

The Truman Diaries: Afghanistan

Reflections from twenty years in the field



The Truman Diaries: Afghanistan

Truman was founded in the aftermath of 9/11 as an alternative to the dominant counterterrorism narrative that has driven national security policymaking for much of the last twenty years. Throughout our history, Truman members have worked tirelessly to develop timely, innovative, and principled solutions to preserve and expand democracy, human rights, prosperity and security around the world.

Many Truman members served in Afghanistan in a range of capacities over the last two decades -- as uniformed service members, frontline civilians, journalists, and more. And while the lessons of 9/11 extend far beyond the US war in Afghanistan, the end of that war offers an important opportunity for reflection and storytelling as we mark 9/11's 20 year anniversary.

The six stories featured here reflect both Truman's commitment to service and also the complexity and pain of war. From a military spouse to a veteran of numerous tours, we hope these stories provide a greater connection to the human dimension of this conflict and why this post-9/11 engagement has been so defining for a generation of Truman members and our nation.

Shenée Simon

Truman Security Fellow

Role: Spouse-Family Readiness Group Leader, MI BN

Location: San Antonio; Fort Hood

“It is impossible to build another nation, and now we are seeing the fallout. But even as I understand this, I was not ready for today.”

In 2015 my partner was in Afghanistan working in intelligence and I was living in San Antonio providing welfare and support services to families of soldiers deployed abroad. I supported 20 families across the country, providing updates, morale and wellness checks.

At the time, San Antonio was a new city, and I was taking care of my two little sons, and was pregnant with our daughter. I was so fearful that my girl would not meet her father, and it was hard for me to accept that he wouldn't be there to meet her when she entered the world.

It was through this welfare and morale support work that I was introduced to the work of Wazhma Frogh, co-founder of the Women and Peace Studies Organization in Afghanistan. Wazhma's robust activism for and advocacy of Afghan women inspired, enriched and strengthened my own advocacy work in San Antonio.

My partner was part of a mission to close bases and reduce the U.S. troop presence. His job represented hope that the U.S. had contributed to stabilizing Afghanistan. He travelled a lot to remote areas with inconsistent communication and regular firefights. Now, six years later, his work seems both incomplete and unsuccessful. It is impossible to build another nation, and now we are seeing the fallout. But even as I understand this, I was not ready for today.

My heart aches for the veterans who served, their families, their sacrifice and the sacrifices of our Afghan partners, and the women and girls of Afghanistan. I am dedicated to listening to the stories and voices of those who have been impacted by the U.S. intervention.



Stephen Ryan

Truman Defense Council Member; Los Angeles Chapter Co-Director

Role: Frontline Civilian

(Intelligence Analyst, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency)

Location: Bagram; Helmand Province;
Jalalabad Province; Kabul; Khowst Province

“In those moments, looking at the sky, I would feel I was in a truly peaceful place. And it was perfectly peaceful - until the deep night was punctuated by a gunshot, or a mortar impact, or another sound of war.”

I remember walking outside at night on my third deployment in September 2011. That deployment was my first one away from Bagram or Kabul for an extended period of time. We would work during the night and sleep (a little) during the day. You had to use red lenses because white lights were a security risk, so it was generally very dark.

What I remember more than anything else is the moonlight and the stars. Hundreds of thousands of stars that you could see, with not a light in sight to pollute your vision.

In those moments, looking at the sky, I would feel I was in a truly peaceful place. And it was perfectly peaceful - until the deep night was punctuated by a gunshot, or a mortar impact, or another sound of war.

But those moments of peace surrounded by tremendous natural beauty combined with the warmth and generosity of the

Afghan people with whom we worked were the glimmers of a better future.

Even as we watch with horror the Taliban's return to power after 20 years, I know that every one of those glimmers, every friendship, every action taken to help Afghan people was not in vain, even though it can feel like it sometimes. Thousands of Afghans and Americans and so many other allies gave their lives so that a generation of Afghans could have a chance at something better, and the Taliban's return to formal power cannot and will not erase that effort.

Those sacrifices only become meaningless if we deem them so, and if we turn our eyes and avert our gaze from Afghanistan now. Even if it is hard, we have to stay focused and hold them accountable. We owe that to a generation of Afghans.



Leslie Weinstein

Truman Defense Council Member

Role: Executive Administrative Assistant
to the Commanding General of RC-E
and the 101st Airborne Division

Location: Bagram

“I made a biography card for each casualty that the general kept with him at all times. By the end of the tour, he had a stack of cards at least two inches tall.”

I was the sole author of the hundreds of condolence letters sent on behalf of the 101st Division commander. I received each trooper's photo, military biography, next of kin information, and information on the events surrounding their death.

I made a biography card for each casualty that the general kept with him at all times. By the end of the tour, he had a stack of cards at least two inches tall. I looked at the face of every person who died in RC-East between 2010 to 2011.

One U.S. Army medic who was killed in action (KIA) was the same age as my little brother (they even kinda looked alike). My brother was also an army medic at the time; he had just finished a tour in Iraq and was back in the States when I reached out to him. I asked if he knew the soldier who was KIA and he said he did; he went on and on about how they were in training together.

My brother asked if I knew the medic, and suggested I should tell him that he said “Hello”. I told my brother that the reason I was asking is that he was KIA that day, and I thought they might have known each other. My brother just said “damn”. There isn't really much else to say. We had casualties nearly every day, or at least every couple of days, so it seemed almost like we all became immune to the impact of losing a life. I think my brother was still in a similar mindset since he'd just gotten back from Iraq.

Sometimes families would send us letters back after receiving their condolence note. One family sent back a full page photo of the soldier with his pregnant wife. It was devastating to know a child would be born without a father.



Alex Cornell du Houx

Truman Political Partner

Role: U.S. Military

Location: RS Kabul, most major cities

“I found myself running around the base with a number of courageous Afghan women who were training for competitive races [...] what I did in the Marines was minimal compared to the dangers they faced simply by running.”

The way drought impacted the conflict was notable when I was deployed in 2018. It illustrated the extent to which the changing climate was driving the fighting. During the battle for Farah, in western Afghanistan, the Taliban tried to take the city for its water access; they were not shy about it. When the attack started, the Taliban even tweeted that they were after the city for its water.

When I was in the Marine Infantry in 2002 in Iraq we would do crazy things like run a marathon in full gear without practice. Years later, when I was in Afghanistan, I found myself running around the Resolute Support base with a number of courageous Afghan women who were training for triathlons and competitive races.

These women are part of an organization called Free to Run. I remember in the evenings, when the sun was close to setting over the city, the air was so thick with

pollution that at times it felt like breathing molasses.

At night, I'd be hunched over an air purifier coughing and trying to sleep. I was inspired by the women who were risking their lives and health. What I did in the Marines was minimal compared to the dangers they faced simply by running.

It's awful that with the Taliban takeover these dangers have exponentially increased. I expect that the violence against those who have fought for a more inclusive society will get worse. Recently, members of Free to Run told me that since the Taliban takeover, one of the runners was beaten, her sneakers taken away, and graffiti sprayed on her home.

I am certain that many people will die unless safe havens are found. The United States must increase the refugee limit to 300,000 as we did after the Vietnam War.



Clay M. West

Truman Security Fellow

Role: U.S. Military

Location: Daily travel countrywide

“When I asked whether the woman could be released, I was told that her confinement served in some sense to protect her from an honor killing by her family.”

During a tour in 2008 I saw first-hand the hopes and aspirations of the Afghan people, as well as their frustrations with their country. I worked closely with U.S. military, Afghan leaders, linguists, and others involved in the U.S. military justice system.

My visit to Bamiyan as part of a U.S. military Rule of Law mission haunts me to this day. Bamiyan is in central Afghanistan, about 150 miles west of Kabul. Back in 2008, I flew to Bamiyan, toured a local prison and had the opportunity to speak to the warden, guards, and some inmates.

At one point we encountered a 17 year old woman. As far as I know she was the only woman in this men's prison. I later learned that she was sentenced to eight years of confinement for “sexual harassment” - seducing the person who raped her. The man who assaulted her was in the same jail, and received the same sentence.

They would both be in prison together for eight years. When I asked whether the woman could be released, I was told that her confinement served in some sense to protect her from an honor killing by her family. I remember feeling disgusted at the absurd catch-22 of her situation.

As I write this journal entry, conditions on the ground in Afghanistan are dire. The U.S. military has largely withdrawn and the Taliban have retaken the country. I wish the Afghan people the best. I know that their spirit will not be beaten down with the return of the Taliban.



Matt Zeller

Truman Security Fellow

Role: US Army Embedded Combat Advisor, Ghazni ETT

Location: Ghazni, Logar, Paktia, Kabul, Bagram

“The whole time leading up to our departure, I thought for sure I’d be thrilled to leave. But, now, with Afghanistan behind us, I felt an odd, unexplainable desire to go back.”

I left Afghanistan on Christmas day in 2008. When we landed at Manas Air Force Base in Kyrgyzstan, we loaded all of our duffel bags into giant cargo pallets so that they’d be ready to go the moment we secured a flight home to the U.S. Getting anywhere in war is basically a giant game of hurry-up-and-wait, and then jump on the first thing that comes along.

The Air Force crammed us into a giant clam shell and pretended we weren’t there. They’d built a pretty impressive MWR center within a short walk, which is where most of us spent our time in between eating, napping, and smoking.

Our first night in the clam shell, First Sergeant Rock and Sergeant First Class Bogginsall called me over to their bunks, brought me to attention, and read the orders awarding me a Combat Action Badge. The crowd that had gathered took turns punching it hard into my chest,

earning me my “blood” badge. I’ve never felt more proud in my entire life.

I spent the rest of my time at Manas in moments of profound and stark self-reflection of the past year. The whole time leading up to our departure, I thought for sure I’d be thrilled to leave. But, now, with Afghanistan behind us, I felt an odd, unexplainable desire to go back.

I longed to return. I felt I left my job unfinished, that I hadn’t accomplished my mission, that I could still do lots more. My desire to return grew exponentially with each day we spent at Manas, sitting around uselessly, waiting for our chance flight home.

I still can’t explain it, but not a day has gone by since that I’ve not at some point had the almost overpowering urge to get back any way I can.



About Us

Truman is a high-trust impact community for national security leaders. Together, we develop timely, innovative, and principled solutions to preserve and expand democracy, human rights, prosperity, and security around the world. We draw on our nationwide membership's intellectual firepower, national security experience, and extensive personal networks to do the work required for lasting change.

Our diverse membership includes Hill staff, federal employees, non-profit leaders, academics, industry leaders, political strategists, and elected officials across federal, state, and local government. With experience in uniform, as frontline civilians, and as members of the intelligence community, Truman members also know firsthand the stakes of our foreign policy choices.

Our Mission

The Truman National Security Project's mission is to unite and equip a diverse community of American leaders to produce timely, innovative, and principled solutions to complex national security challenges.

We envision an inclusive U.S. foreign policy that makes American lives better because it advances democracy, human rights, prosperity and security at home and abroad.

Learn More

Our institutional homes are sister organizations: Truman National Security Project (501c4) and Truman Center for National Policy (501c3).

The Truman Project houses our members and their work, including Chapter activities, recruitment, training, and advocacy, generating ideas and movements that can change the world.

The Truman Center often draws on Truman Project members and efforts for its own nonpartisan education and research work.

To learn more about the Truman community and membership,
contact us at membership@trumanproject.org
or visit us at www.trumanproject.org.

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