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AMBASSADOR THOMAS MILLER

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It is August 13, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman and today I have the pleasure of interviewing Ambassador Tom Miller as part of our Afghanistan Project. Welcome, Ambassador. Can you give us a brief overview of your career in the State Department and after retirement working with NGOs?

Foreign Service career and post-retirement activities with Afghanistan

MILLER: I came in as a career Foreign Service officer in 1976. I had a 29-year career ending with three ambassadorships in Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Ambassador in charge of the Cyprus negotiations. I did a lot of work on the Middle East, including as Director of the Israeli-Palestinian office and the North African office. I was Director of the Counter-Terrorism office. I started out my career, believe it or not, in Southeast Asia, which is what I have my Ph.D. in. But as Henry Kissinger said at that time, he wanted global outlook officers rather than area specialists, so I am definitely one of those.

Afterwards, I ran three large internationally-focused NGOs, non-governmental organizations, one called Plan International, which helps kids in impoverished countries around the world. Then I ran the United Nations Association of the U.S., which has over 140 chapters in this country, promoting the values and work of the U.N. The last organization I ran was called IESC, an NGO focusing on private sector development. For the purposes of this interview, IESC had two large USAID projects in Afghanistan, so I was going to Afghanistan three, four, five times a year between 2010 to 2018.

Q: The International Executive Service Corps (IESC) was designed to bring in retired private sector experts in different fields to help with development work. Is that right?

MILLER: Yes. That was the initial focus. It still does that, but it also runs large to medium USAID, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other funded projects, contracts in the developing world. We have volunteer business executives, integrating into as many projects as possible.

Q: Can you give us a highlight of your work, the organization's work, in Afghanistan?

MILLER: We had two large projects. One was focused on helping the Ministry of Agriculture improve its effectiveness and efficiency. The other one focused on private sector development in Afghanistan. We helped incubate private sector firms and gave advice and loans to private sector companies. Both, I will say, went quite well.

Q: Were they inside or outside of Kabul?

MILLER: They were both focused on Kabul. Teams were in Kabul. We worked throughout the country with both of them.

Engagement after the fall of Kabul

Q: I think we'll move on to the focus for today. Can you tell me where you were in August of 2021, as we started to see the government of Kabul fall? The Taliban started to go into Kabul and the U.S. Embassy moved to the Kabul airport.

MILLER: I, like most Americans, was glued to the TV. Because of my previous experience in Afghanistan, I was very concerned about people there who had worked for us and their families. I was getting increasingly upset and angry. My wife tells me I was yelling at the TV. I didn't throw anything at it, but I was very concerned about how this evacuation, the whole process, was going.

Q: I think offline, you were starting to tell me that as you were trying not to throw things at the TV, you had a phone call.

MILLER: What happened, totally coincidentally, as I was getting more and more upset, I got a message via LinkedIn from one of our former employees. She and her husband had moved to California in 2018.

Q: An Afghan employee?

MILLER: Yes, an Afghan employee. She was the head of human resources for one of our projects. I knew her because she was so outstanding. I kept on giving her awards when I was out there. The message was essentially, "Help! Help! I've got my entire family, all my siblings and their families, and my mother stuck in Afghanistan. I need help in getting them out." I said, "Of course." I was so upset that I couldn't do anything, and I said, "I will do whatever I can to help." And that started a three-year effort, which is still ongoing, to try to get people out.

This was something that, I thought, I'm a former ambassador and people will return my phone calls. I will make a couple of phone calls and that will be it. It will be a short-term project and help a lot of people. Little did I know how little I knew. This started an effort which became extremely complex, extremely expensive, and full of all kinds of unknowns that I never anticipated.

Q: I'm going to let you tell the story.

MILLER: I said I'll help. She gives me the names of all of these people. Many of them were what we call SIVs, people with special immigrant visas or eligible to receive them. These were the people who had associations with the U.S. government and they were our highest priority.

So, there was a great deal of chaos, as I'm sure you've gotten from your other interviews, in the U.S. government at this time. It was my understanding that we had not stood up much of an organization. Many people in the U.S. government say that the entire ability to assist these people was decimated by the previous administration. There weren't the resources or the organization or anything else. I quickly decided that the U.S. government was not going to be the answer to getting all these people out. Making a few phone calls wouldn't be the answer.

Q: This is still in August when the NEO evacuation was underway?.

MILLER: Yes, this is August. We're now getting more into September. I learned a couple of things and had a couple of coincidences. The first thing was that there was a young guy in his mid-thirties whose dad had worked for me at the embassy, whom I happened to run across early on. We were just talking. I'm going to leave his name out of it because he's in the Foreign Service now and he's been a partner throughout. He said, "I've got a bunch of people I want to help, too. Why don't we join forces." I said, "Absolutely, let's do that." He wanted to help a colonel in the Afghan army that he had advised when he was fighting in Afghanistan with the U.S. military and his family.

When you talk about families in Afghanistan, you're really dealing with extended families. The group he wanted to help was fourteen people. The group that I wanted to help was initially forty-two. It grew a little bit. So, we joined forces.

I quickly discovered there is a Catch-22 in the U.S. system. If you are going to come to the United States, the last step in the process is that you have to have an interview at a U.S. embassy. Well, by this point, there was no U.S. embassy in Kabul. So, I came up with the brilliant idea that I would bring them all to Greece. I went to the Greek Prime Minister, whom I know very well, and I asked him for a bunch of visas, and he gave them to me, for people to temporarily reside there. Temporary turned out to be well over a year.

Q: These were family members of the woman who had called you?

MILLER: Correct, really extended family. And also the colonel and his family.

Q: They were all still in Afghanistan? Or had they gone to Pakistan or someplace?

MILLER: No, they were all still in Afghanistan. I got these visas, and it was an unlimited number initially. I asked for a much larger number initially because I was going to do this whole program with a larger NGO, which in return for me getting the visas, they would

pay the expenses, the upkeep of these people while they were in Greece. Well, that didn't work out.

Instead, we found an NGO in Greece that agreed to pay their expenses. So, I figured we need some money to get them overland into Pakistan and then fly them to Greece. We raised a little bit of money. We had a plan. It took a while for them to do a million things. I'm not going to go into details here. We did not start getting them out of Afghanistan until February, March of 2022. It was very difficult to get out but they did get out.

Q: They were trying to get to Pakistan first?

MILLER: To Islamabad, yes.

Q: What were the kinds of problems they ran into?

MILLER: They ran into the Taliban, who didn't want to let people go. I just basically said, "I can't help you until you get to Islamabad. You're going to have to do this on your own." And they did, and I'm sure bribes and everything else were paid. But I wasn't part of that.

When they got to Islamabad, that's where my help started. We had made arrangements with the very small Greek Embassy in Islamabad to issue visas from Greece. When I say small—I mean really small—and their ability to issue visas was limited. But we started the pipeline. And by spring of 2022, we had people starting to come to Thessaloniki. This is where the NGO had its facilities in Greece.

Just as we were getting people into Greece, the war in Ukraine happened. One day this NGO in Greece comes to us and says, "It's a disaster what's happening to our Ukrainian Orthodox brethren." There's a tremendous link in the world between Orthodox Christians. This NGO basically said, "We can't do what we said we would do. We're going to have to charge you because our efforts are going to be toward helping the Ukrainians who are coming to Greece."

All of a sudden, I'm looking at several multiples of six figures in costs, and I have no resources, absolutely none. The resources I had had been spent on flying them to Greece. So, I go to—I'm going to be vague because I don't want to start an online stampede—an organization, a foundation I knew well because I had worked for the founder many years before. And I ask them if they could help. The founder had died a couple of years before. They said, we really would like to, but we can't because he wanted to take this foundation in a different direction.

What I didn't know was they went to the founder's three kids. This guy had made a lot of money and had three kids in their early sixties, late fifties, whom I know pretty well. The middle one calls me, and she says, "Tom, can we help?" This was totally out of the blue. And I said, "Yes. I'm up a creek without a paddle." She said, "How much do you need?" I said, "Give me \$200,000 if you can, and give another \$100,000 to this organization." I

was not a 501(c)(3). I was not a tax-exempt organization. I was nothing. I didn't even have an organization. My partner and I were just doing this on the fly on our own.

What we had done early on was we went to this other 501(c)(3) that does similar stuff. I'm going to leave their name out of it. They were great. We asked, "Can we park our money with you? In other words, people will give money to you, and when we need it you'll give it to us." And they said, sure. I told this woman who made the offer, the children of this guy I had worked for, and I said, "Can you give another \$100,000 to his organization?" So it was \$300,000 - \$100,000 to the organization, \$200,000 to me. Now with this money I've got some running room, and I can start paying the very expensive living costs for these people, having no idea how long it would be or anything else.

Helping the Afghans who made it to Greece

Q: How were they doing? Were they happy to be out of Afghanistan?

MILLER: Yes, they were happy to be out. But Greece was a disorienting experience at first because these were middle class Afghans. These were not the poorest of the poor. These were people who had college degrees, were computer literate. Most of them spoke decent English. Some of them did not. What happened was I found they brought their parents. They brought a bunch of people who were not SIVs, and that's where it got very complicated. I was under the impression until they got to Thessaloniki that they were all SIVs. I didn't ask and they didn't tell until we started trying to process these people. I went to the American Embassy in Athens. I explained the whole situation to the ambassador and his staff. They were absolutely wonderful. I can't say enough good stuff about them.

We started the process of getting these people through. As I said, there were a bunch of glitches. One of the sisters of this woman who had called me left Afghanistan early on a plane to Doha, and she brought her mom. Mom had no status. The sister was an SIV and they were ready to manifest her. She was in Doha for a long time, and that was a difficult situation because mom had all kinds of medical problems. They were ready to manifest the sister to the U.S., but she was going to have to leave mom, and mom had hypertension and diabetes, was grossly overweight, the whole nine yards, and the sister couldn't leave mom.

So, I got involved. I ended up cold calling, talked to a young woman, I never got her name, at the embassy, explained the situation. And lo and behold, what happened was mom was on the plane with her daughter. I don't even know who to thank.

The background, the theme of this story, is a very cumbersome, awkward system with wonderful people in the U.S. government, who understood it was an awkward cumbersome system, but they did their best to make it work. That was one story.

We had another couple of people, a guy who was an SIV who ended up settling in northern Virginia. Most of the people I helped ended up in Sacramento.

Q: Did the people that were SIV applicants, did they have their visas already approved or did you have to go through the process of helping them get them processed?

MILLER: The process took a tremendous amount of time. They didn't have anything. It was many, many steps - security background checks, medical, making sure they were who they were. It was extremely hard. It took a year or more for all these people. Of course, I never expected that. I could write a book about all the things I didn't know and didn't expect.

Q: With the military, especially the people who were SIV holders, because they had worked with the U.S. military, there were a lot of contractors for the military that were hard to reach for documentation. Were the people you were working with, were they related to USAID or the State Department?

MILLER: Yes. A lot of them had worked on USAID or other kinds of projects. To be an SIV, you have to have a direct connection to the U.S. That's something that they check out very carefully.

Let me tell you about another family, a young guy in his early 30s and his wife, and their one-year old son. She was pregnant at the time and had a baby girl in the U.S. They ended up bringing the guy's mom and dad, and a cousin who was in her early twenties; the family had taken her in when her parents were killed in Afghanistan. They brought these three people, and they had absolutely no status.

The SIV status only conveys to direct family members: son, daughter, mother and father, not to the mother and father of this guy. They brought mom, dad and cousin. I didn't know about this until they got to Thessaloniki. This was in March of '22. In December of 2022, the father drops dead of a heart attack in Thessaloniki. Mom is left alone with the cousin. Mom, by the way, is the sister of this other woman who had come over with the young lady from Doha.

I went to the embassy. I said, "Help, help!" They managed to do the right thing. I'm trying to do this in a way that no one gets in trouble. Mom and cousin got to the U.S. on visas, not SIVs. We now are in the process of applying for political asylum for them, and that will probably take years. But we got them here through another vehicle because you couldn't leave them.

I have many stories like this because I thought everyone I was helping had SIVs and it turned out not to be so. And it turned out that the colonel and his family of thirteen, a total of fourteen, the guy who was an Afghan army battalion commander wasn't an SIV. Afghan military are not SIVs. But eventually they were fully approved, and they just arrived in the United States in August 2024.

I've also been making phone calls, sending emails on behalf of other family members. But the pipeline to Greece is pretty much closed, and we ended up with 58 people that we

brought to the United States. They are all now in the U.S. starting new lives. The colonel and his family went to Ohio. Most of my people went to Sacramento, but a few came to northern Virginia.

These are college educated, computer literate people, and they're starting out with jobs at McDonalds, driving Lyft, et cetera. My commitment to help them stopped, and they knew this, when they got here. They're doing the American dream and their kids, like this young guy whose wife was pregnant who had a baby girl here, who is now an American citizen born here, their kids will go to college. This guy actually has gotten a job with an NGO, but he's been driving Lyft since shortly after he arrived in the U.S.

Q: This guy, who was he?

MILLER: This was a guy who worked for one of the projects IESC ran. He came with his wife and toddler son. Then the wife gave birth to a little girl three months after they arrived here. He was the one with the mom, the dad, and the cousin, and the dad died of a heart attack in Greece. Mom and cousin, through the good graces of the American Embassy, made it over here. And we now have a law firm, pro bono work by some immigration lawyers, who have helped me apply for political asylum for mom and cousin.

Q: Did you have any contact over time with the CARE [the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts] office in Washington or the embassy office for Afghanistan in Doha, or AfghanEvac?

MILLER: I had a good deal of contact with the CARE office, and that continues to this day. There's a guy there who is very helpful. I've had a lot of contact with Rena Bitter, Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, and her DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary], Julie Snuff, and they've been extremely helpful. I have had no contact with our embassy in Doha, even though the person who is running it used to work for me, Karen Decker. But, at this stage, I don't need anything.

I've had some contact with the people in the PRM [Population, Refugees, and Migration] bureau because they handle refugees at State. SIVs are handled by Consular Affairs. The P1s and P2s are PRM's responsibility. I've had contact with people who are in a position to help.

Resettling in the United States

Q: When they got to the United States, because of the timeframes and the way they came in, were they on their own with their families and friends, or did they get some kind of social services that refugees would usually get?

MILLER: As SIVs they got some social services for a while. I think they get housing coverage for six months and some other stuff. I can't tell you exactly what it is, but it's something. The reality is everyone helps everyone. The woman who initially contacted

me, who had gotten here in 2018, she's kind of the anchor in Sacramento. She ended up with a great human resources job for the State of California. She has been the mentor and advisor for this group - several of her sisters, one of her brothers, I think four other siblings, and their families.

My wife, Bonnie, and I went out to Sacramento about a year ago just to meet all these people. The only one I knew was the one who had contacted me. And we spent some time out there just meeting and talking to them. They were obviously extremely grateful. They're starting at minimum wage jobs. They will quickly work their way up the ladder. It's the American dream all over again.

I have seen the immigrant story from the ground up, and it's a wonderful story of success in this country. And those who have gotten into the politics of immigration, from my perspective, don't have a clue of how important that is to the economy, to the social fabric of our country.

Q: One thing I can tell you in doing these interviews is that from the beginning, people who were working with the Afghans understood that the definition of family was quite different.

It's heartwarming to hear what you did. I want to give you time to talk about any lessons learned or reflections.

MILLER: I forgot to mention that I also unexpectedly had a Greek friend of mine give me another 100,000 Euros. So, we raised about \$365,000 and almost all of it will be spent on these Afghans. We had no idea how much money it would cost.

One thing we did do is we paid for all food and shelter in Greece. We also paid for the tickets for these guys to come here. The rule is that they sign a form that basically makes the tickets a loan and they have to repay the loan. Well, you come to the United States. You have no money. You have no job. You have nothing. Your language may not be that good.

Q: And it's expensive to live here.

MILLER: So, I said, we will cover the cost of the tickets to the United States.

Lessons learned, a couple of things. Number one, any time you volunteer to do something, try to know as much as you can about what's really involved. I was totally clueless, and this became a lot more complicated and expensive than I ever anticipated. People ask my wife and me would you have done this if you knew all the time and effort it would take? I don't have a good answer to that question because I'm not sure. Just the money itself was daunting. I was not sure that I could ever raise, back then, that kind of money, but I did.

I'm extremely glad I've done it. People ask my wife and I if we are still working. The answer is yes, but we don't get any salary. We both work full-time. She started a very interesting project in northern Syria providing mental health and psychosocial support workshops to people who have experienced trauma and displacement at the hands of ISIS and Turkish militias.

The end of the story, just to put an interesting cap on it, is that we took my wife's Syrian project and our Afghan project and we combined them, helping people in great need and trouble, and living in difficult areas and we formed a 501(c)(3) and got IRS approval almost immediately. So, we now have an umbrella organization that is a 501(c)(3) and can accept gifts with tax exemptions, etc. That's what it is today. My wife's project will continue for a long time.

Q: What is the 501(c)(3) called?

MILLER: It's called OSCOD, which stands for Opportunity for Survivors of Conflict, Oppression, and Disaster. Extremely awkward name and my wife came up with the name. We have a Board. We are real, and I just put checks in the mail to the last 14 people to reimburse them for the air fare to the US.

Q: The last thing is the transportation because they had to get their visas approved?

MILLER: The last thing is getting the visas. Even the medical costs can be a very complicated thing. They passed all that stuff. They passed the security, medical, and everything else. I'm just not bringing people to Greece anymore. They have all these people who come over who still have other family members. So, I'm in regular contact with the CARE office to make sure that these family members don't fall through the cracks. I'd say I've spent many hours a week just on that.

Q: Once the people get out, they still have a lot of family they're worried about in Afghanistan.

MILLER: Yes. To give you an example, the woman who contacted me had four siblings and the mom. Her dad had died years before. One of the siblings didn't have any kids. The others had three, four, five kids. Then, what I didn't know was there were uncles, cousins, parents, all these others. That added up to forty-two. As I said, my partner had fourteen. All of my forty-two have made it to the States by now and all fourteen of my partner's families. The overall number is fifty-eight that we have successfully evacuated to the U.S.; I don't know if there will be any more. I'm still helping others get on the CARE flights, making sure that their paperwork doesn't fall through the cracks, and often it does.

I've never asked the USG people working on that issue for any favors. I've never asked the CARE people to jump my people to the head of the queue. Because these are all people who are deserving and I don't want any favors shown just because of my association.

Q: This is a lovely story, one illustration of the bigger picture. There was a lot of private help to people and an outpouring of support as our government system started to figure out what to do. I wanted to thank you again.

MILLER: My pleasure, Robin. Thank you for asking me to tell the story. I'm glad I did.

You asked about lessons learned. One of the lessons learned is we have wonderful people in the system and we have a system that needs a lot of improvement.

Q: Thank you.

End of Interview