

Afghanistan may be part of Thanksgiving gatherings — maybe clashes of dueling political opinions, discussions of open hearts and concrete action to help Afghans find safety, or somber acknowledgments of the meaning of empty chairs at tables with places still set. More than one generation of Americans has sacrificed in Afghanistan, and with the rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces this year and the collapse of the Afghan government back into the hands of the Taliban, a duality remains, whether it will be reckoned with over plates of turkey and pie. Thousands of lives, decades of effort and massive amounts of money were marshaled into and lost to produce a country suffering from widespread hunger and back in the hands of the cruel regime that controlled it at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the U.S. by the Al Qaeda terrorists the regime harbored. Sprouting from that ecosystem of duality is the story of a collaborative program between National Guard soldiers and universities across the U.S., including here in Iowa, intent on helping Afghans have the means to feed themselves and turn away from the Taliban. What actionable lessons can be harvested from that microcosm about intentions, oversight and consequences may be sowed in the words of people who were involved — Iowans and others who set out on a noble mission and did what they could.

The 'Dirt Warriors'

"I think about Afghanistan every day," Craig Bargfrede told the Ames Tribune in early September. "It's there with you."

Bargfrede works for the Iowa Department of Transportation now, but in 2010, he was a colonel in the Iowa National Guard commanding the 734th Agribusiness Development Team.

The 64-member team — nicknamed the "Dirt Warriors" — deployed on its mission to Afghanistan in July 2010 and were welcomed home in June 2011. Bargfrede said the team included five Air National Guard soldiers and officers in addition to its Army National Guard members.

While in Afghanistan, the team's 15 agricultural specialists — with expertise in veterinary medicine, horticulture and crop and livestock farming — applied education and efforts to help Afghans improve the seeding of their fields, get their livestock vaccinated and start raising egg-laying chickens for better access to food and income.

Bargfrede said about half of the team's 64 members were there to provide security.

The team operated in the Kunar Province, located in the northeast part of the country, along its border with Pakistan.

U.S. soldiers who fought in Kunar — the location of notorious valleys such as the Korengal — took to calling it Afghanistan's "Heart of Darkness," according to an article published in November 2008 by the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center.

Bargfrede agreed that "Kunar was a very kinetic province," and the Korengal was too hostile of a place for the team to ever travel to.

He said the province's rugged, mountainous terrain could quickly rise thousands of feet in elevation over short distances. Kunar was dry, except for where there was water down in valleys — where people grew corn and wheat as their primary staple crops.

"We quickly learned that these people know how to farm in that terrain. We weren't going to teach them how to farm. What we did do was build their human capacity — how to plan things, how to organize things, how to do something as simple as a budget," Bargfrede said.

How an Iowa National Guard team and others like it came to be working in Kunar and other Afghan provinces to develop local agriculture is a story with seeds in eastern Europe.

Retired Texas Army National Guard Maj. Gen. Darren G. Owens spoke before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture in 2016 about the **history** of agricultural development work in the Guard, and Owens described how the kind of work teams ultimately did in Afghanistan started in Kosovo.

Conflict and destroyed infrastructure there had led to food insecurity and malnutrition in rural areas. Hunger fed discontent and led to criminal and anti-government activities.

Owens said the lesson taken away from Kosovo was that improved food security led to improved overall security in areas where U.S. forces were deployed — and all that it took for gains to be made was basic farm policy that would improve food supply sustainability, market stability, conservation of soil, farm income and supplies of better-quality food and fibers.

The potential impact that such work could have in Afghanistan was not lost on military, political and agricultural leaders at the time. In 2007, Owens said the secretary of the Army, director of the Army National Guard and president of the Missouri Farm Bureau met with a Missouri senator who served on the Senate Armed Services Committee about the concept of agribusiness development teams.

With Congressional support, military, academic and agricultural partners in Missouri, Texas and nationwide spearheaded the development and deployment of the first agribusiness development teams in Afghanistan.

In all, working with the land-grant universities of their respective states, Owens said that between March 2008 and January 2014, 52 separate agribusiness development teams involving more than 3,000 Army and Air National Guard members from 17 states had deployed to 16 Afghan provinces and executed more than 700 projects at a cost of more than \$45 million.

Enter the Dirt Warriors, who Bargfrede said was the second team in Kunar after one from California.

Before the Iowa team deployed, members spent months in the first half of 2010 — after forming that January — training with instructors from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in

subjects such as soil, nutrient and water management, fertilization and animal health.

For Jerry Miller, who led the Extension at the time and has since retired, the relationship between Iowa State and the 734th was personal because he's also a retired Army veteran.

"Fortunately, I was in an administrative position that I could coordinate the effort to pull a team together for the training," Miller said.

Miller was a commissioned officer who served on active duty for almost three years before he came to Iowa in 1968 for graduate school. He was a long-time Iowa State faculty member before he went over to the Extension in 1998, the same year he retired from the Army National Guard as commander of the 34th Infantry Division.

He would become the interim vice president for extension and outreach in 2010, and Bargfrede contacted him in November 2009 — they knew each other from the Guard — once Bargfrede knew his team would be going to Afghanistan.

Miller said the training partnership is an example of "how the civilian sector and the military sector can work together and the military can reach out for expertise."

Peter Shinn, who was a U.S. Air Force captain attached to the 734th on the ground as the team's public affairs officer, credited the professionalism and expertise of the Extension staff who trained the team. "A lot of what they taught was put to practical use and the reach back capability that ISU provided the ADT was also super helpful."

Miller and Bargfrede said the partnership is a model worth replicating elsewhere.

Miller said he hoped the work would perpetuate "goodwill and positive relationships."

He also hoped some kind of positive legacy remains after 11 years and the Taliban takeover. "I don't know, but I would hope that there would be."

'We were all working our absolute hardest to try and do the right thing'

Bargfrede said the team would take part in meetings with local leaders that followed infantry operations to clear out hostile forces. Those meetings served to show Afghans the benefits of supporting government forces, and not the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and descriptions of those benefits included the work an agribusiness development team could do.

Owens told Congress that the agribusiness development teams' work supported the core U.S. mission in Afghanistan of disrupting Al Qaeda and preventing its return, but the mission also included "reversing the Taliban's momentum and denying it the ability to overthrow the government."

"I will say that neither the U.S. Agricultural Strategy for Afghanistan nor any subsequent document provided any **discussion** on how to execute the strategy," he added.

Lack of strategy and missions with moving goal posts were among the overarching problems with the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction — the federal government's oversight authority for the approximately \$146 billion appropriated for Afghanistan relief and reconstruction since 2002, according to the organization's website.

That's only part of the approximately \$2.3 trillion spent on the war overall.

The special inspector general noted in its August 2021 report — "What we Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction" — that the mission of combatting Al Qaeda came to involve rebuilding institutions, "and these were plagued by increasingly interconnected reconstruction problems."

Boosting the country's agricultural and broader economy was a way to lure fighters off the battlefield. However, "That was only possible through building better roads so farmers could sell their goods; but building better roads required security for the construction workers. If progress could not be made on all fronts simultaneously, it was hard to make progress on any."

The report added that a tempting solution was for the U.S. to send in more troops and more aid. "This assumption proved incorrect."

Shinn, who said he's now a military historian, said it's difficult for him to not look at the endeavor of the war, writ large, "as an enormous waste of time, energy and money."

As for the 734th's work and his involvement with it, Shinn said, "The people that went to Afghanistan, that I went with, every single one of them had a heart that was attuned to trying to right by the Afghan people, and by the American people. We were all working our absolute hardest to try and do the right thing, as we understood it."

Bargfrede said he considers the Dirt Warriors' mission a success. "I would never hesitate to say that it was absolutely worth the time that we spent there."

In a place where he said the average annual wage was \$200 or \$300 a year, he said what the team did "was the right thing to do. Call it nation building, call it whatever you want, but focusing on building their human capacity and teaching them how to function as a government, as a **community**, that always sticks with me, and the friendships that we made over there."

He knows from some of the Afghans he's stayed in contact with over the years — some of whom have since made it to the U.S. — that the practices the team taught have been kept up in some areas, while in others, "things just kind of fell apart."

"I would love to be able to go back over there today, if we could, and see some of the fruits of labor, see if the projects we got started, if they're still continuing on or they fell by the wayside," Bargfrede added.

Shinn specifically noted that the rabies vaccination program undertaken by the team's veterinarian, then-Maj. Loren Adams, and Dr. Mohammed Ghalib — a veterinarian working for the Kunar

Provincial Department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Land — likely did have a lasting impact.

The program aimed to vaccinate 70% of the dogs in and around the city of Asadabad in order to reduce human cases of rabies. Shinn said Ghalib went on to become the director of the provincial agriculture department, "giving him valuable experience in implementing this important public health campaign. The program also employed up to six local Afghan veterinarians."

In terms of how Americans can begin to grapple with the difficult and complicated questions posed by the war, Shinn advised to "Take a more skeptical view of leaders who are telling you that military action can be done without consequences," and be skeptical of generals who say a mission can be accomplished easily, who advocate for more troops or dollars in order for things to go right.

'Instruments of national power'

For many people — particularly for Afghans trying to flee Taliban rule and allies trying to help them get out — the American-led war in Afghanistan is not yet over, even as the broader historical questions raised by the war beckon.

Bargfrede, speaking in early September, wished for a way to turn the clock back and do the previous and final month of the withdrawal over again. "The last two or three weeks here have been very much a roller coaster of emotions, from bitterness to anger to frustration to despair to hopelessness."

He said he felt unable to help Afghans who remained and asked for help, other than writing a letter of recommendation to the appropriate authorities.

Shinn, speaking in November, said he, too, has heard from trapped Afghans. "I don't know how to help him," he said of a linguist whose family is in Afghanistan. He said he did pass on numbers to the State Department, which could not help.

He recommended people urge their Congressmembers and senators to act to help Afghans — such as by applying economic and diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to allow people to leave.

Shinn added, "we should bring all instruments of national power to bear to ensure that anybody who wants to leave Afghanistan can."

"I think that anything less is another moral failure on the part of the United States," he said.

The military projection of U.S. power in Afghanistan over the past 20 years has cost the lives of at least 120,000 people: more than 2,400 American service members — not including the many more who later died by suicide — more than 3,800 U.S. contractors and Defense Department civilians, more than 1,100 allied troops, at least 47,000 Afghan citizens and about 66,000 Afghan military and police members.

Though Owens told Congress no agribusiness development team was known to have been attacked while conducting a development mission, he said three of the teams' soldiers were killed in action while providing support — in 2009, Texas' Sgt. Christopher Staats and Sgt. Anthony

Green, and in 2011, Missouri's Sgt. 1st Class Robert Wayne Pharris.

All three soldiers were killed by improvised explosive devices, according to reporting by the Springfield News-Leader and the Military Times.

Despite some rocket fire, Bargfrede said the Iowa team's forward operating base was secure enough, and had a dining facility, shops, a restaurant and a bakery. Afghans worked at the base and there were contingents of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army.

Whatever a veteran's story, Bargfrede hoped that, going forward, people will honor, respect and "think about the sacrifices that they made, the time, the energy — not only the soldiers that were over there, but their families. Families sacrifice just as much, sometimes more than the man or woman that gets deployed."

"Develop a better understanding. Let's face it. We live here in Iowa, the central part of the U.S. We're pretty sheltered, really, for the most part. Just develop a better understanding of what the people that deployed, that spent time over there — regardless of when it was, regardless of what they did over there — just develop a better understanding and appreciation for the sacrifices that they all made," he said.

Phillip Sitter covers education for the Ames Tribune, including Iowa State University and PreK-12 schools in Ames and elsewhere in Story County. Phillip can be reached via email at psitter@gannett.com. He is on Twitter @pslifeisabeauty.

Copyright 2021 The Tribune, All Rights Reserved.