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BAXTER HUNT

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It is August 15, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman and today I'm interviewing Baxter Hunt for our Afghanistan Project. Baxter, welcome.

HUNT: Thank you. Great to join you.

Career in the Foreign Service

Q: Could you start out with an overview of your career up to the time you started working on Afghanistan?

HUNT: I have been with the State Department since getting out of grad school. I came into State as a presidential management intern, back in the late 1980s. I was on the civil service side for three years and started in the Foreign Service in 1990. My first assignment was in Warsaw, Poland, second assignment in Durban, South Africa then spent a number of years in Washington. I wound up going to Ottawa, Canada, in the early 2000s, and then back in Washington again.

Then I wound up going to Kabul in 2010 serving for a year in the INL [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement] team in Kabul. I was working on the rule of law, justice, and corrections programs in INL. And back to Washington for two years after that and then decided to go back to Kabul to serve as INL Director in 2013-2014.

Q: We'll come back and discuss those two tours.

HUNT: Subsequent to that back in D.C., I spent a year working in PRM [Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration] where I was the Director of the office that covered our assistance programs in Central Asia as well as a few other parts of the world, then I served in the Executive Secretariat as Deputy Executive Secretary. After that I went to Santiago, Chile as Deputy Chief of Mission and served there as DCM and Chargé for 18 months apiece.

I came back to Washington in 2020, and was working at the Foreign Service Institute as an Associate Dean there at the time of the pullout from Kabul and the evacuation of Afghans. It was at that time that PRM reached out to me and asked me to head up the State Department contingent at one of the military bases in the United States. This was at a U.S. Army National Guard training center called Fort Pickett (since renamed Ft. Barfoot) in southern Virginia. I spent about six weeks there from late August to early October of 2021.

Q: And today?

HUNT: Today, I'm up in Toronto, Canada serving as Consul General here and happy to have a chance to reflect on the Afghanistan experience.

Postings in Kabul 2010-2011 and 2013-2014

Q: Let's start with your INL work in those two different tours. What I'd like to get a feel for is the kind of things you did, the kinds of projects that involved having Afghans working for you, and what was going on in the country and in the embassy.

HUNT: It was a large assistance program that we had through INL. We had a large team. I'd say, including the direct hires, the contractors and the local staff, we had about 175 employees with INL—a very large team—working on assistance programs around the country. We had a few staff members at the PRTs [provincial reconstruction teams], as well as in Kabul.

The work that I did my first year there was specifically on building up the capacity of the Afghan government to have greater rule of law, in particular working on the corrections facilities around the country. We had people who had been corrections officers in the United States who came over and they were subject matter experts on how to run prisons to make sure that they were secure and also humane. There was a lot of work to do.

Q: That was around the country?

HUNT: Yes, around the country. We had an opportunity to visit quite a few places around Afghanistan and some very spartan conditions as you can imagine in the prisons there. We were able to put some money into making those facilities better, but it was certainly a challenge.

Q: Were these prisons that had a lot of Taliban?

HUNT: Yes. There were Taliban detainees, so it was really important that they be secure.

Q: Were these people working at the prisons considered people who would be eligible for SIVs [Special Immigrant Visas] later?

HUNT: I don't know that any of the people working at the prisons would have been eligible for SIVs. I think the SIVs didn't extend as far as those people who were Afghan corrections employees.

The other thing I was going to mention, and this was something that I found especially rewarding, was we did a lot of work on trying to support women in the justice sector. The hiring and utilization of females in the justice sector in part because they could deal so much more effectively with female inmates or any kind of situation involving women.

We did that, and also Congress had specifically appropriated part of the INL funding in Afghanistan to support women shelters around the country. We were proud to be able to provide funding to those shelters. It was mostly in the northern half of the country because it was too difficult to do that in the south. There were about thirty women shelters spread around Afghanistan that INL helped fund.

Q: These were grantees.

HUNT: Yes, correct. A little outside of INL's normal scope of work, but in a place like Afghanistan—where frankly there was a lot of domestic abuse going on that wasn't necessarily addressed by the government—it was great to have these shelters that were safe places for women.

Q: Were you also supporting the judicial system?

HUNT: Yes, absolutely. There was a lot of pressure inside Afghanistan not to go after people in the drug trafficking business. We worked to provide information to our Afghan government partners and create what we called vetted units, people who were being polygraphed to try to make sure that they were trustworthy.

We were doing everything we could to try to build up the capacity of the ministry of counter narcotics, and the rest of the justice system, to try to fight drug trafficking. We tried every angle we could, but one of the areas that we never got a great handle on was trying to bring down the amount of poppy production.

Q: And was this in your 2010-2011 tour?

HUNT: No, this was the second tour in 2013-2014. I wasn't dealing so much on the counter narcotic side during the first tour.

Q: You got to travel around.

HUNT: I got to travel around. My first tour was during the surge when there were close to 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. There was a lot more security and a lot more support for movements around the country, so I was able to get to a lot of different cities during that first year.

My second tour, 2013 to 2014, the drawdown was already underway. There was less security around the country and fewer PRTs operating. We were more restricted in terms of our ability to move around.

Q: This is because there was less protection?

HUNT: Less protection and also more security incidents taking place. We always had to work very closely with RSO on planning our movements, making sure that they were comfortable with what we were planning to do. But there was less capacity to move around by my second year there.

Q: Who was the ambassador your second year?

HUNT: Jim Cunningham was in the role my second year there. My first year there, it was Karl Eikenberry.

Q: Under Eikenberry, I talked to Tony Wayne and Frank Ricciardone.

HUNT: I overlapped with Tony Wayne.

Q: Was Tony Wayne overseeing assistance that year?

HUNT: Tony Wayne was in the overall deputy role to Eikenberry. We had a team of ambassadors.

Q: That “team of ambassadors” approach started with Ambassador Eikenberry’s arrival.

HUNT: Hans Klemm was the Ambassador in charge of our range of assistance programs during my first year in Kabul and Ken Yamashita was in that role my second year in Afghanistan.

Q: Obviously, you found it rewarding enough the first time to go back a second time. That was a big job that you went back to. How did you feel about what was going on in Afghanistan and what we were accomplishing?

HUNT: A lot of what we were trying to do was build up the Afghan capacity. It's a country that I think has never had a strong central government. A very tribal country. We were trying to create a stronger central government that had more effective governance around the country that was able to deliver resources to the people in a very impoverished country. It was very, very ambitious.

I think that we made progress in certain ways. I think that we created the space, certainly in Kabul and in some of the other urban areas, for people to return to a somewhat normal life, to get infrastructure in place, to have more rule of law, to have government services being provided. I think we made some real progress in those ways.

But what happened in the end with the collapse of the government in 2021 reflects that it was not a fundamentally strong central government. It wasn't in a position to succeed with our withdrawal from the country. It was very sad to see.

Q: In July and August 2021, you were at the Foreign Service Institute. What were you doing there?

HUNT: Yes. I was Associate Dean at the School of Professional Area Studies.

Work with the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration Affairs

Q: Before we go on to your work for the Population, Refugees, and Migration Affairs (PRM) bureau at Fort Pickett, can you tell us about what the PRM Bureau is and the kinds of programs that they run worldwide?

HUNT: Population, Refugees, and Migration Affairs. It is the bureau that works with our implementing partners to assist refugees globally, assists displaced persons within countries, and also assists people who are coming to the United States as refugees. It coordinates with resettlement agencies here in the United States, as well.

Q: We call the implementing partners resettlement agencies, but they are not government agencies. They are usually not-for-profit organizations that get funded to help with resettlement. This has been going on since Vietnam, I believe.

HUNT: Yes, right.

Q: During your previous tour of duty in PRM overseeing programs in a different part of the world, what do you think you took away from that tour, or had you worked on PRM projects overseas before?

HUNT: No. That was my one time working in PRM. I only spent one year there, but it is a bureau that I greatly admire. A largely civil service staff, many of whom have worked in that bureau for a long time, who are really committed to the cause of assisting refugees and displaced persons. And I think the bureau works very well with our implementing partners around the world.

I was able to do a little travel during my year in that job. I went down to Colombia where there have been lots of displaced persons over recent decades from the conflicts there. I was able to go to Turkey where a lot of assistance was going to refugees from Syria.

PRM assists some of the most vulnerable people in the world. I think a lot of people probably aren't aware of it outside of the State Department and don't fully appreciate what they do. But Congress appreciates what it does and it's one of the bureaus that is usually well funded.

Q: When the U.S. troop withdrawal was a certainty and Kabul fell to the Taliban, we created a situation of refugees that was different from the usual.

HUNT: Yes.

Q: Can you describe what the usual process is for helping a large group of refugees?

HUNT: In the case of Afghanistan, we hadn't seen a sudden arrival of refugees on that scale since Vietnam. A bit of similarity in terms of a country where we had been in a conflict and where we felt a responsibility to assist people who had been our partners there. But in terms of trying to support that volume of people coming out in a very short period of time, it was challenging.

Normally, the refugee process is one that has a longer lead time with people coming from third countries. They have gotten out of a country that they were fleeing. They are seeking to come to the United States and we have more time to do the processing and prepare for receiving them in the United States.

Q: I think your time at PRM was in 2014-2015?

HUNT: Yes, it was.

Serving as the State Department lead at Fort Pickett, August - October 2021

Q: I'd like to move on to your time at Fort Pickett. Could you tell me about your experience?

HUNT: It was one of the most intense experiences of my career, one of the most unusual experiences of my career. I would say there was also a little sense of déjà vu when, like in Kabul, there was a big U.S. military presence at the base with a relatively small number of civilians trying to do a lot of things, and trying to bring our different perspectives to bear on supporting that operation.

It was a little like going back to Kabul, to include the fact that we had ultimately about a hundred local employed staff members from Embassy Kabul who did go to Fort Pickett along with their families. Some of those people I knew. Some of them I had worked with.

It was a rewarding experience. You felt so bad for the Afghans. They were fortunate to get out, but they had a traumatic experience having to leave on no notice, having to leave friends and family behind in Afghanistan. That was very much weighing on them. But we were glad to be able to help them out and get them started here in the United States.

On August 27 I got a call from PRM asking me if I could serve as their lead at Fort Pickett, which was just then gearing up. PRM wanted me to go the next day, so I quickly packed up and got on the road the next morning. On August 28 I arrived and met with U.S. Army personnel who had arrived that same week.

Later that evening we received the first busload of evacuees, about 400 Afghans who were bused down from Dulles Airport, and we started providing support for them. It was a whirlwind, especially those first few days. By August 31, just three days later, we were up to 3,700 guests. So, it ramped up very quickly.

Ft. Pickett used to be an active-duty Army base decades ago, but it had pretty spartan facilities. Army National Guard personnel would come through and they'd spend a short time there while training. Ft. Pickett had large open barracks that we used to house most of our guests.

The first thing we had to deal with was that in Afghan culture you're not going to have men and women from different families in the same barrack. That was one example of the sort of thing that I was advising our military colleagues on. You're going to have to house women and children in some barracks, men in other barracks, otherwise things are going to go bad very quickly. So, we did that. We did have some smaller housing units for families who could stay together, but mostly it was these large barracks.

We had to ensure the setup of basic amenities, from dining facilities to recreation areas. It was a scramble to try to provide a safe, comfortable - as comfortable as you could make it - living situation for our Afghan guests. And there were lots and lots of kids. About a third of all of the guests that we took in there were children.

Our Afghan guests ran the gamut from people who had worked at the Embassy, who had good English and were more cosmopolitan, to some of the Afghans who spoke little or no English, who came from more rural areas and who had a harder time adjusting.

Q: Did they need clothes?

HUNT: Yes they did. One of the unfortunate things about the evacuation was a lot of people were separated from whatever bags that they had managed to bring to the airport. So, there was an extended period of time when they were separated from their luggage. Eventually, most of them did get their luggage.

One of the first things we worked on was facilitating clothing donations to the evacuees, and we had good support from some of the NGOs [non-governmental organizations] to make that happen, particularly Team Rubicon. This was a group of military veterans who solicit, collect, and distribute supplies to people who are going through domestic or international emergencies. They set up shop in Blackstone, Virginia. This was especially important because DOD [the Department of Defense] couldn't accept charitable donations. Team Rubicon filled that void. They collected lots of clothing and then they assisted with distributing this on the base. That was really helpful.

When people arrived on the base, again, they were bused down from Dulles Airport and were checked in by our military colleagues. They were given welcome kits that included snacks, hygiene kits, and information about the base. They went through their initial

medical screening. This included Covid vaccinations because this was happening when the pandemic was still in full swing.

Q: You were in charge of finding the vaccines?

HUNT: We had a U.S. Navy medical detachment that was assigned to Fort Pickett and they were doing the preliminary vaccinations. In addition to Covid, there was MMR (measles, mumps, rubella). That was something that had to happen early on when people arrived at the base. We were quite focused on avoiding outbreaks of Covid, and there was one case of an Afghan guest who had measles. We had designated quarantine areas on the base.

The International Rescue Committee [IRC] was one of our most important NGO partners there. Our military colleagues did the initial intake and some of the medical processing, and the IRC started the casework necessary for individual Afghans to be processed. Then the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service [USCIS] was doing biometrics for everybody who came onto the base and also doing their applications for employment authorization, so that they could work once they left the base.

Q: Was there an issue of many of them wanting to go to the Washington, D.C. area or to Sacramento?

HUNT: Yes. A message we constantly delivered to the Afghans was that the federal benefits that they were eligible to receive were a fixed package and that amount did not go up because you're going to a higher cost area. So, they were going to have more challenges getting housing and their money was going to run out more quickly if they were going to northern Virginia or Sacramento. But, that was where the big Afghan communities were and I think a lot of them still went to those areas.

Q: The IRC was one of the nine resettlement agencies. They were playing this role at the base helping decide where the Afghans would go?

HUNT: Correct, yes. The other partner at the end of the line was the International Organization of Migration [IOM], which transported the Afghans from the base on to their final destination. IOM and the NGOs were used to longer lead times for refugees being resettled in the U.S., so that communities could assess whether they were in a position to support them. In this case, we were looking to have people make those decisions in a matter of weeks, not months. That was a challenge as well.

Our U.S. military colleagues did a fantastic job, but this was not their day job. They were eager to get people off of the bases and to complete the mission. The last Afghan guests at Fort Pickett departed in February 2022, and I think that most of the operations at U.S. bases had ended by then. It was pretty remarkable that we were able to get that many people through the bases in a few months' time given all the things that needed to happen.

Q: You mentioned that as of August 31st, 3,700 had arrived. But there was a larger number of people that came through, right?

HUNT: Yes. By the end of my time there, we were up to about 6,000 people. We very quickly occupied all the beds on base, which was about 5,800. We knew that we would need to take in more people. So the solution was that FEMA trailers that were ordinarily used in case of natural disasters in the U.S. were transported to Fort Pickett and a whole new living space was constructed by Kellogg, Brown and Root [KBR] contractors. They called it Pickett Village. This was a space that could accommodate several thousand more people.

In the end, they didn't reach that capacity. I think it probably never got above 7,000 total people on the base at one time because people were starting to filter out as well. But early on we expected Ft. Pickett might need to house 10,000 or 11,000 people at one time.

When I first saw the trailers, I was a little anxious because they were designed to sleep 30 or 40 people. Some of them were double bunked and some of them were triple bunked and space was tight. And I thought, especially when you get into winter that's going to be really tight quarters for people to live in. But in the end, they didn't have to use all the trailers and people were able to spread out more.

Q: Did you have any security issues or violence issues, or discovered people that were perhaps problematic?

HUNT: Security was a concern, but in the end there were relatively few incidents. There was one case of an Afghan guest stealing a vehicle and going for a joy ride. There were a couple of instances of domestic disputes where people had to be detained by the local law enforcement authorities, but it was rare.

There was concern in the local community about security, and we worked with local officials to assure them that the situation was not going to get out of hand and we were monitoring who was coming and going from the base. Blackstone is a town of 3,300 people, so in a matter of three or four days we exceeded the population of the town with our Afghan guests.

The mayor of Blackstone, who was also the publisher of the local newspaper, came onto the base as soon as the first Afghan guests arrived, and was taking photographs. His initial stories about the influx of Afghans were a bit alarmist, but we worked to address his concerns. We took him around the base multiple times. And in the end, he was an ally and came to realize this is a really important mission that we have here. It was not the case that people needed to be nervous about the Afghans who were coming there. And he was actually helpful from that point on in dealing with some of the other officials who came to visit including Members of Congress.

Q: What do you think your biggest challenges were? You had about 170 people working with you. Is that right?

HUNT: Just in our core team, we had nineteen State Department and USAID personnel during the six weeks I was there. I think it probably went up a bit subsequently. But it was really a big interagency effort. About a week after I got there, DHS [Department of Homeland Security] deployed what they called their Federal Field Coordinator. They had one of these for each of the bases. This individual, Chris Cronin, was from ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], and he did a very good job.

Unlike State and USAID, DHS had not had a big presence and role in Afghanistan. So I don't think that there was as much of a sense of urgency in DHS, as in DOD, State and USAID, about the whole mission. But bit by bit they did get more people from different parts of DHS to come to the bases and support the mission.

Like the military, security on the base was top of mind for DHS. They ultimately were able to get military police [MPs] deployed and posted at the different entrances to the base because, again, there was concern that our Afghan guests could come and go without us being able to monitor it. So, it was helpful to have the MPs there.

We couldn't force people to stay on the bases, it was not a prison. But one of the conditions of their [humanitarian] parole for coming into the U.S. was that at a minimum they needed to go through all the medical screening. A few people did leave the base and we recorded their information, and we were telling them you have to make sure that you check in with USCIS wherever you happen to be. We were not able to detain people just for the purpose of keeping them on the base, but we strongly encouraged everybody to go through the process there, so that their status in the U.S. was regularized.

The people who did not come in as part of the special immigrant visa [SIV] process didn't necessarily have a path to permanent residency. They were being paroled in, but they didn't have a clear path that the people in the SIV process did. So, we tried to reinforce to everybody, you need to go through all the processing here so that you can get employment authorization, and you need to meet all the medical requirements, so that we can help support you through placement in a community, advising you of federal benefits, and things that are going to help you as you are trying to get started here in the U.S.

Q: Any particular stories or people stand out for you?

HUNT: One of the stories that was interesting was that Fort Pickett is adjacent to the Foreign Affairs Counter Terrorism Training Center [FACT]. As part of FACT training, they do simulations. One day some of our Afghan guests were alarmed to see a truck rolling past the base with an ISIS flag and with guys with lots of heavy guns in the back bed of the truck. Some of our guests thought that they were in danger. They had come from a place where that looked a lot like the Taliban to them. So we had to quickly reach out to the trainers at FACT to let them know to cease and desist on this sort of scenario within sight of the base because we had people who were going to be alarmed if they saw this.

Q: That must have been an 'exciting' moment.

HUNT: That was a strange moment, yes. Another unusual story involved the many children on the base. They discovered that if they pulled a fire alarm that a fire truck would roll into the base with sirens blaring and guys jumping out in their equipment. And it was great fun for them to watch this. We had a little epidemic of kids pulling fire alarms, so at some point our military colleagues disabled the fire alarms. We were trying to stay in the good graces of the town of Blackstone, and they were quickly getting very tired of responding to false alarms.

Q: When you were there, were the people starting to come and go, or were most of the people that had come still there when you left?

HUNT: Relatively few of the Afghans had left by the time I departed. It took a while to get things ramped up in terms of personnel arriving on base to do the processing. And I think there was a three-week time period between Covid vaccinations that we had to get through as well before people were cleared to leave. A lot of start-up processing; we were starting to see some people being resettled off the base by the time I left, but it wasn't a huge number.

Q: Were you setting up any schools or activities for the kids?

HUNT: There was a definite focus on MWR [morale, welfare, recreation] activities and facilities. These were set up adjacent to the living areas, with toys and books and Wi-Fi hot spots. We tried to make sure there were areas where moms and kids had their own space. They could have tea and they could connect with people. The living quarters were cramped and you didn't have space to socialize there.

We started English language classes for kids and adults. Some of the evacuees had little to no English, so they needed to start in on that. We organized soccer games and volleyball games. There was plenty of field space for the kids to run around. We were making some progress in terms of things to keep people busy.

But, people were very anxious to get off the base. We set up an information center with office hours every day. Members of my team were there to answer people's questions, letting them know what the process looked like and what their expectations should be. That was greatly appreciated by the Afghan guests, even if they didn't always get the answers they hoped for.

Q: Did you have a lot of families that were bigger and non-traditional? One difference about the Afghanistan family is their sense of family is different and they get married early.

HUNT: There were quite a few large families, some multi-generational families that were there. Some of them were western and some more traditional. We also set up a makeshift mosque so that people could worship on the base. It was a hard situation for the families given all that they had been through and trying to deal with kids and not having a normal

life. The parents weren't working, they were mostly killing time. People were really anxious to move on.

Q: You stayed for six weeks and went back to your job and somebody else came in.

HUNT: Yes. We had a great collection of people who volunteered and served there. I really enjoyed working with them, and we bonded with our military and DHS colleagues as well. We spent a lot of time with them. We had an interagency cell, so we were working side by side with the DHS folks, with the military folks. It was a good relationship.

Q: Did any of the Afghans stay in touch with you?

HUNT: Not any of the people from Ft. Pickett. I did wind up connecting to some Afghans who settled in the Alexandria-Arlington area. I did a little work with a group that was assisting some people who were resettling there, but they weren't people who I knew from Fort Pickett.

Q: This was an intense time, but it worked out well in terms of meeting the goals?

HUNT: Yes. I should mention that I was very impressed with the NGOs, the people from IRC, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the American Red Cross. They all did really good work and were all super dedicated. Some of them had been to multiple military bases, helping as new bases were set up. They were really committed and I admired the work they were doing. Made you feel good about our partners.

Q: Is there anything else that you wanted to tell us about your experience?

HUNT: Medical care was one of things that we focused on most. We were smack in the middle of the pandemic. A lot of these people who were arriving hadn't been vaccinated yet, so that initial medical screening and vaccination process was really important. The Naval Medical Detachment there did a good job.

The International SOS group that was contracted with was providing day-to-day medical care for our Afghan guests, but they were not set up to deal with medical emergencies. One of the important tasks of my team was doing liaison work with local hospitals. The most pressing cases were people giving birth. We had 12 babies born to Afghan moms during the six-week period that I was there. They were going into rural hospitals that were already maxed out in their intensive care units because of Covid.

That was another stressor with the local community. The hospitals said they already didn't have the space to deal with the Covid cases, and now these Afghans were taking up bed space. So, we would end up doing regular calls with area hospitals and with the Virginia Department of Health giving them the statistics on here's the number of people who are in hospital or have been in hospital, and trying to reassure them that it wasn't going to get out of control.

We had people from my team who would go to the hospital to make sure Afghans got checked and to deal with any complications. For example, sometimes a family member would want to stay with the patient, but the hospital didn't want to have somebody else in the room. There were some cultural challenges. Some of the women didn't want to have male doctors treating them. All kinds of things came up.

International SOS had the challenge of trying to fill prescriptions, such as insulin for diabetics. We worked with an area Walmart and got them to agree to accept prescriptions from International SOS. That way we were able to get medicines for our Afghan guests and avoided more healthcare complications, more people having to go to the hospital. That was a big win during our time there.

Q: Nobody gave you a checklist.

HUNT: No. You just had to deal with things as they came up. We also had a steady stream of visitors to Ft. Pickett, from Congress, the military, State Department and DHS. So another part of my job along with the heads of the other agencies was explaining to them how the operation was going, reassuring them that things weren't spinning out of control here, and giving them a good look at the operation.

Local officials were the most skeptical. We were suddenly putting thousands of people from Afghanistan into a remote, rural location in the United States and it's not surprising that people are going to be nervous and skeptical about the operation.

I think in the end, there was a lot of generosity by the local communities and they made lots of donations. But it was always a work in progress to make sure that there wasn't a backlash against the operation.

Q: Anything else?

HUNT: I think that's about it.

Q: You didn't have a baby born on the base itself?

HUNT: No, we didn't.

Q: I heard a couple of those stories.

HUNT: I'm sure it happened. I wouldn't be surprised if on a flight somewhere as well, but not during my time at Fort Pickett.

Q: The Afghans were anxious and they didn't know what was going to be happening.

HUNT: Yes, exactly.

Q: By and large, was it a group that was appreciative?

HUNT: Absolutely, they were appreciative. They let us know if there were things that they needed or things that they didn't like. When they first got there, the food provided wasn't to their taste. It wasn't what they were used to having and we adjusted it. We had to learn as we went along. It wasn't a situation anybody was anticipating. I think that they were appreciative that they had gotten to a safe place, that they were receiving a lot of support from their U.S. allies and that ultimately they knew that they were going to move on to a more permanent situation.

Regarding our local employed staff from Embassy Kabul, we tried to provide extra attention to them. We did town hall meetings with them. We were able to distribute some debit cards with funds and cell phones to them. We were able to provide some special benefits to our employees, and I think they appreciated that.

Q: I think you said this earlier, but how many were there?

HUNT: About a hundred from Embassy Kabul made it to Fort Pickett. I think they particularly tried to place them at Fort Pickett. I'm sure there were some at other bases as well.

One other anecdote that comes to mind was there had been an earlier operation set up at Fort Lee, closer to Washington, D.C. At Fort Lee, an on-base hotel was commandeered to house the evacuees. So when people got to Fort Pickett, they were in touch with people at Fort Lee, and learned that they were not sleeping in barracks at Fort Lee, that individual families were in individual hotel rooms. So some of our guests at Ft. Pickett asked to be transferred to Ft. Lee, but they couldn't go. Fort Lee was full up.

So there was a little comparison going on about the accommodations at different bases.

Q: I really appreciate you doing this. I know it must have been something moving for you. You had already done two years in Afghanistan.

HUNT: It was. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to help these folks out. It was such a traumatic experience for them. We needed to do whatever we could to smooth their entry into the U.S.

Q: Thank you.

End of interview