerable in some other way, like belonging to some marginalized group? Could they apply for an SIV? We would get guidance from Ambassador Bass about those priorities – guidance which we understood came from the most senior levels of the USG - and relay those to the team before they went out to the gates.

Sometimes, especially in the first few days, there had been a period of time in which, for whatever reason, the planes weren't coming in at the pace that was necessary to keep taking people out. So for about a day and a half the population on the HKIA, which was Hamid Karzai International Airport, the HKIA compound swelled.

Q: Were these people who you were unsure of?

These were all people on the compound with us who had come through the gates or who had been brought on by some other means. Someone had said, yes, they may come onto the compound.

People would come on to the compound through the gates. Our people would interview them and then they would be funneled in the direction of the Pax Terminal. There were also special groups who would be brought on in buses or in large groups. We established, not me personally, a process for those larger groups to get a verbal pre-approval to enter the compound through a separate channel.

The reason that we had consular officers at the Pax Terminal was to make sure that anyone getting on a plane came through our people, consular team members. Sometimes they would have already seen one of us at the gates. It was probably a different person. They would have seen one of our consular officers at the gates. But these people who were coming on the compound in buses and through other mechanisms, would not necessarily have been vetted by a consular officer. So a consular officer would ask

questions and make the decision: did they meet the criteria for evacuation on a U.S. aircraft or not?

All kinds of people came through the gates. U.S. citizens came through the gates. LPRs came through the gates. Afghans came through the gates. Other nationals came through the gates, like from allied countries, Canadians, French, or whatever, to include Afghans who had nationality or residency status in other countries, and we [the U.S.] would take those people out.

There were certain efforts to designate specific locations, and those were negotiated with the Taliban, that were not the regular gates, specifically for U.S. citizens and immediate family members to enter the compound so that they can come through and be put on evacuation flights.

It was as if the Taliban would become the first line of vetting of those people, which felt very strange. Did they have a passport? A lot of the challenge with that process was that it's the Taliban. We would all think there had been an agreement and then no one would be let through. Then later we learned they held a group of people until they had a batch, and then they'd send them through. But it wasn't large numbers.

We would say U.S. citizens, spouses, and children were eligible, but then people would show up with other relatives, like their parents or their uncles, or whomever, and the Taliban wouldn't let those people through.

We would relay—there would be people in Washington and at posts around the world who were on the phone with these people, U.S. citizens who wanted to leave. We were not necessarily in direct contact with those U.S. citizens or their relatives, but other people were. So they would say, go and just take who you can; but they didn't want to. They wanted to take everybody. As a human being, I understand that. Some of the reasons that American citizens didn't leave, who wanted to leave, is that they couldn't bring additional family members with them or additional people with them, beyond those set criteria.

I think I can say this. It's not classified or anything. If we had had a big family unit show up at the gate and consular officers were the ones doing the vetting, it's more likely than not that we would have permitted their parents, for example, to come in. But that wasn't the situation that we had.

There were those efforts to get Americans in. And there was also—you may talk to J.P. Feldmayer or the correct person about the local staff effort—we had consular officers who helped with that, too, to review documents, talk to people, make sure that they were who they said they were. It wasn't like our officers knew all these people. We didn't have that many people who had been at the embassy, and frankly, Kabul is a big embassy. So just because a local staff member worked in the facility section, even a consular officer or political officer at the Embassy would not necessarily know them.

Q: Plus there was the Covid pandemic. So a lot of people had come on board as employees but were working remotely because of Covid.

AKERS: Yes, exactly. So there were those efforts to get U.S. citizens in through these other channels, other gates. Then there were these group efforts that continued. We were passing numbers. We were getting numbers. The military had numbers, like how many people are out on planes, how many are pending, and we would pass those to the task force, so that's how they got the numbers.

I was mainly located with the Joint Operations Command. I was out at one of the gates that first night but was located at Joint Operations Command after that. That's where Ambassador Bass was, and Jim DeHart and the Marine commanding general within their center. Our teams would be out. Sometimes we would pull them back. Maybe the military said we've got to close the gate for security reasons, whatever it was. So we'd pull them back and then we'd give someone a break or let them go to the Pax Terminal.

We sometimes had to have people, consular officers, oversee unaccompanied minors because it was a big area and families would get separated. A kid would get separated from their family. So we worked with the PRM partners [staff from the Population, Refugees and Migration bureau] who were there with us. We set up this little area in the Pax Terminal which was where the unaccompanied minors were taken.

Then all throughout the day there would be calls – maybe to someone at the Pax Terminal. We'd get a report from a parent who is looking for their child; or a call from Greg Floyd over at the other part of the airport where Ambassador Wilson was. They'd get some call from Washington or we'd get a call from somewhere, "We found this kid." I don't know how this all happened. But I'd see messages that said, "Yes, we got them reunited."

Q: There weren't just one or two of these types of cases? There were several?

AKERS: No, not just one or two.

Q: It was happening every day?

AKERS: Yes. And there was the situation with the baby that got passed over the wall. All these unaccompanied minors. One time we were getting just bombarded by inquiries from a senator's office about two teenagers. They had been separated from their family members and there was just relentless pressure from so many people in Washington to put them on a plane. At one point, that night, one of the RSOs came and he's like, "Okay, we found them and we got them manifested for a flight." And I was like, "Whoa! We just learned about these kids two hours ago and we are not in the business of proactively separating families and separating children from parents that they might have and who might want them." He was like, "Oh." He said, "Would you like me to go unmess this up?" And I said, "Yes please. It doesn't mean they won't ever get on a plane, but let's do a

little due diligence to make sure that we are not inadvertently taking children away from their family."

Q: What happened next?

AKERS: They eventually got on a plane. We figured out that they had family, their family was in the U.S., and it was okay. But it was like, I know the situation we were in. I care, I get it. I know how difficult this all is, and we all want to help. But I felt responsible. I thought, we have to take a moment and think and be sure before we take any action that is going to be incredibly hard to unwind.

That was the day-to-day work. So what I did for the 12 hours that I was the team lead on the night shift, I would come in around four. Shift change was at 6:00 p.m. Jayne would go back to our shared little housing thing around nine or ten, maybe later. She'd come back in around 4:00 a.m. I'd stay until 10:00 a.m. We both covered the swing time.

All night long I was updating the task force [in Washington] or passing information to people on the task force, assigning people to their shifts, dealing with decisions that needed to be made. I think my second night, the Germans came up and said, "We have 50 seats on a plane." And I was like, "Great, who are you willing to take?" And they said, "We would like people who are fully documented for entry into the U.S." And I said, "Great." And I told my consular officer, "Go to the Pax Terminal and find fifty people who are fully documented and put them on that flight."

What actually happened was that fifty people got on the terminal plane. Not all of them were fully documented, but they were all ready for evacuation. I think the Germans were mad, but I just thought, that's someone else's problem now. We couldn't think about what was going on in Doha or Kuwait or Bahrain, or Frankfurt, Germany, or all these other places the planes were going to. We had no insight into that. We had no connection with those people. We didn't know what was happening on the other end.

Our job was to do our task, our piece of it: to have confidence that the people that we were putting forward to be manifested for flights met the criteria as defined by State Department leadership and the White House, even though that changed from day to day.

Q: What were the kinds of changes that happened from day to day?

AKERS: There was one point, the day we first arrived I believe, that the President had made some kind of statement that all vulnerable Afghans, especially women, were eligible. When we arrived, the guidance was all women. That's really a large aperture and is not where we eventually settled and remained. Then it was, obviously, U.S. citizens and their family members, lawful permanent residents and their family members. People who have some kind, maybe they have a regular immigrant visa already started or they're the spouse of a U.S. citizen who has not yet filed for them, but they had a petitionable relationship under U.S. immigration law. That could be worked out later. SIV holders, SIV people in the process, SIV applicants, people who had tourist visas in their passports,

people who had residence elsewhere. Also that category of vulnerable Afghans, for example did they belong to a specific ethnic minority, might they be particularly targeted by the Taliban for what they were doing, were they part of an organization where they might be particularly targeted?

There was a moment when—I don't know where this came from—someone said that we should not put SIV holders through. I remember that moment very clearly. I remember because I heard it at the same time that my night shift team heard it. Then the person walked away. And I said, "Okay, team, we all heard that." And I paused, and then said, "Now, I trust your judgment and I want you to go and make good decisions like the good officers you are."

Q: Good for you.

AKERS: I did not want to be insubordinate, but I also did not think that that guidance would be in effect for very long, and it wasn't. I just told my people–something like twelve consular officers–I said, "Just go and I trust you to make the decisions. And you know that I have your back and you know you can talk to me, call me on the radio, whatever. You know that if you're not sure, you can call me."

Q: Do you have any idea why they came up with that?

AKERS: No, I don't. That was one shift and then that instruction went away.

Q: What did you all do, your team, about people that didn't have their documents because they were scared and had destroyed them in case of encounters with the Taliban?

AKERS: That was handled at the interview. The only people that we put in positions of actually interviewing people were officers who had actually done consular work. We had other people on the ground with us who had been sent as TDYers. But in my recollection, we did not put anyone in a position of making a decision of yay or nay on the decision to evacuate who had not actually done consular work, or who had taken consular training and had a consular commission.

If people didn't have documents, sometimes they had copies on their phones. But really, we used the consular interviewing skills that I used to oversee teaching when I worked at FSI and the ones that all of us used in the field of asking questions and seeing whether the story made sense. The lack of paper was not in and of itself a reason to deny entry or to send someone out of the airport.

There were people who could not credibly explain, even with the use of an interpreter , what their connection to the U.S government was or how they had served in some capacity. I think that saying, "I'm afraid of the Taliban," wasn't really enough to meet the threshold. What was their specific situation? Not that that doesn't tug, not that that's not compelling. It is. I interviewed people who I sent out, not very many, but I said, no. It doesn't make sense. The person cannot credibly say what they did with the U.S.

government, how they served, or why they specifically are vulnerable. Those people would be taken by the military separately and held for a while. It wasn't like they went kicking and screaming. They didn't necessarily know that they were being taken in a different direction, of not going to the Passenger Terminal.

Q: I think you said you started around the19th of August. Each day or each night, or both, how many people were coming to how many gates?

AKERS: I don't know that I can answer that without consulting some photos of the boards that we took that we passed along to the task force. And how many gates were open at any given time depended completely on an extraordinarily fluid security situation. They would say, "We've got to shut down Abbey Gate or North Gate" or whatever. And then we would pull our officers back. Then maybe a couple hours later, they would say we can reopen and then we'd send them back out.

Q: I was trying to imagine the nightly scene. The overall number of people evacuated is 124,000. Right?

AKERS: Yes.

Q: It's such a big number. It's incredible what your teams were able to do.

AKERS: Yes, it is. I remember some of these people were coming in bus loads, not through the gates. They just came up to the Pax Terminal and the consular team would ask, what is this group, who are they? Then they would speak with each individual and then move them through.

I will say, in my recollection, and I talked about it with Jayne since and it is her recollection, too. I do not remember a time when consular staffing was the bottleneck. There would be times when they might say, "Do you have someone to send to X location?" and I would say "Yes. Send this person." Or, "We had just let a big group through and we need more people at the Pax Terminal and we're shutting down this gate." And I'd be, "Great, take some consular staff from there and send them to the Pax Terminal."

I don't mean to say that there might not have been a slight amount of time. We had thirty people working at our peak, and that was probably with a couple of new people that came in on the 24th. We asked them, after this, to stop sending people, because we knew the retrograde [the military term for the pull-out] was going to start soon. Yes, it is inspiring what our team managed to accomplish.

Q: And how were they doing? Were people starting to get brittle with each other?

AKERS: There was no real drama. I do know, because I had to counsel someone one time. I think every person who was there felt very strongly about it and didn't want to be anywhere else in the world. I certainly felt that way. And many of the people who were

there, not all, but a number of them, had prior service in Afghanistan. Some of our team had prior military service in Afghanistan.

I talked earlier about how devastating it was to see what was happening. Part of that, in July, and early August 2021, part of that was anger and rage, and the situation and the feeling of desperation that was palpable, certainly in the crowds. We could see the video feeds at the gates.

One challenge at times was to ensure that our team members were operating within the parameters that we had defined for them and that they weren't trying to go off and do their own thing.

One time I had one of the RSOs come to me about someone who had moved to a different location without telling us and for a brief time their location was not known. We had to check in. The RSOs had to know where we were at all times. That was part of the personnel accountability piece. DS was responsible for our security and safety, so they needed to know where we were: North Gate, South Gate, whatever. And they made it clear to people that if you change locations for any reason you've got to check in. You've got to let us know. This one person had not done that. I said, "Okay, pull them back." And I had a conversation with this person and I said, "You can't do that again." And they said, "But I did it for this reason." And I said, "I don't care. We are responsible for you. DS is responsible for us. You cannot ever do that again."

The whole period of time was so hard. Our team, we're hearing stories of human agony. They're talking with people who are injured, bloodied, had been beaten with sticks outside where they get in, or are traumatized by whatever their circumstances are, by fear, by desperation. And that takes a toll on any human being to hear that, to see that. The smells, the constant gunfire, the whole situation was traumatic.

Sometimes we might decide to, for example, assign someone to the Pax Terminal as opposed to work at the gate because that was a little bit calmer, because those people were already in the airport.

One time one person just didn't show up for a shift. I was super worried. Then it turned out they were asleep and hadn't woken up. They needed a night off.

Were people fraying at the edge? Sure, a little bit as the days went on because you knew no matter how many people got out, we could never get out all the people that wanted to and that we would want to. That hung heavily over me, certainly, and everyone, that we were in this race against time. No matter how hard we worked, we would never, ever be able to get out all the people that we would have wanted to get out.

Q: And the gates were starting to be too dangerous. I think somebody told me that in the days before the explosion at Abbey Gate it was the only place people were getting through, and it wasn't a gate anymore because they were going through sewage to get to the spot.

AKERS: Yes, that's true. As the days went by, the desperation grew. By the time of the bombing, I believe that was the only open gate, for a day or two.

Q: And it sounded like there was intel and they were able to pull consular officers back in time.

AKERS: Yes. Two things I will say on that. First is, overnight on the 25th, it was early morning of the 26th, maybe 3:00 a.m., I was on shift and a colleague got a readout of some intel and we sent a message out to all U.S. citizens registered in Afghanistan telling them not to come to the airport. I knew that that was the right decision to make, but I also knew that it might ruffle feathers because we wanted to get all U.S. citizens out and here we were now telling them not to come to the airport. I believed it was the correct decision to make. Based on the information that I was provided and that there was a real legitimate threat, I believed it would be better to not have Americans come, and not be killed, than to have them come and have something happen.

We sent that message out. I told the person to send it out and told my colleagues, “yes, it's cleared. Go.” I told Jayne on the phone and she responded, "Yes, that's the right thing to do." I told Ambassador Bass when he came in that morning, and he looked at me. He knew there was going to be some kind of blowback. And I was like, "It was the right thing to do." He didn't question it at all. He just said, okay.

I stayed a few more hours and then I went and got a few hours of sleep. I came back around 4 p.m. And when I got back, Jayne and diplomatic security, based on the information that had been provided, together had decided to pull all the officers back. Most of them were sitting in the JOC when I got there, and some seemed annoyed. They were just sitting there.

Both of those decisions I am convinced saved our team’s lives and American citizens' lives.

Q: And the Marines couldn't leave. Right?

AKERS: No, I suppose not. I don't know how they made decisions about where they deployed people. I've never known exactly where in relation, physically, how close they were or where they were.

Q: I think I heard that within a couple of hours or very soon after the bombing the consular folks came back to the leadership and said, "Can we go back and start working again?"

AKERS: It wasn't quite like that. Actually, what happened is the Marines came to us and said the military would like to resume flight operations. Jayne asked for volunteers and everyone put their hand up, and she took a group to the Pax Terminal. We took the other folks home and brought in the night shift team. We absolutely went back to work.

Q: And then after that, was all action at the gates over?

AKERS: Yes. The work was mainly at the Pax Terminal. The bombing happened on the 26th. Then everyone except for the last of us left on the morning of the 28th. The Ramp Ceremony was on the 27th and on the morning of the 28th everyone else left. There was just a small number of State people still there.

Q: Do you feel like there were Americans that were left behind because of the bombing and the closing?

AKERS: I don't know. I don't think anyone can know that. Because so many factors go into people's decision making and part of that has to be their decision for their own safety.

I think there were probably Americans who wanted to leave and either did not feel that they could do so safely, given the situation at the gates, or who maybe had wanted to leave, like I said earlier, but couldn't because they wanted to bring additional family members who the Taliban wouldn't permit in. Due to the bombing, most of the gates were closed anyway. It happened on the evening of the 26th. The retrograde had started.

Those last 24-36 hours I created a WhatsApp group called "Last Consular Officers Standing." There were five of us. We took turns working out at the Pax Terminal. There was still a trickle of people coming in through these other locations. There were U.S. citizens among those groups and legal permanent residents. So it would not be correct to say that no Americans got into the airport afterwards, just not through one of the main gates.

The answer to your question is, probably, but we couldn't safely resume operations at any of the gates.

Return to Washington

Q: You stayed until the end, until August 30th? How were you feeling at that point?

AKERS: Yes, I left on August 30th.

I said almost every day while I was there, to Jayne, there was no place in the world I would rather be and no one else I would rather be with. I don't think I've ever been so exhausted in my life. I was really hoping I didn't have Covid, so that I wouldn't have to be stuck in Kuwait. I was sick, but I didn't have Covid. All of us were. There was some crud, a cold, going around and also just exhaustion, sleep deprivation, eating MREs for two weeks. I lost 15 pounds in those 12 days.

Q: Oh no.

AKERS: I was eating one MRE a night. Sometimes people would bring us food from the other side of the compound [where the cafeteria was still operating]. We weren't sleeping on the CAC side. We were sleeping on the JOC side. Sometimes the incoming shift would bring a container of food from the cafeteria that was over where most of the team was staying.

I came back to Washington because I had a partner at the time here, and my mom was close by. I told my boss in Toronto, I think I want to take a couple of weeks off, and she was like, yes, take all the time you need. I came back and there was this meeting with the Secretary and the people who were around in D.C. during the evacuation. It was a virtual thing. Then the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs did a thing for the consular people who were in the area.

I felt tremendous guilt for a long time. I felt tremendous guilt as well as tremendous pride. Rationally I know that we did everything we could. I know that. I knew that then. But that guilt, that constant race against time and knowing that time was going to run out and we weren't going to be able to get everyone out, was overwhelming. In the end, we did a lot, but that was hard and that was very difficult for me to talk to people and have them say nice things like, that's amazing, that was heroic. For a long time, it was hard for me to hear that.

It got better. Writing my part of the Foreign Service article was a little bit cathartic for me. Although they didn't leave in the paragraph where I said, "I hope the department learns the lessons from this experience."

Q: Tell me what those lessons are.

AKERS: That would require a whole other two-hour interview. Look at the AAR, the After Action Review, the one that the department was not going to share or publish. That in and of itself should be a lesson. There were a lot of things in it. I mean, I was interviewed for three hours, in December of 2021. Jayne and I did a joint interview. That was going into my thinking, is this after action. That was early 2022. I didn't know that they were going to try to bury the After Action Report.

And I don't attribute that to department leadership, by the way. I understood that decision but vociferously disagreed with it.

Another thing. In the aftermath, one thing that I worked on a lot was trying to break down administrative barriers for my team members who had travel vouchers get denied or had their overtime not paid, or had their comp time not paid, or who didn't get their danger pay. That was salt in the wound, and it was by no means intentional, but the underwhelming experience of reentry for many of our team, particularly those who had gone on TDY from other locations, in terms of accessing services, accessing mental health services, ECS, RMOP, was disappointing. Everyone said, call your RMOP.

I can tell you what my RMOP said.

Q: The RMOP is the regional psychiatrist for different posts.

AKERS: Here's what mine said, in Canada. When I got back and I requested an appointment, I said, "Hi, I'm back from doing this evacuation in Afghanistan and we were told to reach out to our RMOP. First they were like, great, he's got an appointment available in two weeks." I said, "OK. Glad it's not a crisis." Then he had an opening. And when I finally got on the call, he was like, "What are you looking for from me?" And I said, "I don't know!" All of us were encouraged to contact these people for support and resources. I don't know what I'm looking for."

He wasn't the right person.

But, there was a town hall in April of 2023, right after they announced that they were not going to release the AAR. There was a town hall with the Secretary and John Bass. And I stood up and asked a question, or maybe I made a comment, saying I disagree with this decision and here's why: No one did anything wrong. There was nothing to hide. There was no massive failure during the evacuation.

Could things have been done better? Could there have been better communications, infrastructure? Could things have been done better? Probably. But for the situation and what we had to work with, I think we did pretty darn good. But I also said, the reentry process was so much more difficult than it needed to be, and people were not supported. Some people were lucky, and they had really great supervisors who said, "yeah, take some time." Or, "Hey, are you okay?" I'm seeing this and I want to check in and make sure, are you okay? Do you know you can call ECS if you want to? I'm not saying you have to, but you can."

I know, for some people on my team, their supervisors took an active supportive role with them. Other people, trying to get overtime, for example, their boss was, "I don't know. That happened in the last fiscal year, so I don't know if we can process it." I got that issue to the right person. But come on! That was frustrating because it shouldn't have had to be that way.

Before we end, I just remembered something I want to mention. They announced the Group Heroism Award ceremony. And they said, with about three days' notice, everyone come to the ceremony. Many of the people receiving this award were the consular officers, many of whom were overseas. I happened at the time to be working temporarily in the CA front office.

Q: CA is the Consular Affairs bureau.

AKERS: Consular Affairs Front Office. And they [the Secretary's office] hadn't said anything in the invitation about if you're overseas, you can travel [that the Department would pay for the travel]. So I went to our leadership in consular affairs, our PDAS, our Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, and I said, "Is CA going to fund travel for all these

people to come? That would be the right thing to do, wouldn't it?" And he said, "Yes, absolutely, that's a great idea." Great.

So I wrote to everyone and I said, “Work with your supervisor, your consular manager. Consular Affairs said they're going to fund your travel. If you can come, CA will pay.” And a lot of them did. One guy got on a plane from Port Moresby [Papua New Guinea] and flew all the way to the U.S. for that one day. Another one got on a plane from Islamabad. He paid his own way because there hadn’t been time to get orders, though it all was made right after. People came from everywhere because it was important. It was the first time we were all back together again since August of 2021. That was probably when I finally said to myself, yes, this was a heroic endeavor and our team deserves this.

Q: And they felt that way, too, and it was worth it.

AKERS: I think they did.

Q: Thank you so much Jean for retelling your story. I think we will end the interview here.

End of Interview