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Oregon family helps bring trusted Iraqi translator to America

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WASHINGTON (AP) - They became good buddies during the war, the young American soldier and his invaluable Iraqi translator, an easygoing guy who could spot dangers in the shadows and calm jittery nerves in the streets.

When it was time to go home, Joey Coon, then an Army National Guard sergeant, set up an e-mail account for Bandar Hasan. He gave his friend a quick lesson on how to use it so they could stay in touch.

Joey didn't expect much; Bandar wasn't familiar with computers. But he did call on occasion, and the two joked about him coming to America one day, an idea that seemed far-fetched.

That all changed early one morning when Bandar called Joey, his voice tense, his message urgent. He was no longer a translator, he was on the run and in fear of his life.

"He was very scared and worried and thought he was in a lot of danger," Joey says, recalling how this conversation differed from others. "It was less about two guys joking, 'Hey buddy, won't it be fun when you come to the U.S.,' and more like 'Joey I need to get the heck out of here!'"

Joey knew Bandar had risked his life for him and other American soldiers.

Now he was determined to do all he could to save him.

Among the thousands of Iraqis who've worked with Americans during the war, probably no group has faced greater danger than translators. They've been denounced as spies, condemned as traitors. Some have been killed or tortured, others threatened with corpses at their doorsteps or bullets on their windshields.

Though a law passed in 2007 made it easier for translators to come to the United States, some Americans - many of them soldiers - have felt the need to do more. They've raised money, hired lawyers, even made room in their homes for arriving Iraqis.

"Maybe it was survivor's guilt," says Jason Faler, an Oregon National Guard captain who started a foundation to aid Iraqi translators, after bringing three of his own to America. "I had come home unscathed from a combat zone. I was worried that very dear friends of mine would not survive. They had sacrificed a great deal on my behalf ... and I wanted to give them some help."

It was much the same story for Joey Coon, an unlikely candidate for the military. At age 18, he'd already flashed his libertarian streak, refusing to register with the Selective Service, writing the agency a letter detailing his distrust of government. If the cause was just, he declared, he'd be first in line.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, he found his cause. He joined the Oregon National Guard, expecting to be sent to Afghanistan.

Instead, he arrived in Iraq in January 2005 on the sprawling base in Balad, about 40 miles north of Baghdad. About halfway through his tour, he met Bandar Hasan.

Bandar had just finished high school, where he'd studied English. He'd never held a job when a friend suggested he apply to become a translator. His widowed mother - his father died before Bandar was born - objected.

"No, you're my only child," he says she told him. "I don't want to lose you."

He kept pressing. Finally, she relented.

Like many other translators, Bandar concealed his identity: He wore sunglasses and a "gator neck," a sweater-like mask that covered his face below his eyes. He chose a code name: Dash. He sometimes spoke with a Lebanese accent since he was working near his home village.

Bandar worked the gate overnight, then joined the Americans on patrols and raids, riding in their Humvees, eating meals with them. Slender with a trim mustache and ready smile, he liked to laugh and joke, but knew when to be serious, too.

"He was good at de-escalating situations," Joey says. "He would lend a certain amount of calm to every situation to explain to us what's going on and to keep the locals informed. If the locals are confused, the soldiers get very anxious."

And if an Iraqi uttered something that sounded fishy, Bandar translated, but expressed his skepticism privately to the soldiers.

"He was someone that I trusted in a situation where you really need people you trust around you," Joey recalls. "It's very dangerous there and you need good friends that you can count on."

Associating with Americans could be deadly - as they both knew.

In one horrible incident, a 15-year-old Iraqi boy whose farm was near the base befriended the soldiers. They occasionally gave his family food and he provided tidbits of information, such as what road to avoid.

That proved to be fatal. One day, Joey says, the bodies of the boy and his 10-year-old brother were dumped on the fence line of the base. Both had been beheaded.

Later on, when Bandar hooked up with the Guard, Joey discovered these two boys were relatives on his father's side.

It was then - as it is now - incomprehensible to Bandar.

"They were only children," he says and leaves it at that.

After Joey left, Bandar began working at the less dangerous base hospital. He apparently had a falling-out with another Iraqi - the details are not clear - and suddenly, he was without a job and without protection. He'd already seen friends and colleagues killed. He feared he'd be next.

It was spring 2007 when he called Joey.

In turn, Joey contacted his father, Jim, a real estate agent in Bend, Ore., who vividly remembers his son's voice, thick with emotion, saying: "Dad, I've got to get him out of there. We've got to do something."

Jim Coon needed no convincing.

While his son was still in Iraq, he'd helped Iraqis by organizing a shoe drive with friends and family, collecting 2,000 pairs, along with clothes and toys. He shipped a giant package to Joey, who handed out the goods in schools and villages.

But this was different - in many ways.

Unlike most other Iraqis who depend on resettlement agencies or relatives to make their way here, Bandar was counting on Joey and a special program that helps translators.

It was no simple task: Joey had to decipher complicated immigration laws, plow through a blizzard of documents and acquire a general's letter to snare one of a small number of special immigrant visas being granted to translators that year.

As he plugged away, he never provided Bandar with any specifics, unless the news was good.

But Bandar's anxiety was palpable in his e-mails.

"Hi, whats up joey how are you," he wrote in July 2007, "... i need know what you do for me... you are may only hope in may life pleas dont forget me ..."

"I would never forget you," Joey responded, adding that he was talking with a friend about how to get him a visa. "Stay strong and be very safe."

Bandar's fears of being forgotten were understandable. Iraqis had seen soldiers come and go, making promises that were broken, sometimes through no fault of their own.

Joey sent Bandar money so he could temporarily move to Kurdistan, where it was safer. But Bandar didn't understand the language there and didn't have a job, so he headed to Baghdad, where he hid out, sleeping during the day and watching TV at night.

His frustration and isolation filled a February 2008 e-mail.

"Joey ... i Dont have place in my country. and i cant continuous like this," he wrote. "... i am with out freedom now i cannot move and i cannot do anything. brother this is my life now. hope you can doing something ... Dont forget me i am your brother."

Rescuing Bandar soon blossomed into a team project.

Teresa Statler, a Portland immigration lawyer who already had helped two Iraqi translators come to America, set out to do the same for Bandar.

Reaching him wasn't always easy; he was reluctant to open and scan American documents in the Internet cafe in Baghdad where he read his e-mail. Statler improvised,

once sending a giant packet of materials to a Baghdad hotel, where he picked them up.

Jason Faler, the Oregon Guard captain who established The Checkpoint One Foundation to help Iraqi translators, set up a DASH fund so contributors had a place to send checks.

Faler also contacted a general who'd served in Afghanistan to get a recommendation letter required for the visa. He told him he had vetted Bandar and felt he was a strong candidate. Joey also wrote a letter vouching for Bandar's character, loyalty and skill.

In the spring of 2008, Faler, in Washington on business, met Joey, who had moved to the nation's capital to be director of student programs at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. He offered some parting advice.

"I said, 'Joey, the job does not end when your interpreter gets to the U.S.,'" Faler recalls. "In fact, it has only just begun."

That summer, back in Bend, Joey joined his family in hosting a fundraiser barbecue. He introduced a video featuring Bandar working, smiling, even doing a bit of jig.

At the end, though, the young translator looks directly into the camera and makes a heartfelt plea: "Bandar cannot stay here in Iraq ... Maybe the bad guys will kill me."

When the video ended, Joey says, "there wasn't a dry eye on the house - including mine."

The word that Bandar had been issued a visa came in a March e-mail.

"Bandar, my brother!!!!" Joey wrote, announcing the news. "... I'm so happy for you ... It's been a long, hard struggle, but I think we've finally made it."

"Oh My God, is that true?" Bandar recalls thinking as the message popped up on his computer screen in Iraq.

"I really Cry when i see the e.mail," he wrote back to Joey, reminding him: "you Still my Big Brother." Bandar is 24 and Joey 28, though he could pass for a decade younger.

At the American Embassy in Baghdad, officials handed Bandar a large sealed envelope of documents and offered their congratulations.

He clutched the package tightly and instead of waiting for a bus that would take him to the gate that protects the Green Zone, he just ran. And ran.

A few days later, he and his mother shared a tearful goodbye. She didn't want him to go, but he says he told her: "This is my future, this is my life. I want to be safe."

Boarding his first plane ever, Bandar watched, without regret, as the Baghdad skyline disappeared below. "It's not very good memories I have of Iraq," he says, his voice turning softer. "Always scared. Always bad situations."

Joey had stayed up all night waiting for a call - Bandar left about 4 a.m. Eastern time - figuring a million things could go wrong.

Later, he alerted his friends on Twitter and Facebook of his plans to greet Bandar at the airport. About a dozen of them gathered, including Joey's girlfriend, Brooke Oberwetter.

Joey and Bandar hugged, took a cell phone photo, e-mailed it to Jim Coon, then headed to an Irish pub to celebrate.

The next day, they played Frisbee on the Washington Mall, did some sightseeing around Capitol Hill, the White House and the Washington Monument and toured the Museum of National History. Along the way, Bandar took photos.

"One day," he says, "I'm going to show them to my children."

As predicted, the hard part wasn't over.

It took three months for Bandar to find a job; he now holds two part-time positions busing dishes, but worries about supporting himself and has even considered joining the Army - where his language skills are in great demand.

"He's a very proud guy," Joey says. "He doesn't want to feel like he's a burden."

Bandar also hasn't escaped the horrors of war. Early on, he learned an Iraqi friend, a contractor he'd entrusted to watch over his mother, had been killed. Then a child from a village near his own who reminded Bandar of himself as a boy was killed, too.

There were days, Joey says, when he'd see Bandar staring off in space, tears streaming down his face.

But those moments have not dampened Bandar's joy about living in America.

"I am the king of my life now," he says. "I can walk anywhere. I can come back at 3:30 in the morning. I feel like I'm free. This is very important to me."

Actually, Joey says he has told him that yes, it's infinitely safer than Iraq, but no, it's NOT a good idea to walk the streets at all hours.

Joey says he sometimes feels like a big brother, sometimes like a father, showing Bandar new things. The young Iraqi who hadn't seen a computer mouse a few years ago now has his own Facebook page and ATM card.

He shares a house with Joey, his girlfriend Brooke and another roommate. Brooke says she had no reservations having Bandar join them.

"I love Joey very much," she says. "I knew he wanted Bandar to be here. I knew he was part of the deal."

Both Brooke and Joey tease Bandar about eating too much fried food and say their mission is to get him to try fruit or vegetables.

Bandar plans to take English classes and would eventually like to go to college and maybe, one day, bring his mother here.

For now, he's basking in being "adopted" by a new family that includes Jim Coon. The two talk and exchange text messages regularly. "He calls me Dad, I call him my No. 2 son," the elder Coon says.

Bandar is giddy just thinking about it.

"I've got a brother," he declares. "I've got a family, people who take care of me. It's amazing."

He stops for a moment as if to absorb it all.

"Joey," he confides, "he's not doing a small thing for me. I will never forget this all my life."

As for Joey, he and his family are thrilled - and relieved.

"Whatever problems we might face, whether it's money, jobs, whatever, we've sort of got the basic issues out of the way - life and death," he says. "There have been difficult times

but it's always been worth it ... We're a team. We're in this together."

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