



SSgt Ben Wormington, pictured in the above left photo, was in Iraq for his third deployment in 2008 when he befriended Ted, an Iraqi interpreter attached to 1st Recon Bn, pictured in the above right photo on the far left. (Photos courtesy of Ben Wormington)

An American Dream:

After 12-Year Process, Iraqi Interpreter Begins New Life in the U.S., Credits Marine Who Refused to Leave Him Behind

By Sara W. Bock

Author's note: To protect the identity of Ted and his family members, their real names have been withheld from the following story.

Five years after he returned home from his third deployment to Iraq, Marine veteran Ben Wormington logged in to his Facebook account and was overjoyed to find a request from “Ted,” an Iraqi interpreter he had befriended in 2008 while serving with 1st Reconnaissance Battalion.

Ted was one of many Iraqi nationals who worked alongside American troops following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. He and others like him provided mission-critical translation and

interpretation and helped establish trust between local communities and U.S. servicemembers. It was an exceptionally dangerous role to assume. Iraqis like Ted who worked for the Americans are widely viewed as traitors, and they and their families have lived for years in constant fear of threats from militants linked to al-Qaida, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups. To this day, many former interpreters have bounties placed on their heads and are attacked, abducted or killed because of their previous associations with U.S. forces. Many have been forced to move away from their hometowns in order to avoid being identified by insurgents.

As the U.S. began to withdraw its troops from Iraq, Congress authorized a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program in 2008 for Iraqis who had embraced American ideals and served as interpreters and in

other vital roles, offering them, their spouses and minor children a pathway for entry into the United States where they could “safely and expeditiously resettle” without fear of retaliation. A year later, in 2009, the program was extended to include Afghan nationals who were serving alongside American troops and faced similar threats from the Taliban.

When Wormington and Ted parted ways at the end of 2008, Ted had already begun his special immigrant visa application; so when the two reconnected online in 2013, Wormington figured it was safe to assume that Ted had already begun a new life in the United States.

“Where are you?” Wormington typed in a message to Ted, awaiting a response that he was sure would be somewhere not too far away, like “Texas” or “California.” He was not even remotely prepared for the answer he’d receive: Ted was still in Iraq.

“I’m not safe. The situation’s not good,” Ted typed back.

Wormington immediately knew he had no choice but to take action. He calls it an “aha moment,” and compares it to another he had after 9/11—one that led him to enlist in the Marine Corps. He knew right then that he’d do whatever it took to bring Ted to America.

“I felt like we left a Marine behind,” he says.

He had no idea where to start, and no way of knowing that he was embarking on what would become a seven-year battle—a frustrating and costly one—to bring Ted, his wife and two daughters to the U.S. to live their American dream. But his perseverance paid off on March 7 this year when that dream finally became a reality.

From Ted’s family’s new apartment in Wormington’s hometown of Omaha, Neb., the two “brothers” spoke with *Leatherneck* earlier this year, sharing stories from their time together in Iraq and the events that passed during the 12 years that led up to their heartwarming reunion. A deeply emotional Ted says of Wormington, “I never would have made it here if he hadn’t been there.”

Wormington had participated in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 and returned in 2004, assigned to the personal security team for then-Brigadier General John F. Kelly. By 2008, when he met Ted, things in Iraq were “quieting down” and the withdrawal of U.S. troops had begun. It was in this context that he began to wonder what the outcome of America’s involvement there might be.

“I had so many questions about how Iraqis felt about us,” recalled Wormington. “I was just trying to make sense out of everything that had happened there.”

Then a staff sergeant, Wormington was attached to a heliborne reaction force—1st Platoon, “Bravo” Company, 1st Recon Bn—as a joint terminal attack controller. Ted also was assigned to the platoon, which was based at a combat outpost near the Sinjar Mountains in northwestern Iraq, along the Syrian border.

Relying heavily on helicopter transport, the platoon was tasked with disrupting the smuggling of weapons and black-market goods across the border of Iraq and Syria. Wormington coordinated



Wormington, left, and Ted kneel for a group photo with members of 1st Plt, Co B, 1st Recon Bn, in Iraq in 2008.

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the unit’s air support and aerial surveillance and worked closely with Ted to keep the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant abreast of the situation on the ground.

“They’re saying, ‘Hey Ted, what are you seeing, what are you identifying?’ ‘Does this look normal, or off?’ ‘Is this guy telling the truth?’ ” said Wormington.

Ted not only advised the platoon commander, but also knowingly put himself in harm’s way to assist the Marines. His actions earned him numerous awards, commendations, and letters of recommendation that he planned to include in his visa application. One commendation presented



LCPL J.P. SOTELO, USMC

With the help of an Iraqi translator, a Marine captain speaks to a citizen of Ar Rifa, Iraq, in 2003. During the war in Iraq, many English-speaking Iraqis like Ted worked with U.S. servicemembers, putting themselves at great risk of threats and bodily harm by al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations.

to Ted detailed his exposure to enemy fire as he facilitated the surrender of an insurgent. Due to Ted's efforts, the insurgent surrendered unharmed, and Ted assisted in extensive questioning during which he "was able to extract invaluable information that helped shape the platoon's scheme of maneuver to decisively end the engagement," according to the commendation issued by the battalion's commanding officer.

Wormington and Ted grew close due to the interconnectedness of their roles with 1st Recon, and a friendship was formed. During their off-duty hours, Wormington and Ted—who almost always had an English dictionary in hand—would spend hours sitting outside talking. Wormington would answer questions about the usage of English words, and Ted would answer questions about his background and his thoughts

Local militia members cornered him [Ted] and issued a warning. "They threatened me and said, 'Hey, we'll kill you if you don't knock it off. Don't speak with the Americans. We're going to kill you.'" ★

on the often-philosophical questions that plagued Wormington, like "What's next for Iraq?"

Their conversations ranged from serious to lighthearted. Wormington laughs as he describes the sense of humor and dry sarcasm that Ted acquired by watching American sitcoms like "Friends" and "Frasier."

Ted, originally from northern Iraq, gained fluency in English by watching those TV shows and others from the 1990s and early 2000s. He was a particular fan of the show "Becker," whose title character was played by Ted Danson—which is why he decided his interpreter name would be "Ted."

Ted and his family fervently supported the U.S.-led invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime.

"We are really grateful for that," he said. "The way I look at it is that you guys just saved us."

In 2006, Ted, who had earned an associate's degree in Iraqi law from the University of Baghdad, would occasionally approach coalition forces patrolling through his neighborhood, relishing the opportunity to practice his English conversational skills. But after a few of these encounters, local militia members cornered him and issued a warning.

"They threatened me and said, 'Hey, we'll kill you if you don't knock it off. Don't speak with the Americans. We're going to kill you,'" Ted, whose cousin had been killed by al-Qaida that year, recalled. He couldn't let himself fall victim to the same fate, and he knew the militants wouldn't hesitate to follow through.

Realizing he couldn't stay there, Ted fled to Syria for 10 months, where he worked painting houses until after his family had relocated to a relatively safer area of Iraq.

After his return to Iraq, Ted didn't let his previous brush with the militia dissuade him from taking an assessment to qualify as an interpreter for a U.S.-based defense contractor. He passed both the verbal and oral examinations with flying colors and traveled to the Green Zone in Baghdad—the government center of the coalition provisional authority—where he received an assignment to Camp Fallujah to work with the Marines.

Ted rotated among the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Recon Battalions until the end of 2008, when a new status of forces agreement detailed that going forward, only units combined with Iraqi forces could operate outside the wire.

"We weren't built to do that," said Wormington of 1st Recon. So he and Ted parted ways, unsure if they would ever see each other again. The platoon was transferred to Al Asad Air Base to ride out their deployment, and Ted was assigned to an Army unit training Iraqi security forces near Basra in southeastern Iraq.

While training with the Army, Ted jumped from a vehicle and suffered a severe back injury, rendering him unable to continue his work. In the absence of proper medical support, he spent the next eight months trying to recover by lying flat on his back at home.

And though Ted had already begun the process of applying for the SIV program before he was let go from his interpreter job, his health problems—and lack of internet access due to Iraq's weakened infrastructure—meant he couldn't access incoming emails from the U.S. State Department's National Visa Center, which requested additional documentation.

"He didn't have the physical mobility to be going to internet centers," said Wormington. "And then you add on the fact that ISIS started to take over, and it wasn't safe for him to be going out and gallivanting around and putting on some random computer that he's worked with the U.S. troops, and scanning documents and mailing them to the

National Visa Center. The system itself, it doesn't take into account the danger that they're in. That's still the case with Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria."

By the time Ted reconnected with Wormington via Facebook in 2013, he was married and had a wife and children. To the extent that he could, he continued to work on the lengthy application for a visa that would allow him and his family to seek refuge in the U.S., but many of the email communications contained jargon that was difficult to understand, and a long series of roadblocks inhibited the visa's timely processing.

While many Iraqi and Afghan interpreters had received their special immigrant visas and were now living in the United States, there was a backlog of tens of thousands of applicants who, like Ted, were seemingly caught in a web of bureaucratic red tape. As the presence of ISIS grew in Iraq, the U.S. State Department saw an influx in applications for special immigrant visas from those who had worked for the Americans and were now facing heightened threats. But a temporary halt in refugee processing due to reduced staffing at the U.S. Embassy meant that applications were stalled, and some individuals were forced to start over.

Ted was able to send his documentation to Wormington, who exhausted every possible avenue in an effort to somehow expedite the process. He contacted the National Visa Center on behalf of Ted, called his congressional representatives in Nebraska, and spoke with an immigration attorney, but never seemed to make any headway.

A breakthrough came after he contacted every major national news outlet—CNN, Fox News, MSNBC—as well as his local news outlets. Most of his attempts were met with silence, but a reply from James Wilcox, a news anchor with KETV Channel 7, the local ABC affiliate in Omaha, would



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set Wormington on course to finally bring Ted to America.

After Wilcox's short news segment aired, detailing Wormington's efforts to get Ted's visa approved, people began to reach out. One individual in particular connected Wormington with the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), which provides legal advocacy for refugees. An attorney who was knowledgeable about the process of obtaining special immigrant visas took on Ted's case. It was a step in the right direction, but the journey was far from over.

In order to collect and submit the extensive documentation and paperwork required, including police records that proved he did not have a criminal history, Ted had to make numerous trips from his home in southern Iraq to the capital in Baghdad.

"The situation is kind of dire there, the militia

GySgt Heidi Schuerger listens as an Iraqi interpreter communicates information from the local police in Al Kut, Iraq, in 2003.



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON

The Marines of 1st Recon Bn's heliborne reaction force in 2008 included Iraqi interpreter Ted and SSgt Ben Wormington, who was attached to the unit as a JTAC.



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON

Local Omaha, Neb., news anchor James Wilcox, left, first covered Wormington's efforts to bring Ted to the U.S., and his broadcasts helped connect Wormington with the right people and organizations to make his dream a reality. Ted had the opportunity to meet Wilcox in March, and Wilcox even provided Ted's family with a furnished condo to stay in while they secured a more permanent residence.

activity going on there," said Ted. "The government is corrupted in Iraq. I can't trust anyone."

Not only were his trips to Baghdad dangerous, they were also costly. To take a taxi to Baghdad cost about \$300 round trip. Wormington began to send money to Ted through an Iraqi interpreter living in the U.S. who had worked with Ted, had applied for his SIV after Ted and had been in the U.S. long enough to have been granted citizenship. Using a "middleman" was a necessary measure as Ted's safety would have been jeopardized had he received wire transfers from someone with an American name.

The years crept by, and as Ted's application inched closer to approval, shifting policies following the 2016 U.S. presidential election resulted in a steep decline in the number of Iraqi interpreters receiving visas, a consequence of an overall reduction in the number of refugees granted entry. And a travel ban instituted by the Trump administration on refugees coming from several Muslim-majority countries ground the process to a near halt.

"We had lost hope a couple times," said Wormington. "But I leaned on Ted and he leaned on me, and we said, 'We're not going to quit, we're going to find a way.'"

In March 2019, Ted was granted an appointment at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to go over his application and paperwork and find out which additional documentation he needed in order to receive a final decision. He received approval to schedule the required medical assessments for himself and his family. The assessments, however, weren't available until early January 2020.

In September 2019, as the appointment date drew closer, there was another glimmer of hope. A federal court ruled that the delays faced by thousands of Afghans and Iraqis like Ted who worked for American forces and were waiting for their special immigrant visas to be processed were both "unreasonable and unlawful."

"In 2013, Congress mandated that SIV applicants should receive a decision within nine months of submitting their application" read a statement from the International Refugee Assistance Project. Ted was one of thousands who had been waiting much longer than nine months, and the U. S. government was now required to come up with a plan to process the delayed applications in a quick and efficient manner.

But just days before Ted and his family were scheduled to travel to the capital for their medical screenings, supporters of the Iran-backed militia Kata'ib Hezbollah attacked the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Dec. 31, 2019. Three days later, on Jan. 3, the U.S. carried out the assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani at Baghdad International Airport, fueling the fire of anti-American sentiment throughout the region.

Not only were operations at the embassy now on hold, but in Ted's hometown, one of the Iranian-backed militia leaders made a proclamation at the local market, stating that anyone who had worked with Americans would be hunted down and killed.

At that point, there was no question: Ted and his family had to get out of Iraq as soon as possible. A text message from a fellow Marine veteran who was working in Baghdad as a government security contractor confirmed what Wormington already knew.

"I cannot stress enough, Ted and his family need to leave now," the text read.

With the help of his attorney from IRAP, Ted was able to get approval from the National Visa Center to transfer his case from Baghdad to Ankara, Turkey. He, his wife and children were granted visas to leave Iraq and fly there, where they could safely wait while his case continued to be processed.

Fortunately, Wormington had already rallied an army of supporters in a Facebook group, and they had managed to raise money to help cover the family's medical screenings, flights out of Iraq and other necessary costs. But now it was far too dangerous to be receiving large sums of money from an American account, so Ted borrowed \$3,000 from several people to pay for his family's airfare to Turkey, promising to repay them as soon as possible.

Ted found an apartment in Ankara for his family, and Wormington was amazed by the generosity of individuals who sent him money via Venmo

to transfer to Ted to cover their expenses. He created a Facebook page in January, after the family arrived in Ankara, which he named “Ted’s American Dream.” In his frequent updates to the page’s followers, he shared the family’s needs—which were met with generous donations—as well as his own heartfelt sentiments.

“My faith in the American project has been debatable time and time again, but every time I look into Ted, his wife and his children’s eyes, I believe again,” Wormington wrote in a Jan. 25 post. “I believe in our collective project. I believe in our common values. Party lines fall away. The ‘news story of the day’ falls away. What remains is the aim to, together, be better than we are alone. This is what drives me. Ted’s hope, his belief in us, his hope in us ... for his family ... for his future, renews my strength.”

As Ted and his family waited for appointments to be scheduled at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, they enjoyed simple freedoms like being able to go outside without fear—but they had nothing with them aside suitcases they’d brought from Iraq, and no idea how long they’d be waiting there.

And while fleeing Iraq was a huge victory, there was still an uphill battle ahead. Ted’s lawyer from IRAP was having trouble getting a response from the embassy about scheduling Ted’s necessary appointments. In a long shot, another veteran Recon Marine and supporter of Ted contacted the office of U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, Pat Toomey.

“Next thing we know, Ted’s got an appointment scheduled in Ankara at the embassy, and then the approval to get his medical appointments.”

Then there was another problem: Ted had copies of his required documents, but left the originals behind in Iraq in an effort to avoid suspicion as he exited the country. He was able to coordinate with an Iraqi who was traveling from Baghdad to Istanbul and was willing to pick up the documents and bring them to Turkey. Ted got on a plane to Istanbul to retrieve them and boarded a plane right back to Ankara, where his family waited. He brought the documents to his next embassy appointment and finally their visas were approved, just as the COVID-19 pandemic became a looming global threat.

Wormington saw the writing on the wall and knew there was no time to waste. Rather than wait for funding for the family’s travel expenses from the International Organization for Migration, he used some of the donations he’d received on behalf of Ted and his family to purchase their airfare to America.

“I am so grateful. I’m speechless,” said Ted, whose family members are now learning English and are settling in to their new life in Omaha.

When their plane touched down in Nebraska on March 7, they were greeted by Wormington, his wife and two children, as well as dozens of people wearing red, white and blue and holding signs in both English and Arabic that read “Welcome



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON

Above: Wormington introduces Ted to a crowd of supporters gathered to give him a “hero’s welcome” at Omaha Eppley Airfield, March 7.

Left: After 12 years apart, Wormington and Ted embrace each other upon Ted’s family’s arrival to the United States, where they finally have begun a new life without fear of retaliation for his work with American troops.

Wormington rallied the large group of supporters in an effort to give Ted a “hero’s welcome” like the ones he had received when he came home from his deployments to Iraq. ★

Home.” Wormington rallied the large group of supporters in an effort to give Ted a “hero’s welcome” like the ones he had received when he came home from his deployments to Iraq.

“He needs to see that, and his family needs to see what Ted has done for our country, and what he’s done for their country and for them, and what he’s done continuously to keep the faith and keep fighting and not give up,” Wormington said.

During Ted’s first few days in the U.S., Wormington had what he says is “the greatest honor of his life.” In an effort to protect his young children, Ted had never told them that he was an interpreter for American troops.



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON

Above: The emotion is visible on their faces as Ted and Wormington introduce their wives and children to each other at Omaha Eppley Airfield, March 7.

Right: Wormington's daughter holds her "welcome" sign for Ted and his family prior to their arrival in Omaha. The families instantly bonded and "blended into one," said Wormington.



COURTESY OF BEN WORMINGTON

"I was able to sit there in my living room with my mom and my wife and my children, and Ted was the interpreter, and I was able to tell them what their dad had actually done for their country, before he even had a wife and children, but he did it for them," said Wormington.

The two families immediately blended into one—"they fit right in!" says Wormington. His mother, Monica, even hosted Ted and his family, in her home while they waited to move to a more

For Wormington, who served on active duty for eight years and struggled to put his time in Iraq in context after returning home, working to help bring Ted and his family to America has reinforced his faith in humanity ★

permanent apartment. And James Wilcox, the news anchor who initially reported about Ted's plight, graciously provided them with another transitional home in his vacation rental before their apartment was available.

As she spent time with Ted and his family, her son's efforts to bring him to America made even more sense to Monica Wormington.

"I know why Ben and Ted are connected—because they are the same," she said. "They're cut from the same cloth."

Ben Wormington continues to be amazed by the generosity of others, as well as the support Ted has received from the local interfaith community in Omaha. The woman in charge of the family's resettlement is Muslim, like Ted, but his case is managed by Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska, and a local Jewish synagogue offered to furnish the family's entire apartment. An anonymous donor contributed \$10,000 to buy the family a car so they could have reliable transportation. And he was able to transfer the remainder of the money he'd raised for the family into a savings account in their name.

While the coronavirus pandemic temporarily impeded Ted's ability to get a job, take his driver's assessment and enroll his children in school, he is deeply grateful to finally be safe and free in America and is eager to contribute to society as soon as possible.

For Wormington, who served on active duty for eight years and struggled to put his time in Iraq in context after returning home, working to help bring Ted and his family to America has reinforced his faith in humanity and, he says, was a way for him to be of service to others even though his military service has ended.

He sees Ted as being in the center of what he calls a "hurricane of generosity," created by lots of Americans contributing in ways that may seem small or insignificant to them because they don't get to see the collective, combined benefit that he has had the opportunity to view up close.

"It's flowing around us—it's breathtaking to see what little bits of good done by a lot of people, what that result is," Wormington said. "It's been humbling for me. When anybody wants to talk about America being divided, or that we're more divided than we've ever been, no. Just give people something worth spending their time on. We still have what it takes, as a nation, to live up to the ideals we were founded on. America's as beautiful and amazing as it ever has been [...] I'll never second guess the power of what good people can do together."

As Ted settles in to his new home, Wormington is at peace knowing that through his perseverance and refusal to give up, he played a role in finally bringing home the Marine he left behind 12 years ago.

"Ted has always been my family," said Wormington. "I could do nothing else for the rest of my life and die a happy man. I got my wife and kids, I served in the Marines, and I helped get Ted and his family to America. If it all ended now, that's a life I'd be proud of." 🇺🇸



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