



“You’re always prepared for the worst-case scenario”

CASE STUDY:

AFGHANISTAN TO AFGHAN RUG BUSINESS

Flight Lieutenant Wilthew was serving with the UK’s Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan’s Northern Provinces in 2003/4 when the seeds of his business idea were sown.

Mazar-e-Sharif is part of the old Silk Road that is renowned for its handmade Afghan rugs. James and his colleagues would gather, drinking tea and chatting in the rug shops close to their main base, during the few hours of downtime they got each week.

Rafi, the owner, sold him some rugs which he posted back to the UK, some to keep, some to sell to help pay for his wedding.

After eight years and five operational tours with the RAF, James Wilthew left the services in 2007 and, after a short spell in London working as a civil servant, he and his wife relocated to Hebden Bridge, in the Upper Calder Valley in West Yorkshire.

In 2014, a friend spotted one of James’s Afghan rugs and asked if he could get him one from the same seller.

James adds: “Having done a full-time military career I didn’t think about starting a business then. But having worked part-time, it gave me time to think and start some research.”

He managed to track down Rafi via Facebook and an interpreter in Afghanistan.

“We ended up Facetiming at a specific time and date and he said: ‘Let’s do business.’”

Several months were spent figuring out import tax, how to get payment to Rafi and other issues.

“But before I knew it, I was looking for premises and the shop was open,” says James.

The Afghan Rug Shop, which prides itself on being a Living Wage employer and fair trade approved, celebrates its fourth birthday in Hebden Bridge this year.

There have been challenges. Months after it opened in August 2015, the Calder Valley was hit by the Boxing Day floods and Hebden Bridge was left waist-deep in water.

“We just had to dust ourselves off and get on with it and get the shop open again. Being ex-military, you learn to have a plan and you are always prepared for the worst-case scenario,” says James.

“I see a lot of people blinded to potential threats to their business. As long as you are prepared, you can deal with most things.”

The business has also had to cope with the all-time low in the dollar exchange rate as Brexit uncertainty continues [at the time of publication] - which means profits are down. But thanks to some careful planning, there is still money in the business to pay staff and keep the shop running.

James says his military training has also reinforced the importance of stepping back. He says it’s important to delegate to others, so you can watch from afar and think more strategically, to better steer the business.

“I think we have planned for a lot more things than other businesses might have done. That’s the military mindset,” says James.

And while The Afghan Rug Shop is proving popular with tourists and locals alike, he has not abandoned the military entirely - he’s recently rejoined as a Reservist.

FSB member James Wilthew,
The Afghan Rug Shop, West Yorkshire

