

Last Chance at the Abbey Gate

Brothers who worked with U.S. forces
make a desperate attempt to flee
Afghanistan with the help of strangers.

BY KEN OLSEN



Basharmal Paiwand knew he had to abandon his attempt to get out of Afghanistan with his wife, son and younger brother. The intense heat and suffocating crowds clamoring to get into the Kabul airport were making his 3-year-old son sick. He couldn't imagine a U.S. military contact he'd never spoken to – much less met – would find them among the thousands desperate to flee after their country fell to the Taliban. And his brother might well be turned away because he wasn't part of the last-minute evacuation plan.

Paiwand texted a photo of his suffering son to Ryan Manion, a Pennsylvania woman who was helping arrange their escape from thousands of miles away. Then he sent her a text saying they were giving up if her contact didn't find them in the next five minutes. A flurry of messages followed. Manion texted Air Force Maj. Jared Lefaivre, who was helping Afghan translators and other allies get into the airport. She then sent a series of texts to Paiwand, first telling him to hold the sign with a prearranged code word higher as he tried to move his family to the front of the crowd. Then to shout the name of her late brother, Travis, a Marine killed by a sniper in Iraq. And finally to show Travis' photo to Marines near the Abbey Gate in hopes that one of them would recognize her brother, realize Paiwand and his family were trustworthy, and pull them to safety.

In the midst of this chaos, Paiwand told Manion that his brother, Mohammad Bawar, was also with them. "At that point, I hadn't slept for 36 hours," Manion says. "I told him, 'If your brother doesn't get through you have to keep going. We'll figure something out for him later.'"

Then all communications from Afghanistan went dark.

Ryan Manion, center, founder of the Travis Manion Foundation, helped Mohammad Bawar, left, and Basharmal Paiwand, right, escape Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021 and resettle near Doylestown, Pa. Manion then connected the brothers with Operation Afghan Open Road to help them train to become truck drivers. Photo by Denise L. Henhoeffer

Discarded allies When Kabul fell, Paiwand and Bawar were mired in the complicated process of obtaining Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), meant to make it easier for Afghans and Iraqis who worked with the U.S. military to come to the United States. Their family had long worked with the Army, starting with their eldest brother in 2007. As his business supplying construction materials and heavy equipment to U.S. bases all over Afghanistan grew, he used his success to help his parents, siblings and a large number of Afghans in need. "He never said no to anyone," Bawar says.

Their brother – who is not being identified to protect his family – was arrested by the Taliban twice and received monthly letters or phone calls warning him to stop working with American forces. He refused, Paiwand says. "He said, 'It's my country and my business.'"

A Taliban sniper killed him in March 2013 as he was sitting in his car in Kabul. But his family was undeterred. Paiwand provided equipment to U.S. Army bases and Bawar worked for him as a supervisor, translator and troubleshooter. Five other brothers and their father also continued working with U.S. forces.

Paiwand started the SIV application process in 2017. He obtained a recommendation letter from his former Army supervisor but couldn't persuade him to also provide his passport number – which Paiwand needed to complete his application. Three years later, he reached out to Manion after reading her Facebook post about her brother writing a letter on behalf of his Iraqi translator just a week before he was killed, and asked her for help with his SIV.

"I get a lot of random messages on Facebook and Instagram," says Manion, who established the Travis Manion Foundation after her brother was killed. "This one really struck me because he had worked with the U.S. Army He saw and understood that kinship and brotherhood that my brother had with (his translator)." Paiwand and Manion also bonded over their mutual loss of brothers to war. And Manion agreed to try to help Paiwand contact his former Army supervisor.

Although she was unsuccessful, Manion and

Lafaivre estimates he helped some 500 Afghans get into the airport and onto flights after the fall of Kabul. "There were a million things that had to go right for every one of the rescues," he says.

Paiwand kept in touch, and she sent him a message when the Taliban rolled into Kabul on Aug. 15, 2021. "Did you get out of Afghanistan?" Manion asked. "No, ma'am," Paiwand replied. "I'm in hell."

"I felt helpless, but I sprang into action," Manion says. She told a skeptical Paiwand she knew people who could help get him, his wife, Layla, and his son, Atal, out of the country. She posted a message on social media asking if anyone had a contact at the Abbey Gate and got connected with Lefaivre.

An Air Force rescue pilot, Lefaivre says he got "mixed up in all of this by happenstance." He was deployed to Kabul in mid-July 2021 as part of a Personnel Recovery Task Force. After the country collapsed in August, a friend from the Marine Corps contacted Lefaivre and asked for help getting his interpreter and family into the airport and on a flight out of the country. Lefaivre helped make that happen within a few days, then agreed to let his friend share his contact information with others trying to help Afghans escape. "My phone blew up," he says. Manion was one of the next people to contact him.

Lefaivre told Manion that Paiwand and his family should be at the Abbey Gate by dawn the next day with a sign that said "Spurgeon." That code was part of a system that helped him and his colleagues quickly find Afghans who worked with U.S. forces among the desperate crowds outside the airport. Paiwand and his wife, son and brother headed to the airport around 1 a.m. They were stopped at a Taliban checkpoint on the main road to the airport. "The guy was smiling at us like we were running and afraid of them," Paiwand says, "and asked if we were going to America or Germany? I said, 'Nope, Pakistan.' And he became angry and said, 'I will never let you go on this road.' But we found another road that led straight to the Abbey Gate."

Finding "Spurgeon" By morning, more than 10,000 refugees crowded between Paiwand's

family and the Abbey Gate. The temperature had hit the mid-90s and there was the persistent percussion of the Taliban gunfire just beyond the purview of U.S. forces. People were passing out in the relentless heat that was also affecting Paiwand's son. Feeling they had no choice but to return to the family home in Kabul, Paiwand texted Manion a photo of Atal and told her they were leaving in five minutes.

Lefaivre soon appeared. Despite the chaos and confusion, he had little trouble spotting the people with the "Spurgeon" sign when he went looking for them outside the Abbey Gate.

"I found them tucked away in a corner, being held by some British guys," he says. He told the British contingent he had come to escort Paiwand and his family into the airport. The British resisted, warning such a move would start a riot, Lefaivre says. He pulled them out of the crowd anyway, took them across a canal and through the Abbey Gate as the British closed ranks behind them – all without incident. Then he texted Manion the good news.

After two grueling days in the Kabul air terminal, standing in line for 12 to 14 hours at a stretch, sleeping on cardboard and worrying about Atal's refusal to eat, the family crammed into a plane with hundreds of other refugees and flew to Qatar. Then the family went on to Italy before arriving at Camp Atterbury in Indiana.

Manion sent them food and clothing and lobbied the relief agencies to move them to Pennsylvania, where she could help them get established. She picked Paiwand and his family up at the Philadelphia airport in early November, got them settled in their hotel, took them grocery shopping and made dinner plans for the following evening. The family spent every day at Manion's house for several months. And the Travis Manion Foundation hired Paiwand and Bawar to help Afghan refugees resettle in the Philadelphia area. Although their contract with the foundation ended in April, the brothers continue this work as volunteers.

“There are a lot of families who need a lot of help because they have a lot of children,” says Bawar, who sees this work as a way of honoring his slain brother.

Uncertain future Meanwhile, Manion’s husband, David Borek, asked Task Force Movement – organized in response to a White House initiative to get the supply chain moving – to offer the same truck-driver training to Afghan refugees as it was providing to veterans. The Justamere Foundation funded 32 scholarships as part of what became the Operation Afghan Open Road pilot project.

Paiwand completed the truck-driver training with the first Afghan cohort at Bucks County Community College and is considering his employment options. Mohammad served as translator and troubleshooter for other Afghan students, helping them get their CDL learners permit, obtain visas and navigate language barriers. But he’s set his sights on putting his bachelor’s degree in IT to work in the tech world rather than becoming a truck driver while he waits for his SIV application to be approved.

Atal is in school. And thanks to Manion’s connections, Layla found work as a seamstress in an upscale clothing store. She’s enrolling in a dental assistant training program at Bucks County with a scholarship funded by Justamere.

These successes are bittersweet. Three dozen of the brothers’ family members and several of their former employees remain trapped in Afghanistan. Many of them have had their SIV applications approved, but cannot obtain passports from the Taliban government. They are in hiding, unable to work and dependent on whatever money Paiwand and Bawar can send for food and essentials. It’s a common problem. Many Afghan refugees are financially supporting family left behind while trying to get established in the United States – to say nothing of another 100,000 SIV applicants and their families who haven’t been able to get out of Afghanistan.

Manion, meanwhile, is quite concerned about the lack of support for Afghans who made it to the United States. One of the overwhelmed relief agencies that promised to furnish Paiwand’s rental showed up with “a dirty mattress and very

little of what a family needs to get started,” Manion says. “Two of the chairs broke the first night.” Another woman, whose husband was killed by the Taliban, is living in a row house in a bad part of town. “They gave her a food stamp card and let her go,” Manion says. “Who’s focused on what comes next?”

Reunion Despite all the challenges they are still navigating, Paiwand and Bawar are grateful to Manion and Lefavre, two strangers who stepped up to help them escape Afghanistan and almost-certain Taliban retribution. They reconnected with Lefavre when he and his wife visited Philadelphia in December 2021. “It was a very emotional and meaningful experience for us,” Paiwand says. “I didn’t find the words to thank him for helping us.”

Paiwand and Bawar are just two of many Afghans who Lefavre and his colleagues helped get through the Abbey Gate with code words and cardboard signs. He fielded requests from congressmen, senators and at least one former ambassador over the course of a dozen days. Lefavre estimates he helped some 500 Afghans get into the airport and onto flights after the fall of Kabul. He received the Bronze Star for meritorious achievement for this and other actions during the withdrawal. And the task force he served with was credited with helping 10,000 Afghans escape and has been nominated for a Gallant Unit Citation. Their success, and the U.S. military’s overall success at getting more than 120,000 Afghan allies out of the country in a matter of days, is an underappreciated accomplishment that runs counter to the social narrative that the U.S. withdrawal was a complete failure, Lefavre says.

“There were a million things that had to go right for every one of the rescues,” Lefavre says. He credits Manion for making sure it so much of it went right for Paiwand, Layla, Atal and Bawar.

Manion disagrees. “I did nothing,” she says. “He put his career on the line. I asked him why. He said, ‘It’s humanity. I couldn’t stand there and not help.’” 🌿

Ken Olsen is a frequent contributor to The American Legion Magazine.