

A Universal Language

As Afghan Evacuees Arrive at Quantico, Marines Get Creative to Bridge Cultural Divide



CPL SCOTT JENKINS, USMC

By Sara W. Bock

During a fall festival at Upshur Village, MCB Quantico, Va., Oct. 31, 2021, Capt Joshua James passes out candy to Afghan children temporarily being housed there.

In 2009, Marine Corps combat artist Kris Battles traveled to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, where he produced numerous works depicting the bond between Marines and local Afghans who assisted them as interpreters and translators or in other vital roles. So, after he made the short drive from the Combat Art Studio at the National Museum of the Marine Corps to the newly formed Upshur Village, located on the western end of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Sept. 8, 2021, he felt a tinge of familiarity as he sat on his three-legged stool, sketchbook in hand, and documented a historic moment in Marine Corps history.

Once an extension of Officer Candidates School and today a commonly used training area for Marine reservists, Camp Upshur had been transformed practically overnight into a temporary home for thousands of America's Afghan allies and their family members, and Battles needed only to travel to his own backyard to record it.

While the experience was in many ways reminiscent of his deployment more than a decade ago, Battles could sense optimism and hope in the air: a stark contrast, he says, to the troubled environment of a war zone. Just weeks earlier, these Afghan men, women and children, fearing retribution for their association

with U.S. troops, fled for their lives as the Taliban seized control of their country—and they were the lucky ones. Now, they await a new beginning in a nation with a lengthy history of welcoming newcomers to its shores.

“To sketch them in a more safe and secure environment, to see them already starting to flourish, was a very positive thing,” said Battles, who, now a civilian, has served as the Marine Corps Artist in Residence since 2019.

Working intently putting his pencil to paper, Battles created rough sketches of Afghan guests eating meals in the chow hall, waiting in line for medical attention and even merely watching him with curiosity.

A single scene in particular stood out to him during his two-hour visit to the makeshift village—one of eight designated “safe havens” at military installations across the country and the only Marine Corps base on the list—where Afghan evacuees were awaiting processing and

eventual resettlement into American communities. A Marine was kneeling to the ground, teaching a group of smiling Afghan children to play the timeless childhood game, “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” While observing the simple activity that requires neither material supplies nor a common language, Battles was struck by the significance of the moment: that interactions like these gave the children a first glimpse of their newfound life in America.

“This young Marine, being a young man himself, not much out of high school, he’s not too far away from ‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’ himself, so he’s sharing his experience which also welcomes them, makes them feel more at home automatically,” said Battles, gesturing toward the aptly named “Rock, Paper, Scissors” oil-on-canvas painting he created based on the sketch. “Games are a great way to build rapport,” he added.

Battles points out some of the nuances in the painting; namely, that the differences in the clothing worn by the two boys gives context clues as to the setting, despite the fact that the monochromatic background does not. One boy is dressed in traditional Afghan clothing and the other is wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and a pair of Crocs that are far too big for his tiny feet.



In the Combat Art Studio at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Kris Battles, the Marine Corps Artist in Residence, prepares to put the final touches on "Rock, Paper, Scissors," an oil-on-canvas painting he created based on his sketches at Upshur Village, and the cover image for *Leatherneck's* February issue.

JASON MONROE



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With his sketchbook in hand, Battles observes Afghan guests interacting with each other at Upshur Village during his Sept. 8, 2021, visit to the safe haven community, one of eight military installations where Afghan evacuees are temporarily being housed as they await processing and resettlement.



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Marines with CLB-2, 2nd MLG, escort the first group of Afghan guests into the living spaces at Upshur Village, MCB Quantico, Va., Aug. 29, 2021. In the five days leading up to the guests' arrival, Marines worked around the clock to prepare living quarters and outdoor spaces around Camp Upshur for the Afghan families.

"People were immediately responding to the call for help and donations," Battles said in a nod to members of the local community. "It's in our nature [as Americans] it seems, to help out and to give out of the bounty that we have, so they immediately responded, and of course, the kids are already wearing the T-shirts."

Indeed, within hours after the news broke on Aug. 26 that MCB Quantico had been selected as a temporary housing site for Afghan evacuees, the base began receiving offers of support from individuals in the surrounding military and civilian communities, local interfaith groups and non-governmental

organizations. Posts across social media platforms called for items like pillows, bedsheets, diapers and school supplies to support the arriving guests who had traveled thousands of miles with little more than the clothes on their backs.

"We were just really overwhelmed with the incredible outpouring from the community and the sheer quantity of donations that we were receiving at the outset," said Major Tara Patton, the deputy operations officer for Task Force Quantico, which was formed in support of Operation Allies Welcome, a whole-of-government effort spearheaded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Schools and units across MCB Quantico pitched in to help collect supplies during the early days, and as the months have passed, items needed by the guests have continued to pour in. Patton describes the setup of donated goods at Upshur Village as being much like a Walmart store, where Afghan guests can come on their designated days to get the items they need.

According to Danielle Decker, the external affairs officer for Operation Allies Welcome Quantico, the cross-collaborative endeavor to help

MSgt John Rudd, left, and SSgt Jacob Lipham, assigned to 8th ESB, 2nd MLG, interact with Afghan guests at Upshur Village, MCB Quantico, Va., Sept. 23, 2021. For Marines who served in Afghanistan, the opportunity to welcome America's allies to safety is particularly fulfilling.



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Right: LCpl Konate Allan, a field artillery cannoneer with 1st Battalion, 10th Marine Regiment, leads Afghan children in push-ups for recreation at Upshur Village, MCB Quantico, Va., Sept. 27, 2021.



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Afghan evacuees start a new life in America involves the work of multiple agencies and bureaus within DHS, including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Customs and Border Protection; and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as well as the Department of Health and Human Services, the State Department and the Department of Energy. The effort also relies heavily, said Decker, on the Department of Defense to provide security and staffing at each base. In addition to Quantico, two other locations in Virginia were chosen, Fort Lee and Fort Pickett, and across America, Fort McCoy, Wis.; Fort Bliss, Texas; Joint Base McGuire-Dix, N.J.; Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., and Camp Atterbury, Ind., also made the list.

During a Nov. 9 State Department town hall meeting for Afghan resettlement stakeholders, former Delaware Governor Jack Alan Markell, coordinator for Operation Allies Welcome, said that cultural advisors were assigned to each of the bases to ensure that the efforts of the military members were supplemented with culturally appropriate food and places of worship.

At Quantico, which Decker says was chosen based on its capacity to provide a secure location that could house and meet the needs of guests while providing essential security and support, representatives from each of the participating agencies are present at an on-site Interagency Coordination Cell (ICC). For Maj Patton, who works in the ICC, it's a unique

Maj Carla McGirr, a civil affairs officer with Task Force Quantico, interacts with an Afghan girl at MCB Quantico, Va., Oct. 8, 2021.



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Navy LT Marissa Singh, a dentist with 2nd MLG, provides dental care to an Afghan guest at MCB Quantico, Va., Sept. 25, 2021.

opportunity unlike anything she's experienced in her Marine Corps career thus far.

The mission to support Operation Allies Welcome also is an out-of-the-ordinary one for Marines from units across 2nd Marine Logistics Group, part of the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based II Marine Expeditionary Force, who mobilized at a moment's notice, diverting from a planned humanitarian relief effort in Haiti to a much closer-to-home locale.

According to Patton, on Aug. 24, the first Marines from 2nd MLG were sent to Quantico. "That was actually on about an hour's notice," she adds. At the onset, the Marines lived in two-man tents on site as they readied the squad bays at Camp Upshur, formerly used by OCS, to serve as temporary living shelters for the Afghan guests. As the evacuees began to arrive just five days later on the 29th, the Marines facilitated

the check-in process and helped them get settled in.

"Initially we were working pretty hard with the base to use the existing infrastructure at Camp Upshur to support billeting Afghan guests," Patton said. When it was realized that additional accommodations were needed to support an influx of arrivals, the task force summoned 8th Engineer Support Battalion from Camp Lejeune to establish "Pioneer City," a second temporary housing area. "In 36 hours, working 24-hour ops, they built the site from nothing, on a landing zone, and turned it into a space for about 1,000 Afghan guests. It's really been interesting to see it evolve over time," she added.

As of Oct. 21, said Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Hummitzsch, the executive officer of Combat Logistics Regiment 2, 2nd MLG, roughly 900 U.S. servicemembers, primarily Marines and Navy corpsmen, were supporting the mission in various roles like running the donation center, performing site maintenance and repairs, providing medical care as well as visiting with the guests, playing with the children, and helping their temporary accommodations feel a little bit more like home.

"Everyone is really proud to be part of this historic effort," said Hummitzsch. "The ability to quickly respond like we did, the opportunity to provide the necessary support to the success of Operation Allies Welcome, and to be able to walk around and see all the smiling faces from all the adults, the families, the kids."

Recognizing the trauma that many of the Afghan guests went through in order to arrive at Upshur Village, Hummitzsch said, makes their smiles even more meaningful to him. "And the Marines and Sailors are doing phenomenal things helping them out every day," he added.

In October, Decker said that approximately 3,800 Afghan guests were currently living aboard MCB Quantico, adding that some families had at that point been fully processed and were starting their new lives in various locations across the U.S.

"The guests undergo a series of vetting processes throughout their stay with us, and they also undergo intake immigration and biometrics processing and medical screening, and then they'll ultimately reach their final state of assurance and then ultimately depart camps to their final destination," Decker said.

During the State Department's Nov. 9 stakeholders meeting, Nancy Izzo Jackson, who heads the department's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration, explained the intake and resettlement process for those evacuees seeking special immigrant visa (SIV) status or qualify for designation as refugees fleeing persecution, stating that the interagency partners were working around the clock to resettle everyone into their permanent home communities as quickly and respon-

Looking for ways to help support Operation Allies Welcome?

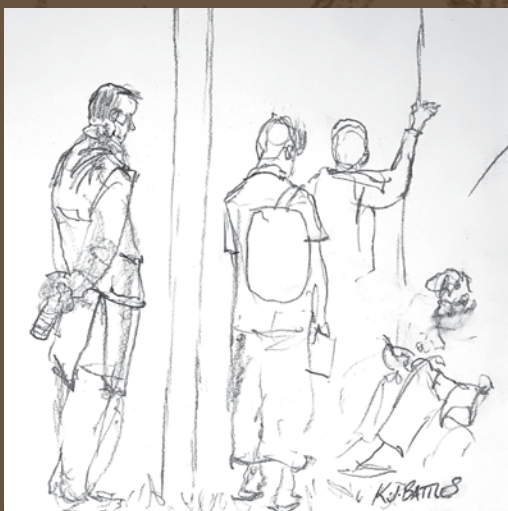
The State Department has partnered with Welcome.US, a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative created "to galvanize additional private sector support and resources for arriving Afghans and channel the immense goodwill of the American people," explained Uzra Zeya, State's undersecretary for civilian security, democracy and human rights, during the department's Nov. 9 town hall meeting.

Interested individuals, veterans organizations, businesses, religious groups and Afghan American diaspora groups can visit the organization's website, Welcome.US, and from there can donate airline miles to provide transportation from safe havens to resettlement communities; volunteer to provide temporary housing, or sign up for new community sponsorship opportunities.

Operation Allies Welcome goes far beyond the mobilization of military bases and the service-members assigned there and extends to the mobilization of an entire nation to welcome our Afghan allies and honor our nation's obligation to them—an obligation that those Marines who served in Afghanistan understand well.

Nazanin Ash, CEO of Welcome.US, hopes that the effort will help repair division in the U.S.: "Our ultimate ambition is to unite all Americans in this common cause of welcome," she said.





Afghan Refugees await Medical attention
at Camp Upshur on MCB Quantico 8 Sept 2021



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LCpl Amir Shinwari, a linguist, sits in prayer with Afghan guests during religious services on MCB Quantico, Va., Oct. 8, 2021.



LCPL BRIAN BOLIN JR., USMC

LCpl Tyler Zaki, a motor transportation operator with Combat Logistics Battalion 8, 2nd MLG, engages in some outdoor playtime with Afghan children on MCB Quantico, Va., Sept. 18, 2021.





Marine Corps combat artist Elize McKelvey, right, encourages Afghan children to draw pictures and doodles in her sketchbook during a Sept. 8, 2021, visit to Upshur Village. She saved the drawings, pictured below, as a memento of her experience there.



and private companies. It is a true testament to the boundless American capacity for generosity towards those most in need. From New Jersey to Wisconsin to New Mexico, our Armed Forces colleagues and local communities around our military bases have opened their arms and their hearts to our Afghan guests.”

For Maj Patton, who served in Afghanistan, her role with Task Force Quantico has afforded her a unique opportunity to see her time there come full circle. During the early months of her assignment at Upshur Village, there was an interaction she won’t soon forget. A 4-year-old girl, who evidently had been observing the Marines’ interactions with each other at Upshur Village, stopped and saluted her as she walked by.

“I just kind of stopped in my tracks and realized that that little girl could be back here in Quantico 20 years from now as a Marine Corps second lieutenant going through [The Basic School]. While that may or may not be in the cards for her, the fact that she’s here and going through this process means that if she wants to, she has that opportunity. There are those little moments that really resonate with you personally and make it a worthwhile endeavor,” Patton said.

As Kris Battles and fellow combat artist Elize McKelvey, a veteran Marine who also is part of the Marine Corps Combat

Art Program, observed and sketched at Upshur Village, children played and ran free. At one point, a large group of them gathered around McKelvey’s sketchbook with pens and pencils and began creating doodles of their own. In that moment, Battles could sense that the children felt at home there, and the artists relished the opportunity to connect with them through a shared interest.

“Part of our job as combat artists is to record for posterity in traditional media these stories for 100 years from now, for 200 years from now. This was a great opportunity, very historic, and it happened right on our doorstep,” said Battles. “An added benefit of what we do is bridge building. Combat art builds bridges in America between the military and [civilian] cultures, and we also build bridges to other cultures because art is a universal language.”