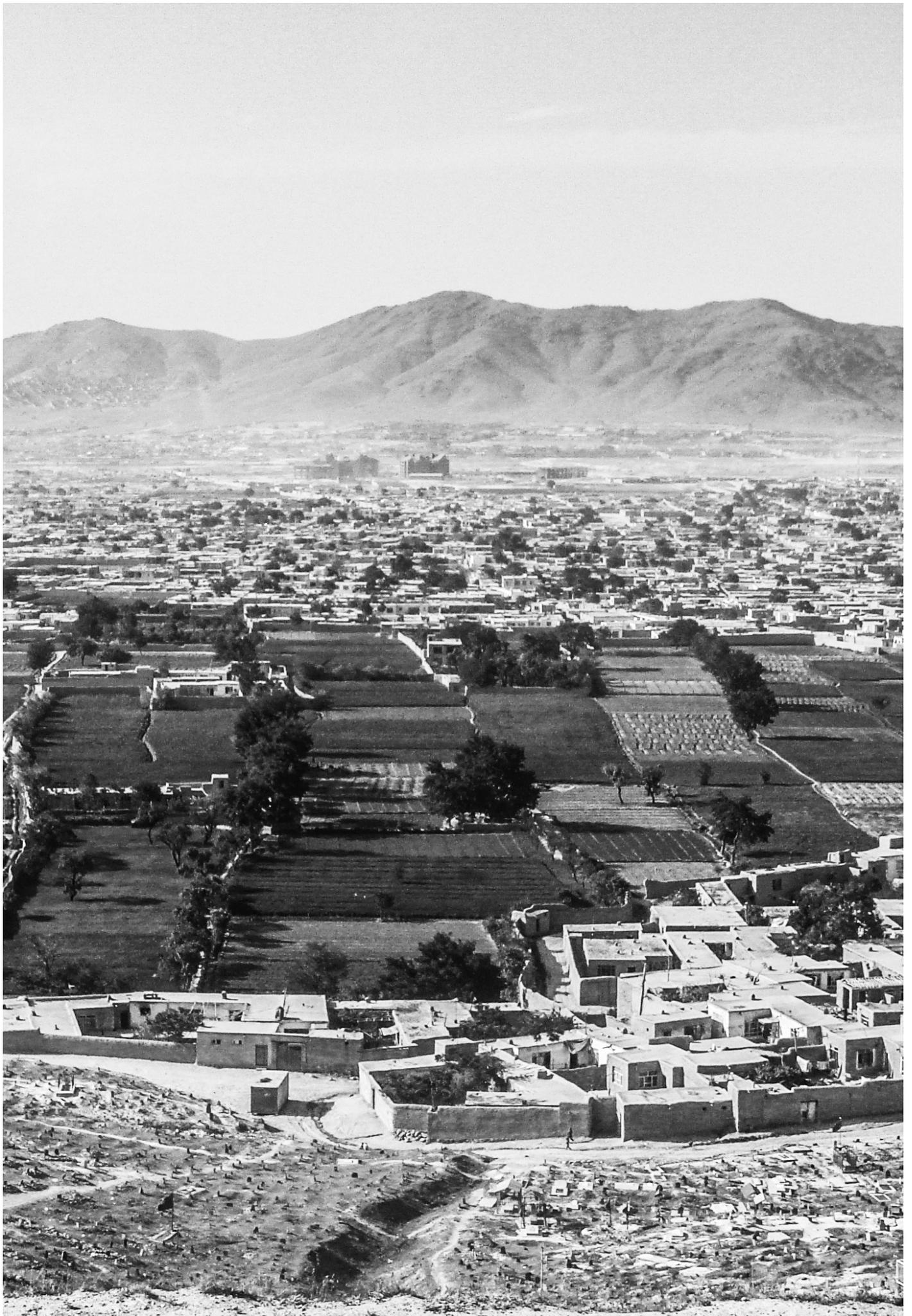


# **Afghanistan Veterans: Moral Injury & Righting Wrongs**

*by Andy Barnham  
and Sara de Jong*

Exhibition Guide



# Andy Barnham and Sara de Jong

## *Afghanistan Veterans: Moral Injury & Righting Wrongs*

This series presents Afghanistan veterans from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany and Sweden, who became leading political advocates for the protection and rights of Afghan interpreters at risk due to their association with Western forces.

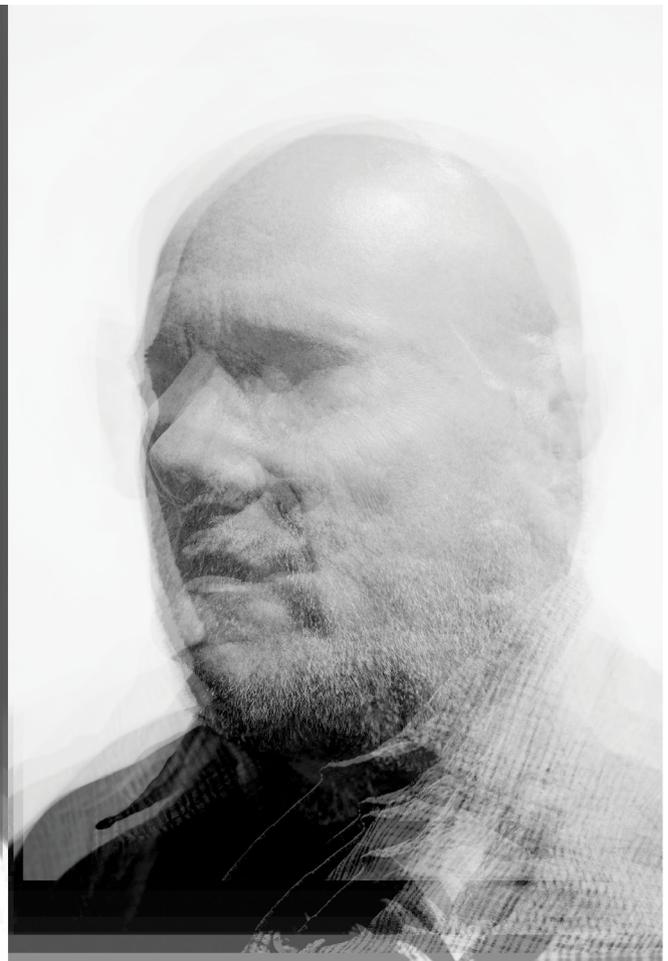
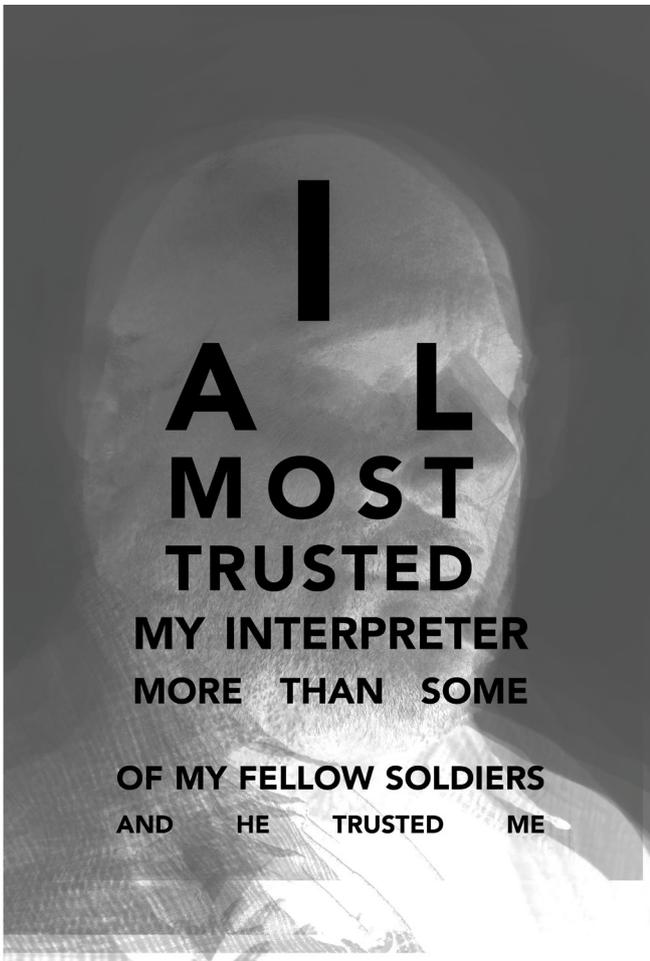
Through portraiture and interview quotes, photographer and Afghanistan veteran Andy Barnham and Professor Sara de Jong from the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of York, provide insight into the motivations of the veteran advocates' commitment to their former Afghan colleagues.

Moral injury is caused by the violation of one's ethics and generates guilt and shame, but can also provide fuel for political engagement with the aim to right wrongs. The leading veteran advocates portrayed here, amplified the voices of Afghan interpreters through media engagement, political lobbying, and legal challenges and provided direct support, including during the evacuation efforts in August 2021.

Combining portraits with their inverted double images, the veteran political advocates are portrayed as looking at themselves in the mirror, only able to face themselves when stepping out of anonymity and challenging the unjust treatment of their former Afghan colleagues. Their advocacy efforts helped assuage moral conflict, but also led them to uncover the deep structural injustices of war economies and migration policies.

The texts in this exhibition guide are edited extracts from Professor Sara de Jong's research interviews. Should any part or the whole of the text be quoted elsewhere, please credit to Sara de Jong.

View of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, from Bibi Mahru Hill also known as Swimming Pool hill, a small hill located in the heart of the city (opposite). While not the most imposing of terrains, the hill offers 180-degree views overlooking Kabul. Photograph taken by Andy Barnham in May 2006.



SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**FELTHAM, JON**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**AFGHAN-CANADIAN INTERPRETERS**

**AMAN LARA**

COUNTRY (3)

**CANADA**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**1996- 2018**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**ROYAL CANADIAN REGIMENT**

**PRINCESS PATRICIA'S CANADIAN LIGHT INFANTRY**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**18**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**WARRANT OFFICER**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**07 1998-02 1999, OP PALLADIUM 3, BOSNIA/ HERZEGOVINA**

**04 2001-10 2001, OP PALLADIUM 8, BOSNIA/ HERZEGOVINA**

**09 2002-04 2003, OP PALLADIUM 11, BOSNIA/ HERZEGOVINA**

**01 2006- 09 2006, OP ATHENA 2, AFGHANISTAN**

**09 2014- 10 2014, OP ATTENTION, CYPRUS**

## Interview 28 May 2023

“My relationships with interpreters started long before I went to Afghanistan. It started when I did multiple operations in the Balkans. At the young age of nineteen, I learned a lot about how interpreters can affect an operation. That continued on through Afghanistan.

The interpreter is your vision to the battlefield. Without the interpreter you would have no clue what’s going on. The interpreters, when you build trust with them, they start to give you more information. It got to the point where the interpreter would be like: ‘John, are you sure you guys want to go this way today? Because I just have a funny feeling something bad is going to happen today.’ And every time they said that something bad happened. They have this intuition.

At the end of my Afghanistan tour, I became really good friends with one of the interpreters. I received a call on WhatsApp and he’s like: ‘I need help. We’re gonna die here’. I was like, ‘I didn’t really realise what was going on until I watched the news with the Americans pulling out. I was like, ‘Holy shit, I got to do something for these guys.’

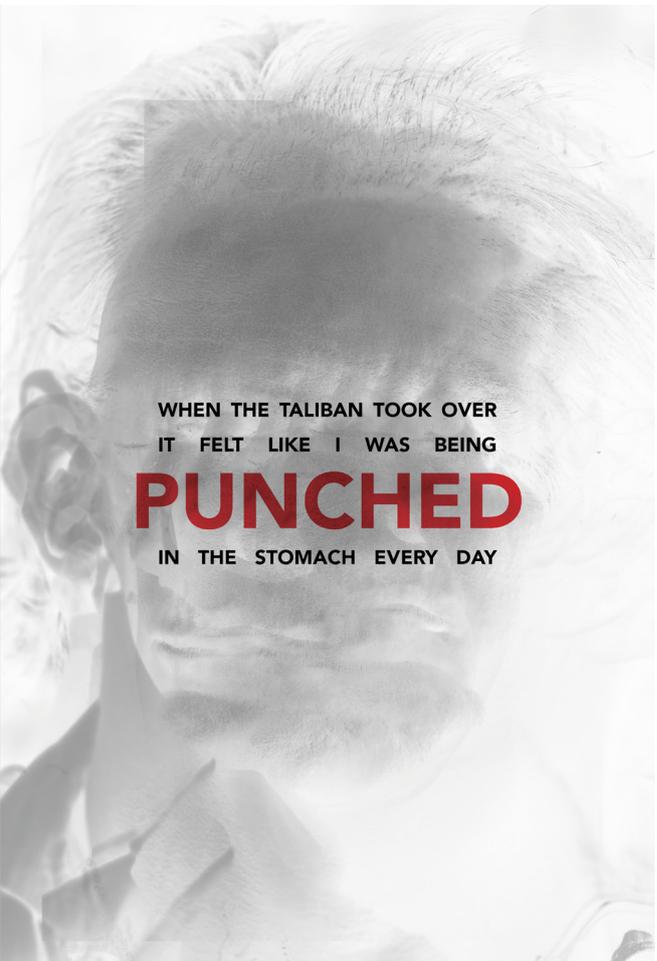
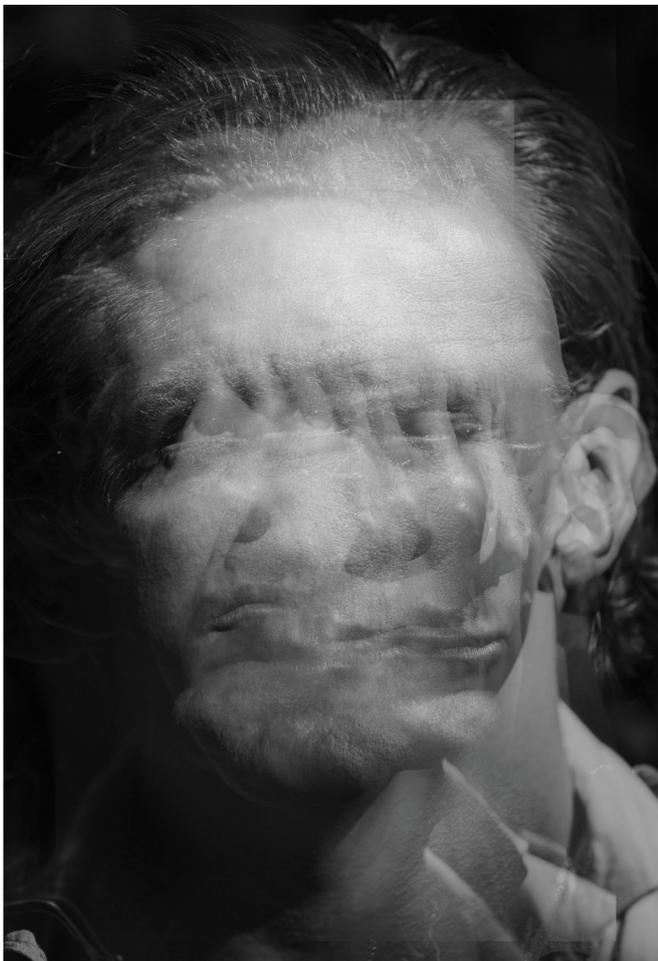
For my research during my Master’s degree, I was talking to a lot of Afghans that I had built relationships with as my former interpreters. I probably talked to about fifteen or twenty of them. Over time, they were sending me pictures of their wives and their kids and their families and showing me where they lived.

All of a sudden, it turned into April of 2021 when the Americans announced the pull out of Afghanistan, and they were like: ‘I need help, I need help really badly. Should I move from Kandahar up to Kabul now?’ I was like: ‘I have no idea what you should do’. With the relationships that I had built, I felt compelled to do something.

The way that I looked at it is that when I developed a relationship with [my former interpreter] in Afghanistan at the end of my 2006 tour, it became like trust. It was like I almost trusted him more than some of my fellow soldiers. Because he was like: ‘Don’t go that way. Don’t do this, don’t walk there’. You would listen to him.

And he trusted me. The trust function was there.

When [the interpreters] reached out to me again in 2021, after I had done some work with them in 2018 for my university programme, I felt compelled to return the favour.”



SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**BLANCK, BJÖRN**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**KAMPANJEN TOLKARNA**

COUNTRY (3)

**SWEDEN**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**2004- 2012**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**NORRLAND DRAGOON REGIMENT**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**20**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**CORPORAL**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**10 2004- 05 2005, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**06 2006- 11 2006, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**06 2007- 08 2007, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**07 2010- 09 2010, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**11 2010- 05 2011, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**10 2011- 05 2012, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

## Interview 28 May 2023

“It definitely caught me when the Taliban took power. Or even before they took power, when the Western forces withdrew, and we saw that the Afghans were not defending the country like they were expected to. It absolutely caught me.

I read that there was this phone line that you could call if you were a veteran in need. I heard that the number of people calling increased by like 800% when the Taliban took over. It was good to hear that, because it made me understand that there were other veterans who were also affected by this.

I guess I also was more affected than I thought I would be. I mean, it doesn't change my life in any way, like my family and my security. And I didn't go to Afghanistan as an investment. It's hard to try to figure out yourself what you invested and how you did it, but obviously I did invest.

It did not only catch my attention, but it felt like I was punched. Not in the face, but in the stomach. Not hard enough for me to fall on the ground crying, but hard enough for me to really feel it. And it was like that for many days in a row. Like I was punched in the stomach in the morning every day.

I mean, I was still functioning and I was still working and I still spent all my evenings and weekends communicating with Afghanistan. I felt really bad, because we just had a daughter, our first born, and I spent less time with her than I would do if that wouldn't have happened in Afghanistan.

In the past few years, I decided that I would work, and I would play some ice hockey, but other than that, I will only be with my family. I will not leave Sweden. I want to be a family father; I want to be there with my wife and child. I want to downsize my life and really just settle down. So, this came from nowhere and it kind of took over my brain.

I felt like I had felt in the years before, it's only me doing this. I mean, I have other allies. [Name omitted] has been my closest one. He's also a veteran and he also did the basic army training in the same regiment as I. We did two of the same missions together, although not in the same squad. So we knew each other, and we both found each other in that we were ready to go the extra mile.

A lot of veterans were pissed off, but [the two of us] were persistent, and we had the capacity to move on and continue to do this until Sweden takes responsibility.”

OUR COMMITMENT TO HELP GET  
OUR INTERPRETERS OUT OF AFGHANISTAN

IT

CON  
SUMED

US



SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**HERBERT, CHARLES**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**INDEPENDENT**

COUNTRY (3)

**UK**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**1985- 2021**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**16<sup>TH</sup>/ 5<sup>TH</sup> QUEENS ROYAL LANCERS**

**ROYAL HIGHLAND FUSILIERS**

**ROYAL REGIMENT OF SCOTLAND**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**17**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**MAJOR GENERAL**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**12 1987- 03 1988, OP BANNER, NORTHERN IRELAND**

**01 1991- 04 1991, OP GRANBY, SAUDI ARABIA, IRAQ, KUWAIT**

**02 1992- 05 1992, OP BANNER, NORTHERN IRELAND**

**10 1994- 03 1995, OP GRAPPLE, BOSNIA**

**09 1997- 08 2000, OP BANNER, NORTHERN IRELAND**

**02 2005- 05 2005, OP TELIC 6, IRAQ**

**09 2005- 12 2005, OP TELIC 7, IRAQ**

**03 2007- 12 2007, OP HERRICK 6, AFGHANISTAN**

**01 2008- 04 2008, OP TELIC 11, IRAQ**

**03 2010- 09 2010, OP HERRICK 12, AFGHANISTAN**

**05 2015- 11 2015, OP GRITROCK, SIERRA LEONE**

**06 2017- 04 2018, OP TORAL 5, AFGHANISTAN**

## Interview 22 March 2024

“It was a very emotional period. It was one of the most emotionally draining periods of my life, which is weird because I was sitting in a container in Somalia. I wasn’t in the Baron Hotel<sup>1</sup> [in Kabul] on the front line. But it was tiring, it was emotional, it was very, very difficult being in contact with people in Lashkargah<sup>2</sup> who were sending you videos of fire fights outside their house at night and people sending you videos of their father who’d had his legs broken by the Taliban.

One couldn’t help being angry, really angry with an institution that I thought was too flippant about it. It was doing a good job during the evacuation. I don’t fault it. Technically it did a good job; it got lots of people out.

But I was angry because I didn’t see any of the interpreters that we had been tracking for weeks and months and we had on our little spreadsheets. I didn’t see any evidence that they were being called forward and taken out.

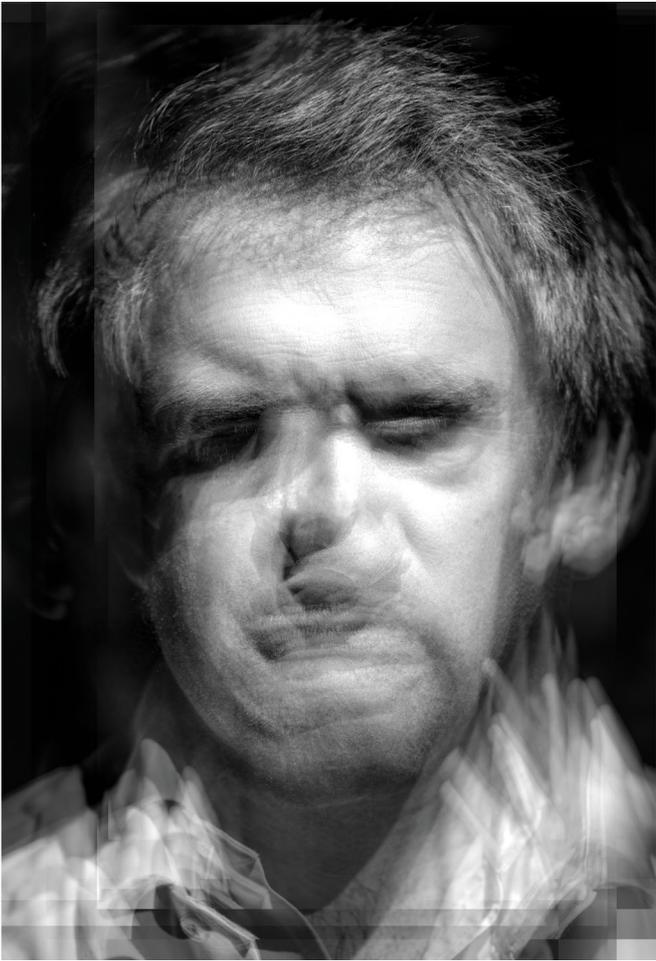
It wouldn’t have been such a political crisis if they got interpreters out in May or June. If the countries had gotten their interpreters out in a timely manner, there wouldn’t have been an evacuation on the scale and nature that we saw in August.

I think my own mental health was shot to bits. I think everybody’s was and we all turned on each other at various times. I think it consumed us. Our determination and our commitment to help get our interpreters out of Afghanistan over that period consumed everybody.

It ate us up and it became an obsession for a period of time. I don’t regret it. I absolutely don’t regret it. I don’t regret any of the bridges that I burned. You know, we were doing what was the right thing to do, Sara. And thank heavens, there were good people.”

1 Afghans who were called forward for evacuation by the British Army were told to travel to the Baron Hotel, where an evacuation handling centre was also established.

2 A city in southwestern Afghanistan and the capital of Helmand Province.



**IT JUST FEELS SO WRONG.**  
IT FEELS LIKE WE LEFT  
SOLDIERS BEHIND. IT  
**JUST** FEELS SO WRONG.  
IT **FEELS** LIKE WE LEFT  
SOLDIERS BEHIND. IT  
JUST FEELS **SO** WRONG.  
IT FEELS LIKE WE LEFT  
SOLDIERS BEHIND. IT  
JUST FEELS SO **WRONG.**

SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**GORDON- FINLAYSON, PETER**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**SULHA ALLIANCE**

COUNTRY (3)

**UK**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**2009- 2013**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**QUEEN'S DRAGOON GUARDS**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**24**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**CAPTAIN**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**10 2011- 05 2012, OP HERRICK 15, AFGHANISTAN**

## Interview 11 September 2020

“We built really strong rapport with these guys. They were embedded with us. They would come in our vehicles, they wear our uniform, they wear our body armour. When we went on patrol, they had to wear the same helmet and all the same protective gear. The only difference was that [the interpreters] didn't carry weapons, because they weren't an offensive asset.

The other crucial element to the interpreters was that British troops only ever spent six months in theatre<sup>1</sup>. So, you spend the first two or three months really kind of finding your feet. Then you spend perhaps two or three months actually operating at optimum level. Then the last month, you're starting to draw down and you're handing over to the next guys.

So, for us, the interpreters were the crucial element of continuity between different brigades. They were the source of intelligence that ran through the entire conflict.

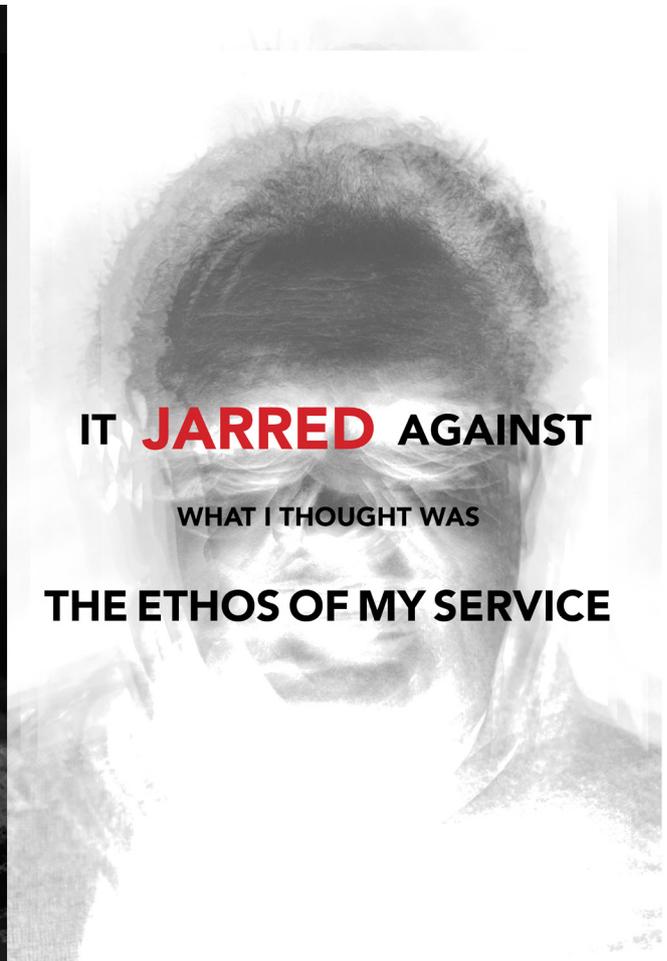
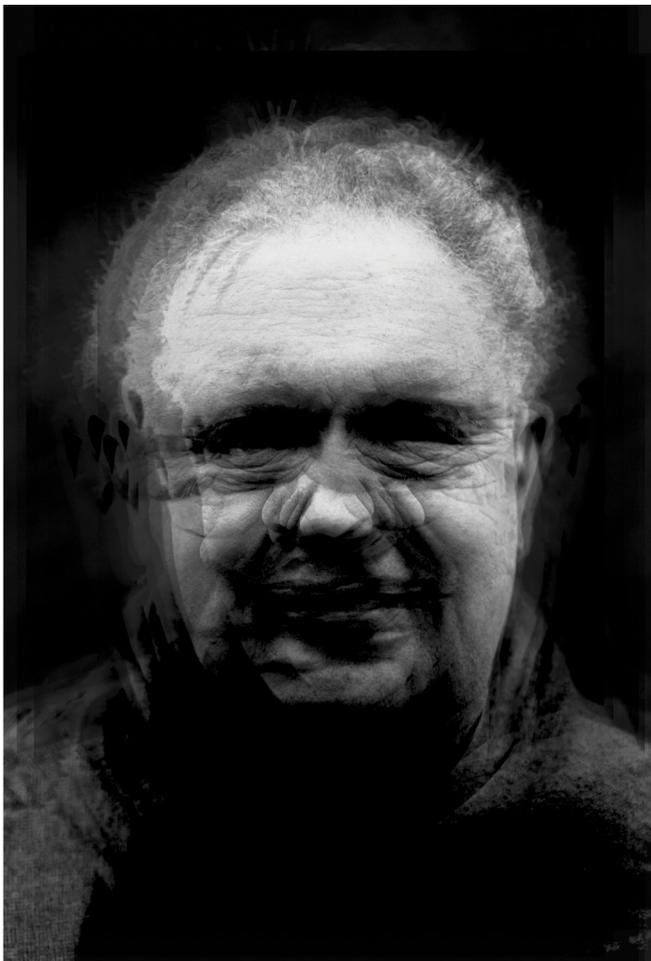
[The interpreters] joined press up competitions and I played chess with [one of them]. He kicked my ass every time. I think I'd beat him once in about 100 games. They were part of the tight knit team, and then we were set to leave them behind and say goodbye at the end. It was a bit like leaving one of your soldiers behind.

In training, you train and train and train that if somebody gets injured, you do everything to get them out of there. Or if somebody gets killed, you fight to get them out. So, to leave the interpreters behind felt weird. The only comfort was that you knew that you were entrusting them to the next person, who you knew would treat them in the same way.

Therefore, to leave them behind at the end now, it just feels so wrong. It feels like we left soldiers behind. Yeah, it feels like we've left Corporal Jones from Cardiff. It feels like we've left him there. You know, it's bizarre. It's totally bizarre.

That really is the motivation, the very strong motivation, I think for ex-military people who worked with interpreters in this way and welcomed them into the team and they excelled in the team.”

<sup>1</sup> The term 'theatre' is a military colloquialism used here to indicate (the area of) deployment on operations.



IT **JARR**ED AGAINST  
WHAT I THOUGHT WAS  
THE ETHOS OF MY SERVICE

SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**DIGGINS, SIMON**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**SULHA ALLIANCE**

COUNTRY (3)

**UK**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**1978- 2014**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**ROYAL REGIMENT OF FUSILIERS**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**18**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**COLONEL**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

04 1978- 09 1978, OP TOSCA, CYPRUS

01 1984- 12 1984, OP BANNER, NORTHERN IRELAND

08 1985- 05 1986, OP TOSCA, CYPRUS

08 1990- 04 1991, OP GRANBY, KUWAIT

05 2000, OP PALLISER, SIERRA LEONE

07 2004- 07 2005, OP TELIC 4- 6, IRAQ

07 2008- 07 2010, OP HERRICK 9- 12, AFGHANISTAN

01 2011- 08 2011, OP ENDURING FREEDOM, DJIBOUTI

## Interview 29 February 2024

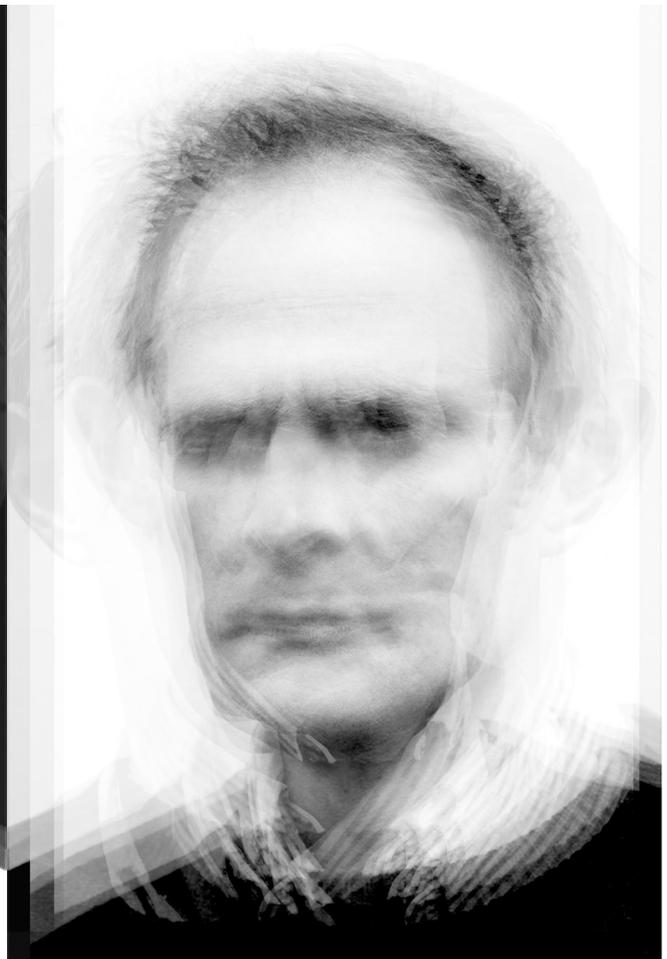
“There was a civil servant who basically explained: ‘Well, if he comes back, he might claim asylum’. [This Afghan interpreter] lost three limbs in our service and you’re going to deny him [repatriation to the UK to access military medical facilities]. At the time, it just completely jarred with me.

I can’t honestly say I became an advocate then, but I was slightly aware of the issue because five years before, I’d been in Iraq and the issue of an Iraqi interpreter came up and I was asked as a relatively senior officer, ‘What shall we do about the Iraqi interpreters?’ We were all anticipating a draw down. That was ██████████ asking me who I knew very well, you know, because he’d been my boss. And he said, ‘Well, what do we do?’ And I said, ‘We’ll look after them’. And then we moved on with the conversation, but I was kind of aware of the issue from Iraq. I mean, there was the whole story about how Iraqi interpreters weren’t looked after.

And then four years later, I left the army. Almost within a month of me leaving, a friend of mine, ██████████ phoned me about his particular interpreter [whose asylum application in the UK had been refused]. And that’s kind of how it started. It started with a sense of incongruity that we could be so bloody awful as an organisation, as a system that we deny [repatriation to an Afghan interpreter] who’d lost three of their limbs in our service.

I just felt it was wrong. At our best, we’re all equal together. We’re serving together, they are working alongside you. They go out on patrol, they’re sharing our risks. I wasn’t going out and patrolling particularly. I’d go out and patrol places to visit, but I wasn’t doing what they were doing on a daily basis. But we’re sharing our risks and then the system wasn’t looking after them properly. That just always just struck me as simply wrong.

I’m an infantry officer, that’s what you do. You’re with your blokes; that’s how you operate. So, when we weren’t doing that to people who are working with us, it jarred against what I thought was the ethos of my service. And yet that ethos was not part of the way in which the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence as an organisation or other people looked at that. They were like: ‘That’s fine, but that’s for the British [only]’. They will not treat other people the same. That was just wrong, you know.”



SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**AITKEN, EDWARD**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**SULHA ALLIANCE**

COUNTRY (3)

**UK**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**2009- 2018**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**ROYAL LANCERS**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**23**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**CAPTAIN**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**03 2011- 09 2011, OP HERRICK 14, AFGHANISTAN**

**09 2013- 05 2014, OP HERRICK 19, AFGHANISTAN**

## Interview 22 March 2024

“We had had enough exposure in the media, and the cause had had enough exposure in the media that it felt like we were in the right place. And we were the right people to say something in a really powerful way. But we didn’t really have the firepower. And so Charlie Herbert<sup>1</sup> coming along and being able to go and tap up the establishment figures in the House of Lords was exactly what we needed.

I remember us drafting the Open Letter with him. I was traveling to the south of France for a wedding. I remember having to stop and get out and climb a hill at the side of the road in order to get phone signal to convince Lord Dannatt<sup>2</sup> to put his name to this and run him through it and who we were giving it to from the media

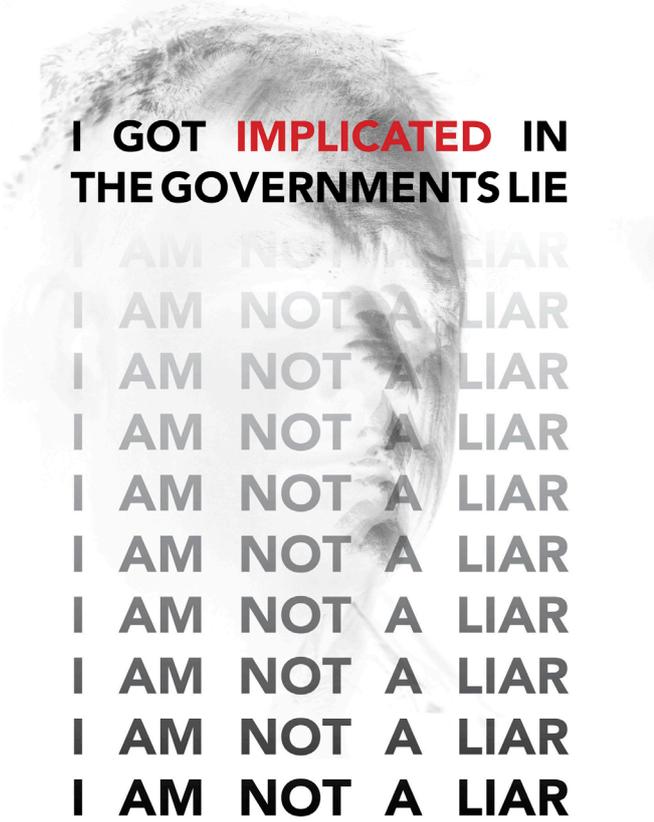
We were basically still learning at that point; how you do these things, how you make a big statement in the media, how you follow it up, who you give it to, what sort of background briefings you give to journalists, so that they have a bit more context.

We just let fly and I remember it being very exciting. And I remember thinking, ‘wow!’. When our letter hit the front pages of some of those newspapers, part of me thought, ‘oh, right, what have we done? We really got onto something.’

Of course, any media that we had had before then, had been of interest, and it might have been on the Today program, but it had never been front page news. So that was the first time that it became clear that this wasn’t just an interest story. This was something that was going to become a big, big thing and a big story, and there was genuine national interest in this situation.”

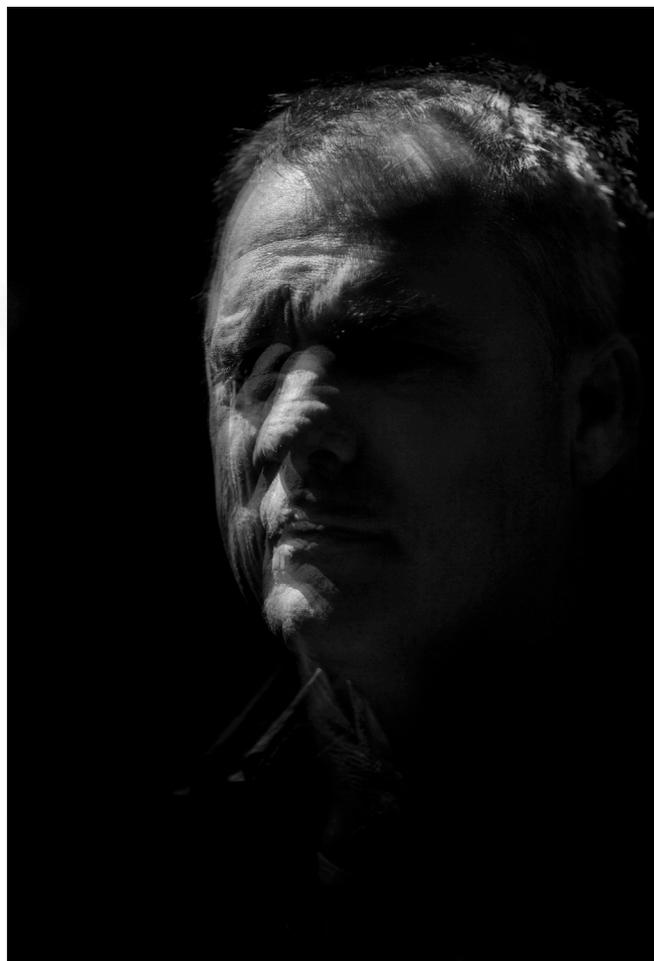
<sup>1</sup> Major General Charlie Herbert, who became an outspoken advocate for Afghan interpreters in 2021, is also featured in this project (see pages 7- 8).

<sup>2</sup> The Lord Dannatt GCB CBE MC was the Chief of the General Staff (the professional head of the British Army) from 2006 to 2009. He is a Member of the House of Lords. Lord Dannatt was the chief signatory of the Open Letter, coordinated by the Sulha Alliance with Major General Charlie Herbert, to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Defence on the 28th of July 2021, which expressed concern that the newly launched Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy was not applied with the necessary generosity and speed. The full Open Letter can be found on page 20.



**I GOT IMPLICATED IN  
THE GOVERNMENTS LIE**

**I AM NOT A LIAR  
I AM NOT A LIAR**



SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**SCANES, JASON**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**FORSAKEN FIGHTERS**

COUNTRY (3)

**AUSTRALIA**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**1996- 2015**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**ROYAL AUSTRALIAN ARMY ORDNANCE CORPS**

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**18**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**CAPTAIN**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**10 2004- 04 2005, OP MAZURKA, SINAI**

**12 2012- 09 2013, OP SLIPPER, AFGHANISTAN**

## Interview 24 May 2023

“It was something that I just felt so deeply morally obligated to do. I thought they had given me a voice in Afghanistan, so I have to make a voice for them in Australia. Otherwise, nobody would listen or even want to hear from them. But if a veteran is standing up, then people will be wondering what’s he got to say.

I was hoping that the Government would be the same, but it actually turned out to be the opposite. That further impacted my moral injury, because you can’t even get a ten minute meeting with a minister in the Government that you’ve previously served under for 20 years.

I remember driving down [to parliament], which is a long way from where I lived. It’s like an 18 hours drive. I remember I drove down to Parliament on several occasions. All the way down. That’s one-way, so it’s like a 36 hours round trip.

I went to the Parliament: ‘Can I get an appointment? Can I talk to somebody?’ I got nothing for years, and that really just spurred me on, that I was being ignored. My interpreter was certified by the Defence Ministry in 2013 and then after waiting about three years, we were like: ‘Hey, where’s this at?’ We were getting no answers. I started advocating and then at the five-year mark I was really pushing; that was around 2018. Then I started up [my advocacy organisation] Forsaken Fighters.

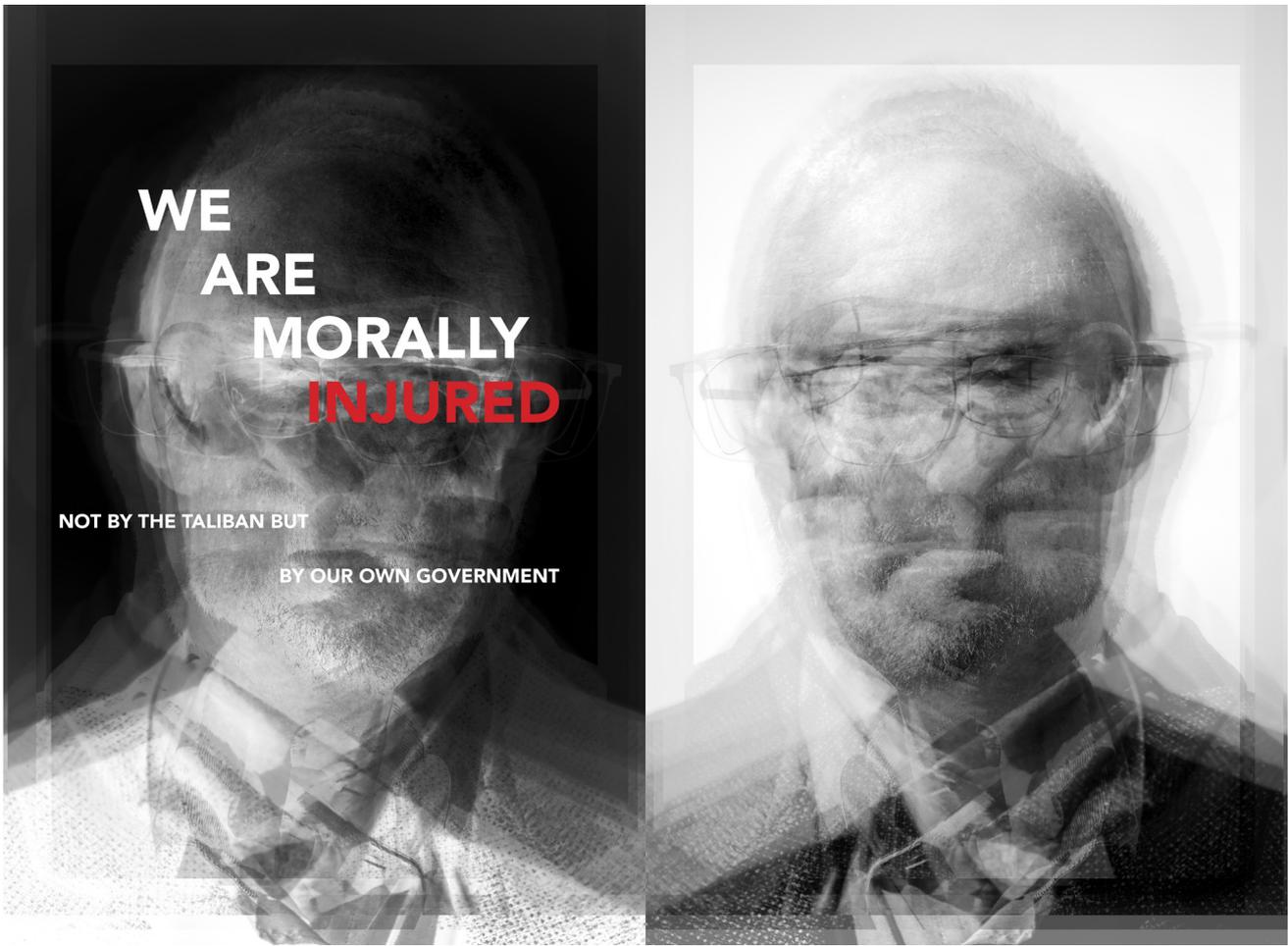
With the troops withdrawing in 2014, [the interpreters] were really concerned. They used to say: ‘The Taliban says, you’ve got the clocks, but we’ve got the time.’ They meant they would just wait us out. The interpreters were quite concerned about that and we used to keep them mission-focused by saying to them: ‘Mate, we’re Australian, we’ll look after you. We’re mates, the government is looking after you, you’ll get here.’

I got implicated in the Government’s lie. I am not a liar.

To then get home and to not be able to get answers from the Government was just really morally confronting for me. [My interpreter] had 14 days to respond to a 160 pages email with attachments from the Australian Government.

He had applied whilst I was still serving with him, and he got his letter, before I’d left, from the Australian Government, saying that he was certified. So, we were really excited for him at that stage.

I’ve discovered through this whole process how really broken the system is in Australia and how I really feel for those guys that helped us. I know there are a lot of other veterans out there that have the same issues. I’m in contact with many of them. But there comes a point when [the engagement with the issue] becomes all-consuming as well.”



**WE  
ARE  
MORALLY  
INJURED**

**NOT BY THE TALIBAN BUT**

**BY OUR OWN GOVERNMENT**

SURNAME, FIRST NAME (1)

**GROTIAN, MARCUS**

ADVOCACY ORGANISATION FOR AFGHAN INTERPRETERS (2)

**PATENSCHAFTSNETZWERK AFGHANISCHE ORTSKRÄFTE**

COUNTRY (3)

**GERMANY**

DATES OF SERVICE (4)

**1995- TO DATE**

REGIMENT/ UNIT (5)

**ARMED FORCES OPERATIONAL COMMAND \***

AGE ON ENLISTMENT (6)

**18**

CURRENT RANK/ RANK ON LEAVING (7)

**CAPTAIN**

FOREIGN DEPLOYMENT (8)

**05 2002- 11 2002, SFOR, BOSNIA/ HERZEGOVINA**

**05 2005, KFOR, KOSOVO**

**06 2011- 01 2012, ISAF, AFGHANISTAN**

**\*CURRENTLY ON LEAVE OF DUTY**

## Interview 25 March 2017

“I wanted to do some volunteering. Something where I could decide for myself when goals are achieved. Because in the military my superior says what goals we must achieve. And, in turn, a politician tells him what goals we must achieve in Afghanistan. That is not rewarding. You also always leave in the middle of a [military] operation, after six or seven months and you hope that your successors will somehow resolve the problem.

In early 2015 there were several media reports about resettled Afghan former local staff, who had trouble coping with life in Germany without support. There was a German Army mentoring program. The German Army Inspector General put out a call that Afghan [resettled] local staff who had worked for the Germany Army could contact them and say: ‘I need help’. Those willing to be a buddy should just contact them and say: ‘I am willing to help them’.

I did that and was given the address of [a particular refugee accommodation] I met a young, dynamic Afghan who spoke six languages fluently, had a German girlfriend, an iPhone 5, but no apartment in Berlin. But there was another Afghan sitting next to him in the room. I asked: ‘Who is that?’ That’s Ali, he also worked as a local employee [for the German Army]. ‘Does he have a mentoring buddy too?’ ‘No, he only speaks Dari, he doesn’t know what’s going on here at all’. ‘OK. How many of you are here in total?’ ‘23’. Then I said: ‘Okay, let’s have a meeting.’

Only three or four had a mentoring buddy. Some had very serious problems. So, I said, this mentoring buddy one-to-one relationship is only helpful when there is a buddy for all local employees. As long as that is not the case, we need an entity where all former Afghan locally employed staff [who have been resettled to Germany] can call, so we can help them. That’s how I came up with the arrangement of a network with regional groups.”

\* \* \*

Speech by Marcus Grotian at the Bundespressekonferenz (Federal Press Conference), August 2021

“I personally, as citizen in uniform – also when I am not wearing one now –, am speechless that this Government, even after this catastrophe that is still ongoing, still rejects any responsibility.

I read often these days that many veterans are re-traumatized. And I can tell you why. We are morally injured. Moral injury is a category in the psyche. The fatal thing is that we have not been injured by the actions of the Taliban, because the Taliban were opponents, the enemy does things that surprise us, that is why they are our enemies. We have been morally injured by our own Government, and that is shameful.”

On the 1st of June 2021, 17 veteran, refugee and other civil society organisations from seven countries published a letter calling on their Heads of State and the NATO Secretary General.

His Excellency Jens Stoltenberg Secretary General  
North Atlantic Treaty Organization Boulevard Léopold III  
B-1110 Brussels Belgium

1 June 2021

**Re: Protection of Afghan Locally Engaged Civilian Staff**

Dear Mr. Secretary General,

Time is running out to protect NATO's local Afghan allies. In 100 days, on the 11th of September 2021, NATO's full withdrawal should be completed. The current acceleration of the process could leave as little as 30 days. We call on NATO member states to act immediately to evacuate Locally Engaged Civilians (LECs) and their families to ensure that those that protected our lives will themselves be safe from reprisals.

NATO's Afghanistan mission assembled one of the largest international coalitions in history. It also assembled the efforts of local Afghan staff, including interpreters, security guards, and cultural advisors, who provided crucial support to NATO-led forces.

While NATO countries have been united in their combat and non-combat missions, they have been divided in their protection of Afghan locally engaged civilians. In the absence of a coordinated resettlement programme to protect local staff at risk due to their work for member nations, LECs have faced arbitrary barriers to protection with each NATO partner applying different criteria and reasons for exclusion.

The undersigned are acutely aware of the realities on the ground. Our organisations are in daily contact with former and current Afghan LECs whose lives are at risk. They fear that they are excluded from NATO's ambition to be "united in leaving together". They are afraid that they will be left behind not only due to inconsistent criteria, but also because the deteriorating security situation makes it impossible to travel to interviews and obtain documents in time.

With the ongoing withdrawal, NATO member states must act urgently to guarantee the safety of present and past Afghan LECs through evacuation and resettlement:

Firstly, governments must take a flexible and generous approach without arbitrary exclusions, in the recognition that the targeting of current and past local staff will be indiscriminate, irrespective of length or date of service, direct employment or subcontracting.

Secondly, with only 100 days left before full withdrawal, governments must substantially increase capacity to process relocation requests in situ. Where the volume of requests makes it necessary, governments must immediately extract LECs to safe locations for processing. Without a coordinated effort to guarantee the protection of the Afghan local staff that supported its partner nations, NATO risks betraying its own promise that the "drawdown will be orderly, coordinated, and deliberate". We are copying this letter to the heads of state/government of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Sincerely,

Forsaken Fighters Australia Inc., **Australia**  
Afghan-Canadian Interpreters, **Canada**  
The European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL), **Europe**  
L'association des Anciens Interprètes et Auxiliaires Afghans de l'Armée Française, **France**  
Patenschaftsnetzwerk Afghanische Ortskräfte e.V., **Germany**  
Algemene Federatie van Militair Personeel (AFMP, The General Federation of Military Personnel, **the Netherlands**  
Vakbond voor Defensiepersoneel VBM (VBM, Union for Defence Personnel), **the Netherlands**  
The Sulha Alliance, **United Kingdom**  
Association of Wartime Allies, **United States**  
Human Rights First, **United States**  
International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), **United States**  
Red T, **United States**  
Veterans for American Ideals, **United States**  
International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), **International**  
International Federation of Translators (FIT), **International**  
Language Resource Centre, International Secretariat, Amnesty International, **International**  
World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), **International**

Copy to:

The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister of Australia  
The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau PC MP, Prime Minister of Canada  
Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of France  
Dr. Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany  
The Hon. Sergio Mattarella, President of the Italian Republic  
The Hon. Mark Rutte, caretaker Prime Minister of The Netherlands  
The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom  
Mr. Joseph R. Biden, President of the United States

This Open Letter signed by military leaders, coordinated by the Sulha Alliance in collaboration with Major General Charlie Herbert, was published on 28th July 2021 and prominently covered in leading UK media outlets.

## **OPEN LETTER TO HMG CONCERNING FORMER LOCALLY EMPLOYED STAFF IN AFGHANISTAN**

We feel compelled to write this open letter as military leaders and civilian officials from the campaign in Afghanistan. We remain gravely concerned about the situation faced by our former interpreters and the supporting staff who stood shoulder to shoulder with us on the battlefield, despite recent initiatives from the government.

The Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) is a positive step and we are grateful for the evident hard-work of those officials tasked with this endeavour. However, the policy is not being conducted with the necessary spirit of generosity required to protect our former colleagues from an indiscriminate and resurgent Taliban. Put simply, far too many applications are being rejected despite the recent changes to the policy.

ARAP is not providing the sanctuary that the British public have been led to believe is being granted to our former Afghan interpreters and colleagues. Too many of our former interpreters have unnecessarily and unreasonably been rejected from relocation to safety in the UK and we strongly urge that the policy is reviewed again immediately, to ensure more are given sanctuary.

The current policy discriminates against many interpreters who spent years supporting the UK military in Afghanistan but who were among the 35% of staff dismissed from service for various reasons without any due process or ability to appeal their dismissal. We urge the government to amend the policy so that all former interpreters are offered the chance to be resettled to the UK unless it is proven that they have committed such an offence that constitutes a threat to national security. We all acknowledge that any risk to these individuals must be balanced against the risk to national security and we do not advocate for anyone who would jeopardise the security for which we fought. The UK already has an excellent system for addressing this risk, which is used when assessing applications from asylum seekers. The same exclusion bar should be applied to our former interpreters and locally employed staff. At the moment, their rejection from ARAP is wholly disproportionate.

As well as those interpreters rejected for relocation due to dismissal from service, we are also gravely concerned for those locally employed staff who provided essential support to the UK but who are not eligible for relocation because they are not considered to have been in an 'exposed role' and the many interpreters who were subcontracted rather than directly employed by HMG. The Taliban make no such distinction about employment of local staff with coalition forces and have already murdered a number of those in these categories. We ask that all locally employed staff be made eligible for relocation on a genuine case-by-case basis rather than the broad rejections currently being issued by ARAP.

We urge the government to act immediately. Time is of the utmost essence to save the lives of those who served alongside our servicemen and women in Afghanistan and who saved countless British lives. It is clear there is insufficient capacity for ARAP to cope with the scale and pace required. If any of our former interpreters are murdered by the Taliban in the wake of our withdrawal, the dishonour would lay squarely at our nation's feet.

Signed by:

General The Lord Dannatt – Former Chief of the General Staff  
Admiral of the Fleet The Lord Boyce – Former Chief of the Defence Staff  
The Rt Hon Admiral The Lord West of Spithead – Former First Sea Lord  
General The Lord Richards of Herstmonceux – Former Chief of the Defence Staff  
General The Lord Houghton of Richmond – Former Chief of the Defence Staff  
General The Lord Ramsbotham – Former Adjutant General  
Marshal of the Royal Air Force The Lord Craig of Radley – Former Chief of the Defence Staff  
Marshal of the Royal Air Force The Lord Stirrup – Former Chief of the Defence Staff  
Baroness Coussins – Crossbench Peer  
Lord Ricketts – Former National Security Advisor  
General (Retd) Sir Richard Barrons - Former Commander Joint Forces Command  
General (Retd) Sir James Everard – Former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander NATO  
General (Retd) Sir Richard Shirreff - Former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander NATO  
General (Retd) Sir Peter Wall - Former Chief of the General Staff  
Vice Admiral (Retd) Duncan Potts - Former DG Joint Force Development and Defence Academy  
Lt Gen (Retd) Sir David Capewell - Former Chief of Joint Operations  
Lt Gen (Retd) Tim Evans - Former Chief of Staff HQ ISAF, Afghanistan  
Lt Gen (Retd) Richard Felton - Former Commander of Task Force Helmand  
Lt Gen (Retd) Philip Jones - Former Chief of Staff NATO Allied Command Transformation  
Lt Gen (Retd) Sir Mark Poffley - Former Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Military Capability)  
Air Marshal (Retd) Sir Stuart Atha - Former Deputy Commander Operations RAF  
Air Marshal (Retd) Phil Osborn - Former Chief of Defence Intelligence  
Maj Gen (Retd) Martin Smith - Former Senior NATO Advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Interior  
Maj Gen (Retd) Nick Ashmore - Former Military Secretary  
Maj Gen (Retd) James Chiswell - Former Commander of Task Force Helmand  
Maj Gen (Retd) Julian Free - Former Director of Campaign and Transition Assessment Group, HQ IJC  
Maj Gen (Retd) Charlie Herbert - Former Senior NATO Advisor to the Afghan Ministry of Interior  
Maj Gen (Retd) Andrew MacKay - Former Commander Task Force Helmand  
Maj Gen (Retd) Patrick Marriott - Former Assistant Chief of Staff (Operations) PJHQ  
Maj Gen (Retd) Mitch Mitchell - Former Commander Joint Force Support Afghanistan  
Maj Gen (Retd) Paul Nanson - Former Deputy Commander RC (South West) Afghanistan  
Maj Gen (Retd) Jonathan Shaw - Former Assistant Chief of Defence Staff (Global Issues)  
AVM (Retd) Bruce Hedley - Former Director Joint Warfare  
Brigadier (Retd) Alastair Aitken - Former Commander 77 Brigade  
Brigadier (Retd) Johnny Bourne - Former Commanding Officer 1 RGR Battle Group, Kandahar  
Brigadier (Retd) Ed Butler - Former Commander Task Force Helmand  
Brigadier (Retd) Rufus McNeil - Former Commander 101 Logistics Brigade  
Brigadier (Retd) James Stevenson - Former Deputy Commander NATO Training Mission Afghanistan  
Colonel (Retd) Ash Alexander-Cooper - Former Senior Advisor to Afghan Special Police Units  
Colonel (Retd) Nick Kitson - Former Commanding Officer 3 RIFLES Battlegroup, Helmand  
Colonel (Retd) David Richmond - Former Commanding Officer 5 SCOTS Battle Group, Helmand  
Colonel (Retd) Iain Smailes - Former UK Defence Attache, Kabul  
Colonel (Retd) Stuart Tootal - Former Commanding Officer 3 PARA Battle Group, Helmand  
Dr Mike Martin - Former Army Officer, Helmand Cultural Advisor, Author Helmand - An Oral History  
Johnny Mercer MP

The advocates' warnings that Afghan Resettlement programmes were not executed with the speed required, went unheeded.

Following the Taliban take-over of Kabul on the 15th of August 2021, Western nations scrambled to evacuate their citizens and Afghan local staff. Many Afghan local staff and their families were and remain left behind.

A 2023 UK Defence Select Committee report noted that British "veterans' mental health will be negatively affected by those Afghans left behind".

In 2023 the international NGO Local Staff International was founded with the mission to safeguard the rights and dignity of local staff worldwide, ensuring comprehensive support and advocacy for their essential roles in global missions.

We would like to thank the participants for their continued commitment, honesty, and time.

We are grateful for the support and funding provided by the Durham University, the ESRC Impact Acceleration Accounts and the University of York.

## Andy Barnham

Andy Barnham is a portrait photographer and British Army veteran. He is also the son of a refugee; his mother and her family fled Vietnam in the closing days of the Vietnam War finding sanctuary in the U.S.A.

Andy discovered his passion for photography while serving as an officer in the Royal Artillery and carried a camera in addition to his rifle. Of the locations he deployed to during his service it was Afghanistan which influenced him the most; he learned Dari deploying as a military interpreter in Kabul in 2006 and volunteered to return in a front line capacity, mentoring Afghan National Army soldiers in Helmand Province, in 2008.

After leaving the British Army in 2009 Andy became immersed in the menswear scene and has photographed the best of British heritage and craft for luxury editorial titles for over a decade. The 'scruffiest officer' in the mess found himself taking sartorial photography on Savile Row and fashion on the runways of London, Milan and Paris.

Andy now focuses his camera on portraiture. He draws upon his unique combination of international, military and civilian experience to break down barriers and to engage and create relationships with his subjects in order to capture meaningful portraits.

[www.andybarnham.com](http://www.andybarnham.com)

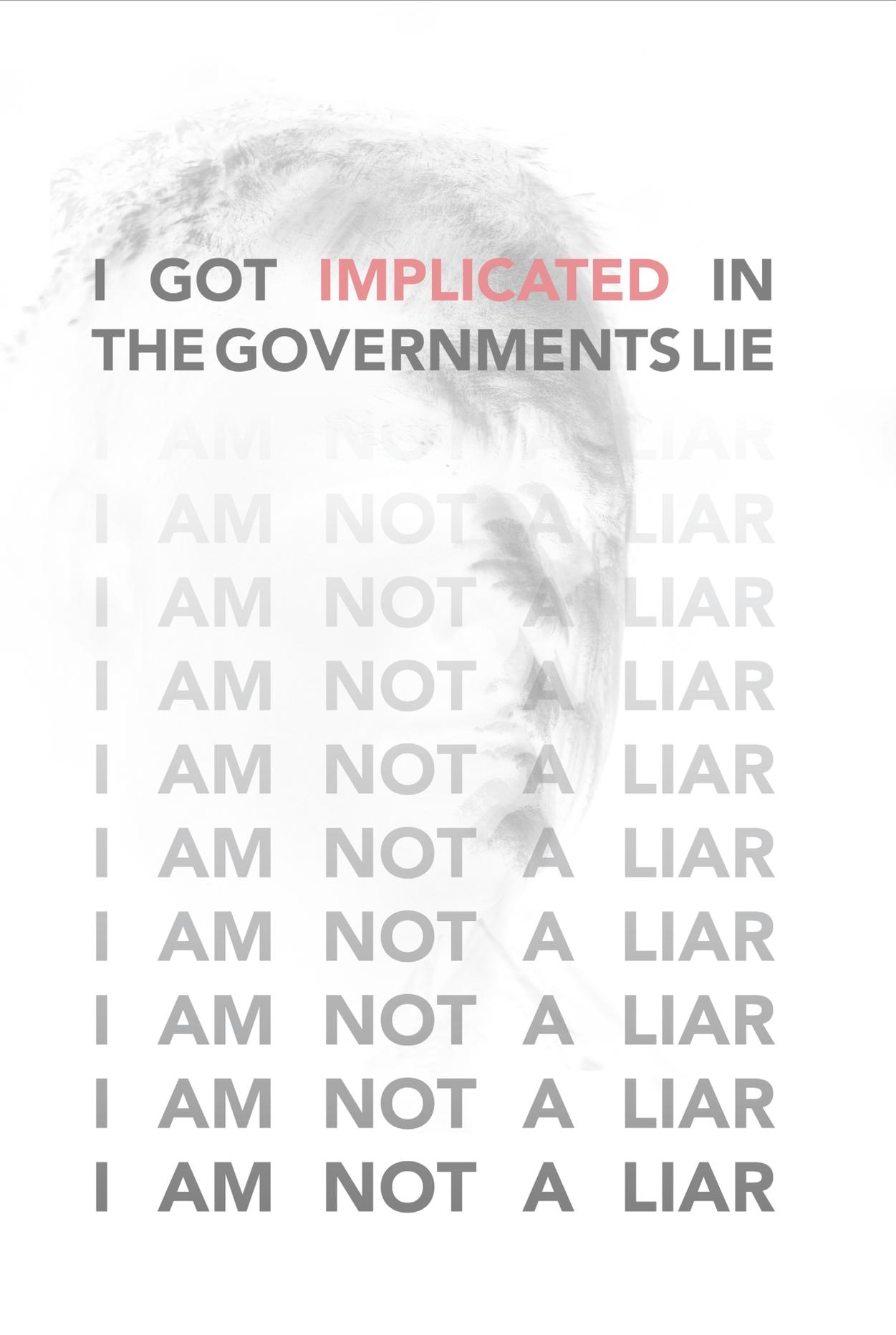
## Sara de Jong

Sara de Jong is a Professor at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of York. Her broader research interests include the politics of NGOs and civil society, especially in the field of migration and gender; (post) colonial politics and brokers as political actors.

In 2017, Sara started a research project on the claims to protection and rights by Afghan and Iraqi military interpreters and other Locally Employed Civilians, which also investigated the strategies and activities of their advocates, including veterans, lawyers and civil society actors. Since then, she has conducted more than 90 interviews with interpreters and advocates in the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, France and the Netherlands, carried out observations of national and international political meetings, and analysed media, legal and policy reports.

Sara is committed to engaging with formal and grassroots politics, from providing oral evidence to the Parliament's Defence Select Committees in the UK and the Netherlands, to volunteering as a befriender for women held in immigration detention centres. Sara is a co-founder of the Sulha Alliance, an organisation that campaigns for the rights of Afghan former interpreters and other Locally Employed Civilians who have worked with the British Armed Forces.

[www.york.ac.uk/politics/people/academicstaff/sara-de-jong/](http://www.york.ac.uk/politics/people/academicstaff/sara-de-jong/)



**I GOT **IMPLICATED** IN  
THE GOVERNMENTS LIE**

**I AM NOT A LIAR**

**I AM NOT A LIAR**