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JONATHAN REISHER

*Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon. It's March 2, 2025. I'm Robin Matthewman, and today I'm interviewing Jonathan Reisher for our Afghanistan project. Jonathan, welcome. Let's start off with your background—where and when you were born, when you joined the army, et cetera.

REISHER: Sure. I was born in 1988 in Germany because my dad was serving in the army at that time and when I was two we moved back to Washington State, where I grew up. After high school, I attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. I have a family history of military service, so it seemed like a natural fit for me. I majored in history. In 2011, I graduated as a lieutenant in the infantry and went down to Fort Benning for basic infantry training and ranger school. Then I reported to the 101st Airborne Division at the end of 2012. I was assigned as a platoon leader in 3rd Brigade 101st Airborne Division, commonly known as the “Rakkasans,” and deployed in September of 2012 to Paktia province, Afghanistan.

Q: Your first tour of duty in the army was in Afghanistan?

REISHER: Yes. My very first tour. I was still a second lieutenant and had about two months in the unit.

Q: And this is after the surge?

REISHER: After the surge.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about what that entailed?

REISHER: We were one of the first units to get a troop cap placed on us. That was somewhat of an issue. We know that trying to end the surge, they needed to draw down troop levels, but at the same time, the footprint that we were responsible for was that surge level footprint. A normal infantry platoon has about forty soldiers in it, plus other Soldiers attached to help with things like finding Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)

Our mission was to push the Taliban out of the area and create space for the US Forces to shrink their footprint while also handing over security responsibilities to Afghan Forces.

Q: Did you get involved later in their applications for special immigrant visas?

REISHER: I did actually. While I was there, I wrote letters of support for my interpreters. I maintained relationships with two of them and helped them get to the United States. One of which came to the United States in 2014 and settled in Washington State because he liked how I talked about Washington State. And then another one of my interpreters, I think, came in 2015 or 2016 to Kentucky. I know the third gentleman is in California. I wrote him a letter, but he and I lost contact after that.

Q: And did they come to the U.S. within a year or two, or did they stay for longer?

REISHER: It was about a year or two after I left. I think there was tension particularly with interpreters at that time, because they saw the contracts getting smaller and smaller, and units leaving. And most of these guys had memories of the Russian withdrawal to some degree. Actually, one of the main airfields in the province had maybe a regiment's worth of Russian destroyed tanks and vehicles sitting there all in a row, like they were on a parade. It was kind of eerie. So even back in 2012, there was a kind of shadow, like, when is America going to leave, and under what conditions is that going to happen? All these interpreters are very smart individuals, as you know, and so they were planning early on trying to develop some sort of evacuation plan.

Q: I'm now talking with some local employees at Embassy and diplomatic offices, and I've learned that sometimes local staff came to work for the embassy, particularly because the SIV gave them the possibility of going back to the United States. Did these three individuals have large families, wives and children? I'm assuming they were all men.

REISHER: Yes, they were all men. They had wives, and at that time, all of them had two or three kids.

Q: But they had to leave their parents and extended families behind.

So you left in what month?

REISHER: February 2013

Q: I'm sorry the month that you arrived was?

REISHER: September 2012.

Q: What did you do between February 2013 and August 2021?

REISHER: I spent a couple more years in the infantry. I worked in the Air Assault School at Fort Campbell, KY, and then I was selected for Psychological Operations (PSYOP). I did that training pipeline. My first deployment as a PSYOPer was to the embassy in Baghdad. In 2017, I worked for Ambassador Silliman. That was a huge step for me, going from infantry platoon leader to an embassy environment, but this time, I had the training to engage with partners. I learned Arabic. I knew the language and so when I compare my initial interactions with Iraqi counterparts and Afghan counterparts, it was like night and day. I did some more time in the Middle East, a couple more deployments and other things, and then I did graduate school at Carnegie Mellon University. That is where I was when all the stuff at HKIA, Hamid Karzai International Airport, happened. When the huge withdrawal happened.

Q: You were still active duty in the military, but they were letting you go to school for a year? Just as an aside, Ambassador Silliman was my Deputy Chief of Mission for a month when I got to Baghdad in August, 2013,

Okay, in May of 2021, President Biden decided to go ahead with the planned withdrawal of the U.S military from Afghanistan, which had been envisioned in the agreements made in the previous Trump administration. He delayed it a little bit. He decided in April that instead of withdrawing in May, they would set September as the withdrawal date, and things started to change pretty rapidly. When did you first get contacted by people you knew asking if you could help them leave Afghanistan?

REISHER: First it started off with my interpreters, the two gentlemen I still was in contact with the day the capital fell and the Taliban took control.

Q: And that was when Afghan President Ghani left.

REISHER: And the President had left, yeah, and so that's how it started. I was actually on leave with my wife on a road trip. So that day, I remember it well, because we were at Crater Lake. When I started getting contacted, I had intermittent communications. But finally, when I got to the Airbnb, I was able to talk to these guys. They were really concerned about their families and particularly because all their brothers had either been interpreters or one gentleman in particular was like three months short of meeting the length of time to be eligible for a SIV [Special Immigrant Visa], or they had multiple brothers that were in the police force, the army, or worked for the government in some capacity. And then, obviously, because of all that, their wives and the children and the parents were potentially at risk.

Q: What happened next?

REISHER: I just had my laptop and was sitting outside. At that time, the fires were really bad in Oregon, so I could see the fire and the smoke in the distance. And I'm talking, having frantic conversations with people and trying to figure out what I could do, if anything, what kind of letters I could write. So, it was very stressful. I stayed up most of the night doing that, but it just kind of seemed like everything was collapsing around me.

I was safe and sound on the West Coast of the United States. But I tried to imagine what it was like for them. I was feeling at a loss about how to help these guys in Afghanistan. It was just a little bit of a feeling of helplessness on my part.

Q: What did you discover as the way forward to try to help them and their families? I guess some of them might have been SIV eligible? I should note some of the effort that was going on around August 15th, when the capital fell. The U.S. government was just getting organized, and the Embassy had transferred to the airport. People were flying into Kabul. The military was flying in to try to get some control of the of the runways and consular officers were coming in to try to help with the vetting of people who wanted to go to the United States. Also, the previous ambassador, John Bass, had been asked to go to Kabul to help Ambassador Ross Wilson with the evacuation part. So, on the fifteenth, things were still in play, and there were people still flying in the airport. But what happened on your end?

REISHER: I started reaching out to my network, because I knew a lot of people were also having similar problems, or similar issues trying to figure out what to do. Some of that was to military people, but I also had a friend who was a lawyer and had done some immigration work with dreamers before. I started talking to him, started talking to Ambassador Mendelson at Carnegie Mellon as well, because she was my advisor for my summer internship program and for some of the programs that I did at Carnegie Mellon. But the biggest breakthrough was my West Point chat, which had some folks in there that were starting to form different organizations. And I got pulled into an organization called “Allied Airlift 21,” but there were many, many other organizations under “Digital Dunkirk”. But, that was the one I got pulled into.

Q: Let's just pause here for a second, so you can go ahead and describe what “Digital Dunkirk” was.

REISHER: “Digital Dunkirk” was the name that we collectively gave the digital evacuation effort from the state side. So, it was an all-volunteer effort, a collection of military, civilians, former State Department, a whole mix of folks volunteering their time.

Q: With the goal of doing what?

REISHER: Helping bring more Afghans - or help the process of getting more Afghans - safely to the U.S.

Q: In this case, to the airport, correct? So that, because the airport was a mess, the entrances were a mess, there was a mass of people, and the Taliban was not being helpful. Inside the airport, the embassy staff were able to process people, help people, if they could get to the gate.

REISHER: Exactly. So, then the naming goes back to Dunkirk during World War II, where the civilian population mobilized and brought a significant chunk of the British Army back to the UK. The idea developed quickly. I want to say that within less than

twelve hours we started to formulate what looked a lot like an Army battalion. So, you have your leadership section, you have personnel section, you have intelligence capabilities, you have operations, logistics, and then you have the signal or messaging aspect of it. For the command, that was a lot of making decisions about the organization. We had a lot of liaisons working with other organizations or Afghan families as well. Because we had so many folks coming in, asking questions, we set up a Slack channel.

REISHER: So, we had quite a few people, pretty high-ranking, coming in, asking questions or requesting information. Our Personnel Section was primarily focused on cataloging everyone. The “Two Section” [Intelligence] actually centered around using Google Maps, to develop what we called a COP or “common operating picture” of HKIA, with all of the Taliban checkpoints that was corroborated as people move towards the gates. We would get grids or pictures and videos and figure out exactly where they were, how big the Taliban checkpoints were, what they were doing and so on, and also where some safe houses or safe areas were. The “Four Section,” the logistics, was doing a lot of trying to figure out, were there other ways beyond just flooding the gates to get people out? They were also focused a lot on what would make somebody qualified for evacuation, right? Because the other aspect of this was that we didn't want to shove a ton of people at the gate knowing that they would be interacting with Taliban and if they couldn't get inside HKIA, that just exposed them. But it would also overwhelm the Marines and the Soldiers on the gate, so that wasn't going to help anybody. So, they were very focused on, here was the cut off. In that case, if they didn't have the following things, they probably should not try to get into the airport. They needed to stay and hang tight, which was always a hard conversation to have with somebody.

REISHER: And then our communications folks were very focused on establishing secure lines of communication and also protecting personal information. We started out on WhatsApp, but it was very quickly apparent that the Taliban was also in that WhatsApp too. Same thing with Signal. A funny story is that with some of the messaging I was still using a sudo-name of Khalid bin Walid, which was like a nom de guerre that I used with some of my Arab partners. Well, some people were saying this dude's Taliban. No, of course I'm not Taliban. But I had to re-verify myself.

REISHER: I wound up in the Command Cell, even though I was kind of junior. I was in communications with Ambassador Mendelson, my lawyer friend, and then actually, my mother in law, who works for Palo Alto in the cyber security field. That was the kind of the things I focused on - transferring information from the cyber security, State Department, or legal perspective to the group discussion. Then, I also worked in the Operation Cell as a liaison, helping to get families through the gate.

Q: How did those families get connected with you?

REISHER: There were two ways. One was we had a list of people that applied. You could go on the website, Allied Airlift 21 and apply to basically get assigned a case worker, somebody who would work a specific case and talk them through it, getting to the gate and getting the appropriate documents in order. And then the other way was

almost like a referral. My lawyer friend had someone from his college days who was stuck in Afghanistan. I took his case on as one as well as some of my Afghan interpreters and some other friends. It was either a direct kind of relationship or it was people who just submitted their names and their case information.

Q: Take me through what would happen with a particular family. Somebody has applied, and then you would contact them by phone?

REISHER: By phone, typically, or by WhatsApp or Signal. We tried to get people into Signal, which was a little bit more secure, but that could be very challenging because of the deteriorating situation. A lot of times, people didn't have access all the time to electricity or even their phones, and didn't want to be seen in certain places with phones on them, so the communication was very limited, and so we often had to first establish some kind of communications window - between this time and this time - and try to send a message or make a call for an initial discussion. And then the first thing we did was try to see if they were eligible to actually get through the gate, and then kind of go from there,

Q: Most of the people you were working with, were they usually already in Kabul?

REISHER: Yes.

Q: And then you would ask them where are you and tell them what gates they should try to go to? Is that the next step?

REISHER: Exactly. And we had some communication on the inside in terms of timeline, hey, tomorrow we're completely swamped. Don't send anybody to this gate or Abbey gate is completely flooded. Go into this other area and please do it in the evening, or something like that. So, we had such communications because, again, we really did not want to just flood the whole area with more people than could make it through.

Q: And so those people, were they military people, or were they like State Department folks?

REISHER: Some were military and, I'm not sure, but I'm assuming some were State Department. It was such a blur over a couple weeks, but I'm like, there are people I talked to regularly then and I don't even know if I remember their names, or even if I ever had their names.

Q: Right. Everybody who was involved describes how time collapsed and everything, because it was less than two weeks?

REISHER: Right.

Q: And the families were telling you about difficult situations that they were encountering trying to get there. Were there any stories that stood out?

REISHER: I think the one I recall in particular was this family that I pulled off of Abbey gate. They were almost completely through the SIV process when this whole thing happened, and they had small kids. There were issues with food and water. But the way it worked generally was we would have our common operating picture up, and we would map out a route for them, which was pretty crazy to think about, because you were literally, saying, "Okay, go down whatever street you're going to see, at the hotel, take a left, go down an alley," Those sorts of things.

Q: And people were having to go through a sewage gutter to reach Abbey Gate. It had become very difficult by the end, by the time of the explosion? I think it didn't look like a gate anymore.

REISHER: Yeah, it had eroded.

Q: The nearby hotel was where the British were doing a lot of processing of its people. How did you know that there was a threat at Abbey gate?

REISHER: We had a lot of open-source reporting, and then having our Afghans take videos, it was very apparent. It was a prime target because of the chaos and because of the terrain, like you mentioned. For me, it was just, there was a lot of threat reporting. I knew that family was not going to get through in any time in the next twelve hours, probably or more, and that there were safe areas close by that they could go to. That was definitely a hard discussion, but I think prior to that, I had gained a lot of credibility with him because earlier there was a checkpoint that had popped up, and I told him about it. I told him don't go down this route. He decided to go down the route anyway, and he was actually detained for about twelve hours, which was extremely stressful. His family was also detained by the Taliban. They didn't know what was going to happen, but for some reason, they let him go, and so he popped back up on our chat and I was able to get him the rest of the way to Abby Gate. And I think because of that experience, he really trusted that I had knowledge that he didn't have, because we were collating everybody's information. And so, I basically told him you need to take your family, get them away from this gate. And then within a few hours, the detonation happened, which I mean looking at, it made sense, right? If you were the Taliban, you have a whole group of people that were essentially your enemy. You have the Americans, and then you have ISIS, which was also an enemy. Anytime you have your enemies killing each other, that is a win-win for the Taliban. Kind of made sense as well for them there.

Q: At the time in August 2021, the news we were getting publicly was that it was ISIS-K that did the bombing. Is that consistent with what you guys understood then?

REISHER: Yes. It's the same.

Q: I've heard from different people that there were different actions taken that day, that the threat information was known, but there was so much going on that it was hard to

actually pull everybody back. What happened? Where were you or what were you doing when the explosion happened? It was probably a shock.

REISHER: Oh yeah, yeah.

Q: Okay. So, at that point, Abbey Gate was one of the last gates open, right? There was also a quiet door, a secret gate that had been used for taking certain groups of people out, and at some point, it became a place to bring people in.

REISHER: I'm not certain about that part, but I do know that there were some folks that were able to get in other ways, not through Abbey gate. Not really sure.

Q: What happened to Allied Airlift 21's work after Abbey gate?

REISHER: It was obviously chaos at first, and people were trying to figure out if their families were still alive, and some weren't. But then we made the decision to pull everybody off and to reassess, because the gate was going to open back up, and so at that point, the command started talking about transitioning the mission. Okay, we've probably culminated with getting people out immediately. Now, we needed to start looking at long-term efforts to help the families.

Q: You personally, how many families did you estimate that you were able to help get to the gates and get in?

REISHER: I was able to get in two.

Q: And for the broader effort? The whole group was working with hundreds of families?

REISHER: At least four hundred, maybe even more.

Q: It sounds extraordinary that everybody was so far away working from home, and with Google Maps, and you were able to help give people the guidance of how they could get into the airport. And Allied Airlift 21 was just one of many groups that was doing the same thing. Is that right?

REISHER: Yes, that's correct.

Q: Okay. And some of these people, one of them you knew, and one of them was from the application that they had applied for help through the website.

REISHER: I worked with about six families. Five of them I knew so or had some kind of connection with, whether through a friend or I knew them personally, or their brother personally. I often think about my position and very hierarchical, military and structural bureaucracy. At that time, I mean I had ties directly to Ambassador Mendelson, the Under Secretary of State with her network, and I talked to multiple generals or ambassadors directly on email, including the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander,

Admiral Stavridis. And over email, he gave me his cell and told me to call him if I needed to. This was wild. People stopped what they were doing to help. And it wasn't just folks like me.

Q: For some of the State Department people inside the airport, they were trying to bring people in, and they were getting a deluge of requests to do things from outside. But it sounded like this kind of operation was very orderly, and you were only contacting people on the ground when you needed to in the way, like an appropriate way, but not sort of asking a favor that was out of their control to do. Is that right?

REISHER: Yes. I mean, there were some favors asked, but we tried to establish a proper channel so they wouldn't be overwhelmed. And I think that also speaks to the movement across the board. I had two families get to the gate and four that did not. Those other families all got out of Afghanistan. Some of them are in the U.S. Some of them are in other countries, working on their visa applications and waiting to hear back. But I think for the preponderance of the families, the help came after Abbey gate, and after all Americans and foreign organizations had left. We just didn't want to push all those people to HKIA if we knew they wouldn't pass initial screening.

Q: When this unit transitioned, you kept working with people to help them get to Pakistan or things like that?

REISHER: I did, yeah. I am still kind of helping out, but it's primarily just checking on application statuses. I am very aware that in Vietnam, when everything collapsed in Saigon, some of this process for folks took ten years or more. Part of it is support in helping them process their paperwork and navigate the system. But part of it is also ensuring that while you might be in Turkey for the next ten years, you have a job and your kids are in school, and you're safe.

Q: There is this group called AfghanEvac that worked with the White House and the State Department to set up the CARE Office, the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts. Was Allied Airlift 21 or other groups working on the Digital Dunkirk part of the AfghanEvac effort?

REISHER: From my understanding, yes. My official relationship stopped after December 2021. But from my understanding, afterwards Allied Airlift 21 was rolled into AfghanEvac with a bunch of other organizations. I think they formed a board and solidified the leadership of that organization.

Q: That's wonderful. Did I miss anything?

REISHER: No, I think it was a very comprehensive interview.

Q: At the time, you were a student. So, what was your relationship with your official chain of command? You all were volunteers, so did you have an actual command setup.

REISHER: Yeah, we set up a command structure with a command team, like you would see in a military unit, but it was all ad hoc, all volunteer. I was in the command group, but we made decisions very collectively. But, there was no direct relationship with U.S. military actions on this effort. Their focus was on the deployment of forces to conduct the DoD side of the evacuation.

Q: Do you have any comments on how it all worked out during those two weeks in August 2021? There wasn't really a plan at first, but somehow people got into action and collectively helped as many people as they could get out.

REISHER: I think from the point of execution, whether you're looking at the Department of Defense, the State Department, or us Digital Dunkirk, I think it probably went the best it could have. I think that sometime in the future, this could probably make a really good case study for interagency collaboration and about leadership from a network perspective. I had never had that level of insight or direct line to senior leaders. And I don't think the senior leaders had ever had a direct line to the people actually executing operations. I think that was very enlightening, because we were able to move very fast, very quickly, and from what was a completely chaotic and unorganized effort, build something that was as organized, I think, as you could possibly have it.

Q: Very good. All right. Did you ever expect that about 80,000 tied to the U.S. would be evacuated in such a short time? And for you guys, it was mostly the families of interpreters and local officials that you had worked with?

REISHER: Yes, and a lot of folks like we talked about, like police officers that were at risk but didn't necessarily qualify. A lot of those folks didn't get pushed to the gate per se because of the paperwork issues. But a lot of them were folks that were in that gray area where their packets had been submitted. It had been several years, and they were in the middle to near the end of their visa application process, and everything happened.

Q: You mentioned earlier that when you worked in Iraq, you had a whole different view of the world developed as you started to see how the military and the State Department and others work together. So, you want to talk a little bit about how that informed what you were doing and why they ended up putting you in the command unit?

REISHER: When I was in Afghanistan as an infantry officer, I didn't fully understand how the whole government worked together to attack problems, whether it was insurgency or governance or something like that. But with my time in Iraq, I was exposed to the inner workings of the State Department, and I think I got a pretty good foundation on public diplomacy, what the role of development is, what those roles are, and I learned the language of the interagency environment and those sorts of things that most military folks don't usually interface with. And so when I was working in the headquarters part of Allied Airlift 21, a lot of what I did was simply translate from the State Department to the Army or the Army to the State Department.

Q: Because it's very, very valuable. How do you see the State Department fits in?

REISHER: I think a lot of the structure. I didn't have any insights on the structure from the State Department side, but I knew about consular operations and what consular officers go through. I know about the RSOs [Regional Security Officers] and their role and security and relationship with the military. And then also, there's different bureaus that look a lot like army combatant commands that have a regional focus on top of the country level, country teams. And I know that if you've been to one embassy, you've seen one embassy, but the experience of how a country team operates, and what the State Department looks for in decision making. And I think that also is extremely important.

Q: Thank you. We'll end the interview here. Thank you again, so much.

End of interview