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Oral Histories of U.S. Diplomacy in Afghanistan 2001-2024

JAMES DeHART

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's March 19, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman. Today I have the pleasure of interviewing James DeHart for our Afghanistan project. Jim. I wanted to get started with a little bit of background of where and when you were born, what you were doing before joining the Foreign Service, and your Foreign Service work before working on Afghanistan.

DeHART: I was born in 1965. My dad was a Foreign Service officer, a consular officer. So I spent the first ten years of my life mostly overseas. We lived in Australia and Hong Kong, and the Dominican Republic and Tijuana. He retired when I was ten years old. We moved to Central Oregon and I went to school in Bend, Oregon. Then I had a conventional path into the Foreign Service. I went to Gonzaga University in Spokane and studied political science. I had a couple of years where I did various things including bartending and backpacking around Europe. Then I moved to Washington, D.C., went to George Washington University, got my Master's in International Affairs there, then joined the State Department soon after that as a presidential management intern originally. And I've been in the State Department for about 32 years.

Panjshir Province Provincial Reconstruction Team

Q: When did you first start to work on Afghanistan?

DeHART: I volunteered to go to Panjshir Province, which is about two and half hours north of Kabul. My assignment there was 2009 to 2010. I was the director of the Provincial Reconstruction team (PRT) there. Prior to going, I also had almost a year of Dari language from 2008 to 2009. When I went to Panjshir, that was the only U.S. PRT in Afghanistan that was civilian led, so I was able to be the director there.

Q: Tell us a bit about Panjshir and about your PRT experience.

DeHART: The PRT was very small, only about 50 Americans, mostly military, mostly Air Force. The PRTs that we had, roughly 30 of them at the time around Afghanistan, were essentially there to work with the government at the provincial level—help the

government extend services to the people under the theory that if we helped the government show results to the people, it would draw the people to the Afghan government, make them more supportive of the government and keep them from falling under the influence of the Taliban.

Q: At that point, was there an office in the embassy in Kabul that was supporting the provincial reconstruction teams?

DeHART: Yes, there was. We had a large embassy in Kabul and there was one large office within the embassy that was dedicated to provide support for all the PRTs. Panjshir was unique because it was a place that was 99% Tajik and the Panjshiris had worked with us from the very beginning when we went back into Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban. They were close partners with us and the province was very secure. We were able to move around pretty much the entire province, not always in armored vehicles. We did a lot of moving around on foot, hiked into villages, and went all over the place. It was an incredibly interesting experience.

Q: Did USAID do its projects in Panjshir through your office or were these parallel projects?

DeHART: There was one USAID person when I arrived, Jeremy, and he was fantastic. Then I tried to build up the civilian team and we got a few more. They were there working but the way USAID was structured was that most everything was contracted out of Kabul. Our USAID officers actually had very limited ability to get their hands on any USAID resources, which I felt was a big problem at the time.

Q: Was your work centered on assistance or was it more like representational work, like you're doing now in the consulate in Vancouver, Canada?

DeHART: It was a mix of things. When I arrived there, I found that our military had done an enormous amount of construction in the province. They had built a lot of schools, health clinics, and micro-hydros on the river to capture a small amount of electricity. They had built buildings for district offices for the police, for the district governors. There had been a big construction boom.

I worked with my military counterpart, Lt. Colonel Eric Hommel to change the focus of the PRT. We tried to focus it more on governance, encouraging the governor and his team to get better organized and also, to try to empower the line directors who were supposed to be representing the various ministries from Kabul in the province and to try to link them back to their ministries and make them more effective. So we were focused on trying to get the government to work at the provincial level.

Q: My understanding is that it was hard because the governors were appointed and they had no independent revenue flows.

DeHART: That's right. The governor had limited legal ability to raise revenue in the province. He also had a poisonous relationship with President Karzai. Karzai didn't like him at all, so this was a big problem. He was autocratic in his approach, Governor Haji Bahlol. As Afghan governors went at the time, he was definitely one of the better ones and he did have a lot of respect of the people in the province, and he could get people to do things there. He did keep the province calm and stable. He was an interesting guy to work with.

Q: What was the housing like? Was your team living in tents or buildings?

DeHART: We lived in what had been a Turkish road construction camp and we took that over when they departed years earlier. The PRT was really pretty nice and we had makeshift small buildings and had a private room with a shared bathroom. It was pretty luxurious as a PRT.

Director of the Office of Afghanistan Affairs

Q: You were there for one year. What did you do next?

DeHART: Then I was asked by Richard Holbrooke to come back and be the director for the Afghanistan office, which was a stretch (higher than my current rank) job for me. So I went back to Washington and became the director and wound up staying in that job for three years.

Q: Richard Holbrooke had set up a separate office for reconstruction and there was still an office for Afghanistan in the South Asian (SCA) Bureau. Where was your office?

DeHART: He had set up his own office called SRAP (Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan). When I went back, I was director of the country desk, which was an office of about 20 people. There was also a Pakistan office. It was an awkward situation. We were still residing in the SCA Bureau, South and Central Asian Affairs, whereas SRAP was separate. But Holbrooke didn't see it that way. He asserted authority over the Afghanistan and Pakistan desks as well, and he asserted that we should all be one team, which sometimes worked.

I think at that time the team that he had brought in and assembled from the outside had his ear. A lot of my effort in my first year was actually trying to make the Afghanistan Desk an integral component of his operation at the same level of his staff. There were a lot of turf battles. There was a fair amount of bureaucratic tension in that situation.

At the time, I also stayed as close as I could to the SCA front office. Bob Blake, who is fantastic, was Assistant Secretary at the time. I would regularly attend their front office staff meetings as well to keep them informed of what we were up to.

Q: Can you describe what the office did, any of the big policy issues that came up during that time.

DeHART: The main effort for Holbrooke at the time was trying to get a peace process going with the Taliban. At that time, the Taliban were very much in the shadows. The figures within the Taliban were not well known. It was still an extremely novel idea just to be talking to them. With people like Barney Rubin, an Afghanistan expert who came in from the outside, Holbrooke tried to get something going with the Taliban. It was very daring, I think, what he was trying to do and pushing the envelope on U.S. policy.

We on the country desk were not quite in the thick of that. So we wound up spending more time on other aspects of our policy toward Afghanistan, everything else in a way, including trying to support good elections in Afghanistan. There was always the next election on the horizon. We were doing things to try to support and strengthen and stabilize the government.

Q: Holbrooke passed away suddenly, at the beginning of 2012. You were there when Grossman came in after him. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: That was a big shock that day. Then Ambassador Grossman came in?

DeHART: Yes. Ambassador Grossman came in. He was given the mandate to take Holbrooke's efforts and to take them further. He was very focused on moving a peace process forward, picked up right where Holbrooke had left off. Then I think some of the bureaucratic tensions eased a bit. The Afghanistan desk came into that effort a little bit more, but we were still very much focused on some of things that we had been working on already, including supporting elections.

Q: And you were supporting the embassy leadership?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: And you had several ambassadors.

DeHART: Yes. At that time, I think there were still five leaders at the embassy who held the rank of ambassador somewhere previously.

Q: Were you involved at all in the discussions about the auditing and all the work going on to check on whether assistance was being used well? There was an office that was permanently checking on ways in which the assistance was or wasn't being used well?

DeHART: I don't remember when SIGAR came into being. Yes, we did spend a fair amount of time understanding our various assistance programs trying to capture the results of those and explain the results of those programs.

Q: That was a very big job that you had at a complicated time with the diplomatic surge and changes in strategy. Then did you take a break from Afghanistan at that point?

DeHART: No. Because I had been working in a stretch position, it was an OC job and I was still an O1, I felt like I couldn't go back, and I had opened my window.

Director of Afghanistan and Pakistan programs on counternarcotics and the rule of law

Q: That means you had made yourself available to be promoted to a senior foreign service position.

DeHART: Yes. And the clock was ticking on that prospect. I was able to convince INL (the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) to take me on as an office director in INL, another OC position, where I was covering both Afghanistan programs and Pakistan programs. At that time Afghanistan programs and assistance money was far and away the largest program.

Q: Was the INL, Narcotics and Law Enforcement, program in Afghanistan equally split among counter narcotics and the rule of law and law enforcement, or was it more of a counter narcotics program?

DeHART: We had quite a lot of resources for all. I don't recall the exact balances. We had substantial funding for counter narcotics, for different kinds of rule of law programs, training of prosecutors and judges, and a major crimes task force. We had quite numerous programs on the rule of law and on the counter narcotics side.

Q: Did you work on the police training programs?

DeHART: No. The police training program actually preceded me, so we were out of the business of police training.

Q: My impression from speaking to a couple of ambassadors over the years was that the military training and preparation of the military seemed to go better in Afghanistan than the police training. I'm not sure if that's your opinion.

DeHART: Yes, that's true. I think probably one of the very best was the training of the Special Forces and the special crisis response units in Afghanistan, then after that the military and police training was always troubled.

Q: Was it a time of great violence going on? Or had the surge made less of a deadly time for the people that were in Afghanistan?

DeHART: No. It was a time of significant violence, I would say, there was probably an increasing realization the things that we had tried to do weren't working very well. We were also starting to transition downward in Afghanistan, at that time. By the time I had

moved over to INL, we were closing PRTs, including the PRT in Panjshir that I had been at. And we were trying to transition responsibility to the Afghans as quickly as we could.

What I found was that INL seemed to still be on the upswing with its programs and investments in Afghanistan, whereas the rest of the USG was on a downward trend. So I made myself very unpopular with my team by moving us to a downward trajectory as well. We did a program review, looked at all the programs and figured out which ones we could cut, which was most of them, and which ones could be eliminated and how we would start to move in sync with the rest of the State Department and the U.S. government.

Q: In 2002 when people first got to Kabul and looked around, they saw such a poor country had been war torn for so long that they thought the prospect of nation building and development was going to take at least 20 years. During the first 10 years, they described that it was a tough thing to make progress. From your vantage point, did you feel at that point in time that some of these projects that you were putting on a downward trend were being picked up on by a more capable government?

DeHART: To some extent, yes. I always felt that the biggest contribution we were making was by being there and facilitating a relatively stable situation where people could get trained by us or by others in some relative peace. You could see a new generation coming up of young people who had room to grow as people and with skills.

Quite often, it was not the government ministers we were working with that made such an impression. Or even maybe somebody who was being directly trained by us. It was more like some 28-year-old who was doing administrative work in some ministry or operating the computers or something, who was able to do this task because the international community was there and we had created this space. That individual might be a young man or young woman who was developing professionally as a person in a way they wouldn't otherwise. You could see where it went. For me, the most important thing is we had created this space where people could come up and grow in that way.

Q: Did you feel that was true outside of Kabul as well?

DeHART: Yes, depending where you went to greater or lesser extent. In cities like Herat or Mazar, which are more urban, you could see that taking shape for sure, maybe not so much in the south or the east of the country. But it was certainly not limited to Kabul.

Q: After that, you had a break. Where did you go after that?

DeHART: After that I did finally leave the Afghanistan account. I went to Norway as a DCM for three years. I wound up as chargé for nearly two years of that period, which was fantastic.

Q: You got there in 2015 and there was a change in the administration, at the beginning of 2017.

DeHART: Yes, that's right. But I still kept in contact with things in Afghanistan because the Norwegians, for years, had been playing this unique role in getting a peace process started. They were, maybe along with Germany, the essential partner for us in the reconciliation effort. I was able to connect with those Norwegians and to stay somewhat current on the peace efforts.

Q: Under the Trump Administration, did the peace efforts take a bit of a different turn? Ambassador Khalilzad was a special envoy again.

DeHART: That's right.

Q: What was going on in the peace negotiations at that time? Were they making progress toward the eventual agreement that was signed in February 2020?

DeHART: Yes. I don't recall when Ambassador Khalilzad really got his efforts underway.

Assistant Chief of Mission, 2018-2019

Q: You were in Norway, in Oslo, for three years. Then what brought you to Kabul?

DeHART: I bid some other things and I bid Kabul, and I wound up in Kabul as the Assistant Chief of Mission to John Bass, the number three job. My responsibilities were not the peace process, not the political work. I was in charge of embassy security and management, and consular and foreign assistance, essentially everything except for policy work.

Q: Let's talk about that tour. Can you explain what was going on in Afghanistan, what the feeling was about how much violence there was, what was happening with the Afghan military being able to hold its own, a panorama of what that year looked like?

DeHART: I think from the time I arrived, and it was not a big surprise, our outlook was very pessimistic. Under the then president, it was clear that we were going to leave Afghanistan. The only question was how quickly I think we were going to do that.

Q: Under President Trump?

DeHART: Yes. He had made it clear that he wanted out and it looked possible that it could be very abrupt. We were trying to figure out what that meant for what we needed to do at the embassy. I would say we were very pessimistic. We knew that it wasn't going to end well.

Q: Because the Taliban was continuing to make strides?

DeHART: Yes. The government and the security forces, it was clear that after, despite everything that we had invested over the years, they couldn't hold their own and the

country continued to be in a very difficult situation. It was the Taliban. It was also ISIS-K that was coming on, so there was a lot of instability, a lot of violence around the country.

Q: What was ISIS-K and what was happening that year?

DeHART: ISIS Khorasan was active particularly in certain parts of the country, and more nihilistic and brutal than the Taliban in the attacks that they undertook against civilians, against Hazaras. It was more sectarian oriented violence than we had seen in the past, in Afghanistan. There was ISIS-K. There was of course that the Taliban seemed to be strengthening as well, increasing their influence across the country. Depending how you measured it, more outlying districts seemed to be falling under the sway of the Taliban. And as our forces were generally pulling back, the Taliban were filling that gap.

Q: Was the State Department preparing for what would happen in the embassy? Was there a thought that the embassy would stay even if the U.S. troops withdrew?

DeHART: It was clear to us that if U.S. troops completely withdrew it wouldn't be realistic to keep the embassy, at least not in its current location. There was increased discussion and planning toward the possibility that a residual embassy could be moved out to the airport, to Hamid Karzai International Airport, and perhaps continue there.

It was actually toward the end of 2018, that we got word that leadership wanted us to greatly downsize the embassy. Our sense was that it might be a step to get a lot smaller, and if we couldn't do that we'd have to leave completely. So we then undertook a really intensive effort to reduce the size of the embassy to try to cut it in half.

Q: How big was it before versus after?

DeHART: The first thing I learned, because I was asked by Ambassador Bass to lead that effort, was that it was almost impossible to get an accurate count of people at the embassy. Because so many people we had there were contractors and they were coming in and out of the country on different schedules and for different periods of time. It was hard to know whether to count somebody who might be in-country for two months, versus four months or six months.

We had more than 6000 people on the ground at any given time and were essentially asked to cut that number in half. And it was extraordinarily difficult to do because we had essentially a self-contained city in Kabul where we provided everything for ourselves. We flew in food and water. We generated our own tower for electricity. We had our own wells for water. We had apartment buildings that people lived in with complicated HVAC systems that had to be maintained. We had all of our systems right there, self-contained. We didn't rely on the local economy for anything. And you need a lot of people to run all that.

Then we had a very large perimeter around all of this and we had to have people defending that perimeter. The number of support personnel to keep such a place going is

really dramatic. It was difficult to cut large numbers without compromising our ability just to live and survive there.

Q: I have never been to Kabul, but I had done a year in Bagdad and there we had a facility at the international airport that was almost as big as an embassy compound. In Kabul was that the case that there was a compound as part of the airport in Kabul that already had a robust operation going on at the airport? Were there agencies—military and other agencies—that were working, not at the embassy, but at the airport.

DeHART: Yes. We had a presence there. There was a military side of the airport as well in addition to the civilian operations.

Q: I interviewed a security official, I think he might have gotten to Kabul after you left, who talked to me about the kinds of plans you have to make to move equipment out, to evacuate a mission like that. He had learned that the hard way in Basra and he tried to get plans put together to do a better job of evacuation from Kabul if that decision was made. Did you run across him?

DeHART: No, I don't think so. We of course had ongoing planning. I was briefed on the military's NEO plan for any evacuation and understood what those plans were if we needed to evacuate in a hurry.

Q: What does NEO stand for?

DeHART: Noncombatant Evacuation Operation. The military conducts the evacuation. But with an evacuation, the preference is not to go straight to military resources, but also to use commercial travel for as long as it's available.

Q: So your year was spent reducing the footprint of the embassy and making plans for a possible move to the airport for total withdrawal. Is that right?

DeHART: The NEO planning was something that I wouldn't say was my full-time job, but it was my full-time job for a few months to lead this downsizing of the embassy. And that was really hard because that had an impact on every section of the embassy. It wasn't popular with everybody, certainly. I actually felt pretty good about that exercise because we did feel that eventually we might be looking at a complete evacuation and it would be helpful to have a small embassy if and when such an event took place.

Q: With the smaller footprint, the smaller number of people, did you have a change in direction of what the different sections of the embassy were doing?

DeHART: We basically took a look, and I asked all the section heads to look at their programs and to tell me what was essential and what was not essential, and to go from there. We tried to put as much power in the hands of the different section heads as we could to tell us what ought to be done, and a lot of them did a great job, I think, an honest

job of assessing what was truly important and should continue, and what could be given up.

Q: Let's move to the consular section. Was there a lot of planning going on for making progress on the backlog of SIVs, Special Immigrant Visas, and was there effort to try to get American citizens to understand the danger of remaining?

DeHART: Yes. We were processing SIVs as quickly as possible. I had the delegated authority to approve SIV cases before they went for their final interviews with consular.

Q: Can you describe what an SIV is?

DeHART: Special Immigrant Visa for which many Afghans are qualified because they worked for us or for the State Department, or for the U.S. government agency, for the military, as an interpreter, any number of functions. So they qualified for a special immigrant visa.

The thing I would point out about the backlog is there's a whole system where somebody applies and starts for a special immigrant visa, and it may be many, many months before that application progresses to the point that the embassy could do anything about it. There have happened over the years various choke points through the entire application process. I say that because it's not necessarily a question of the embassy not doing its work fast enough. The hold-up might very well be elsewhere in the system and frequently was.

Q: Once somebody applies for, let's say they work in the political section of the embassy and they apply for that, they have to get certain information to the people processing it, and then also there has to be a lot of security checks on them and their family. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes, that's right. There is very close scrutiny of the applicants.

Q: And some applicants' involvement with working for the U.S. government as an interpreter out in the field, it may have been a long time before. Many agencies may have to weigh in. Is that right?

DeHART: It could be. It depends where the inquiries might lead. Basically for the most part, these are excellent cases because when they were hired to begin with they would have undergone close scrutiny before ever being offered a job with us, whether it was by our military or by the embassy. They were scrutinized long before they ever actually put in for their special immigrant visa. Then the initial checks take place.

Q: There is some mention in a couple of the interviews I've seen where the Trump Administration decided to slow it down. That doesn't sound like that was your experience.

DeHART: We were not slowing down when I was there, and that was under that administration. What we did actually do was, as I was going through and approving

various cases, reviewing many of these cases that had come out of the committee process back in Washington, there seemed to be a whole lot of cases that I didn't feel were at a high level of risk of reprisals by the Taliban. They qualified legally for the SIV, but they didn't look to be like individuals who were truly under serious risk. Whereas there were many others in the queue that obviously did have a profile that would put them under very serious risk.

So we actually went back and worked through and tried to do a reprioritization to make sure that those who faced the biggest threats to their safety would rise to the top and be interviewed first and get through the process first. That's where my focus was at the time, was trying to make sure that we were prioritizing in a way that made sense.

Q: Later, the issue came up that some people worked very closely with the U.S. government, were sponsored by the U.S. government, but weren't directly employed by the U.S. government. So there was a whole group of people that weren't included in the SIV process at all, like judges or people who had received AID grants to set up women's shelters or things like that. Is that correct?

DeHART: Yes, that's true. There were quite a number of people who worked very closely with the United States or with our allies who didn't meet precisely the qualifications for an SIV.

Q: Was there a rough percentage of SIV applicants who were military versus civilian? Is that a figure that you're aware of?

DeHART: We don't have a reliable figure for that. Certainly, the largest share of SIV applicants worked for U.S. military forces just derived by the size of our military effort, but we don't have a precise figure.

On the previous population of those who worked closely with us, of course our relocation efforts took place, both during the evacuation and since the evacuation, are also inclusive of many Afghans who were not SIV qualified, but who did work with us and who were under threat as a result.

Q: Is there anything else that stands out during that year that you thought would be useful to understand what it felt like at the time or that set the stage for what happened in 2021?

DeHART: I had no direct responsibility for the peace efforts, for the negotiation conducted by Ambassador Khalilzad. I was watching it closely and there for a lot of the discussions. I would say that we had some concerns that maybe he was giving away too much.

There were a couple of things in the draft agreement as it came together that were really troubling. One was the mention of Islamic Emirate, which got repeated mention through the document, and it had an asterisk next to it that said, this is what the Taliban call

themselves. It's not what we call the Taliban. It was a very lawyerly presentation and I felt that Afghanistan is not a nation of lawyers and they would just read those words, "Islamic Emirate" and fear the worst, I think, about what that meant to put it in an agreement.

Q: That means that it was giving the Taliban legitimacy as a state, as opposed to an insurgency. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes. Their words, "Islamic Emirate", which is basically a move away from a republic, based on any democratic principles and towards a regime that is in accordance with Sharia.

At the time, we knew that was problematic, and I would say that we didn't even fully appreciate the impact that made on Afghans. I think we later saw that when they saw those words in the agreement and knew that we had given the Taliban that, they felt that the United States had essentially decided to turn the country over to the Islamic Emirate. That contributed to their lack of will, I think, to resist the Taliban.

The other thing that I think contributed to their lack of will was another lawyerly formulation regarding the release of prisoners up to 5000, which was, I think, devastating to the morale of the government.

Between those two things, I thought that I should send a dissent memo or cable of some kind and I was leaning toward doing that, but struggling with whether that was the right thing to do. I knew that it wouldn't make a difference, but I still felt it was the right thing to do. But I also knew it would complicate Ambassador Bass's life and I didn't want to do that.

Q: Ambassador Bass, a career Foreign Service officer, was sort of stuck in the middle?

DeHART: Yes. A fantastic leader and doing his utmost at all times. I don't want to characterize his views on anything. I didn't want to just make his life more difficult as he tried to navigate all these difficulties, so I hesitated on that. Then in the course of my hesitation, Amrullah Saleh, a key figure in the Afghan government, essentially accepted the language of the draft, not because he liked it, I'm sure, but for whatever calculation he made, he took it. Then at that point, I didn't feel I could be holier than the Afghan government on the topic. It was done.

Q: What role did he play in the Afghan government at that point? Was he the National Security Advisor?

DeHART: He jumped around to a couple of different jobs. I can't remember which position he held at that moment.

Q: During this period when they were outlining the agreement that would include the U.S. withdrawing all troops in the end, were Khalilzad and his team talking about a conditions based agreement at that time?

DeHART: Yes. It was still being presented as a conditions-based agreement with some requirements that the Taliban move against Al-Qaeda as well.

Q: Do you remember what the key conditions were that we would only do X if they did Y, and Z? Do you remember what the key things were at that time?

DeHART: I don't remember the wording precisely, but the key condition was not cooperating with Al-Qaeda. We would draw down and we would depart with a key condition on terrorism. There was some other conditionality, I think, as well. It didn't look to us like the Taliban had much interest really in abiding by any of these things.

Q: So it didn't look like a condition-based agreement was going to hold? Was 'not attacking U.S. troops' one of the conditions that they talked about at the time?

DeHART: Yes. One more thing. That one was entirely realistic because I think the Taliban were perfectly happy not to attack us on the way out.

Q: Ambassador Bass was there the whole time you were there. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes, that's right. Then I departed and he was still there.

Q: How was morale in the embassy when you left in the summer of 2019.?

DeHART: I think that generally morale was good. People were there because they wanted to do something important. Ambassador Bass was an excellent leader. We tried to look after personnel and not put up with any nonsense or bad behavior on the compound. I think people were there to do a job that they wanted to do and generally speaking, morale was good under the circumstances.

Q: Then you were working on some other interesting jobs, including the U.S. Arctic Coordinator.

DeHART: I came back to Washington. I worked for a year as the Department Security Negotiator. The biggest negotiation I was involved in was to try to get more money out of South Korea for the cost sharing of U.S. troops stationed there. I had been instructed to gouge them for quite an incredible amount of money that they were never going to pay. I worked on that for nearly a year, and got to the cusp of an agreement that was then rejected by our then president. At that point, the Deputy Secretary of State took mercy on me and he pulled me off that account. He asked if I want to be the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region.

Q: Who was the Deputy Secretary of State?

DeHART: Steve Biegun.

Q: Then where were you in August 2021?

DeHART: I was working as the coordinator at that time. In the months leading up to August, I was in touch with some people who had worked on Afghanistan in the past and watching from afar the wheels coming off, but not having any special insight because I was not part of the discussions.

Citizen Evacuation from Kabul in August 2021

Q: In the second half of August as the airport got flooded with people, Afghans trying to get out of Afghanistan, as the government was falling, John Bass asked you to go back to Kabul with him. Did you go with him?

DeHART: We had been in contact in the weeks and days leading up to that. Then he emailed me and Karen at the same time and just informed us that he had been asked to go back and lead the civilian part of the evacuation. So I emailed him back and I asked him if he wanted me to come as his deputy. He said, "Let me get back to you." Then a half day later, somebody came back to me and said, "How soon can you go."

Q: So you did go?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: Tell us that story.

DeHART: I had 24 hours to pack. Suzy George, Chief of Staff to Secretary Blinken, was quite appreciative and then very helpful in making sure that I could catch a mil air flight out of Doha into Kabul, but I flew first commercially to Doha.

I felt I should go because I had done so many years on Afghanistan and the last time I had been there, I had worked for John Bass, I knew how he worked, and I had also overseen the security and management. I knew a lot about the embassy platform and just about the environment there. I thought I could be helpful. I thought I was better equipped than most people just because of my experience to go and actually help a lot. That's why I went.

When I got on the commercial flight and we were still on the tarmac, and we hadn't taken off yet, my sister called me from Spokane. She was with my mother and my sister was crying, which she doesn't do, which I don't see, at least not that often, and sitting with my mom, and she was very upset that I was going. We were just about to take off and that was really hard.

Q: What date did you arrive in Kabul? Or was there anything to see when you got to Doha?

DeHART: I got to Doha, this is around August 19 or 20, or something like that. I was on the plane alone. I got off the commercial aircraft in Doha. I stepped off the plane and I saw these three guys standing there probably waiting for somebody else to get off the aircraft. I could just tell they were State Department. So I stopped to talk to them, and yes, they were. We went and picked up a couple more. It turns out there were five different people there and they were all trying to make their way to Kabul to join the operation.

Strangely, a couple of them had checked luggage for the evacuation, which surprised me a lot. I mean, who checks luggage for an evacuation? We had this ridiculous period where we were waiting to retrieve their bags. We had a control officer from the embassy. I think State Department control officers are hardwired never to leave somebody's luggage behind. I said, we've got to catch this mil air flight and minutes kept passing.

Most everybody got their luggage, I think, and we made it over to the base, and we made the flight that we were supposed to be on, at midnight, something like that. Picked up some personal protective armor before we got on that aircraft to go on to Kabul.

Q: We still had Ambassador Ross Wilson who had moved the operations off the embassy over quickly, I forget the date, and they had some people who were operating. But John Bass and his team, your team, what was your mission supposed to be compared to what the embassy people were doing?

DeHART: When I arrived, our embassy had already fully evacuated. Ambassador Wilson had led that evacuation out to the airport. The residual embassy was now set up on the civilian side of the airport, which I didn't see until I left Kabul, nine, ten days later. I barely saw that operation. We taxied over and were dropped off on the military side of the airport where we were set up with people there and that's where Ambassador Bass was. We were co-located with the Marines and the equivalent of a half a block from where Admiral Vasely had his office. We were all there with the military.

Q: What did Ambassador Bass tell you your job was, your mission?

DeHART: I think I just started working, I was fielding inquiries from Washington and trying to identify the people that we were going to help and assist, and get them in.

Q: The situation, when you got there, was that a lot of Afghans had stormed onto the airport grounds. But at some point, the U.S. military worked to clear the airport so there would be room to try to bring in the people that we were trying to help to get out as well. Is that correct?

DeHART: Yes. Before I arrived, probably I had even departed Washington, the embassy had been evacuated, and then the airport had been overrun by desperate Afghans.

Fortunately, U.S. forces were able to clear the airport of those Afghans and then restore operations.

Q: The clearing was taking them to Doha? It wasn't making them leave the airport?

DeHART: No. A lot of them were made to leave the airport. A lot of them were moved out of the airport. I wasn't there for that. I don't know precisely the numbers allowed to stay.

Q: At this point there were a whole lot of American citizens and Afghans with ties to the United States that were in the city and weren't able to get onto the airport compound. And there were a lot of people in Washington and U.S. folks who were calling everybody to try to get help for their contacts. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes, that's true. When I arrived, we had regained control of the airport. There were thousands of Afghans, desperate people circling the airport, and in all the major gates and entrances into the airport, mobs and mobs of people, thousands of people. That was really the scene. It was a really desperate scene. From anywhere inside the airport you can hear constant gunfire, which I think was largely Taliban firing into the air doing their version of crowd control.

Right away after I arrived, I went out to a couple of the gates to see what was happening at the gates. It was fairly apocalyptic with mobs outside and people struggling to get through the mobs to try to present themselves to be able to enter the airport. It was extremely difficult to process those people at the gates without losing control of the gates. And it was just a horrendous experience for Afghans who were trying to work their way through the crowds to get there. Taliban beating on people. There were thieves that were preying on people. They knew that people were bringing as many valuables as they could carry, so they were getting robbed. It was hot. It was really dangerous out there. That was the scene, which was a really desperate one.

Then quite quickly we started having discussions about how do we move groups of people that we were trying to evacuate safely into the airport without subjecting them to all this mayhem out there. And that really became the main effort, which was designing operations to bring in large numbers of people.

Q: One group of people were the Afghan employees of the embassy, bringing them in.

DeHART: Yes. But our initial focus was American citizens; we needed to focus on them first. Any American citizen who wanted to leave, we wanted to help them leave as well as their immediate family members who may have been legal permanent residents or other status (but not extended family members, not grandparents or siblings). They were our first priority.

Q: Was there a rough number of American citizens that we were trying to help get out?

DeHART: Washington was very interested in the numbers. I was not interested in the numbers because we don't track American citizens. I felt that trying to assign a number was to pretend that we had some information that we didn't. We don't track Americans. We don't necessarily know they're there unless they raise their hand to say that they're there. At the airport, we put together a system working with consular affairs to put out invitations to Americans to invite them in and we had no idea how many were going to show up.

Q: Then they had to find a way to a particular gate in order to be able to get into the airport. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes. The system that we came up with, and this was worked out with John Bass and with the military leadership, also General Chris Donahue, together with Admiral Vasely, was actually to bring the American citizens in through the old Ministry of Interior facility because it was a protected gate into the airport. The Ministry of Interior building, the old one, was controlled by the Taliban, so people weren't going there.

We had communications with the Taliban to allow American citizens to show up there at a rallying point and then the Taliban would essentially check them to make sure they were Americans or qualified family members and then send them down this corridor to the gate to enter the airport. We had the Taliban doing consular work for us and they were willing to do this because they wanted us to leave and they felt that if we could get our citizens out then we would go, and so they worked with us on that.

Q: Quite a lot of people came through that way?

DeHART: I don't recall the exact number, but we were doing movements in hundreds. Each movement was in the hundreds. We started smaller and we built it up because what we did was, here again, Consular Affairs Washington would send out to 500—or maybe a thousand American citizens—who we believed were there, and say, please show up at such and such place, in this window of time, for evacuation.

Q: Would there be a bus there or something to pick them up?

DeHART: No. They needed to make their way to that location and once they were there, the Taliban would let them through. We had hoped the Taliban would just send them down right away, but they didn't. They collected them and made them stay there for, in some cases, several hours. That was probably nerve wracking for the Americans. These are mostly Afghan Americans, with some understanding of the local context.

After gathering them and having them stay there for up to a few hours then they sent them down en masse. We started with a relatively small number. I can't remember, maybe a few hundred or maybe 500 initially that we invited to come. Because we didn't know if a hundred would come or 500 would come, or they would tell all their friends and a

thousand would come. We didn't want it to be too big because we were afraid of losing control or the Taliban feeling overwhelmed and then shutting it off.

We had to get the right number and it worked. Then we increased it. We kept running these groups. Generally, the Taliban cooperated in this effort and we got a lot of Americans through that way.

Q: Were American citizens also going through Abbey Gate or was that a different kind of operation?

DeHART: There were three sets of entry points. One was these special operations that we did, like this one, and there were other ones that we did as well. Another one was South Gate, which was the main entrance to the airport where a lot of our NATO allies came in, different partners of ours came in. We can talk about that one separately.

Then there was a third category that I would identify was just these targets of opportunity around the airport. Because you had multiple gates, including Abbey Gate and North Gate, and East Gate, where people would just come and our Marines were there. And if our Marines could spot somebody then they would try to get them in and our consular officers would process them and bring them in.

We gave guidance to our consular officers to help them identify the priority people that were trying to break in there. Those were less organized. Those were targets of opportunity for people that just showed up and made their own way.

Q: American citizens?

DeHART: American citizens, all sorts of backgrounds. The truth is there was a lot going on that was outside of our visibility. We had so many uniformed service members, I'm sure, who had friends who had served in Afghanistan years before, who were in touch with their former interpreter. The interpreter called them in Illinois. That person called their buddy and said, they're coming to this gate, can you get them in. That was happening all over the place. That was not a coordinated organized effort. That was just an organic effort that was occurring.

Q: But it was good to permit those people in? People that were vulnerable were able to come in.

DeHART: Yes. They were Afghans who had worked with us at some point, many cases where our service members felt really strongly that we needed to help this person.

Q: Did you get involved in problems of people being able to get to Kabul at all that were there, people that were being stranded because they couldn't get into the city before they got into the airport?

DeHART: I think people were coming in from various places. I wouldn't say that we had a great handle on precisely how far they had moved. I don't recall ever a single case where somebody said something awful happened to someone because they were making movement from some location. We also had in the back of our minds there were others in places like Mazar or other parts of the country that we would want to help, too, when we could.

Q: There were charter flights. People were getting private people, maybe U.S. companies were trying to get people out to Mazar. That was definitely something different from what you guys were doing.

DeHART: The Mazar charter flight thing is a whole different conversation.

Q: You worked on it later, or were you aware of it at the time?

DeHART: We were not focused on it at the time. That was more of an issue when I was back in Washington on the task force.

Q: Were you getting a lot of calls from people in Washington who were getting calls from Congress people with a lot of extra pressure?

DeHART: We were getting flooded with calls, especially from just so many people ranging from foreign officials in other countries that might have contacted our ambassador at this or that European country, all over the world. We had requests from heads of state and government to help this or that person or group.

Then we had a lot of calls and inquiries from current U.S. officials from all over our government and some former officials who held very senior positions. It became my role to field these, to be a clearing house for all the inquiries that were coming in and try to make sense of them, and to see if we could assist with some of these requests.

Our consular officers got phone calls directly from a number of senior people and former senior people, which we were upset about. It was unfair to them. They were out there. Our consular officers had far and away the most difficult job, I think, right out on the front lines together with the Marines, seeing these people coming in, in absolute desperate conditions and making these quick judgments on whether they could stay or had to be removed back out there. And they were getting pressured calls and not all of them were very nice, and that was pretty unfair.

Q: How many consular officers were there on those front lines?

DeHART: In the dozens. Never had an exact count. The count of personnel was handled on the embassy side, the flow of people coming in and out.

Q: From your perspective inside, once people were inside the airport, it was a fairly orderly thing. Was the military trying to fill up planes and get them going and coming back?

DeHART: It was an organized thing. The circumstances everywhere were hard. If you were fortunate enough to get to the airport and through a gate, and inside, you were then pointed to an area to wait. And it took some of them, non-American citizens, but some of the Afghans, it took them probably days to move from that initial point, after getting in the gate to getting on a flight. Those might be days sitting outside with very little shade, very little food and just sitting there in the dirt and the dust. People were creating makeshift camps all along the way as you progressed from one point to another. You also endured some security screening at each point as well then finally made it onto an aircraft.

Q: I got to interview Greta Holtz. She was in Doha briefly. When she first arrived she said, "There's too many people here, you have to stop the flow." And the military said, "You don't understand, Kabul is much worse." Were any of these planes going to other places in Europe or was everything going to Doha?

DeHART: When I first arrived the whole network of lily pads was still being established. Some initial flights as I understood it went into Kuwait and then that dropped away, and it became Doha forward for the Gulf.

As I recall, it took some time after I got there before they really nailed down Ramstein, Sigonella and Rota, around Europe, to take these folks. That was a problem because people were piling up in Doha as well, as Greta noted. We just didn't have enough places to send these people. It started to increase steadily in numbers at the airport in Kabul.

Q: The Abbey Gate explosion occurred on August 26. Were you there at the airport at that time?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: What was the view of what happened from your perspective?

DeHART: Maybe just a quick thing about Abbey Gate. It was not really a proper gate. There was a gate there. When I visited Abbey Gate earlier, you walked up there and then you were looking at a couple of thousand Afghans all sitting in front of you, stretching on both sides. And there was a trench between us, kind of a canal, very small. You could step through it, which was fast becoming a sewage canal. And there was a metal fence on our side of the canal. There was a hole cut in the metal fence where we could step through it. And Afghans were either sitting or in the canal and trying to show documents to get up there. They had come in. They had walked through the canal. The canal went through the walls. The gate was not really a gate. It was kind of a mostly open area. If the Marines weren't there, then there was nothing really to stop these people from coming all the way in.

That was Abbey Gate and why it was so exposed and so dangerous. When I was standing there that was the most vulnerable I had ever felt in my life. This place was just grossly unsafe and there was no way to make it safe.

When the bombing took place there, I was back in the facility co-located with the Marines. A number of us were there. I didn't hear the explosion, although I think others said they did. Basically, they just hit the alarm, duck and cover, and ordered everybody to suit up in body armor, helmets and be ready to move if we needed to. Everybody suited up and we listened and waited.

Then they had some information that turned out not to be correct that following the bombing—we knew there had been a bombing—some fighters may have breached the area and entered the airport, which was a typical Taliban tactic to hit it first with bombings and then come in afterwards with fighters. But I think that turned out not to be true.

Q: The Marines were there and were there State Department consular people there at Abbey Gate present at the time of the explosion and injured?

DeHART: To my knowledge there were not. In the previous, roughly, 24 hours we had pulled them back from Abbey Gate in response to some threat information that we had seen and was growing. We pulled the State officers back. I don't think the Marines had that luxury.

Q: They had to be there. Then what changed after the bomb explosion in terms of your operation? Did our government in Washington decide to pull out earlier or to change things, as the security situation was deteriorating?

DeHART: We no longer tried to pull people in from Abbey Gate. We didn't send our officers back there. The consular officers, after we were hunkered down for some period of time and we realized that the attack was essentially over, they came back to me and said, "We'd like to go back to work," which was very admirable.

We started by sending them back to the terminal and some more interior places before we allowed them to go back out to some of the exterior gates and other points. Essentially, we went back to work.

Q: When you were there, did you know we were going to leave by the 30th or the 31st?

DeHART: Yes. I don't recall when that date became essentially the deadline. I think it was from the very start, as I recall, and that date never shifted. We were always working under that deadline.

Q: In the news here, it seemed that after that, there was more of a rush and more of a sense that we may not be able to get all Americans out. As an observer, it seemed to me

the message shifted from “we’re not to leave anybody behind” to “we’re doing our very best, we’re trying our very best. But if we can’t get people out we’re going to have to get them out after we go.” What did it feel like there?

DeHART: What it felt like in Kabul was the White House was intensely focused on getting every single American out. We even pointed out that not every American wanted to leave. These were difficult choices for the Afghan Americans who were there that might have had extended family members that they needed to care for or had property that they valued. They didn’t want to abandon it. There were various reasons, or maybe they just didn’t want to endure an evacuation or move to the airport the way that we had asked them to. People were making their own decisions and that was perfectly fair.

What it felt like to us was: we really felt we had given every opportunity to every American who wanted to go. At some point, we needed to shift our focus to others, to our embassy employees and qualified SIV holders and get to those large populations who were there.

Q: What were the other groups besides American citizens that were the organized groups trying to get out in those last days?

DeHART: Bearing in mind that there were still targets of opportunity to bring in various Afghans who had worked with us, we organized major movements of our local staff from the embassy, upwards of about 3000 at the end that we got out. We had to do that differently. We didn’t feel that we would have Taliban cooperation to move them through that safe gate in the same way we had done Americans. We felt if we did it that way, we would expose our local employees to a lot of risk.

The good thing about our employees—the advantage that we had— was they had the ability to self-organize in a way that American citizens did not. They knew a lot of each other. We had a couple of our political officers that were organizing this effort and did a fantastic job.

Q: I talked to one of them last week. He described getting the local staff and their families together in a bus at a particular place and bringing them in by section. Somebody was organizing buses.

DeHART: Yes. They identified captains among our LES who would be the leads. Our GSO went and managed to procure a bunch of buses in a financial transaction that would not withstand normalcy, knowing that perhaps the buses would never be returned. The buses went around town and the captains organized people, and people got on the buses. We brought them in a very regulated way, one at a time, through a gate that was controlled by a different government agency, and got them in that way, a very low profile way, once again, avoiding any steps that would attract too much attention and effectively blow the gate.

We moved one bus after another. It was pretty fraught because the buses were rented or purchased, depending on how you looked at it. The drivers were also tired. And some of the drivers called their buddies and said, "We got a bus that's headed to the evacuation." So there were some instances where the bus driver pulled over and some stranger got on. That was a little bit scary, not knowing if that was an ISIS bomber or who that it was.

In the end, it was quite a success. Here again, a relatively small number of our employees chose not to be evacuated. But upwards of 3000 people, including their immediate family members, came out that way.

Q: I talked to one political section employee, who said at one point things were getting uncomfortably tense in the city. And he and his colleague and their families came to the airport by themselves. They didn't wait for the embassy, but they made it out okay.

Somebody told me that we weren't able to bring out the local guard force, the Afghans who would have been guarding the Embassy for some time. Is that right?

DeHART: Yes. There were our Afghan guards who did not qualify, as I recall, for SIVs. Maybe some of them might have been able to qualify. There were efforts by their supervisors to try to organize them and bring them through in buses, and we didn't have the capacity at the gates to take those buses. I think there were some buses that were just driving around out there, hoping for a way in.

Q: That was the way it was? Because they weren't direct employees of the embassy, their ties to us were different.

DeHART: Yes. Their ties were somewhat different. It's not to say that we wouldn't have taken them if we could. We were prioritizing groups of people, which was also difficult, but if they appeared anywhere they were lower down than some of the others that we had to get out.

Q: Anything else about those 10-11 days that you were there?

DeHART: Nine, ten days, yes. Jane Howell, who was the consular chief, was absolutely extraordinary. She was part of our deliberations and the key person, together with her Deputy Jean Akers that would spread the word to provide guidance to the consular officers. The consular officers—the conditions that they worked in for ten-hour stretches out at the gates and the perimeter—were crazy.

Q: Were these people who had come in from other embassies to do this work?

DeHART: Some of them had been there at the embassy and some, maybe most I'm not sure, flew in, volunteered and came. They did extraordinary work.

My political advisor, who had worked for me in Panjshir a decade earlier, I was unable to get him in. He got himself in and his family and kids, coming down the canal into the

Abbey Gate area, before that attack, and basically crawled through this canal and convinced somebody to let him in. And then I was able to move him and his family from there straight to an aircraft. He's somebody well qualified for an SIV.

Q: He had come in from Panjshir or he had been living in Kabul?

DeHART: He was in Kabul at the time. The governor I worked with, a very stubborn guy who claimed he would always go down fighting, became one of the few Afghans who did. He took up arms and went back. He had been living in Kabul for some years after being removed as governor. He went back to Panjshir to fight it out and was killed by the Taliban in a firefight there, shortly after the evacuation ended. I followed the stories of a number of people who I had worked with back in 2009-2010.

I'll tell you one other story. All sorts of crazy things happened. After the Abbey Gate bombing, a U.S. government official came to Jane Howell, our consular chief, with a young girl in his arms, an Afghan girl, all dressed up nice, super cute little girl. She was maybe five, six years old. He said, "This poor girl's mother has just died in the Abbey Gate bombing and we've retrieved her. She's got family in the United States and can you help get her there?"

So our consular folks undertook some pretty major efforts to track down family in the U.S. and found the dad in California, worked through the FBI and traced him, found the number, called him. It was emotional. They thought we're going to have to inform him, good news, we have his daughter here and she's safe and we can get her to him. The bad news is his wife, the kid's mother, is dead at Abbey Gate, so we're making a death notification call here.

They talked to him and explained the situation. And he said, "Her mom is right here. Let me get her." The whole thing was a ruse to move the girl from Afghanistan back to the family members in California. Nobody in the family had died at Abbey Gate.

It was his daughter. The wife was back in California with him. The daughter apparently had been left in the care of relatives in Kabul, for whatever reason, and now they decided they wanted the daughter back.

Q: That's interesting. Sounds like she did deserve to go to the States. It was just the way they did that.

DeHART: She absolutely did. It was clever how it was done. It was not honest.

Q: It is March 21, 2024. I'm continuing my conversation with James DeHart on his assistance to American citizens and to Afghan allies during and after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Good morning, Jim. Thank you for coming back.

You got on the second to last plane out of Kabul and you came back to Washington. Did you have a job to go back to, doing Arctic coordinating?

DeHART: I did. I was eager to get back to my role as the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region. But when I got back to D.C. and started to catch up on my sleep, I immediately got sick, just a bad cold, so I was out for a few days.

Q: I understand Ambassador Wilson actually had Covid. Were there other people that had Covid?

DeHART: I'm sure that there were. I was astounded that there weren't more. I figured most of us might come back with Covid because we were working in such a tight environment for so many days. So I was frankly amazed that all of us didn't have Covid. I didn't. I just had a bad cold from exhaustion, I think. Then as I was emerging from that I got a call and a request to not go back to my Arctic role, but instead to lead the Relocation Task Force.

Q: Were there several task forces formed at that time?

DeHART: Yes. It's hard to describe because when I say task force, it was actually a compilation of seven task forces or working groups, each with a slightly different function. Task Force 1 was the kind of task force you usually think of, the 24/7 operation in the ops center, monitoring events around the clock, but there were six other entities of various shapes and sizes. Then there was an overall task force coordinator, which was a role that I was asked to take on. Dean Thompson had been working in that role, the Assistant Secretary for SCA, but I think he needed to get back to his day job.

Q: Can you explain what you were doing and your team, and how you were doing it.

DeHART: At that point, after we were completely withdrawn from Kabul, there were Afghans spread all over the place, upwards of 70,000 or 75,000 of them perhaps still at lily pads overseas, and U.S. military bases in Germany, Spain and Italy, and still at Doha, and some other places. There was a whole lot of work that needed to take place to manage their movement through those lily pads and into the U.S., and to be received domestically and then moved out for resettlement around the country.

It was the efforts on the lily pads at our U.S. bases. It was the efforts of moving them in between and then at the reception centers, one was by Dulles and another in Philadelphia, if I recall. Then U.S. bases, 11 of them around the United States where DOD temporarily housed all these folks. Then PRM needed to take over from there and work with its voluntary agencies to get them resettled around the U.S. This whole landscape that we

needed to look after people and move them along, it was a tremendous amount of moving pieces that everybody was handling.

Q: What did you do first? I know there was an effort to get planes. Explain what you were working on and what the different teams were.

DeHART: We had different teams. Those seven task forces or different entities were responsible for different facets of this operation. My role was to connect all of those efforts and make sure it was essentially a coherent effort and organized. I tried to have an over-watch over every effort and would convene twice daily, shift meetings for updates from everybody, and we would try to problem-solve.

There were tremendous people working on that task force and there were a number of officers who held the rank of ambassador, senior people, really effective. Were it some other situation, I'd probably be working for them. There was a huge amount of experience and great judgment on the task force to get all of these tasks done.

Q: This was unprecedented, except maybe in Vietnam. We hadn't moved so many people from so many places with so many different immigration statuses, before I'm sure.

DeHART: I think it was unprecedented. I don't have historical knowledge of the Vietnam experience. This was an incredible effort with very large numbers of people that needed to be moved. Then to navigate all the requirements of that, the security screening and the health screening, which became a big issue when there were some initial outbreaks of measles.

Q: Let's start with the bases in Europe; we'll come back to Doha, which was huge. Were there a lot of organizational needs for Germany, Italy, Spain?

DeHART: This was one of the unique features of this whole effort was the State Department's role on all these platforms. I think DOD did a tremendous job in stepping up overseas and with very little notice, if any notice, preparing these U.S. military facilities to receive thousands and thousands of Afghans. And to feed them and to take care of them and to look after their health needs, and to look after their cultural needs, and to configure the physical locations so that they would be suitable for this population that included families, women, children, to situate them appropriately to keep them safe and maintain the morale. It was a huge challenge.

Add to the fact that these were all people who were highly stressed, if not outright traumatized, a lot of disabilities, a fair amount of illness, many without language skills. It was quite an effort to look after these people. DOD did a tremendous job to set up these operations at the bases. And I think the State Department did a tremendous job in providing officers at these locations, who could help lead all the cultural needs, and to pitch in and figure out how to manage this population effectively.

Q: I know that there was a worldwide call for volunteers to go to the bases in the States. In Europe, were they relying on the embassies in those countries?

DeHART: I think they relied heavily on embassies. People came in from all over the place. There were State leads, senior officers in Washington who volunteered and went out to these places to lead the teams. It was an all-hands on deck effort for sure, and people came from all over the place to do this.

Q: I hope you'll bear with me because we're trying to get it recorded for history of what those efforts entailed so we are able to explain to the public, historians, etc. what this entailed. So I hope you'll bear with me on some of these detailed questions.

What was the main work for our people helping Afghans who went to the lily pads?

DeHART: I think that the main work for the State Department personnel, I wasn't there at any of the lily pads, so I think it would be interesting to hear from those folks who were on the ground. I think it was everything involved in looking after these people and keeping them comfortable and providing culturally appropriate solutions to their needs.

Just thinking of food services and what they're going to eat, was it going to be MREs or could something better be done. I think there were quite a number of State officers who had experience with Afghanistan and Afghans who went and were able to interact, based on that experience, which was helpful. This was a highly human challenge as opposed to a technical bureaucratic challenge.

At the U.S. military bases, all across the U.S. from New Mexico to everywhere, I think that the State officers that went to those locations in a way were the really forgotten heroes of this whole effort. I think, from my perspective on the task force, people gave less thought to those folks and what they were doing. There were so many volunteers from across the State Department that went out to these U.S. military bases and stayed on the bases, and looked after the Afghans that finally arrived there after this incredible journey, this incredible evacuation. By the time they would get there, absolutely exhausted and frazzled.

There was so much that needed to be done. Although DHS was called upon to support that population, I don't think that DHS was well equipped and the officers with law enforcement expertise, their background wasn't really suitable for the task.

The State Department officers who came in didn't join the Foreign Service thinking that this was the kind of work that they were going to be doing, which was to go out and buy diapers for people, other sanitary needs. Or just figure out if they could string some clothesline and sheets they could create some better spaces and give women and families the privacy that they needed. Or that they would have to deal with some case of domestic violence—or a child who is at risk in some way—with no legal authorities to do that. Just a practical need and they would have to problem-solve on the spot and essentially act as social workers for this vulnerable population.

That was the kind of work and people poured themselves into doing that. I think it reflected really well on the Foreign Service in the sense that Foreign Service officers may not be trained for specific tasks, but if they see a problem and a human need, they're going to want to try to solve it, and they can be creative in how they do that. I think that's the kind of creativity and determination that people showed. And I think especially of those domestic safe havens in the U.S. military bases that required so much creativity.

Q: One of my consular colleagues volunteered to work at one of the domestic bases and she indicated they were instructed not to say what they were doing. I don't know if that was because of privacy concerns, security, some kind of vetting being done or what. Were these volunteers also doing some kind of security checks on these people before they were able to leave the bases?

DeHART: There was vetting that took place on the lily pads and the DHS vetting that may have been taking place on other facilities. I'm not sure. That certainly could be the case. As the task force coordinator, I wasn't aware of any instructions to officers to zip it or be prohibitive of what they were doing. They weren't necessarily broadcasting their great work to the world. They were doing their jobs.

One of our roles on the task force was one of constant recruitment. There were a lot of Foreign Services officers and civil service officers who were fanned out across the U.S. at these bases and at lily pads overseas, and at the reception centers, the Dulles Reception Center, a lot of people. These folks all had regular jobs. Their home offices didn't necessarily want to lose them for too long a period of time or they didn't necessarily want to be gone from their families for a month or two months, or more than that.

There was a lot of need and we were constantly going out and shaking the tree for more volunteers to make sure that we could meet every need. That was something that we were pushing from the task force.

Q: What were the reasons that people were at the bases? Was it in order to make sure that their immigration status was all in order?

DeHART: There were a variety of reasons. Somewhere along the line, they had to receive some security vetting and to make sure they had to receive health checks and receive vaccinations, immunizations. These were checked as they progressed.

Then they had to be matched to a particular location where they could be resettled. In some cases they had to be unified with separated family members who had a lot of unaccompanied children that needed to be reconnected. I think the assurance process managed by PRM to prepare for their arrival in a community that would make sense for them and to ensure that the support was going to be there when they arrived was also an important element. It was a whole variety of steps and requirements that had to be met before they could pop out on the other end in a small town in Colorado.

Q: Did you work on the problem of what happened in Doha with a lot of people coming in, but not being able to go to the United States immediately?

DeHART: Yes. From the task force, we were in constant contact with our different posts, including in Doha, about what they were dealing with there.

I should add that it wasn't just the official U.S. lily pads that we were concerned with. During the evacuation itself, there were a lot of other evacuation flights in addition to the U.S. military flights. Some of these were organized by our NATO allies, and they were official for them. Others were purely private efforts and they flew all over the place. They got out of Kabul and they flew all over the place.

Some of them sought our help with permissions to land in this or that country, and in some instances, we gave that assistance depending on the group, what we thought of the population that was being moved. And in some cases we didn't and they were on their own. So they just landed all over the place. They landed in Uganda. Some traveled to Mexico, Macedonia and Albania, different points in Europe.

These various flights that were not U.S. military flights made it to all sorts of places. There were a lot of flights to the United Arab Emirates that were not officially sanctioned by us that continued to take place after the evacuation itself.

You also had, in addition to those, in our pipeline as we called it, the U.S. pipeline, in addition to those Afghans. You had many thousands of Afghans spread all over the world in different countries that had arrived there in some fashion, who were not in our pipeline, and who were not on a path toward resettlement in the United States.

Our embassies in these countries had a lot of questions about those people and what we were supposed to be doing with them. A lot of them touched down there and the host government may have been under the impression that we supported their being there and that we would take responsibility for these people when that wasn't necessarily the case.

There was a lot of diplomacy that needed to be done with those host governments and with the status of the Afghans who arrived there. And there were a lot of questions for us to answer for our hosts in those countries. For example, were some of those people qualified to come to the U.S. and were some not qualified, and did we sort through that and where did we set the bar? That was a very big set of issues that we were working on from the task force.

Q: People talk about the prioritization, did you end up with some kind of policy that you were able to explain to the embassies what we could do and couldn't do for different groups?

DeHART: We did. We gave them guidance on who met the qualifications at that time. Then there was also a question of who would do the screening and the vetting. And who would make those determinations and examine each individual and come to a finding

about whether they met those qualifications. That was a resource issue. Could DHS get the personnel deployed at these locations to make these determinations.

Q: How long were you at the task force?

DeHART: Only about one month. I was asked to be on the task force long enough to transition away from a task force into a more enduring kind of operation.

Q: That became CARE?

DeHART: Yes. I ran the task force until Ambassador Beth Jones came on board and then handed it off to her. Then she took over essentially what was then morphing into a different kind of operation.

Q: During this month, a lot of issues we talked about are things that continued for a long time after your time there, basically getting this all organized and supporting the people who had a lot of questions for folks at the bases was a big part of what you did.

DeHART: Yes. And there was a fair amount of frustration, I think, among some of our ambassadors and DCMs and dislocations because we couldn't help them immediately. They had governments that wanted to know when we were going to scoop up all these people and take them to the United States. We weren't able to do that and we weren't going to do that any time soon. To this day, there are still Afghans that the CARE operation is working to address in a lot of these locations that have been there from that time.

Q: Did those governments offer asylum or offer immigration to them and end up with people that really didn't want to stay there?

DeHART: I think every government looked at it differently and the situation was different in every location. Some were willing to keep them. I think some governments welcomed the opportunity to provide asylum. Some may have been perfectly fine with having more workers and labor in whatever sector. Others just wanted them out. Circumstances were different in every place.

Q: Were you involved in what happened after there were private groups that flew Afghans out of the airport at Mazar-i-Sharif? I think there were some U.S. companies and others that tried to take people out on charter flights, but didn't have the same control over the manifests of who was on the flights. Were you involved with that?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: Could you tell us that story?

DeHART: Yes. As a little background, there were a number of private organizations or groups that wanted to assist in the effort. Quite a few of them were led by veterans or in

some cases active duty military who wanted to help and to get deserving Afghans out of Afghanistan, including in Mazar. I think there were a lot of well-intentioned Americans who wanted to help.

The problem was that it was very difficult to maintain integrity of the operation on the ground wherever it was, whether Kabul or Mazar-i-Sharif, which became a focus of the effort. So they had to put a lot of trust in local actors on the ground. They would organize flights and they would have some actor that they trusted to round up the right Afghans or American citizens. Usually the actors claimed they had at least one American citizen family because that was the key to generating support, then getting people onto flights.

I think what we saw was that if people were desperate and there was quite a lot of money to be made, I'm sure, on the ground, there were a lot of flights organized that didn't have Afghans that met our requirements and that didn't have American citizens, if that was the claim. Or there might have been one American citizen and then 250 people that really didn't belong on that flight. We had a lot of those flights going and that was very frustrating.

Q: Where did they go? Did they go to a particular place or did they go all over?

DeHART: As I recall, some flew to Doha. There were a number of them that flew to the United Arab Emirates, mainly to the Gulf. I tried to make the argument that we needed to shut those down when I was in the task force because I felt there wasn't enough integrity in the manifests. We were creating a future problem where we were increasing the population of Afghans in Gulf countries that would not qualify for resettlement to the U.S., but would be stuck in the Gulf.

Q: What does it mean to shut them down? To say they were not authorized?

DeHART: Yes. To inform the government of UAE or Qatar that this or that flight was not one that had our support. I think we, I'm talking of the U.S. government at large, were trying to be generous and also supportive of the efforts, particularly the veterans groups who were very well intentioned. Not everybody was well intentioned, but I think for the most part people were. There were a few charlatans out there, too.

Q: What about Afghan government officials, did they have an organized way to leave?

DeHART: For us, the evacuation was never about removing Afghan government officials. It was never part of our focus. I would say they were largely on their own. Same with the period after the evacuation and as we continued the relocation effort. They were never part of our focus then either. There were a number of them that had created their own Plan B's with resources in Dubai or Europe, or wherever. They were on their own to figure out what to do.

Q: Some of our allies that were running PRTs or other efforts had their own Afghan interpreters and people who had been connected to their governments. Did they take on a similar role that we did?

DeHART: Yes. Throughout the evacuation the ten days that I was there, all the way until the present day, this has been a coalition effort with a lot of collaboration among our close allies, starting with the lily pads that our key allies offered the U.S. military bases in Europe and in the Gulf. That collaboration is there.

I'm in Canada now. The Canadians, I think, really played a unique role after my time in taking a lot of the Afghans who had gotten stuck particularly in the United Arab Emirates. I think we had a lot of appreciation for the role played by Canada in drawing down that population and giving these people safe haven. Germany is making a huge contribution now with relocation efforts through Rhine Ordnance Barracks. This has been a solid effort with our close allies from the very beginning.

Q: After a month, what happened? What did you do next?

DeHART: Then I finally did return to my day job of being the Arctic Coordinator.

Q: Did you do any more work on Afghan relocation?

DeHART: When I was done being Arctic Coordinator, as I was coming to the end, I was asked to then come back and take on an additional relocation assignment, which was to go out and find some countries that would be willing to serve as platforms for us—basically as stepping stones to the U.S. lily pads, in a sense, specifically for our Afghan special immigrant visa cases relocated out of Afghanistan onto their soil where we could properly interview and process them and then move them to the United States. It was a diplomacy job to go out and convince a country or two that this would be something that they would want to help us with.

Q: These are people that were still in Afghanistan a year later?

DeHART: Yes. Even while CARE was undertaking all of its relocation efforts, extraordinary efforts, and the number of special immigration visa cases that were going through the approval process, including in Washington, more and more of these SIV cases were being approved. A number of those who had basically reached the final stage and were ready for resettlement to the United States, those numbers were increasing in Kabul. That population was growing and we didn't have the bandwidth to get them all out.

So you have all these Afghans who are chief of mission approved. They have basically passed all the serious hurdles and all they need is an interview and a medical check, essentially, to get resettled in the U.S. And they're stacking up in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan because we can't interview them there. That's why we needed a couple more

countries where we could get them so we could do those interviews, do the medical and then move them on to the U.S.

Q: This is starting in 2022, the next summer?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: Was the Taliban-led government being cooperative on that?

DeHART: Yes. Generally, throughout this period, except for a few hiccups, the Taliban have been allowing us to relocate Afghans that meet our qualifications, at least not clamping down.

Q: Were you able to find a couple of countries to do it?

DeHART: Yes. This is where I'll be limited in what I can talk about. I had a long negotiation with a close ally of the U.S and I thought that we had gotten there, but in the end that country wasn't willing to move forward. But now that conversation has renewed, and I think it may happen. A colleague is working on that effort now. I'm no longer involved in that.

Then a second negotiation that we had with Germany did come to a positive outcome, and Germany agreed to allow us to use Rhine Ordnance Barracks to house a population of Afghans and to process them. And that just opened late last year, last fall, and it's operating effectively. There are Afghans there that are getting processed and they're moving for a resettlement to the U.S.

Q: Can you comment on the extent of danger faced by this population of people— eligible for special immigrant visas because of their ties to the United States who have actually been in Afghanistan from summer of 2021 to late last year, 2023?

DeHART: These are all Afghans who worked for us, for the U.S. military or for the State Department, or another U.S. government agency who are seen as closely tied to us, so they're vulnerable and subject to reprisals from the Taliban. And we've seen examples of those reprisals and threats to them. Yes, they are at risk and they're qualified under the law for resettlement into the United States, so we want to follow through with that.

I should probably stop there with Germany because I'm sure there's an approved set of talking points with that effort. I'm not privy to it anymore. I just would say that I was happy with the talks with Germany. When I talked to them about their willingness to problem-solve and to find solutions, and to work with us, it was just great testimony to the relationship that we have with Germany.

Q: I want to go back to the task force. Did you do any work on additional American citizens when you got back to Washington?

DeHART: As I recall, there were a few that popped up here and there. There were a relatively small number of cases that we supported in crossing the border, for example, to Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as well. We're talking about onesies and twosies here.

Obviously whenever we learned of an American citizen who wanted to depart Afghanistan, we did everything possible to support that. Many of these folks may have been people who returned to Afghanistan after the evacuation for whatever reason, and then decided they needed help getting out, but we supported that. It wasn't a large number of people. We succeeded during the evacuation, I felt, getting every American citizen out that we knew of that wanted to leave.

Q: Were you physically situated in the Office of Consular Affairs when you were doing this negotiating with allies job?

DeHART: Yes I was.

Q: And did you have any other responsibilities in CA during that period?

DeHART: No. That was actually the nice thing about the job. I never had an assignment before that was singularly focused on one task. It was such a great collaboration with Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter and the entire front office team. I just felt supported in what I needed to do. Rena gave me so much support and autonomy in pursuing it. I didn't have to go to staff meetings. I didn't have to do a lot of the side work involved in most jobs. I didn't supervise anybody. I didn't write any EERs (employee evaluations). I had one thing I needed to do that I could focus on, for about a year. That was good.

Q: Then you went on to be consul general in Vancouver?

DeHART: Yes.

Q: Were there any other issues or stories that you wanted to mention? I think there was a group of judges that ended up in Albania.

DeHART: Quite possibly. There were a lot of people who wound up in Albania. The government of Albania was quite phenomenal in their willingness to host Afghans. Every country's situation was so different. They welcomed the Afghans with open arms and they did not want to put them behind a fence. The Albanians made it clear to us that, if they're going to be there, they wanted them to live in dignity and freedom.

The Afghans were put up in beachside hotels and they were given free rein to walk around and move around, complete freedom, no restrictions. Some of them found jobs in manufacturing, and would go to work, and make some money for their families. The government of Albania deserves a huge amount of credit for its flexibility and willingness to be a safe haven and continue to work with us on Afghan relocation, as they continue to do today. In addition to Germany, they're another key player and key ally and partner in this effort.

Q: I know Doha was a big issue. Was there anything that came up during your time, at the Doha lily pad?

DeHART: CAS (Camp As Saylilah) in Qatar is a lynchpin of this effort, and the government of Qatar has been accommodating and supportive of that platform. That platform has been absolutely essential to moving the number of Afghans that have been moved since the evacuation. Super important. Yes, certainly that was a focus when I was on the task force. When I was doing the SIV diplomacy for this last year, CAS was under the leadership of the CARE office. I was hands off there and I never went back to look at the place because my efforts were elsewhere.

What I would also offer is we—the U.S. government—have gotten a fair amount of criticism for the Afghans that have not been relocated, who are still in Afghanistan, and our inability to get everybody out. And that's true. There are people there that we need to get out. But I think also the criticism overlooks this extraordinary effort that's going on every day, and all the Afghans that we have gotten out of there.

Beth Jones came in and then set up that new operation, CARE, and it's continued to this day under Mara Tekach's leadership. That is a lot of extraordinary work that's been done. Many thousands of Afghans have moved safely through the system and with all the scrutiny from U.S. government agencies that that effort requires. It's a huge operation and the U.S. government has put a lot of resources into it, and a lot of creative diplomacy to make it work.

Q: And it really has been on the shoulders of the State Department.

DeHART: Yes. I think increasingly so, as more responsibility has shifted over from DOD, including CAS in Qatar. DOD is still playing a tremendously important role including in Germany. I think some recognition of that effort is also due.

Consular Affairs Bureau has pulled out all the stops to interview and process as many qualified Afghan SIV cases as they possibly can. Consular Affairs can't really process them until they're sitting in front of a consular officer. There's a team effort to make that happen, but CA is processing record levels now of Afghan SIV cases and the numbers are increasing and increasing. It's an extraordinary effort overall.

Q: I know a lot of people feel very proud of their contribution. Before we end the interview, as we often do, I did want to give you the opportunity to give your own reflections on anything involving our U.S. involvement in Afghanistan over the 20 years, the time you were there during the withdrawal of the troops, the decisions, the evacuation. Anything else you might want to comment on.

DeHART: I'll come back to your earlier question. I think, first of all, as a government we have to figure out how to do better at something that we didn't really understand how to

do as well as we could, which is to work in a conflict zone like Afghanistan, and to be able to operate there in a way that we could meet our objectives.

I think over the 20 years, the theory that we could work with a government to extend services to the Afghan people and that would lead to more support for the government and greater stability, there was never much data to support that theory. And in the end, I would say it didn't turn out to be true.

The other problem was that the nature of our footprint there, the problem, we threw way too much money into Afghanistan. And I think the level of money that we introduced into that economy was part of the problem, and you can't throw that much money in there. I don't mean the direct assistance dollars, but also all the money that's attached to the logistics, the contracting involved in supporting tens of thousands of troops and everything else. We flooded the zone with cash and that leads to all sorts of secondary effects.

As Ambassador John Bass used to point out, Afghanistan was at the lowest, they were at the tail end of all the social human indexes. You're not going to move a country that's at the bottom of those indexes, halfway up the indexes, in the course of a generation. It's not going to happen. So there was a mismatch with our timeline.

I felt for a long time that we had to get out of Afghanistan. I felt that in the short term our presence was stabilizing, but in the long term our presence would always be destabilizing because there would always be some Afghans who would want to throw out the infidels as long as we were there. So I felt we had to leave. We just had to figure out the best way to do it.

When I was the Afghanistan office director, I thought we could have put a heavier focus on supporting elections and bolstering the Afghan state to give the Afghans something more legitimate to try to defend. I think most of our energy went into the peace process. We could have rebalanced that a little bit.

But it was never going to end well. I can't offer "if only we had done this it would have come out okay" because I don't think it was going to, regardless of what we did, probably.

Q: So you're not in the camp of 'we left soldiers in Korea all these years, why couldn't we leave any in Afghanistan,' because there was too much hostility toward our presence?

DeHART: Yes. I think the circumstances are totally different. I don't think that would have worked in Afghanistan. I think we had to go. I think unfortunately under the last administration the arrangement that Ambassador Khalilzad negotiated gave too much to the Taliban and I felt that if we were going to leave, we should just leave, and we shouldn't do it on the basis of that not very good agreement that was reached with the Taliban. I think that it was too demoralizing. It would have been better off if we just

departed with no agreement, just a tacit understanding with the Taliban that they were not going to shoot at us on the way out.

But when we did go under the current administration we went in a hurry and there was an eagerness to stick to our deadlines and to go. In retrospect, I agree with the decision to leave but I think that we could have slowed it down and taken some additional steps, and that the Taliban would have had to accept that as long as they saw us moving out. That's my view.

Q: Thank you.

End of interview