

January 13, 2023

Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics
Center for Journalism Ethics
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison

To the Committee:

Please accept these materials to support the nomination of The Night Raids for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

1) Name and contact information of the nominators and their relationship to the story

- Tracy Weber, Managing Editor | [REDACTED] | Tracy.Weber@propublica.org

2) Names and emails of the reporter or reporting team that produced the report

- Lynzy Billing, Reporter | Billing.lynzy@gmail.com

3) Brief description of the story and a link to it online.

More than a year before the fall of Kabul, Lynzy Billing reached out on Twitter with an incredible pitch for a story. She'd been crisscrossing violent swaths of Afghanistan to track deadly night raids by squads of Afghan soldiers who were funded, trained, and directed by the CIA. The raids, she said, were often based on disastrously faulty intelligence, resulting in the death of scores of civilians who had no ties to the Taliban. What's more, she'd gotten inside one of the squads and convinced two special forces soldiers to talk to her about the botched raids. We grilled her over Skype. Who was this young reporter, and was she really doing this incredibly dangerous and difficult reporting?

She was. And over time we realized that Billing, a British citizen of Pakistani-Afghan origins, was doing something no one else was — nor will be able to do again. Others had documented the cover-up of casualties from airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Billing was documenting in real time what the U.S. was doing on the ground in rural pockets of Afghanistan. Amid the chaos of war, she meticulously counted the dead, cross-checking her findings with witnesses, local hospitals and a forensic pathologist she recruited to help her. Her reporting focused on one of four CIA-backed Zero Units, known as the 02, over a four-year period. Her tally of the dead — at least 452 civilians killed during 107 raids — is almost certainly an undercount.

The resulting work is a singular feat, a deeply intimate tour through what the U.S. wrought during its 20-year war in Afghanistan — a piece that should be studied for what it reveals about the war on terror fought in all our names. Without Billing's reporting, we would never know its true costs or consequences.

- **The Night Raids | Dec. 15, 2022**
<https://www.propublica.org/article/afghanistan-night-raids-zero-units-lynzy-billing>

4) Description of conflicting values encountered in reporting the story

This project was rife with risk for virtually everyone who agreed to speak with Billing. She traveled to the sites of more than 30 raids in which civilians were killed. The scenes often still bore the fresh signs of violence: bullet holes in buildings, blood stains in courtyards and, everywhere, fear and anger. The survivors of the raids, the witnesses, the family members of those killed, the village elders, the local doctors — all took risks to speak with Billing and share evidence with her. They often didn't know why they were targeted and whether the Zero Units would return. And a cloud of suspicion had sometimes been laid over survivors and families, who had no means to prove that the raids had gotten it wrong. To gain a 360-degree perspective on the operations, Billing also spent six months working to get Afghan commandos in the Zero Units to share their perspectives with her. Their risk was also great; they were despised by many of their fellow Afghans and had to lie to their superiors to sneak out to meet with Billing. She also sought out American special operations forces soldiers, who joined in the raids under the umbrella of the CIA, to speak about the civilian dead despite strict prohibitions against speaking about covert operations. All of this was done amid the chaos of war.

5) Options considered to resolve the conflicts

This story took more than three years to complete. Much of the time was spent tracking the dead, pinpointing the sites of raids and traveling hundreds of miles across some of the most volatile swathes of eastern Afghanistan to meet with the traumatized survivors and witnesses. Billing, whose own mother and sister were killed in a raid nearly 30 years earlier, understood the need to establish trust and to avoid causing further trauma. She met with many of these witnesses and families over the course of months, even years, to understand their circumstances and corroborate their stories while protecting them the best she could. She was transparent about what she was doing and why. She was often the only reporter, the only person, to visit them and ask questions about what had happened. Her reporting was shadowed by potentially dangerous consequences to both her and anyone who cooperated with her. She also had to convince the Afghan commandos that she was not going to reveal their identities or turn them in to authorities or even blackmail them (a fear). They met over the course of years, as circumstances in Afghanistan grew more fraught. That patience shook loose increasingly candid assessments of their part in America's war.

6) Final decisions and rationales behind them

The storytelling itself allowed Billing to give humanity and agency to those she interviewed. This was war reporting at its most intimate. Billing chose to write "The Night Raids" almost as she reported it, taking readers along as she navigated the reporting challenges, delicately walking through the deadly raids with survivors and asking probing questions of the Afghan commandos, the American Ranger and the former Afghan spy chief. She returned again and again, not only to ensure she got it right, but to examine the consequences of the raids through the eyes of everyone involved.

Readers are with her as she meets a young male college student whose brothers were killed in a raid and tells him he doesn't have to talk to her: *"I found Batour, 22, in the university's science lab, sitting sandwiched between plastic models of dissected human bodies. Slight, disheveled and with wild eyes, he looked lost. I suggested that we move to the privacy of the roof. He didn't have to talk to me, I said. "It's OK," he said, then took a deep breath and cocked his chin, as if bracing for a blow."*

And readers hear two Afghan commandos question why Billing would want to talk to killers and reassure each other that she could be trusted. *"Both soldiers had obtained leave passes under false pretenses to meet me. The relationship between journalist and soldier seemed to offer them a space where they could discuss their actions — even boast about them when marveling at their superior training and autonomy — because I think they knew I wasn't going to turn them in or use their stories as leverage."*

Her extensive interviewing allows each of them to emerge not as simply a victim or perpetrator, but as a lens through which to assess an anti-terrorism strategy deployed by American forces in Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.