

ALWAYS FAITHFUL

A Story of the War in Afghanistan,
the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond
Between a Marine and an Interpreter

**MAJOR TOM SCHUEMAN
AND ZAINULLAH ZAKI WITH
RUSSELL WORTH PARKER**



WILLIAM MORROW

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have so many people to acknowledge that this section could be a book itself.

There's a Pashto proverb that says "Even on a mountain, there is still a road." We want to recognize a few of the people who helped us build a road through this mountain. First, twenty-five Marines were killed in action during our deployment to Sangin. These were the men who sacrificed their youth, hope, and potential. They were the centurions described by Marcus Flavinus in a letter to his cousin Tertullus in Rome. The centurion wrote:

We had been told, on leaving our native soil, that we were going to defend the sacred rights conferred on us by so many of our citizens settled overseas, so many years of our presence, so many benefits brought by us to populations in need of our assistance and our civilization. We were able to verify that all this was true and, because it was true, we did not hesitate to shed our quota of blood, to sacrifice our youth and our hopes. We regretted nothing.

But whereas we over here are inspired by this frame of mind, I am told that in Rome, factions and conspiracies are rife, that treachery flourishes, and that many people, in their uncertainty and confusion, lend a ready ear to the dire temptations of relinquishment. Make haste to reassure me, I beg you, and tell me that our fellow citizens understand us, support us, and protect us, as we ourselves are protecting the glory of the Empire. If it should be otherwise—if we should have to leave our bleached bones on these desert sands in vain—then beware the anger of the legions.

While we have the watch, we refuse to allow their sacrifice to have been in vain. We will say their names. Our lives will serve as testimony

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that we were witnesses to the greatest expression of love known to man.
We will say their names:

Lance Corporal John T. Sparks
Corporal Justin J. Cain
Lance Corporal Phillip D. Vinnedge
Lance Corporal Joseph E. Rodewald
Lance Corporal Victor A. Dew
Lance Corporal Irvin M. Cenicerros
Lance Corporal Alec E. Catherwood
Lance Corporal Joseph C. Lopez
Lance Corporal James D. Boelk
Sergeant Ian M. Tawney
Lance Corporal Brandon W. Pearson
Lance Corporal Matthew J. Broehm
Lance Corporal Randy R. Braggs
First Lieutenant Robert M. Kelly
Lance Corporal James B. Stack
First Lieutenant William J. Donnelly IV
Sergeant Matthew T. Abbate
Lance Corporal Colton W. Rusk
Corporal Derek A. Wyatt
Sergeant Jason D. Peto
Lance Corporal Arden J. Buenagua
Lance Corporal Jose L. Maldonado
Corporal Tevan L. Nguyen
Lance Corporal Kenneth A. Corzine
Sergeant Jason G. Amores

There were men and women who, despite a Sisyphean task, held the line. In the middle of a spectacular failure, their valor in a sea of chaos never wavered. They gave their lives attempting to fulfill America's promise. We will say their names:

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lance Corporal David Espinoza
Sergeant Nicole Gee
Staff Sergeant Darin Taylor Hoover
Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss
Corporal Hunter Lopez
Lance Corporal Rylee McCollum
Lance Corporal Dylan R. Merola
Lance Corporal Kareem Nikoui
Corporal Daegan William-Tyler Page
Sergeant Johanny Rosario
Corporal Humberto Sanchez
Corporal Jared Schmitz
Hospital Corpsman Third Class Max Soviak

There are 78,000 people that remain in Afghanistan who meet the SIV criteria. These men and women entered into a contractual agreement with the United States. They honored their part of the agreement and it's a stain on our nation's honor that they're abandoned and persecuted. We have a duty and obligation to continue advocating for these people who risked their lives in service to our nation.

It's May 4, 2022, as of this writing. Here are just a few of the messages Tom has received in the last twenty-four hours.

From a man named Homayoon:

Hello Dear Sir,

Hope you are fine and doing well. I really need your help and your support. I am in very bad condition because of the current situation in Afghanistan. I have worked with the U.S. military for 16 years. Please save my life.

From a man named Farid:

You left us alone in Afghanistan suffering.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

And from Soltani:

Please help us. Save our life! You are the only hope for my family's future. My family needs help. I have children. Please save us! Do not leave us!

I'm forgotten and left behind in the country without being saved and evacuated after so many years where I was employed by the American government.

Since last August, Tom has received thousands of these messages. Tragically, so have tens of thousands of other veterans. We've become the face of deceit and we're bearing the burden of a lie. The collective guilt of our nation has fallen on our heads. We bear an invisible scarlet letter—Betrayal and Betrayed—one more moral injury to add to the collection.

Let's be the country these people believe we are. A country without honor will find it difficult to enlist young men and women to fight for it and even more challenging to find allies to fight alongside us.

At its core, our book is about family. While the book highlights two brothers and their struggle, we would not be here without our families. Our parents, siblings, and cousins made us who we are today. Our wives and children give us purpose, meaning, and hope for a better future. They are worth fighting for and, if necessary, dying for.

As men who are where we are because of teamwork and the contributions of others, we must thank the team at William Morrow/HarperCollins. Our editor, Matt Harper, was like a calm voice on the other end of the radio during a firefight. Day or night, through timely and steady editorial guidance, he got us to the objective and believed in our story enough to make this book happen. Lisa Sharkey was hugely supportive of this book from the start—believing in our story after following it in the media. Taryn Roeder in publicity saw something in our story worth sharing with other people and has done a great job helping us spread the word.

Worth Parker cold-called Tom in August 2021 to say he might have

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a way to get Zak aboard HKIA. A few weeks later we asked the retired Marine, Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, and writer to assist us in telling our story. Worth dedicated himself to putting readers on the ground we've walked for more than a decade. He remains committed to evacuating "just one more" Afghan who placed their faith in our nation.

Finally, while we are of different faiths, we both want to give all the glory to God the Father who is and was always faithful.

APPENDIX: “CONTACT FIRST”

“Contact First”

First Platoon, Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines
Support and Attachments
Sangin District, Helmand Province
September 2010–March 2011

Headquarters

Lieutenant Thomas Schueman
Staff Sergeant Timothy Henley
Sergeant Julio Mercado
Lance Corporal Eric Rose

First Squad

Sergeant Trey Humphrey
Corporal Matt Bland
Corporal Marcus Chischilly
Corporal Sean Leahy
Corporal Tevan Nguyen
Lance Corporal Darrell Cain
Lance Corporal Zach Evans
Lance Corporal Zach Hamilton
Lance Corporal Josh Hamlett
Lance Corporal Kevin Hinkley
Lance Corporal Nate Mori
Hospital Corpsman Third Class Doug Long

Second Squad

Sergeant Jeffrey Iwatsuru
Sergeant Fernando Sotelo
Corporal Raymond Orozco

APPENDIX: "CONTACT FIRST"

Corporal Eric Sandoval
Lance Corporal Andre Gatlin
Lance Corporal Travis Haggerty
Lance Corporal Robert Murphy
Lance Corporal Maverick Voight
Lance Corporal Ryan Wishart
Hospital Corpsman Third Class Jay Bergstrom

Third Squad

Sergeant Jonathan Decker
Sergeant Brendan O'Bryant
Corporal Carlos Gonzales
Corporal Justin McLoud
Corporal Jared Smith
Lance Corporal Brenton Beever
Lance Corporal Tristen Chunn
Lance Corporal Michael Disanto
Lance Corporal Derek Goshke
Lance Corporal Justin Teague
Hospital Corpsman Third Class Rashad Collins

Support and Attachments

Master Sergeant Anthony Pierre
Staff Sergeant Robert Perez
Staff Sergeant Cassel Wiggins
Sergeant Matt Abbate
Sergeant Emilio Avalos
Sergeant John Browning
Sergeant Patrique Fearon
Sergeant Robert Gillespie
Sergeant Joe Myers
Sergeant Rane Rohweder
Corporal Jose Aguilar
Corporal Alex Harmon

APPENDIX: "CONTACT FIRST"

Corporal Shon Hicks
Corporal Royce Hughie
Corporal Jordan Laird
Corporal Joseph Nikirk
Corporal FNU Roberts
Corporal Jacob Ruiz
Corporal Jeff Sibley
Corporal Michael Spivey
Lance Corporal Arden Buenagua
Lance Corporal Nick Calhoun
Lance Corporal Nico Detour
Lance Corporal Cameron Dunbar
Lance Corporal Alberto Espinoza
Lance Corporal Carlos Garcia
Lance Corporal Jacob Greene
Lance Corporal Clay Harrison
Lance Corporal Kevin Hensen
Lance Corporal Darin Hess
Lance Corporal Syrus Isfahani
Lance Corporal Jorge Ortiz
Lance Corporal Travis Smith
Lance Corporal Britt Sullivan
Lance Corporal Justin Talbert
Lance Corporal Bobby Thrillkill
Lance Corporal Colby Yazzie

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- ANA: Afghan National Army—The ground combat element of the Afghan National Security Forces
- ANSF: Afghan National Security Forces—The Afghan military, police, and intelligence forces
- CO: commanding officer—The senior officer in a military unit
- COP: combat outpost—A small, well-fortified position from which military forces can plan and execute operations
- FOB: Forward Operating Base—A secure, well-fortified position from which smaller positions such as combat outposts may be supported
- HKIA: Hamid Karzai International Airport—The major international airport in Kabul, Afghanistan
- IED: improvised explosive device—A “homemade” explosive device, typically crude in construction and made of military and/or nonmilitary components
- IOC: Infantry Officer Course—The course by which the U.S. Marine Corps trains new infantry officers
- ISAF: International Security Assistance Force—The umbrella headquarters over all allied (non-Afghan) forces in Afghanistan
- JTAC: Joint Terminal Attack Controller—A service member trained and qualified to coordinate aircraft in providing close air support to ground combat forces
- MEU: Marine Expeditionary Unit—An expeditionary Marine Air-Ground Task Force embarked aboard U.S. Navy amphibious ships. There are three MEUs deployed at any time.
- MOS: Military Occupational Specialty—The specific job a Marine is trained to perform
- OCS: Officer Candidates School—The process by which aspiring U.S. Marine officer candidates are evaluated for potential to serve as U.S. Marine lieutenants
- PB: patrol base—A temporary position from which a squad or platoon conducts operations

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

PKM: A belt-fed, general-purpose Soviet bloc machine gun

RPG: rocket-propelled grenade—A portable, unguided, shoulder-fired launcher for explosive warheads

SIV: Special Immigrant Visa—The special program by which interpreters and people who worked directly for the U.S. government or companies in the direct employ of the U.S. government could receive a U.S. visa

TBS: The Basic School—The six-month school in which all Marine lieutenants are trained as provisional infantry before attending training in their specific MOS

XO: executive officer—The second-in-command of a military unit

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The authors wish to note the important contributions of two authors to the body of work about the American war in Afghanistan generally, and in this book specifically.

American author, Marine combat veteran, and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Francis J. “Bing” West has written extensively on wars and warfare since 1972. Mr. West spent extensive amounts of time in Sangin District with Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines. Not satisfied to receive briefings in air-conditioned tents, he walked with Third Platoon, seeking the truth in every step. His efforts resulted in *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War*, a book that refreshed our memories, validated our records, and clarified events obscured in the haze of combat memories.

CARTER MALKASIAN, PHD, is a professor, author, military historian, and national security practitioner with extensive time serving in, and advising the highest levels of American leadership about, Afghanistan. He served on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kunar Province in 2007. His Pashto fluency earned him accolades as a State Department political officer in Garmsir District of Helmand Province between 2009 and 2011. He returned to Afghanistan from May 2013 to August 2014, serving as political advisor to the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, General Joseph Dunford. From 2015 to 2019, Dr. Malkasian served General Dunford as the Special Assistant for Strategy to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His brilliant *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* offered clarity on dates and facts of strategic decisions deeply impacting both authors. As it concludes in 2020, the authors hope future editions will include Dr. Malkasian’s astute analysis of the year that ended the dream of a free Afghanistan.



Tom and his sister, Jessie.



Zainullah Zaki, 2012.



Grace (Tom's mom), Jessie, and Tom.



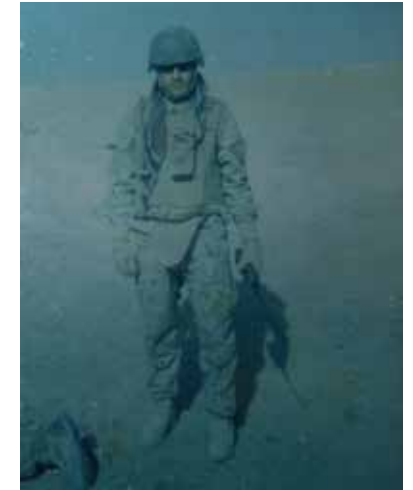
Tom and Andrea at the 245th Marine Corps' Birthday Ball.



First Platoon, Kilo Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan.



Tom and First Squad Leader, Sergeant Trey Humphrey at Patrol Base Abbate in Montana.



Zak in Sangin, 2011.



Zak in Kabul, July 2021.



Infantry Officer Course 4-09 Palm Field Exercise (FEX), 29 Palms, California (Lieutenants Babos, Schueman, Smith, Szostak, and West).



Lieutenants Will Donnelly, Cam West, and Tom at Enhanced Mojave Viper (EMV) before the deployment to Sangin.



Kilo First Platoon at Justin McCloud's memorial service. His son, Desmond, is in the center.

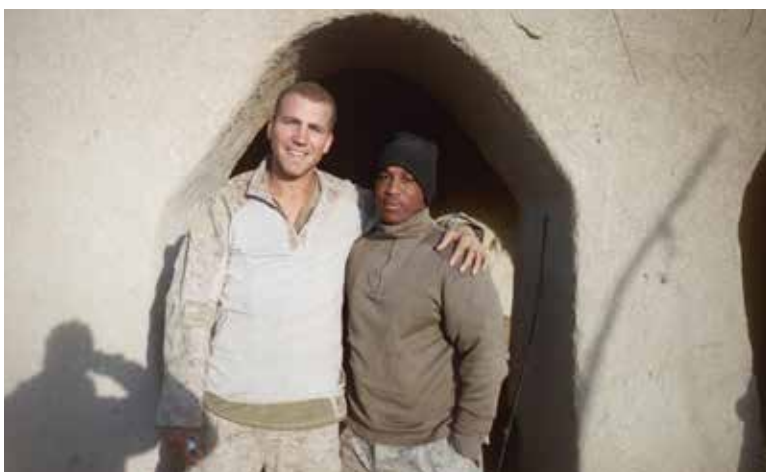
First Platoon on patrol in Sangin. Corporal Justin McCloud, Tom, Doc Rashad Collins, and Lance Corporal Eric Rose with Sangin residents.



Tom and Corporal Aguilar discuss security in Sangin with residents.



Tom and Staff Sergeant Tim Henley in Sangin.



Zak teaching First Platoon Marines to skin a goat.



Tom with Law Enforcement Professional, Vern Horst, after an operation in Trek Nawa in 2013.



Tom after promoting Tim Henley to First Sergeant at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Zak providing security in Sangin.



Tom with one of his interpreters and the *Kandak* commander at FOB Geronimo in 2012.



Tom holds an RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher Zak found while searching a compound in Sangin.



Lima Company, Third Battalion, Fourth Marines (3/4) at Camp Pendleton, 2016.



Tom with Corporal Tevan Nguyen's son, Tevan, in Hutto, Texas.

Lima Company (3/4) on Mean Peak at the Mountain Warfare Training Center (MWTC) in Bridgeport, California.





Tom and Andrea on their wedding day.
Courtesy of Gina Pecho



Tom and Andrea at the Marine Corps Marathon in 2011.



Tom with Jack, Marty, and Amelia.



Tom, Rob Kelly, and Cam West at Camp Wilson during EMV.



Tom with the Infantry Skills Team during a visit to the United States Military Academy at West Point.



Tom with former secretary of state George Shultz at Stanford University's Hoover Institution during graduate school.



Zak and his family outside Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA).



Marines guarding HKIA review documentation in August 2021.



Afghan citizens trying to make it through the screening point for the Abbey Gate; most would never make it past the wall. The tower is the site where the suicide bomber detonated his vest.



Hamid Karzai International Airport in August 2021.

Zak near the North Gate on his second attempt. He was so close, but proximity wasn't enough.



During Zak's successful effort at HKIA. It was his last shot in every way—thankfully the rescue team spotted him.





The scene outside HKIA.



Zak; his wife, Deewa; his daughters, Sadaf, Taqwa, Husna; and his son, Subhanullah, inside HKIA.



Subhanullah, Fort Pickett, Virginia.



Zak, Deewa, Sadaf, Taqwa, and Husna being shuttled to a plane at HKIA.



Wheels up: Zak, Deewa, Sadaf, Taqwa, Husna, and Subhanullah on the plane about to depart HKIA.



Husna in Qatar where they were flown after their escape from Kabul.



Subhanullah in Qatar.



Zak with Sadaf, Taqwa, Husna, and Subhanullah in Qatar.



The rescue team: Major Jared Lefaire and Staff Sergeant Alex Frogley with Zak, Deewa, Sadaf, Taqwa, Husna, and Subhanullah. (Staff Sergeant Greg Veccharino also participated in the rescue but is not pictured here.)



Worth Parker with Subhanullah and Husna, Fort Pickett.



Worth and Zak at Fort Pickett.



Zak and family on their way to their third attempt at HKIA.



Reunion in the U.S.: Zak and Tom in Minnesota, February 2022.