

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Intrepid Afghan interpreters risk life and limb to serve

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MASUM GHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Lucky was 17 and working as a doctor's assistant at a Kabul hospital in 2001 when Afghanistan spiralled into war and he answered the call to head to the front lines.

But like hundreds of other educated, young Afghan men, both nationals and expatriates, he didn't join the country's struggling army. Instead, he put his dreams of becoming a doctor on hold and proudly signed up to be a military interpreter for the coalition forces.

"It is dangerous, but if we don't help our people, who will help them?" he said.

Like other Afghan military interpreters, who are nicknamed "terps" by soldiers, he can't use his real name or be photographed for fear insurgents will target him or his family. He goes by Lucky because Westerners have trouble pronouncing his given name.

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After working for the U.S. Army, then the British, Lucky, who is tall, slender and always neatly dressed, was recruited by the Canadian military. He is currently commanding a small interpreter pool at Canada's forward operating base in Masum Ghar, about 40 kilometres southwest of Kandahar.

Like interpreters stationed with Canadians at other outposts, these unarmed men follow soldiers wherever they go, often right into harm's way.

This week, an Afghan interpreter was injured along with three Canadian soldiers when they were hit by a homemade bomb during an operation in the Zhari district.

Dozens more interpreters have been killed or wounded over the years, including one who was decapitated by a piece of shrapnel last year at Masum Ghar when a rocket hit a bathroom where he was showering.

Like the Canadian soldiers with whom they work every day, the interpreters have families back home who constantly worry about their safety.

"My mother wants me to go to Pakistan to study to be a doctor or an engineer like my brothers," said Abdul, 19. "She doesn't want me doing this. She keeps asking me to stop."

At Masum Ghar, the interpreters share a large tent on the side of a craggy mountain overlooking the forward operating base. They are on call, and can be sent out to accompany soldiers at any hour of the day.

Many wear military fatigues, as well as sunglasses and scarves around their faces to conceal their identities when they are out in public.

When they aren't working, they cook, sleep or sit around on military cots and talk or listen to music on a battered black audio cassette player, often blaring Indian music.

The starting salary is about \$600 (U.S.) month, a hefty amount by Afghan standards. The men are covered by insurance, to be paid out if they are killed or injured on the job.

Most interpreters send all of their earnings home to their families. Many are from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and have had a difficult time adjusting to the south's excessive heat and ultraconservative ways.

While Canadian soldiers rotate in and out of Masum Ghar, Lucky and other interpreters have become constants at the busy base.

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Lucky always knows what's going on. Everybody knows him," said Leading Seaman Mike Bowman, a military medic with the Edmonton-based 1 Field Ambulance. "If you have a problem or need something, you go to him."

Lucky said the only time he and his crew struggled to do their jobs was when Quebec's Royal 22nd Regiment, also known as the Van Doos, was deployed to Afghanistan last August.

"I needed a terp at times," he joked.

He said that while he and the other interpreters speak some French, they had a harder time bridging the language barrier between francophone soldiers and local Afghans.

Most Canadian soldiers treat the interpreters like comrades, even brothers, often sharing cigarettes, jokes and stories about their own families.

However, Lucky won't stand for disrespect or abuse toward his men. "You tell your guys to stop calling my guys 'fucking terps.' That happened yesterday and it's unacceptable," he recently told a Canadian sergeant, who went to him to complain that some interpreters weren't showing up for work on time.

Lucky is looking forward to the day when he can move back to Kabul and start his life. "I'm so bored with the Taliban. Our country is so bored with fighting."

He wants to get married - his family is searching for a suitable wife - and finally, after all these years, return to school.

"Maybe, I hope," he said, when asked whether war-ravaged Afghanistan will ever be at peace.