Episode Book

EPISODE #6322

Why Armies Began Enlisting Their Own Interpreters

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SYNOPSIS

Military translation goes far beyond simple bilingualism, carrying immense cultural nuance and life-or-death operational consequences. Rather than relying solely on local civilian contractors or years of standard language school, the U.S. military launched initiatives like the 09 Lima specialty and the 51st Translator Interpreter Company. This look into military linguists examines how noncitizen heritage speakers were recruited, trained in advanced English at Fort Jackson, and integrated into uniform to provide vital context during deployments.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Who gets to leave when an army goes home? Daniel watched The Covenant, and it sent him toward the people behind that story, the interpreters who accompany foreign troops into places where speaking the wrong way can be dangerous. He wants to know where those people come from, what qualifies them beyond knowing two languages, and what becomes of them when the uniform beside them disappears but the association remains.



Herman

The film concentrates that relationship into a sergeant and an Afghan interpreter. The underlying dependency is much broader. A patrol needs directions, a commander needs to understand an objection, a medic needs a patient history. Somebody has to make those exchanges possible, often while carrying risks the visiting soldiers barely see.



Corn

The interpreter can board the patrol vehicle without acquiring a ticket home. That distinction seems to sit underneath everything else here.



Herman

It does. The Americans built different answers to the language problem in Iraq and Afghanistan. They hired local civilians, recruited immigrants already living in America into uniform, and trained military linguists. Those people could be standing near one another doing related work while having completely different employment status, security access, and prospects after deployment.



Corn

Same conversation. Different escape routes.



Herman

Consider the first encounter with a village. The unit can have surveillance imagery and excellent navigation and still misunderstand why nobody will answer a particular question. An interpreter supplies speech, certainly, but also information about who is entitled to answer, whether the question sounds insulting, and whether the person answering has any authority.



Corn

I would worry about mistaking agreement for agreement. Somebody says yes because an armed stranger has asked something, and the commander hears enthusiastic consent. The interpreter has to translate the social pressure as well as the sentence.



Herman

Sometimes by saying, privately, that the answer should not be taken literally. That requires confidence and a commander willing to hear unwelcome information. Language ability alone cannot create that relationship.



Herman

Nor does every military interpreter work between an occupying army and local civilians. South Korea has interpreter officers across its service branches, principally working between Korean and English. The service period described for that role is twenty-one months. Korean nationals studying in North America have sought it out for the professional access and prestige, as well as completing military service.



Corn

Compulsory service with networking opportunities. The careers office has found the artillery.



Herman

Coalition headquarters need interpreters too. Planning, training, medical cooperation, visiting delegations. There are commissioned interpreter roles, enlisted specialists, and civilian employees. Calling all of them translators can conceal how differently they are trained and used.



Corn

Also, translating a document gives you the luxury of a document that stays where you put it. A frightened person interrupts, changes their account, notices who is listening. That seems a different professional skill.



Herman

Interpreting live speech imposes memory, timing, and judgment demands. Written translation allows revision and reference checking. In practice these military jobs can involve both, but bilingualism does not automatically confer either skill.



Corn

You are about to recruit every bilingual person we know.



Herman

I would settle for you not treating my Hebrew as an emergency appliance.



Corn

It comes with a very long explanation cycle.



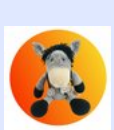
Herman

You ask what a form means, Corn. Sometimes the answer is longer than the form. That same mismatch matters here. Knowing the language and explaining the institution speaking it are separate tasks.



Corn

The American recruitment story starts with scale, then. You cannot wait for every patrol leader to develop your relationship with administrative Hebrew.



Herman

In Iraq, the requirement described in two thousand five was roughly nine thousand translators. Captain Bill Greer, who managed the National Guard translator effort, said a large portion were native Iraqis hired as Army contractors. Civilians, not enlisted soldiers. They supplied immediate language capacity and local knowledge that the force could not manufacture quickly.



Corn

Local knowledge also means local exposure. The man who knows which road reaches your destination may have relatives living along it.



Herman

His employment can be visible to neighbors, customers, rival families. That affects what he can safely say and where he can safely go. A local interpreter is embedded in relationships, not floating above them.



Herman

What would you expect the Army to gain by recruiting somebody from an Iraqi community in America instead?



Corn

Some distance from immediate local pressure, presumably. Established residence in America, perhaps family there. Also someone who can explain American behavior back to Iraqis. Though I would not assume living in Michigan makes somebody familiar with every neighborhood in Baghdad.



Herman

That last distinction is important. The Army's zero nine Lima specialty, called translator aide, recruited native speakers already living in the United States. Recruiters drew from places including Dearborn, the Washington area, Southern California, and Chicago. About seventy-five percent of those soldiers were green-card holders rather than citizens in the account from two thousand eight.



Corn

An American soldier without American citizenship. That does rather complicate the tidy phrase, our people and their people.



Herman

Military service and citizenship are distinct legal categories. These recruits were soldiers, with training, orders, and obligations. Their language background did not make them local contractors in uniform.



Corn

Was this a substantial alternative to local hiring, or a specialist supplement?



Herman

A supplement. The program began in two thousand three through the Individual Ready Reserve and expanded into active and reserve components. Its initial recruiting goal was two hundred fifty native speakers annually. The Army exceeded that goal in one fiscal year, reaching a hundred thirty percent. Successful recruiting, but nowhere near replacing the entire local workforce.



Corn

The arithmetic refuses the recruiting brochure.



Herman

The institutional commitment was real, though. The Fifty-first Translator Interpreter Company stood up at Fort Irwin in California. Its flag was unfurled in October two thousand eight. Its planned strength exceeded a hundred forty native speakers, covering Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Kurdish, and Dari.



Corn

Those languages themselves should stop anyone picturing a single interchangeable regional interpreter. Even Arabic does not make every dialect and social setting equally easy.



Herman

Native proficiency still has boundaries. Geography, class, age, education, and professional vocabulary matter. A recruit may speak naturally with family but need training to handle a court hearing or medical conversation. Heritage speaker describes a background, not a universal qualification.



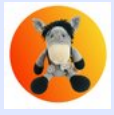
Herman

At the company's launch, about a hundred twenty personnel were assigned, with roughly ninety deployed. These were operational assets being sent out, not simply an interesting language initiative retained at a training installation.



Corn

I can see why commanders liked having them. Less uncertainty about whether the interpreter is available tomorrow, whether he has been briefed, whether he knows what the patrol is doing. Shared routines must count.



Herman

That was the Army's explicit argument. Brigadier General Richard Longo described commanders as more comfortable with an interpreter who was also a soldier beside them. Uniformed interpreters followed military schedules and were subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice.



Corn

Accountability helps. It does not make the uniform a lie detector.



Herman

No. Every recruit still had to pass counterintelligence screening. Additional procedures, including a polygraph and biometric work, could support limited authorization to access classified material. Limited authorization should not be confused with unrestricted clearance.



Corn

The Army trusted them enough to enlist them, then continued checking what it could trust them with. That sounds more realistic than either absolute trust or permanent suspicion.



Herman

There were other recruitment routes too. A National Guard experiment recruited immigrants in Michigan, Texas, and California. It brought in about a hundred recruits over two years before ending and then restarting. Its training and overseas service requirements represented a serious commitment, not casual translation work.



Corn

Citizenship must have been part of the attraction for some.



Herman

It could be. The separate MAVNI initiative allowed eligible legal noncitizens with valuable skills, including sought-after languages, to enlist with access to expedited naturalization. Some naturalized by the end of initial training. These are historical programs, though, not instructions for somebody trying to enlist today.



Corn

That distinction saves us becoming a very unreliable recruiting office.



Herman

The language training also ran in the direction people sometimes miss. For zero nine Lima recruits, the Army could spend up to twenty-four weeks improving their English at Fort Jackson. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, study skills, American culture, even debating skills.



Corn

Finally, a military qualification you already possess.



Herman

I would test out.



Corn

The examiner would surrender.



Herman

Only after a thorough exchange. The purpose was practical, Corn. Understanding a local speaker is insufficient if you cannot communicate the answer accurately to an American officer, especially an answer full of uncertainty or disagreement.



Herman

There were recurring tests, then an oral comprehension assessment, screening, Basic Combat Training, and specialist training at Fort Huachuca. The recruit had to become an effective English communicator and a soldier, not simply arrive speaking another language.



Corn

That reverses the usual picture of a language school. Instead of teaching an American soldier Pashto from nothing, you teach a Pashto speaker the English and military practices needed to function inside the Army.



Herman

The traditional route remained valuable. Greer contrasted heritage speakers with native-born Americans spending sixty-three weeks learning to translate documents and serve as basic interpreters. That was his comparison, not a universal course length for every language or assignment.



Corn

Nor proof that one route produces the better interpreter everywhere. A trained outsider may be less fluent socially but more willing to ask what something means. A native speaker can miss what they assume everybody knows.



Herman

Would you rather have the culturally fluent person who occasionally struggles in English, or the technically polished interpreter who misses the room?



Corn

For a negotiation, I would want the first person supported well enough that the English stopped being a problem. For a technical document, I might choose differently. You cannot detach the qualification from the task.



Herman

That is how I would divide it too. The operational examples show why cultural fluency mattered. A planned Iraqi operation involving a cemetery was called off when a uniformed interpreter recognized that it was a holy day when families visited relatives' graves. What looked suspicious without context could have been ordinary observance.



Corn

The calendar prevented the raid.



Herman

The calendar, recognized by someone willing to intervene. That is the additional requirement. Information sitting silently in an interpreter's head protects nobody.



Corn

He needs permission to interrupt authority. Otherwise you have employed an expert and required him to behave like a cable.



Herman

Another account described a teenage boy asking an interpreter why he looked and spoke like the locals but belonged to the Americans. Their conversation established a connection. Later the boy warned him away from part of the city. A subsequent operation reportedly apprehended about eighty insurgents.



Corn

I would separate the conversation from the success story attached to it. We cannot know from that account how much rested on that one exchange. The part I find persuasive is that the boy approached someone he could actually talk to.



Herman

Fair distinction. The claimed operational result comes from an official anecdote. The human access is easier to understand directly. An interpreter can receive information nobody would volunteer through a shouted question from a foreign soldier.



Corn

That gives him influence over what the commander knows, not just how clearly he knows it. A reason to value interpreters, and a reason to avoid depending on one person's reading of everything.



Herman

Specialist Youssef Mandour, a Moroccan immigrant, offered another practical intervention. He coached troops against asking Iraqi soldiers about wives and children in ways that could cause offense. His advice concerned the people and setting he was working with. Turning that into a rule for every Muslim everywhere would be another cultural mistake.



Corn

The etiquette briefing needs an expiry date and a location.



Herman

It needs judgment. Cultural knowledge helps you ask better questions. It should not become a collection of claims that every person with a certain identity behaves the same way.



Corn

You can see the operational reliance clearly now. Yet the locally hired interpreter who supplied all of this could still be treated as the less trustworthy category.



Herman

Army advocates sometimes described local hires as potentially having interests at odds with American troops. There were legitimate security concerns, but the category covered individuals making very different choices under very different pressures. Civilian status alone tells you remarkably little about courage or loyalty.



Corn

It tells you rather more about who can order a transport for you.



Herman

That is the serious side of the ledger, and a moment before we move on. Desmond has his money tip.

D

Desmond

Desmond's Money Tip. I boil potatoes twice a week, and I do not pour that water down the sink. I wash up in it.

D

Desmond

It saves maybe two pence of hot water a wash, which is about two pounds and eight pence over a year, and over a lifetime, if you are lucky, enough for one modest kettle.

D

Desmond

My kitchen smells faintly of potatoes at all times, and my neighbours have started asking questions.

D

Desmond

Money is mostly a long series of small humiliations. Try to enjoy the cheap ones.



Corn

I could consider that. Your expression suggests we will retain detergent. The civilian's transport problem, though, remains when the unit leaves.



Herman

A soldier normally has an institution responsible for returning him from deployment. A locally hired civilian may have an employment relationship that ends while the personal danger continues. That is the trust paradox here. The people presented as harder to trust can be the people left proving their loyalty afterward to obtain protection.



Corn

We should not quietly turn the Iraqi recruitment picture into an Afghan percentage, either. We have the Iraqi estimate and the uniformed program's numbers. I do not know a reliable breakdown for Afghanistan between local contractors and those uniformed specialists.



Herman

Nor do I. The distinction matters without assigning an invented share to either group. Both routes existed, and their consequences differed.



Corn

The older history makes the local civilian less of an improvisation than he sounds. Armies have long recruited the language they lacked from people living around them. Empires did it systematically.



Herman

You have reached the history section before I have.



Corn

I read accounts of institutions discovering that foreigners speak foreign languages.



Herman

Overnight, naturally. Did any of them discover it before arriving?



Corn

Enough to advertise vacancies. The Nyasaland Times carried an advertisement in nineteen seventeen seeking Chinyanja interpreters for the King's African Rifles. A recruitment notice makes the dependency wonderfully concrete. The military needed a particular language and went looking for people who possessed it.



Corn

In Natal, Indian interpreters worked as colonial civil servants. French colonial Africa developed formal military-interpreter career pathways, with education, access, and possibilities for promotion. These were institutions employing intermediaries, not isolated adventurers who happened to know a phrase.



Herman

Access is important there. An interpreter might hear officials discuss plans, accompany officers, and deal with local authorities. Language ability could open doors, while also marking someone as attached to a power that other people resented.



Corn

Employment could offer advancement and create danger at the same time. We should not imagine everyone entered the role with the same motive. Wages, education, family need, political belief, opportunity. Those can coexist.



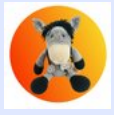
Herman

There could also be several language boundaries inside one encounter. A British officer might speak through Hindustani and have an intermediary render that into Pashto. The image of an officer delivering perfect English to one interpreter who delivers perfect local speech conceals all kinds of relay arrangements.



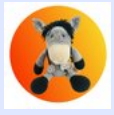
Corn

Every additional exchange creates another place for uncertainty to vanish. Somebody says probably. Somebody farther along hears definitely. The final listener receives more confidence than the original speaker supplied.



Herman

Professional technique tries to preserve those distinctions. Who is speaking, what degree of certainty they expressed, whether the interpreter is adding an explanation. Those are not decorative niceties when a decision may follow immediately.



Herman

Do you think the colonial comparison tells us the modern role is unchanged?



Corn

No. The political projects, legal systems, and military institutions differ. It tells us the dependency is old. A foreign force needs local communication, someone acquires unusual access by supplying it, and that person's future can depend on decisions made far away. I would not claim that every empire or withdrawal handled the debt identically.



Herman

Nor is interpreting universal in the literal sense that every overseas deployment needs a local interpreter at every moment. Shared languages, bilingual personnel, and the mission determine demand. Multinational operations can need language specialists even where nobody is fighting.



Corn

The relevant dividing line is whose conversation you need to understand. Enemy, ally, patient, shopkeeper. Those are different encounters, and mistranslating any of them can hurt somebody.



Herman

Zero nine Lima soldiers served on Afghan foot patrols, in Iraqi courthouses, and in hospitals in Kuwait. Their usefulness extended beyond questioning people suspected of hostility. Some could not publicly identify themselves because of security concerns.



Corn

That also complicates the idea of evidence afterward. The institution wants discretion during service and documentation after it. The person who did the work has to connect those demands.



Herman

Special Immigrant Visas were intended to provide a route to safety. There are distinct statutory programs, and blending them creates confusion. The narrow translator and interpreter program authorized under the defense legislation for fiscal year two thousand six allowed up to fifty visas annually.



Corn

Fifty is a remarkably small opening beside an operation needing thousands of language workers.



Herman

It required a favorable written recommendation from a general or flag officer in the supported chain of command, or the Chief of Mission in Baghdad or Kabul. That narrow program remains listed as active and accepting applications. That does not mean visas are currently being issued despite the entry restrictions.



Corn

Application accepted. Destination unavailable.



Herman

The larger Afghan program came under the Afghan Allies Protection Act of two thousand nine. The State Department reports approximately a hundred sixty thousand Afghan SIVs issued over its history through the reporting period ending this January. That total must not be described as a hundred sixty thousand interpreters. The program covered eligible service more broadly, and family immigration matters to the totals.



Corn

Important correction. Otherwise the visa number starts impersonating a workforce census.



Herman

Eligibility involved faithful and valuable qualifying service, generally at least a year, a serious ongoing threat arising from that work, and documentation including employment verification and a supervisor's recommendation.



Corn

The threat is tied to your employment, but proving the employment may depend on locating a supervisor who has rotated out. I can understand checking a claim. I can also see how a genuine claim becomes difficult to assemble after an organization disperses.



Herman

Exactly that practical difficulty drives veterans and other supporters to help former colleagues pursue cases. A personal connection can help recover records or establish contact. It cannot itself issue a visa.



Corn

The interpreter may remember every patrol and still need somebody else's letter saying he was there.



Herman

Even before the suspension, the process was slow. In late last year, the Chief of Mission review stage alone averaged more than five hundred days. That was one stage, not the complete journey from application to resettlement.



Corn

A year and a half to reach another queue.



Herman

As of January, the reported visa queue contained twenty-three thousand four hundred thirty-one approved applicants, with five thousand nine hundred seventy visas remaining. Those are queue and authorization figures at a particular point. They are not a current count of everyone stranded abroad, and they should not be substituted for one.



Corn

The queue already exceeded the available places by a wide margin. Suspension then adds a different obstacle. More processing cannot solve a prohibition on issuance.



Herman

No One Left Behind's current program-status account says Afghan SIV issuance has been suspended since January first under Proclamation ten thousand nine hundred ninety-eight. Iraqi issuance has been suspended since January twenty-first. New applications under the larger Afghan program closed at the end of last year unless Congress extends the authority.



Corn

The narrow interpreter route can still accept applications while the larger route has closed to new ones. Neither fact tells an approved person they can board a flight. Those distinctions are doing rather unpleasant work.



Herman

A federal court ordered continued processing of pending Afghan cases in February. Interviews and adjudications continue, but visas are not being issued. Cases reaching completion can be refused under the presidential entry restriction. Processing, approval, issuance, admission... those are separate decisions.



Corn

The paperwork can travel farther than the applicant.



Herman

Security screening is a legitimate national responsibility. Supporting American troops does not remove every need to verify identity and background. My difficulty is with a system that continues individual adjudication while withholding the thing the process was supposed to make possible.



Corn

I support controlling entry, too. I do not see why that prevents a country from making a clear, workable arrangement for people it deliberately relied on. The relevant question is whether the individual qualifies, rather than whether paperwork can keep moving indefinitely.



Herman

The danger also predates withdrawal. Mohammed Rafi Hotak began interpreting for British forces in two thousand six and was seriously injured by an improvised explosive device less than a year later. He subsequently faced attacks and repeated Taliban death threats.



Corn

Body armor addressed one danger for one moment. It could not conceal who he had worked for afterward.



Herman

I cannot give a verified total for Afghan and Iraqi interpreters killed in retaliation. Individual attacks and threats are documented, but a confident aggregate would need evidence we do not have. We do not need to invent one to understand Hotak's case.



Corn

Nor should survival be confused with safety. Hiding, separating a family, moving to another country without a durable status. Those are consequences even when nobody appears in a casualty tally.



Herman

Researchers interviewing resettled Afghan locally employed civilians across several Western countries found people and their supporters still advocating for protection. Reaching another country does not mean every family member or former colleague has reached a secure position.



Corn

This is where I would expect personal memory to matter again. The soldier remembers the interpreter who warned him. The interpreter remembers who promised to help. The administrative file may contain neither conversation.



Herman

A commander can leave with an after-action report. The interpreter may leave with...



Hilbert

A notebook he has lent to someone who will not return it promptly. Nabil from my walking club has lent me his this week. He interpreted for military personnel. Small book. Battered cover. American idioms on the left, explanations on the right. Herman, your distinction between speaking English and understanding Americans is visible on every page.



Corn

A demanding distinction to fit in a pocket.



Hilbert

I am using it for a recording on Saturday. Nabil has agreed to read the phrases aloud. I have bought a tabletop microphone for thirty-eight pounds and booked the little room above the club's usual café. The café owner wants payment for two hours. Nabil thinks one will do. I have allowed the extra hour for the expressions he refuses to explain while eating.



Herman

Recording ordinary examples of the expressions would preserve something a vocabulary list misses. The speaker's tone changes the meaning.



Hilbert

That is the part I find fascinating. The same words can mean encouragement or an instruction to stop talking. I have cut the expressions into paper strips and put each strip inside a separate sock. It stops me reading ahead. Nabil will draw them out. I had a pocket recorder for this. I returned it on Monday. It put a click at the start of each recording. The postage cost six pounds forty. They refunded the recorder and not the postage. I have written again.



Corn

Your rehearsal now requires a laundry basket.



Hilbert

A clean one. Nabil has put the names of speakers beside some entries. He remembers which man used which expression. I want those names kept off the recording. We can replace them with ordinary examples. I know the care that takes from civilian work on a base. He is giving me his afternoon, and I want the recording to sound right.



Herman

...A record can preserve somebody's language without exposing the person attached to it. That tension applies to military archives too. You want enough detail to understand the work, while protecting people whose names may remain dangerous to publish.



Corn

It makes the interpreter's skill harder to recognize publicly. An account can say a patrol avoided a mistake, while the person who made that possible remains unnamed. That is sometimes necessary, but it should not make the contribution disappear inside the institution.



Herman

The unit needs procedures that survive rotation. Briefing interpreters, listening when they identify a problem, recording employment properly, maintaining contact details. Those sound ordinary beside combat, but they affect whether the relationship works during deployment and whether service can be established afterward.



Corn

I would add a limit on what commanders expect them to know. Knowing the language does not make a man an expert on every dispute in the district. If the commander treats uncertainty as incompetence, he will eventually receive confident answers that nobody should trust.



Herman

Training the unit to work with an interpreter matters alongside training the interpreter. Speak to the person being addressed, allow complete exchanges, and distinguish a translation from the interpreter's own assessment. Otherwise several conversations become tangled together.



Corn

You can also exhaust the person everyone needs. The interpreter has been listening through the entire meeting while the rest of the room occasionally gets to stop.



Herman

There is an adjacent wartime role we have barely touched. Britain's First World War army designated roughly a hundred fifty signals-intelligence personnel as Interpreter Operators. German speakers listened to enemy and friendly telephone traffic. Language work could mean headphones and intercepted speech rather than accompanying a patrol.



Corn

Friendly telephone traffic as well. Fluency does not guarantee a private conversation.



Herman

It shows how broad the category is. The human bridge might connect an army to civilians, allies, or an enemy voice on a wire. The employment and protection questions depend on which bridge, and who is standing on it.



Corn

For the next campaign, I would watch whether protection arrangements exist before recruitment begins. People remember names and promises long after a unit rotates away. If the offer ends with interviews but no visas, future local recruits will hear about that too.



Herman

Our thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing the show.



Corn

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; episode eighteen fifty-three, Emergency Symposium on the Iran-Israel-US Crisis; and episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. No question too obscure,



Corn (continued)

no rabbit hole too deep.



Herman

The show notes link the State Department reports, the current program-status information, and the Army's accounts of its interpreter program. If you value these conversations, leave us a review wherever you listen.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

SOURCES

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