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JOHN WECKER

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It is June 26, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman and today I'm interviewing John Wecker for our Afghanistan Project. Welcome, John. Can you give me an overview of your State Department Foreign Service career, and I'd like to know about your tours in Afghanistan.

WECKER: I joined the Foreign Service in October 1990 and did a number of tours overseas, primarily economic work in a number of different countries and at the State Department in Washington, DC. In 2008, I went to Afghanistan for the first time, following a year of language training and area studies. Between July 2008 and 2009, I was the Provincial Reconstruction Team American Lead in Bamyan Province, working together with Provincial Governor Habiba Sorabi and the New Zealand Defense Force.

Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamyan Province

Q: Can you describe that year and what it was that you were trying to achieve and what it was like.

WECKER: It was something completely different for me as a Foreign Service officer, very expeditionary. At the time, I think we had 24 provincial reconstruction teams that were a mix of civilian and military personnel, both the U.S. and NATO, and NATO allies such as New Zealand and Australia. I was the American civilian in Bamyan and I provided linkage to the New Zealand Defense Force officials and the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

I also worked as a counselor and advisor to the provincial governor, Habiba Sorabi, the only female governor in Afghanistan. I provided advice and guidance to her and her office, and I also provided them some logistical support as far as helping get them USAID flights to and from Bamyan to Kabul, since driving was too dangerous. I also helped the governor and her staff set up meetings, both at the Embassy and with the Afghan government back in Kabul. And finally, I provided assistance and guidance on development projects in the province.

Q: Did you have a team or were you the only State Department person?

WECKER: Just me from the State Department. Sometimes there was a USAID person on the ground, but generally, it was me working closely with the New Zealand Defense Force and two or three U.S. Army officers who were there doing their own development projects, and the governor.

Q: Can you give a sense of where Bamyan is and what was going on there security-wise during that year?

WECKER: Bamyan is in the central highlands of the Hindu Kush, in a region known as the Hazarajat. The primary ethnic group there is the Hazara, who had taken a severe beating and been subject to ethnic cleansing at the hands of the Taliban. I think it is only about 70 or 80 miles northwest of Kabul, but at the time that would have been a very dangerous eight-hour drive. I never did the drive. While I was free to travel anywhere within Bamyan Province by four-wheel drive vehicle, I always flew in a helicopter or plane to and from Kabul.

When I was there, the entire Provincial Reconstruction Team was very welcomed and the province was safe enough that I was free to travel around wherever I wanted, unarmed and unguarded. I only had to let people know where I was going and when I was coming back. It was also a very undeveloped area—no electricity other than truck batteries that were charged by solar panels. It seemed like a different time, with the only nod to modernity being the number of people with cell phones.

Q: Was the development work centering on things like schools and health clinics, and things like that?

WECKER: Yes. We had some projects with schools, a lot of wells, some agriculture projects, primarily irrigation. In the winter, they get an incredible amount of snow, so there was a lot of work just keeping a few roads open so people could get to the hospital or to Kabul, or wherever they needed to go.

Q: The governors were appointed—they weren't elected—and they didn't have any tax revenues. So their connection to any assistance projects and to their own government was important.

WECKER: Very important. We always included the governor and the provincial government in our development plans. We didn't do anything without their approval. Each year the Embassy also gave provincial governors $1 million if their province was considered poppy-free. Bamyan was one of those poppy-free provinces, so they had that money to work with. We tried to steer them to using that for agriculture projects and less toward things like movie theaters, or more cosmetic things that were maybe not as sustainable.

Q: It sounds like it was fairly pleasant. What was your impression?

WECKER: I could tell you that in my 32 years with the Foreign Service that was the best year in many ways. Because the people in Bamyan were great. I was in a unique and amazingly beautiful place, somewhere I never imagined I would get to see, let alone live and work there. The work was very rewarding, and it was exciting. I was flying around in helicopters and driving around in four-wheel drive jeeps. And the people I worked with were really good.

Q: The New Zealanders, the Kiwis, were they relatively safe or were they engaged in some fighting during that time?

WECKER: They were safe. There was no fighting while I was there. There were a few accidents because there were no paved roads. There was one paved road in the entire province. It was 0.7 miles long. Everything else was dirt, and very mountainous. Occasionally they would have a jeep or a truck slide off a cliff, causing injuries. No one from the PRT was killed during the time I was there, although Afghan police forces were sometimes killed by Taliban-placed IEDs.

Mazar-i-Sharif

Q: The next time that you went to Afghanistan was to Mazar-i-Sharif in 2012?

WECKER: Yes. I had been hoping to get back to Afghanistan. So I went to Mazar-i-Sharif in 2012 as one of the representatives in the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement [INL] office.

Q: There were a few years that Mazar was a consulate. Is that right?

WECKER: Sort of. They called it a consulate. It was nothing that anyone recognized as acting like a consulate. There had been a push to open a consulate, so we called the State Department operation in Mazar-i-Sharif a consulate. I was there with about six to ten other State Department officials, diplomatic security, political officers, and press attachés and a larger number of really great local staff. We were at Camp Marmal, which was a sprawling military base run by the Germans and the Americans. Not so much a consulate as people think of it. There was a very expensive effort to convert a hotel in the city of Mazar into something more like a proper consulate, but that effort was ultimately abandoned.

At that time, with the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, I was monitoring grants activity and reporting on how our grants and grant recipients were doing. That included everything from counter-narcotics work to making courtrooms safe, making judges and prosecutors safe, and also a large amount of work with women's organizations, including but not limited to Women for Afghan Women. They did things like organizing halfway houses and shelters for women and also Houses of Hope, which were for children whose mothers were in prison. That was very rewarding. That was good work.

By 2012, the security situation had deteriorated, compared to 2008, plus we had withdrawn from a lot of places. Where before we could travel the area, based on the availability of quick reaction forces, those quick reaction forces were now gone, so our ability to travel had shrunk quite a bit. I could go between Camp Marmal and the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, but nowhere else in the northern region.

Q: The security had deteriorated because groups like the Taliban were more active?

WECKER: I'm not sure which came first, but NATO and the U.S. were quite quickly drawing down from a lot of bases around the region.

Q: This is the winding down after the surge?

WECKER: Yes. The surge wound down. As that wound down, the Taliban regained more freedom of movement and their activities picked up.

Q: Mazar was relatively safe because it had been a stronghold of the Mujahidin long ago for some time.

WECKER: Yes. And the government in Balkh Province was strong and effective against the Taliban.

Q: Do you remember the name of the governor?

WECKER: Mohammad Atta.

Q: You were the one person that was monitoring projects and were most of the projects being done by international organizations or by local groups?

WECKER: Some of them were being done by the U.N., different organs of the U.N, and others were being done by local NGOs. A number of European countries also had very active development activities throughout the north.

Q: What was your assessment broadly of whether or not they were being effective?

WECKER: I could tell you for sure that the ones being run by the women's NGOs to benefit women and children were very effective and well done. Others, like the counternarcotics activities, were more opaque, since I couldn't go out and see what they were actually doing. You had to take their word for it. So there were some limits to what I could actually see happening and what I could get a sense of what was really going on. That said, I felt like we were doing effective work for the most part.

Q: And were the connections with the embassy good? Were they playing the same role as they did with the PRTs, helping you connect in Kabul? A consulate was a little different?

WECKER: The consulate was a little different. I mostly worked directly with the INL office at the Embassy in Kabul. That was good. It was fairly easy to fly back and forth. We got all the visitors we needed and wanted at any time. The communications worked out quite well.

Q: Any reflections on that tour?

WECKER: It was quite different from my first tour. The first tour was in a small town with a small New Zealand defense force. This one was on a giant base with a lot of military around in the midst of a deteriorating security situation. That was the main difference.

Special Operations Joint Task Force at Bagram

Q: Then you went back to Afghanistan a third time. What was that like?

WECKER: Yes, I did. I guess I hadn't gotten enough of Afghanistan on my first two tours. By the time I went back in 2018 to 2019, the position that I had as the political advisor to the Special Operations Joint Task Force at Bagram was the only State Department Foreign Service Officer position outside of the Embassy in Kabul. That's how far everything had contracted. A prime draw for me this time was to still be able to travel throughout the country and not be locked into Kabul. And the opportunity to watch and assist our Special Forces professionals in action was a definite high point of my career.

Q: That was the summer of 2018?

WECKER: Yes through the summer of 2019.

Q: That was the Trump Administration. That would have been John Bass's time as ambassador at the embassy.

WECKER: Yes. I met Ambassador Bass on several occasions, at the Embassy during "Ramp Ceremonies," at Bagram, where soldiers and Marines killed in action were loaded on planes to return to the U.S. or other home countries. Ambassador Bass made a point of attending all of those.

Q: How would you describe what you were doing or what the military was doing during that time? What was the role you were playing?

WECKER: The Special Forces Command, including the Afghan National Army Special Forces, were doing the lion's share of the fighting, maybe 90 percent of the actual fighting throughout Afghanistan. Prior to parting for Bagram, I met with General Buck Elton who was going out to be the commander, and he was under specific instructions to ramp up pressure on the Taliban as much as possible during this year to force them to come to the negotiating table.

I think we were quite effective in ramping up the pressure, but other priorities sometimes raised their heads. We had a few ceasefires, calls for elections, and other things that made us pause a bit. I can tell you that the pressure we put on the Taliban was very effective. We doubled the number of enemy combatants killed over the previous year, but it still didn't seem to have a visible effect on bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table in any serious way.

Q: That was bringing them to the table to negotiate with us, the United States?

WECKER: Right.

Q: That was the time we tried to get a bilateral agreement.

WECKER: Yes. Although I never had the impression that the Taliban were taking any of those appeals to negotiate seriously.

Q: The picture that a lot of people paint in my interviews—and in some of the articles I read—is that the strategy in those years had been to build up the Afghan capacity and help them to be effective by providing needed intelligence and other support. Was Bagram the key place where that was happening? Was the idea to have eyes in the sky contractors and advisors that would be supporting the Afghan military?

WECKER: Well, I didn't have visibility over the whole country or all of the military activities, just the Special Forces, based at Bagram. My impression was that we had a lot of confidence in the Afghan Special Forces, the commandos, but also were very cognizant of the fact that if we ever left, their effectiveness would drop to zero almost immediately. We spent untold hours trying to keep the Afghan Special Forces out of the political arena of Afghanistan, so they weren't wasting time doing favors for various people in the Afghan government instead of what they were supposed to be doing, which was pressing the fight against the Taliban. No one who had any real experience with the Afghan military was surprised that they collapsed, once we pulled our support.

Q: That was something that you understood clearly, that they were still dependent on our support?

WECKER: Very much. The Afghan Defense Forces were completely unsustainable as an independent fighting force. No question.

Q: Anything else about your experience in Bagram that gave you insights to what happened later?

WECKER: One thing that surprised me was that we never left Bagram by road. We always flew out, so freedom of movement was rapidly dwindling down to almost nothing. Our situation in the country was feeling very tenuous. And we got a lot of rocket attacks on the base—many launched from locations very near the base perimeter. Nobody

felt like we were moving forward in any way that you could understand in a military or security sense. Certainly no one felt like we were on a path to winning.

Supporting Afghan Resettlement

Q: You left Afghanistan in 2019. Did you go back to Washington?

WECKER: Yes, I went back to Washington, and I did something completely different. For the final two years of my career, I was the head of the U.S. delegation to an OECD Working Group on Bribery, an effort designed to prevent companies from bribing government officials. The first year was great because I was traveling all the time. The second year was Covid, so I did a lot of zoom calls. That was my final job until I got into the retirement transition course. And then Kabul fell.

Q: When did you start the retirement course? Was it the August-September class or July-August?

WECKER: It must have been July-August.

Q: And that first month had four weeks of sessions, which were probably online.

WECKER: Yes, four weeks of online sessions. Then the following four weeks were supposed to be a job search. But by then they needed volunteers to help with the evacuation of Kabul.

Q: Did you volunteer?

WECKER: Yes. I think about a third of the class volunteered to do that instead of the job search program.

Q: What did your volunteer work entail?

WECKER: The first thing I did, I went to Dulles Airport where they were just starting to bring in plane loads of Afghans and then from there send them out to the various military installations. I helped set up the operation at Dulles.

Q: I spoke to Tressa Finerty. You were starting at the beginning with her?

WECKER: Yes. This was right at the beginning, people just coming off the planes after sitting on the tarmac at Dulles for eight hours because we couldn't get enough immigration officials, and we were basically inventing things as we went along. Then after a couple of weeks there, I went up to Fort Dix in New Jersey. I was the second State Department person to get there, three days after they started establishing a safe haven. I did that for two or three months.

Q: Then did you segue into doing something different after that?

WECKER: By that point, I wasn't actually in the State Department, but was still wanting to help. For Dulles and Fort Dix, they extended my time in the State Department. I then retired, but was able to work as a WAE [When Actually Employed], now called REA [Re-Employed Annuitants]. That makes it trickier, because you have to find a bureau that will hire you. I think after a few months off, I went back to Fort Pickett in Virginia, where I was the State Department Director there for about three or four more months.

Q: This was a place where people were coming in and staying until they were able to fly to—

WECKER: Their new homes, somewhere in the U.S. as facilitated by the IOM [the International Organization for Migration] and NGOs throughout the country

Q: Then later, you started working with the office called CARE [Coordination for Afghan Relocation Efforts].

WECKER: Yes. I think the first people that were employing me as an REA were in the PRM [Population, Refugees and Migration] Bureau. Then I started working with CARE. Then at some point I was sent out to Kosovo, which was a unique kind of lily pad/safe haven operation. Has anyone talked to you about Kosovo?

Q: No. We're going to spend some time on that today. Then you went to Albania?

WECKER: Yes.

Dulles Airport

Q: Let's start with Dulles. I heard that a plane arrived sometime in August from Kabul, and there had been no preparations for what to do with people that were still on the runway. The U.S. military was a day or two ahead so they were starting to try to figure out how to organize for this. I don't know how involved DHS—Department of Homeland Security, which handles people coming into the States—was. What was your experience at Dulles?

WECKER: I was not there the first day, but I was there either the second or third day. There was already a robust interagency group there, including DHS, the Red Cross, and a lot of other agencies.

These planes were coming in. They didn't have lists of who was on the flights. The Afghans were just coming in and getting through the airport, which could take several hours at a time. Then we had to put them up for at least a couple of nights before we could bus them off somewhere for a more long-term resettlement effort. We had big conference rooms that we put cots in and just laid down blankets on the floor and brought in food.

Q: This was the first couple of nights right there at the airport itself.

WECKER: Yes.

Q: After that, they tried a couple of other things and they ended up using the Expo Center as a reception.

WECKER: That's right.

Q: What were you doing?

WECKER: I was doing my best to make myself useful, reporting back to PRM and others back at the Department what was going on, making sure things were on track, talking to people. Everyone was disoriented. The Afghans coming in had no idea what was happening, what was going to happen, so just talking to them, and trying to give them some sense of relief. If I saw anything that needed doing I would either do it myself or get the right people to do it.

One good story: When the first flood of people came in, all their belongings were packed in trash bags, with no ID on their bags. Anything that they managed to bring with them was just in a trash bag. We ended up with thousands of these bags. At some point—I don't know who did this but it was pretty amazing—they got a contractor that collected all this unclaimed baggage and set up a storage facility and a database. And people could say, I had this and this in my bag, and they identified and got these bags to people. It took them several months. There were thousands of these bags, and almost all were ultimately returned to their rightful owners.

Q: Some people had luggage but in order to pack the planes with as many people as possible they kept the bags aside and then they finally made it to Dulles.

WECKER: Right.

Fort Dix

Q: When you got to Fort Dix, what was your role there?

WECKER: The first few days there were just two of us from the State Department, a director and me as the deputy. A fair amount of the work was simply participating in synchronization meetings with DOD and everybody else. IRC [International Rescue Committee] was there and also some other NGOs to handle the actual processing on the refugee side.

When we got there, there weren't even any tents put up. The military did an amazing job of quickly creating this kind of refugee village with tents. They also took over a lot of unused dormitories or barracks, and made them habitable for families.

There was an interesting glitch at the beginning. While the military thought they had barracks that would hold a thousand people, they didn't realize that when families came in they weren't going to simply stay in the bunk assigned to them. They would immediately make little blanket forts and block things off for privacy, which really shrank the actual capacity of these barracks. There was a lot of inventing things on the fly and adjusting, and making sure that all the medical checks were getting done. There were a number of births in the first couple of weeks there, which was great.

Q: Was there a place on base for babies to be born?

WECKER: There were medical facilities, but I do know of one instance early on where a woman went into labor in one of the very large tents. Her family and friends built a sheet fort around a couple of bunks for privacy as she prepared to give birth. A male Air Force doctor arrived, but he was not allowed to enter the sheet fort, so they got this 19-year-old female airman, and she went in and delivered the baby as the doctor was standing on the outside of the sheets telling her how to do it.

Q: But the baby was okay?

WECKER: The baby was okay, yes.

Q: Were you getting to use your language in these experiences or was the language that you had studied not applicable?

WECKER: Before I went to Bamyan on my first tour, I did 44 weeks of Dari training. Unfortunately, by that time it was rudimentary, but it was still helpful to make small talk, get directions, ask basic questions, things like that. I was able to use it a bit.

Q: How was the morale among the Afghans during that period there at Fort Dix?

WECKER: It was mixed. Most of them were very uncomfortable being forced to live so closely with other ethnic or religious groups. Many of them came from very small villages and, all of a sudden, they're in a very big village, so there was a bit of unhappiness about that. Then there was the fact that no one knew how long they were going to be there, or where they were going to go next, things like that. They were worried about their kids not being in school. So it was not all just happiness about how things were going, but I don't recall anyone asking to return to Afghanistan.

Q: And they had been through a very traumatic experience in Afghanistan. Did any stories jump out for you, things people told you they had gone through?

WECKER: I heard a lot of those stories. I heard more of them later on at Fort Pickett because we had set aside time if anyone wanted to talk to someone from the State Department, they could come and talk, and they would tell these stories. All of these people were right from that August 21-22 Kabul departure date. They had all been through that chaos and turmoil at the airport.

Many of them had been split up from their families. We had a bunch of kids whose parents didn't get on the plane. We had one mother who had been working at the airport that got on a plane and her family was still in Kabul saying, why did you leave us? Things like that. Really heartbreaking stories for almost everybody, just the chaos and being torn from your family and then the violence that took place there.

Q: What were you doing? Were you one of the leadership teams for the State Department?

WECKER: Yes. At Ft. Pickett, and later in Kosovo and Albania, I was the lead for the State Department group that included people from USAID and some other places. We did a number of things including organizing recreational activities, and schools. We had different schools set up. It was a very big operation, over a thousand people covering a very large space.

We worked with the IRC, the International Rescue Committee, and the IOM, the International Organization for Migration. They were in charge of working with the cities, with the NGOs that were relocating people. They would get the assurances—a group in San Diego would say they could take a family of 12, and we'd send that family off to San Diego. Making sure all those groups and the military all worked together was a big part of the job.

Things always popped up. Like at some point it was decided that we could get them work permits. Just the logistics of everything was always complicated because the communication was not great. Some people working on policy (not at the base) didn't understand how things worked, so we got a lot of directions to do things that simply weren't possible.

Q: They were coming in as parolees and not in the asylum system yet.

WECKER: Yes. That was another thing. The morale both at Dix and at Pickett was—this had nothing to do with the State Department—but the decision was made early on to just bring everyone in as a parolee. So people who thought they were coming in as Special Immigrant Visa recipients, and others who thought that they should get some sort of unique treatment and have a definite path to citizenship, they all just came in as parolees with the thought that we'd figure it all out later. That was another degree of uncertainty that everybody had that hurt morale.

Q: I understand that a lot of people wanted to go to one of just a few places in the United States where they knew there were a lot of Afghans and that was problematic. Where did most of the people that you met want to go versus where they were being sent to?

WECKER: Early on, a lot of them wanted to go to Northern Virginia. That was the most noticeable one. Then Sacramento, and maybe Houston was the third. Later, once they

were told you're not going there, then other places became magnets. But those were the big three, Northern Virginia, Sacramento, and Houston.

That was another thing. People were convinced that wherever they went they had to stay there the rest of their life. We tried to explain, you don't even have to go there if you don't want, but you will get a package of support if you go there for however many months, and then you can go wherever you want. There was some fighting about that. At Fort Pickett, some people refused to leave the base because they didn't want to go to a certain place. They didn't know anything about whatever that place was. They just knew it wasn't where their cousin or friend told them to ask to go.

Q: Did you have any security problems, abuse or any kinds of things that you had to straighten out with your colleagues?

WECKER: There were some incidents of violence, domestic abuse, things like that, which were very difficult to sort out because the kinds of authority on policing and maintaining order on the military base were very unclear. I suspect that some people slipped through the cracks that otherwise would have had a better or a more intense interaction with law enforcement if they had not been refugees who nobody knew who they were. But, there wasn't a lot. It wasn't an epidemic or anything.

Q: You were at Fort Pickett a few months and then they started to close the bases, and you left?

WECKER: I was there a few months. One other thing was, Covid was happening at this time. The commanders at all the bases were under intense pressure to get everybody moved out so they could close these things down. But you weren't supposed to put anybody on a flight if they were Covid positive. At Fort Pickett, towards the end, we were testing, not the Afghans, but the Americans that were coming in and out of the base every day. They were testing us daily and finding a fair amount of positives, which meant you had to quarantine yourself for two weeks.

Then we tried to set up a quarantine area for the Afghans who tested positive, but it didn't work very well. That was a major headache trying to close these bases. You couldn't get the Covid rate to zero. And once somebody got Covid, then their family is going to get it. But one way or another they finally got them out.

I left Ft. Pickett and after some months went to Kosovo.

<u>Kosovo</u>

Q: Can you give us a sense of the work there? This is the first interview I'm having with somebody who was anywhere but Doha, Kabul, or the United States.

WECKER: I'm not aware of the dates when the operation in Kosovo opened. We had an agreement with Qatar that refugees there would not stay more than either 60 or 90 days, I

think. There were clearly people that were not going to be cleared to travel to the United States in that amount of time, so they approached the Kosovo government and they agreed to allow us to set up a camp at Camp Bondsteel, which is a NATO military installation not too far out of the capital city of Pristina. And most importantly, they allowed us to keep Afghans there for up to a year. So people who were bumping up against a deadline in Qatar were flown to Kosovo. This was, again, people living in large tents. We had about 300 people there, all Afghans who had something in their file or something that was delaying them or prohibiting them from going to the United States.

Q: Were there families or was it mostly men?

WECKER: There was a small group of single men, but it was mostly families. There were some American citizens and green card holders who had gone back to Kabul and then fled with their husbands. It turns out their husband had some issue and they elected to stay there with their American kids and their American wife until the husband was allowed to travel.

Q: Is this still 2021 or are we now in 2022, as you started doing this work?

WECKER: This is 2022.

Q: Had they been there a while or were they just leaving Qatar?

WECKER: Some of them had been there a while, like three to six months, I think. Staffing the place had been challenging. Basically, we were staffing it with TDY'ers [temporary duty personnel] who would stay a couple of weeks, so we didn't have the continuity that is helpful in running an organization like that. I was one of the first that stayed more than a few weeks, and I had more seniority, which meant a lot when dealing with our military. I wasn't a junior officer out there for two weeks. I was a grumpy old retired guy who had been doing this for a while.

Again I was the Director. I had three, sometimes four, fellow Foreign Service officers there with me at the same time, and then there were a number of FBI and USCIS people that were actually handling the cases. We State employees didn't do any of the processing of the actual cases. We weren't even allowed to know the reasons why they weren't being sent to the United States, which made for some difficult conversations. I would be introduced as the lead for the U.S. government. They'd ask me why they weren't being allowed to go to the United States. And I didn't know.

Q: That's hard. Part of what you were doing was being in charge of the installation?

WECKER: The U.S. military was in charge of the installation. We had Marines in charge of security, but there were things that the Embassy had to know about and be involved in, including any problems that might erupt or occur. If someone were to walk off the camp, we had a standard operating procedure of how we notified the Kosovo government of this. The diplomatic security people had a big role in reviewing these cases for travel to

the United States. So we coordinate things with the Embassy and the military, and the NGOs that were there working, we had some grants for IOM and some others that were building a school and doing that kind of thing.

Q: They were expecting this would go on for an intermediate term, setting up services?

WECKER: Yes. This was evolving all the time. No one really knew how long we were going to keep the camp open, or what we could or couldn't do in terms of improving the camp infrastructure, since a lot of it was based on very unclear and often contradictory military regulations. One problem is we had no answer as to what to do with the people that couldn't go to the United States. There was no good alternative, and we couldn't send them back to Kabul of course. They did finally wind that camp down, not totally wound down, but almost completely wound down. There are still about 14 Afghans in Kosovo that we are housing in a hotel while we try to figure out these last few cases.

Q: You mentioned that a number of them came from Doha. Were there any cases where charter planes had just arrived without any assurance of going to the United States? Had all these people come out of Kabul on U.S. planes?

WECKER: Yes. Then something in their files kept them from going to the U.S.

Q: How long were you there?

WECKER: I think it was three months.

Q: Did some people's cases get cleared?

WECKER: A few, just a handful. We actually had the first person, while I was there, walk off the base. We always told them that it was not a detention facility, but if they left the base, we weren't going to help them anymore. There would be no chance of going to the U.S. You can't come back on the base and come back to your room and board. Finally, this one person did walk off and it caused a lot of waves because there were a lot of people in the U.S. government who didn't realize that we would allow them to walk off. We weren't sure that the Europeans knew that we would allow them to walk off, either. There was a lot of excitement about that. So this one person walked off and then later, I understand, 10 or 12 more of a group of single men all walked off and at some point disappeared into other countries in Europe.

Q: I imagine that they were also trying to see if there were other countries that might take them.

WECKER: Yes. The more obvious ones were people with relatives in other countries: Canada, U.K, Australia. We tried those. There was some effort to find other countries that could possibly take them, but it was very slow negotiating. Nobody wanted to go to these other countries. They'd get upset if you asked them about it. Finally, that number has gotten down to 12 or 14 people at the date of this interview.

When I was in Albania, because there were so few of these people in Kosovo, they took the refugee office coordinator out of Kosovo, so I was going up and managing that portfolio, too.

Albania

Q: When did you get to Albania?

WECKER: I got to Albania in November of 2023 and left there in May of 2024.

Q: So you had some time in between those two.

WECKER: Yes. I had done a few other things. I actually spent the previous winter in Kazakhstan on an INL project.

Q: So you've been working a lot since your retirement.

WECKER: Yes. Not always to do with the refugees. That was a good job, although I don't recommend going to Kazakhstan in winter.

Q: Let's talk about Albania. You arrived two years after the fall of Kabul. Can you give an overview of how Afghans got to Albania, what the general numbers were, and then what the situation was two years later when you got there?

WECKER: During the fall of Kabul, a number of NGOs were helping Afghans leave Kabul and travel onward. I'm not exactly sure how, but they ended up with a couple thousand refugees in Albania. And there were some, I think, formal requests from former U.S. government officials who asked the Albania government to be lenient on these guys. "We appreciate your help with them. They're not U.S. government charges. They're just people who ended up here". That was the original group of 2,000 to 3,000 people, men, women and children of all walks of life.

The Albanian government was very gracious. They helped set up housing in hotels at a beachside resort, and they granted all of these refugees temporary protective status. They could work. They could travel around anywhere they wanted, a really good situation. While I had been in Kosovo at this very austere refugee camp, we learned about these 2,000 plus refugees at a beach resort in Albania, getting jobs, et cetera.

Q: Among the two to three thousand people of all walks of life, were there notable groups of people who had been the Afghan government?

WECKER: There were. There was a group of former parliamentarians, judges, people that had somehow gotten out of Kabul, just not in the flow that was heading to the United States, although that's where they wanted to go.

The U.S. Embassy in Tirana immediately started interacting with these people, working with immigration and trying to get them onward to the United States as quickly as possible, although that took a lot of vetting and other work. I think we're now down to 60 of these original arrivals, people who for some reason haven't gotten through the clearance process.

Q: At this point, you went from November to May and you were working for the office called CARE?

WECKER: Yes. At some point before I got there, the decision was made, since we had such a great relationship with the Albanian government, that we could use that platform for SIV applicants who were at the moment still in Afghanistan. So they started flying SIV applicants from Kabul to Qatar and then onto Albania where we would put them up and do the vetting in Albania before flying them out to the U.S.

Q: That's something CARE has been doing since being set up, working on getting the remaining people out. I would hazard a guess, however, that flights out of Kabul are not something that Americans are aware is going on today..

WECKER: Right.

Q: That has been the way in which we've been helping SIV applicants to come to the United States. When you got there, this had been happening for awhile or just starting?

WECKER: When I got there, it had been happening for several months, I'm not exactly sure how long. It was functioning quite smoothly, usually one flight a week with over 140 people coming in. Then they would just fly out on commercial flights once they got their visa and medical clearances, to go to the United States. Coming once a week on Fridays and then trickling out over the next few weeks.

Q: A lot of these people had worked for the U.S. military over the 20 years?

WECKER: Yes.

Q: Our embassy employees mostly got out during the NEO [the evacuation of U.S. Embassy Kabul in August 2021].

WECKER: Yes, I think that's right. Both working for the military directly and then working with them through contractors or whatever. Also, a tremendous number of very young children. We were getting flights with over half of the passengers under six years old, and very young, large families.

Q: Were there people, like USCIS people and consular officers, working there?

WECKER: Not USCIS, but the consular section at the Embassy in Tirana would conduct the SIV interviews during the course of the week. They were really good, very dedicated

people. And CA [the Consular Affairs Bureau] was sending TDY'ers there to help with the work demand. The embassy and the consular section were super supportive of getting all the right documentation and everything done squared away, trying to get people moved on as quickly as possible.

Q: What were you doing?

WECKER: The CARE office had an operations manager who was managing the flights and worked with all the contractors that we had there, the people that were running the hotels, doing all the transportation. We had a couple of data analysts who were looking at the numbers trying to make this as efficient as possible to get people cleared and out as quickly as possible. I was the main liaison with the embassy, with the ambassador and DCM about what we were doing.

There was a lot of attention and pride in Albania about this project. It's a very pro-American country as you probably know. This is something that they have taken a lot of pride in, and we didn't want to take advantage of that, so we tried to make sure that nothing happened to reflect badly on the project.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WECKER: David Wisner was the chargé, and he's been there at least seven or eight months.

Q: It's been going pretty well?

WECKER: It didn't always go well. When you have that many people, some things go wrong. We had some unfortunate deaths, accidents, things, people turned up with paperwork that was found to be fraudulent. Now you've got to work with the Albanians, because you promised them that everybody coming through was going on to the United States, and now all of a sudden some aren't, things like that. A fair amount of diplomacy was involved working through these issues.

Q: What were the people who were arriving at that time saying about the situation in Afghanistan?

WECKER: The ones that were the most outspoken were the women and girls. Girls can't go to school in Afghanistan, so they were relieved to be out and looked forward to the expanded freedoms of being able to go out, walk around in public and go to school again. Those were the most common stories.

Reflections

Q: Were there any other things that you learned or saw, or reflected on during this period? This isn't your last time. You went back for a little while recently.

WECKER: I think the most unfortunate thing, long term, has been our failure to make sure everybody that came to the United States has a clear path forward to permanent resident status, that they are still in limbo, dependent on what Congress is going to decide and how they're going to get legalized.

Q: Did you have any visibility into why Congress balked at the legislation that would solve the problem?

WECKER: No, it really mystifies me that we had this consensus to bring them out of Afghanistan but are still dragging our feet on making sure they can stay here. It's unbelievable that many, or any, of those people would voluntarily go back to Afghanistan if their legal status here is eventually denied.

Q: It sounds from your experience that the security checks, the vetting, were rigorous and those cases that could have been problematic were being handled appropriately.

WECKER: I couldn't speak about what was happening in the first several weeks. But after that, I think it was good.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to mention? I assume you had a deep connection to Afghanistan and you felt this experience gave you a way to help people?

WECKER: Yes. I've been delighted to have the opportunity. It meant a lot to me.

Q: I want to do one follow-up question. You did three tours and with your language abilities and your familiarity with Afghanistan, I wonder if there's any stories of people that you met, that you knew before, or some interesting stories that you might want to tell us about.

WECKER: During the course of my three tours in Afghanistan, I got to know a lot of Afghans, particularly the ones in Bamyan. A lot of them moved either to New Zealand or to the United States years ago, and I stay in touch with them.

There is an interesting story about the way the New Zealand Defense Force handled their interpreters. When they left Afghanistan, they borrowed a plane from the Australians because they didn't have one big enough, and they took all of their people plus all of their Afghan interpreters and families, loaded them all on the same plane and flew them off to New Zealand. I thought that was a pretty good deal.

Second thing, at Fort Dix, I re-met a number of people that I had known who had worked at the embassy or who had worked in Mazar-i-Sharif. I was happy to see that State Department and USAID were doing a lot to get them jobs and get them set up and going here in the U.S.

The third—this is really interesting. In Kosovo, we used to get ESPN+ and show soccer matches in one of the tents, in the evening. I'd sit by this guy, an older gentleman who

would tell me everything about soccer. He'd explain that this guy used to coach for Liverpool, but his defense was never good, so then he went on to Manchester, and now he's coaching for the Dutch National team. He had this encyclopedic knowledge.

Q: Was it in English or Dari?

WECKER: Broken English. Then it turns out he was Massoud's security chief and was in the building when Massoud was assassinated.

Q: That was right before 9/11, two days before 9/11.

WECKER: Yes. He was there and he had written this book about all his interactions with Massoud and he had been a member of Parliament, and this and that. In the course of those years he must have done something that made U.S. authorities not want him to come to the United States. A fascinating guy with this huge amount of Afghan history, very positive all the time. He has two high school age daughters. We were trying to get them to school. Afghan people are great. I don't know what to say about them. If you get to know them, for the most part, they're friendly, hospitable, sharing about what their lives are like. I thought I'd throw that in there.

This gentleman was still stuck in Kosovo. The only reason they were in Kabul at the time of the fall—he had been living in Abu Dhabi with his family and his daughters were in school in Abu Dhabi—they went back to Kabul about a week before the fall and they got stuck, and then they flew out. He said he preferred not to go back to Abu Dhabi because he had a temporary permit to live there, and felt like he was at the whim of the rulers of Abu Dhabi. If they ever wanted to kick all the Afghans out they could just do it. Ultimately, after many months of going around in circles, he said, I'm just going back to Abu Dhabi.

Q: Sounds like a logical thing.

WECKER: He and his wife and two daughters ultimately went back to Abu Dhabi.

Q: John, thank you for this story. It's always nice to humanize this massive experience. You've met thousands of people in those various tours. It's nice to hear about particular people.

End of Interview