



A bridge in Tashqurgon, Balkh Province, 60km east of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Photo credit: Roland and Sabrina Michaud, 1973.

Youth in Asia

My years with US Peace Corps Afghanistan

By Charles Arnold

Sometime during my first week in Afghanistan, one of our Peace Corps trainers advised us to keep a journal of our experiences and feelings. Accordingly, I went to the bazaar and purchased a notebook. Made in India. Cardboard covers and cheap paper. I also purchased a Chinese fountain pen and a bottle of ink.

To fill the reservoir, you unscrewed the barrel, dipped the nib in the ink, and squeezed a little metal spring that compressed a rubber bladder. When you released the spring, the bladder sucked ink from the bottle. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen.

Many times during my tour of Afghanistan, I sat up late into the evening and, by the light of a kerosene lantern, wrote in my journal or composed aerogramme letters to my family and friends with that fountain pen. During my first year in country, the journal filled several notebooks. The eventual fate of those journals seems to be typical of my Peace Corps experience and proved a harbinger of many things to come.

The following narrative is not based on these journals, or any contemporary account. It was constructed entirely from the fragile threads of my memories.

How I Got to Afghanistan

My family lived in Jackson, Mississippi during my high school years. I came of age in a society that had swallowed the confederate lost cause myth hook, line and sinker. While my high school was in a state capital, it was also in a state of denial.

Students took dates to dances, purchased liquor from bootleg outlets, and carried flasks inside their navy blazers. Girls wore dresses and very sturdy under garments. We danced to great blues and R&B bands whose musicians were not allowed in the hallways of my high school.

I vividly remember the colored waiting rooms, white and colored water fountains, and white only signs in the offices and bus stations. I left Mississippi as soon as I realized we were free to go.

I graduated from the University of New Mexico with a BA in English Literature in the summer of 1970. The Vietnam War was raging, and so were the protests against it. The military used a draft, ironically named the selective service, to supply ground troops for the war.

Everyone knew that, if you were “selected,” your chances of coming home in a body bag were pretty high. But certain classes of young people were exempt, among them were college students and Peace Corps volunteers.

Accordingly, staying in college was a survival tactic for many of us, not necessarily a career move. That’s one reason I majored in English Literature. I minored in Philosophy, mainly because the university awarded a minor degree with only 12 units of upper division classes.

On May 4, 1970, during my senior year, my academic career was upended by the Kent State massacre, where the Ohio National Guard killed four students and wounded nine. In the wake of those shootings, violent anti-war protests gripped campuses all over the nation. The protests at UNM morphed into riots and disrupted the university to the point that the administration decided to end the semester. That made the mid-term grades final, which almost gave me enough credits to graduate. I lacked one elective course, and selected photography, which I completed during the summer.

With a new degree and a number 49 in the new selective service lottery, I returned to live with my family, who had moved from Mississippi to Bradenton, Florida. I quickly discovered that my college education did not teach me a marketable skill. In fact, I had no idea what a marketable skill was. Regardless, I found work in the proof room at the Sarasota Herald Tribune, a local daily newspaper.

My shift was from 3:00pm to 11:00pm, and, in spite of rock bottom wages and monotonous work, the job was a way to pay off my college loans.

On top of those doldrums, the selective service was hot on my tail, and I applied for the Peace Corps, as a way to fend off the beast.

In the application, I said I wanted to go to South America, so I could learn Spanish. Apparently, that was not a convincing reason for the Peace Corps.

They offered me a tour in Afghanistan and a job with the TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) program.

The army was breathing down my neck and the job left me penniless. It wasn't a difficult decision.

With the invitation in hand, I returned to New Mexico for a few months to re-visit my college years before I boarded a plane for the Peace Corps.

The departure city was, I think, Philadelphia. There I had my first encounter with my fellow volunteers. For me, it was love at first sight. We were young, idealistic, ambitious, and of unshakeable spirit.

The flight took us to Ireland and then Amsterdam, where we changed planes for our final leg on Ariana Airlines, Afghanistan's flagship airline.

We landed in Kabul, half a world away from the US, exhausted, hung over, and half delirious from lack of sleep.

Most volunteers note that Afghanistan was not just a place many miles from home, it was a place many centuries into the past.

The bus from the airport took us along a dusty road with more donkeys than automobiles. Men, dressed in long flowing shirts, baggy pants, and turbans, sold fruit from flimsy wooden carts. We passed miles of weather worn mud walls, and more donkeys. The mountains surrounding Kabul were the color and texture of an elephant's rear end.

The first stop for us was the Peace Corps office in Shar-i-Nau, where we were processed fairly efficiently. The staff greeted us, introduced us to our training house mates, and sent us off to our new homes in Kabul.

I shared a training house with Ed Crawford, from Eugene Oregon, John Behnke, and Ray James. We hardly had time to unpack before we all crashed on our new beds, which were nothing more than four legs, a wood frame, and rope webbing.

I have no idea how long we were asleep. I remember waking up during a call to evening prayers, and looking out the window at a somber line of men walking up a nearby hill to a funeral.

When we recovered, we met our servant, Ali, who managed us all with love and skill. He provided tea, great meals, and held my hand while I sat on the stairs outside the tashnab (outhouse) during miserable bouts of dysentery.

Ray Makes a Career Move

Ed was a congenial guy with red hair and an irrepressible sense of humor. John amazed the natives when he juggled on the bus. (I was impressed, too.)

But Ray was a missionary. His mission was, in typical 1960s fashion, to turn on everyone he met. And by turn on, I mean with hashish, or chars, as the Afghans called the powerful home-made hypnotic you could buy for pennies at any tea house.

As for me, Ed, and John, we applied ourselves to the language and culture classes that were to prepare us for our jobs in the provinces. Our social life was limited mostly to our classes and each other. In the evenings, we sat on the floor around a large carpet as Ali brought us steaming bowls of rice and meat, accompanied by fresh-baked naan, shaped like a large snowshoe. It was whole grain and excellent with peanut butter, something I think the Afghans never appreciated.

One Friday evening near the end of our training, Ray interrupted our after dinner conversations with a few guests. One, I recall, was an Ariana Airlines pilot, another was a female volunteer, who seemed conservative, but friendly enough. They joined us around the carpet, and Ray passed out bottles of beer.

I declined the beer, which was not something I do very often. For some reason, the situation made me uncomfortable in a visceral kind of way. I offered an excuse and went to my room. I don't know how long the party lasted, or who else may have joined.

Early Monday morning, the staff summoned me out of training. When I was ushered into a private office and sat in front of a few senior staff, I could have guessed what was coming.

Someone, they wouldn't say who, had reported drug use at our training house. They told me that I wasn't implicated, but wanted to know if I had witnessed anyone smoking hashish or heard anyone discussing it.

Naturally, I had plausible deniability, and I used every bit of it. I told them exactly what I had witnessed, which wasn't much, and what I did. Since my story was substantiated by all the other accounts, there was not much else they could say to me.

I never discovered who reported the incident to the Peace Corps management. Ray was immediately "de-selected". He opted to take the plane fare in cash and caught a bus to Pakistan.

Years later, after my two-year tour ended, and I had traveled around India and Nepal, I encountered Ray on a bus in Northeast India, with a shy blue-eyed young woman. He

told me that he found a job bartending in Kashmir, and had worked there for several years.

If anyone knows where Ray is, please tell him hello for me.

I heard of several similar incidents during Peace Corps training periods, and even with active volunteers. The Peace Corps had a zero tolerance policy, and was very serious about enforcing it.

The volunteers also took their jobs and roles in the country quite seriously, and respected the local traditions and mores. Of course, we all knew that the local hashish and marijuana were not dangerous, but they were very powerful, especially if one happened to be mentally shaky. We occasionally encountered Afghans in the tea houses who were enjoying a serious buzz, and watched them smoke hashish with the large water pipes in the village tea houses.

I liked their attitude towards it, which was much more reasonable than the American reliance on criminal penalties and punishment. They considered drug use a low class activity. Upper class Afghans preferred Scotch whiskey, especially Johnny Walker Red, which was far too expensive for most folks.

Kabul experienced frequent earth tremors. They rattled the dishes, and woke us up sometimes, but mostly they were mild and caused little damage. The remainder of training was uneventful until near the end.

Food for Work

I worked in the Food for Work Program throughout my tour in Afghanistan, and, as I recall, was stationed in six provinces: Farah, Jowzan, Faryab, Badghis, Zabul, and finally Badakhshan.

This account makes no claim to be either accurate or complete. It is simply a narrative built from my memories. The people named here have not been asked to verify these memories. Nor do I have a diary or calendar of activities to refresh them. I hope they are not offended that I have included their names.



A woman baking naan in a traditional oven.

Credit: morungexpress.com

I enjoyed training, practicing my Pushto on any available Afghan, and was fascinated by the bazaars and the exotic people who crowded the markets. And I was looking forward to teaching at a school in one of the southern provinces.

At the time, Afghanistan had suffered crop failure for several years, due to a drought. The government appealed to the international community, which responded by donating millions of metric tons of wheat to the country.

I mentioned the local bread, called naan. For the Afghans, it was not just something to hold the peanut butter and jelly. It was life.

In fact, in several of the local languages, naan means both bread and food. The most common meal in the villages consisted of naan and tea.

Every village household had a hand cranked grain mill and baking naan in a wood-fired clay oven was a daily chore.

When we were guests in their villages, they killed the chicken, or slaughtered a lamb or goat. They cooked up a huge pot of rice, and everyone feasted. They would never accept money in exchange for these meals. That level of hospitality among people who often had very little to eat themselves was quite humbling for me and many other Peace Corps volunteers

Afghanistan was wrapped around the western extent of the mountain ranges that include the Himalyan Mountains in Pakistan, India, and Nepal. In the northeast, the range is called the Pamir Mountains, with peaks up to 25,000 feet. To the southeast, they are called the Hindu Kush. They drain into a large, open plain. To the north of the mountains was the land of the Uzbeks and Turkmen. To the south and east into Pakistan, the Pushtoons.

Scattered in the interior, mountainous regions, are the Hazara, remnants of the armies Genghis Khan left behind to secure his conquest. The small groups of nomads that wandered the country, were called the Koochis. Fun fact: the Afghan National Anthem and the Afghan Constitution mention 14 ethnic groups.

Even in a developed country, transporting and distributing millions of tons of wheat would be difficult. In Afghanistan, with few paved roads and many remote villages, those tasks were staggering.

During the government's discussions with international partners, such as USAID, the German Development Services, and US Embassy, and so on, they decided to use this grant wheat to help develop the country, and invest it in basic infrastructure projects, such as roads, irrigation canals, and so on.

Ideally, these projects would be simple enough to complete with local materials and labor. Furthermore, the government and the Peace Corps planned to assign young employees of the Afghan Department of Provincial Development and Peace Corps Volunteers to oversee the projects and manage the program in the provinces, along with the provincial governors and the local Directors of Provincial Development, as well as young German volunteers from the German Development Services.

This program came to be called, in Farsi, Program-i-Tauzai Gondum (Wheat Distribution Program), or the Food for Work Program.

To jump start the program, the Peace Corps transferred several seasoned volunteers to ramp up operations. Bill Mittendorf worked in Sheberghan in the northern province of Jawzan. Frank Light was in Farah, in the dusky southwestern province of the same name.

A Hearty Handshake and a Pep Talk

I was transferred to the Food for Work Program, which was a huge honor. And it was a relief, too. Even after the highly skilled, intense training and orientation delivered by the experienced Peace Corps trainers and staff, I did not feel prepared to teach English to a class of rambunctious Afghan teenagers.

We were promoted from teachers to engineers. It was a big milestone in our short careers as Peace Corps volunteers.

We were introduced to our Afghan counterparts at a meeting in Kabul, where the Minister of Provincial Development himself appeared to give us a hearty handshake and a farewell pep talk. Unfortunately, he spoke in Farsi, and I had spent the previous weeks industriously studying Pushto, so I had no idea what he said. However, we headed out with a huge reservoir of enthusiasm, and little else.

I packed up my worldly belongings and hauled them off to a far southwestern corner of the country to join Frank Light and his team in Farah Province.

I have no recollection of the trip from Kabul to Farah, or about my duties and activities in the province. I know we passed through Kandahar, the most important city in the southern half of the country, and capital of the Pushtuns, the dominant ethnic group in the South. The king, Zahir Shah, was a Pushtoon, and they were purported to be the most influential ethnic group.

Farah Province and German Girly Magazines

Farah was a dusky little town, little more than a few dirt roads lined with mud walled compounds, and a small bazaar, with a few tea houses. I moved in with the resident team, lodged in a typical Afghan walled residence with dirt floors, and a few rooms around a courtyard.

My housemates were, besides Frank, a few young Afghan counterparts and a few German engineers, who were working with the German government's version of the US Peace Corps.

The Germans were a source of endless amazement for our Afghan counterparts, and for me.

Unlike us Americans, the young Germans were not into roughing it. Each brought a large aluminum footlocker filled with the comforts of home — canned goods, sweets, magazines, and so on.

The magazines were popular four-color glossy publications, which always seemed to feature full color spreads of semi-nude women. These cheese-cake photos were very similar to the ones we were familiar with in American men's magazines, and these German periodicals were not particularly interesting to us PC volunteers, since none of us read German.

For our Afghan counterparts, in a culture that strictly segregated the sexes, these magazines were like a drug. A really, really strong drug. The young Afghan men huddled around a kerosene lantern into the evenings, happily turning the pages, to a giddy

commentary. Even with my limited knowledge of the language, I knew what they were saying.

We were not lucky enough to have Afghan counterparts in every province. Living and working with these young career civil servants gave us rare insight into Afghan culture. In the evenings, over tea, they told us about their homes, their educations, and romances. Even though marriages were arranged, and the bride and groom never dated, in the western sense of the word, love found a way.

They introduced us to the hit tunes on Radio Kabul and opened their journals and read passages from their favorite Persian and Afghan poets for us.

Farah was a naturally dry and warm climate. The bedrooms were hot and stale. Like the Afghans, we unrolled our sleeping bags on the roof, where cool breezes and a spectacular moon and the vast desert sky eased our loneliness.

Frank had several projects in progress around Farah. We rode with him in the department jeep, over rutted roads past fields and farms to check the work in progress. I recall little of those projects, but the lunches in the local villages made a big impression on all of us.

Typically the meals consisted of a hot broth, with onions and maybe a few potatoes and carrots, with a piece of nan, but no spoons, or any cutlery at all. We sat on the floor, either in a large guest room or outside, but always around a big Afghan carpet and were served by the younger males. Frequently, several people shared a single large bowl. The little girls, shy, with their scarves pulled over their faces, peeped at us around the corners, before their brothers shooed them away.

How did you eat soup without a spoon? Very simple, actually. Break up the naan into bite-sized pieces and drop them in the soup. The bread quickly absorbs the liquid and the whole bowl turns into a mushy goo much like turkey dressing.

It tasted much like turkey dressing, too. In fact, it was great. As an added bonus, it made our hands soft and the skin supple.

The folks were always happy to have guests and made sure we had plenty to eat. In fact, they did not stop dishing out food until we left a small portion to indicate we were full. That was much different from the American custom, which was to empty the plate and then refuse seconds. They ended the meals with a small glass of hot black or green tea, with plenty of sugar or hard candy, and a thanks to Allah.

High Pressure Sales Tactics

After a week or two, I was declared ready to launch my own project.

I left Farah one morning with our department driver, and headed north, across the main highway and into the mountains. A long, long way into the mountains.

I had no idea where we went or why. Our destination was a lush, extensive estate in a mountain valley, and spread around a large residence. Our host made it clear that he owned the estate, and most of the surrounding land. He was the village Khan, and called Haji Sahib, as he had completed the prestigious pilgrimage to Mecca.

A large delegation of men greeted us with great ceremony, and we were accompanied to the guest quarters. Carpets were brought out of storage. The household pulled out the fine china, the best and fluffiest cushions.

After we settled in, dinner was served. We had Kabuli palau. Boiled sheep head on a huge pile of rice, and many more dishes. The driver was basking in the great service and enjoyed ordering the folks around.

After dinner we walked to a patio in an orchard and had tea. At the time, my language skills were still rudimentary, but I was getting comfortable with Pushto and could manage simple conversations.

Most of the discussions went totally over my head, but I tried to look engaged. I am sure they were aware how clueless I was. Towards the end of the evening, they introduced the village teacher. He was a few years younger than I, well dressed in his embroidered shirt and baggy pants, called tombongs. Unlike most of the men, he was clean shaved.

One of the men in the party told me, if I wanted company (I forget the exact words he used), I should see the teacher. The teacher gave me a warm smile and nodded, as he shook my hand.

That evening I had my first encounter with culture shock. This situation was never covered in our training. Of course, I had heard talk of the “bacha bazi”, literally, “play boys”, who dressed as women and danced for the entertainment of older men, and also, it was rumored, provided sexual services.

However, I was now in the middle of something quite different. I was a representative of my country, with the power to direct large resources to this landowner and experiencing the treatment that the Haji Sahib always extended to important government officials. It wasn't, to my host, a bribe. It was simply business as usual.

Needless to say, I did not engage the teacher's services, whatever they were. After a hard day of travel and a lot of food, it didn't take long to fall asleep.

The next morning, we were served a breakfast of hot tea, fruit and warm naan.

After the meal was finished, we rode horseback over a nearby hill to a neighboring valley, where there were a few fields, orchards, and small compounds. The Haji Sahib wanted to build a road over the hill and into the neighboring valley.

I knew how to diagram a sentence. I could talk about Elizabethan England and other fascinating stuff. But I had no idea how to build a road or evaluate and manage a project. In retrospect, it may have been a viable project.

Something about the situation made me feel extremely weird. Would I have to return to this area and deal with the Haji Sahib who owned the place? What about that teacher? How could we transport the large quantity of wheat to this place? And exactly, how does one build a road?

I guess the Haji Sahib had all this figured out. He was a man accustomed to getting his way. All he needed from me, though, was my approval.

That night after dinner, I told him that I did not intend to approve this project. Of the dozens of ways to handle this situation, that may have been the worst.

The driver looked at me as if I was crazy. The Haji left the room. Soon, people arrived to remove the cushions and carpets.

Next Stop - Sheberghan

The next morning, we were served a perfunctory breakfast of tea and naan. We left immediately afterwards and returned to Farah. I don't recall any blowback from this incident. However, shortly afterwards, I was transferred to other end of the country, to Sheberghan, where Bill Mittendorf, a more experienced volunteer, was managing a program.

I don't recall any discussions, conferences, meetings, de-briefings, etc. I got my orders and I hopped on the next bus north. No one seemed to notice that my language was Pushto, but I was headed to a region where the dominant languages were Farsi and Turkoman (a dialect of Turkish).

The government hotel in Sheberghan was a one-story building in the middle town. It had about a dozen rooms that shared a common bathroom. These hotels were built in provincial capitals to avoid the obvious conflict of interest issues when government officials are lodged with the local folks. Most of these small cities did not have private inns, beyond the lodging provided by the teahouses and caravan serais.

Bill may have been only a few years older than I, but he was far more comfortable in the culture and got along famously with the home folks. They obviously respected him.

The area was more prosperous than Farah, and the people more relaxed. In Turkoman, the term for Khan is Boy, so they called me Charlie Boy.

On one trip to the nearby village, our host was educated in the US and spoke fluent English. He wanted to introduce us to his wife, which was a huge violation of Afghan norms, and a compliment to us. When she walked in, we were both speechless, simply because none of us had ever spoken to an Afghan woman before, and she may have never spoken to a male foreigner. After hello and how are you, we didn't know what to say.

She was pleasant enough, and as shy as we were. After a few minutes of perfunctory conversation, she left.

In Sheberghan, I learned that I was picking up Farsi quite quickly. It was an easier language than Pushto, and in fact, the most widely understood language, especially in the cities and markets.

Hey, Mister, say "La illaha . . ."

While I don't recall details about our projects in Jowzjan, I was becoming comfortable with the my second Afghan language. That was very fortunate, because I was soon sent to Badghis province, north of Herat, and stationed in the city of Qal-i-Nau, literally "New City". On they way through Kabul, several folks from the Peace Corps administration

interviewed me about my experiences, and I told them that it was much like having a job anywhere. In retrospect, the Food for Work job was nothing like any work environment anywhere else.

They apparently were pleased with the Food for Work program and decided to double down, with a group of volunteers trained and dedicated to the program. They asked for my advice about the type of people who might be most suitable. I told them that construction experience might be useful. I should have added the ability to sleep anywhere, eat virtually anything, a great sense of humor, and endless patience.

By this time, we were quite at home in the country. Our language skills were adequate for most situations. We had squeezed into overpacked buses, bounced around in the back of trucks, ordered meals and lodged at the most rudimentary of tea houses and caravan serais. Even so, the country still had surprises for us.



Bus drivers sold every available seat, in the bus and on top.

Credit: nation.com.pk

To travel from Kabul to Qal-i-Naw, I had to take buses south, through Kandahar, past my old friends in Farah Province, and then north through Herat.

On the first leg of this trip, I was jammed in the back seat of a small bus, with the typical assortment of men in their tombongs, threadbare vests, long shirts, and sandals made from old automobile tires. The few female passengers huddled beneath their chadoris, as far away from men as possible. As usual, there were brisk conversations as the men shared their naswar (snuff) and attempted to spit out the open windows without splattering anyone down wind.

Occasionally the bus stopped in the absolute middle of nowhere, and one or two men got off, carrying very little. Maybe a small bag or a blanket. These folks started walking towards distant mountains as the bus drove down the road, leaving them in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes. Even though this was a common sight during long bus rides around the country, it always amazed me.

We had passed the huge fort at Zabul in good time and were due to arrive in Kandahar on schedule, assuming that there actually was a schedule, when the bus sputtered to a stop.

It was a few hours before the afternoon and evening prayers, but no one seemed concerned. The driver simply explained that the bus had run out of gas, and we had to wait until someone came along who could sell us enough to make it to Kandahar. Inshallah (God willing).

I looked both ways along the lonely desert road and did not see a truck, bus, car, a camel, donkey, or any sign of life. It looked to me like it was going to be a long afternoon. I asked the driver how many times he had driven to Kandahar and if he knew how much fuel the trip required. He told me to chill out. They would be on the way again soon.

In Afghanistan, soon could mean anywhere from 15 minutes to a few days.

Everybody got off the bus, and tried to make themselves comfortable, smoking cigarettes and dipping their snuff. The women huddled together a few dozen yards away from the bus. A few men wandered into the desert to relieve themselves.

A group of men collected small sticks and shrubs in the dry scrub vegetation along the road and dumped them in a barren area across the road from the bus. When they had a generous pile, they set it on fire.

The tinder was very dry and quickly burned down to glowing embers. Several of the men spread a blanket over the coals and crawled under it. Soon, smoke curled from the edges of the blanket and the men started coughing furiously.

As one man emerged from the blanket, another quickly took his place. I wondered what I had to look forward to with a half-dozen or so Afghans, blitzed out of their minds on hashish.

It didn't take long before a few of them started heading towards me, the lone khoraji (foreigner) among the passengers.

They walked up to me, with huge grins and eyes the size of door knobs. One said, "Mister, repeat after me, 'la ilaha illallah Muhammad rasulullah'. Come on, say it 'la ilaha . . .'"

They had decided to convert me to Islam, in the belief that all they had to do is get me to say the Muslim creed in Arabic, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet."

I could have made them really happy, even though I may have been hauled off to a Pushtoon village and married to a sheep. But I was not in a very good mood, stranded on the side of the road with a dozen stoned Afghans, and stubbornly refused. They soon grew bored and went back to their snuff boxes and cigarettes.

I don't recall how long we waited, but eventually a truck stopped and sold the driver enough fuel to get to Kandahar.

Badghis and a Chicken Named Charlie

When I arrived in Qal-i-Nau, the streets were crowded with ragged, hungry men who had come from the villages in search of food. Some had terribly swollen faces. Later I learned that may have resulted from eating toxic vegetation.

I joined several other volunteers stationed there. The only name I recall is Bill Berquist, an outgoing and congenial volunteer who made a career working overseas.

For some reason, the volunteers had a two-way radio and were in touch with the Peace Corps office in Kabul. When they learned that I had arrived, they asked how I was, and I told them that there were thousands of hungry people in the streets. I may have exaggerated, but no one asked me to count them.

It seems impossible that the central government was not aware of this situation, or why the local volunteers failed to mention it on the radio. However, communications were

virtually non-existent, and unreliable at best. Perhaps this particular point is lost somewhere in my memories.

The land-line telephone system was a single wire suspended from poles. The provincial governors were probably the only ones with a telephone in their offices, but the wires and poles were very vulnerable, and the system was not reliable at all.

I once watched an Afghan official attempt to make a call. He attached one wire of a headset to the grid, and stuck the other in the ground. He poured water on the ground wire as he screamed into the microphone. I recall that he actually connected to someone, but conversation was impossible.

The two-way radio in the Peace Corps house was a huge advance, even though the municipal generator operated only a few hours in the evenings, and often failed. It turned out that the local government warehouse was loaded with wheat, but the government officials claimed they had no authority to distribute it.

This was my third station, and I had worked alongside several young Afghans and their local bosses. One of the lessons that they tried to impress on us, when we complained about the difficulty getting anything done, was that they had to live their entire lives in Afghanistan, and needed to be very careful. In a few years, when Peace Corps volunteers were safely back in America, they would have to live with the consequences of our actions.

The first corollary of this principle was that no one ever got into trouble for doing nothing. It was always the safest route.

We managed to end the stalemate, and the local official began to distribute wheat to the hungry folks in the street.

We managed to organize a few activities. Mainly, I think, we engaged men with donkeys to haul gravel from the stream beds and spread it on the roads.

I don't recall much else from my short time there. After I left, Bill Berquist and the other volunteers named their chicken after me. I don't think it was a compliment, but perhaps I am just insecure.

A Long Walk to a Long Karez

After a few months in Badghis, I was summoned to Kabul for a new assignment.

Back in Kabul, I met the newly arrived volunteers and was assigned to mentor Bruce Legandre and Joe Wollmerang, two of the new group of volunteers recruited specifically for the Food for Work Program

We set up shop at the government hotel Qalat-i-Gilzay, the capital of Zabul Province, along with a few young Afghans. This post was only about 200 miles (366km) south of Kabul.

One of our trips to survey potential projects was deep into the extreme eastern desert towards the Pakistani border. Our host was a sturdy man with incredible stamina. He led us, on foot, deep into the ancient desert to show us a karez he wanted to renovate.

A karez is a water supply system where a series of wells is connected by horizontal tunnels. The system takes advantage of the natural elevations and gravity to direct the stream to the surface.

I had heard of them and had seen a few operating in Farah. There were even karez khans, who specialized in karez construction and maintenance.

The one we surveyed had been out of service for many years — maybe many centuries. It was often difficult to determine the age of anything in Afghanistan, as everything seemed ancient and worn. In this karez system, the wells had completely filled in. The only evidence of the ancient karez in the desert was a donut of dirt, about ten feet in diameter and a few feet high, which marked the mouth of each vertical shaft. These tell-tale circles were about twenty or thirty feet apart.

The surrounding terrain sloped very gently. I could follow the long string of wells both ways, many miles into the desert. It was so long, it disappeared in the hazy desert in both directions. I wondered where the head well was, how much labor it had taken to build it, and where, off in the distance, the water surfaced.

As the khan made a pitch to use the food for work program to rebuild the karez system, I began to calculate the volume of dirt in the hundreds of wells in the system, along with the connecting tunnels.

Who knew if it would even work again or if the water tables were still at a reasonable depth?

I knew enough by then to explain the situation to the khan, and avoid an outright refusal. But we did not have the expertise or resources to revive this system, and such a project was way out of our scope.

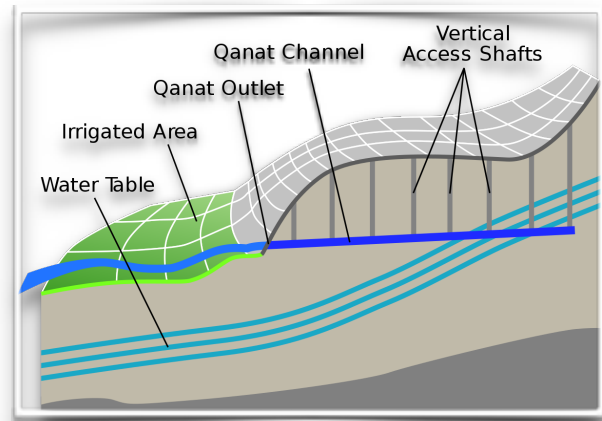
Our friendly khan led us back to civilization with the same speed and vigor. During this hike of many hours, his pace never slacked.

When we returned to Zabul Province, the hotel clerk handed me a telegram that read, "Charles Arnold, Joe Wollmerang, Bruce Legandre. Return to Kabul immediately."

We caught the next bus to Kabul, where I learned that only Joe and Bruce needed to return to Kabul. Silly me.

I worked most closely with my counterpart, Jalaladine. He was a very athletic young man and liked to go through his workout routine in our hotel room. I was hoping his enthusiasm for exercise would be infectious. Unfortunately, it was not.

The predominant language in Zabul was Pushto, and my Pushto skills, never very strong to begin with, had suffered after many months living among the Farsiwans.



This diagram illustrates how a karez brings water to the surface. Qanat is the Arabic term of karez.

Credit: Wikipedia public domain image

Around the cities, most people spoke both Pushto and Farsi. However, as we traveled into the rural villages of Zabul, we frequently encountered people who spoke only Pushto. It turned out, Jalaladine could understand Pushto quite well, even though his native language was Farsi. But, for some reason, I could speak Pushto better.

When we talked with villagers, he translated their questions into Farsi for me, and I gave them the answers in Pushto.

Somewhere in those months I was assigned to Maimana, the capital of Faryab Province, to the west of Badghis Province. I don't remember exactly when I worked there, how long, or what I did. It does seem strange, in retrospect, to have cycled through so many places. Either everybody wanted me, or nobody wanted me, I'm not exactly sure which.

At the time, I didn't ask questions or complain, but simply caught the bus to the next provincial capital and tried to do my best.

Reflecting on my First Year in Country

When we arrived in the provinces, we were quickly overwhelmed with the complex and difficult tasks we had been assigned. To be effective, we had set goals, prioritize projects, formulate estimates, put together projects plans, schedules and allocate resources. On top of that we needed to organize meetings with village honchos and other stakeholders to win their support for our projects.

In short, we had to learn project management on the fly, as well as cope with a foreign and mysterious culture.

When I joined the Peace Corps, I knew all about Elizabethan England and renaissance theater, and lots of other stuff. I could recite the first 18 lines of the Canterbury Tales from memory, in Old English. However, that has been useful only when the doctors wanted to check for brain damage.

But I knew very little about project management, government bureaucracies, international development, or public relations.

We had to learn very quickly.

Vacation and the Fate of my Journals

My assignment in Zabul Provinces ended when I left for my two-week vacation.

After a deep dive into the heart of Afghanistan, I was eager to explore more of South Asia, and caught a bus from Kabul, through the Khyber Pass, and into Peshawer, Pakistan.

Northern Pakistan was much like Afghanistan, only with more reliable electricity, so I continued to India.

Like most frontier border crossings in Asia, the customs and immigration offices on the Pakistani-Indian border was total chaos. Furthermore, the India-Pakistani War had ended during the past year and tensions between the two countries were still high.

I had to walk a few hundred meters to get my Indian visa stamped, but otherwise had no trouble. My most vivid memory is the border gate into India. As soon as I walked through the gate, the humid air was thick and heavy with the fragrance of gardenias.

That may have given me the impression that India was a serene and courteous place. However, one ride in a third class rail carriage knocked that tidy delusion right out. The crush of the crowds, the belching steam engines, and the constant hassles from train station tea vendors sent me over the edge.

Even though my first rail journey was only a few hours, it was a cramped vision of hell, for me. For the Indians, it was simply a normal train ride.

When the train screeched to a halt at my destination, I bolted from my cramped space on the floor outside the toilet, through the carriage door and onto the platform. It wasn't until later I realized I had left my journals on that train.

I was heartbroken.

But, back to Afghanistan . . .

When I returned from vacation, the Food for Work Program was still going full steam. The new group brought a few dozen new faces, enthusiasm, a fresh sense of humor, and loads of new music.

We quickly adopted a few tunes and played them constantly on those little battery-powered cassette players. Neil Young's "Everybody knows this is nowhere" was a natural for us. John Prine's "Your flag decal won't get you into heaven any more," gave us a taste of the turmoil over the Vietnam War back in the US. We rocked to the "Teenage wasteland" and "Magic Bus" by the Who. And of course Cat Stevens' "Baby, baby, it's a wide world".



Afghanistan began producing opium poppies for Iran when cultivation was banned there. Today, 90% of the world's opium originates in Afghanistan.

Credit: The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Our Afghan counterparts tuned in Radio Kabul, and we learned the hit tune of the year, “Mullah Mohammed Jan”. In the lyrics, the singer is dazzled by poppy flowers, simply because they were so brilliant and beautiful, which they certainly were.

Come on, let's go to the mausoleum of Mullah Muhammad Jan,
In the flooding flowers of (his) garden, Oh my beloved,
In the flooding flowers of (his) garden, Oh my beloved,

On the Road Again - Faizabad or Bust

One of the volunteers in my cycle had an emergency and left the country. I was assigned to fill his role in Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan Province, along with Dan Huber and Tim McCormack.

This province is in the Northeast corner of the country, with a long, narrow area, known as the Wakhan Corridor, that extended deep into the Pamir Mountains, to a border with China. It separated Tajikistan, in southern Russia, from Pakistan. A very rugged territory.

On the long trip from Kabul to Faizabad, we had the opportunity to patronize several teahouses, and the new volunteers were initiated into teahouse culture.

Afghanistan is strictly a male society. Women were rigidly segregated, and rarely ventured into teahouses. The teahouse, or Chai Khana, was a place a guy could unwind with a hot cup of tea and a cigarette. Stuff a pinch between his cheek and gums, and, if he desired, drop a lump of hashish on top of the glowing embers in the bowl of a water pipe.

Provincial tea houses also frequently served food. They never bothered with a menu, as the selection was either soup, stew, or sometimes rice. Except for the occasional insect or pebble, it was generally quite edible.

In all fairness, I rarely witnessed men smoking hashish in the tea house water pipe. However, we could easily determine which of the guests were buzzed. It seemed that the staff was zonked more often than the customers. The teenagers who served the tea and food always had to goof off, especially for a group of foreigners who spoke a little Farsi. In fact, a group of three Americans who could speak any Farsi at all was a huge attraction, and a source of endless amusement.

But not all Afghans thought we were charming. Afghans generally have bronzed, ruddy complexions, while ours were wan and pale, even when we were tanned and fit by Western standards. The most common racial slur was “Mr. Katchaloo”, or Mr. Potato. Occasionally, Afghans we met expressed sympathy and asked if we had been ill. Blue eyes also concerned them, as the “evil eye” was portrayed on amulets with blue and white concentric circles.

Having grown up in a region where racial prejudice was as thick as corn syrup, it was very educational to live in a society where people reacted negatively to me, simply because of the color of my skin.



The Kokcha River at Faizabad.

Credit: <https://vimeo.com/182982659>

But, I digress, my most memorable bach-i-chai khana (tea house boy) was the kid who scraped the lunch crumbs and such off our table, onto his hand, and tossed them into his mouth.

Fun and Work in Faizabad

The road to Faizabad followed the Kokcha River deep into the mountains, and approached the town from the opposite side of the river. The road crossed a rock masonry bridge into town. The city itself was built on a large wide bluff between the river and the mountains. Downstream from the city, the river widened into rapids adjacent a flood plain and a broad area of open land which was used as a landing strip.

The previous volunteer stranded his Peace Corps truck in a broad and shallow stretch of the Kokcha River west of the city. I never learned exactly how that happened. Perhaps he was trying to wash it and the current swept the vehicle into the river.

In that area the river was broad and fast. The river rocks were slippery and unstable.

Our first task was to retrieve it. It was only 20 or 30 feet from the river bank, and the water appeared to be about two or three feet deep, not even covering the wheels.

What seemed like a simple task turned out to be extremely difficult. The current was incredibly powerful. Anyone within ten feet of the truck was swept off their feet and carried down stream. We could not even get close enough to tie a rope to the trailer hitch.

We worked at it a few days before we gave up.

In Faizabad, we joined two young engineers from the German volunteer service, Albrecht (aka Ali) Kaupp and Wolfgang, whose last name has disappeared from my memory. They had been working in the area a while, and had access to concrete and other construction materials in the government storehouse.

We moved into their cozy rented house. It was perched above the river and had a large patio. There was a large room with a metal, wood-burning stove, a small kitchen next to it, and a tashnab, a tiny room with a hole in the floor, high over the river. For bathing, we visited the local bath house, or hamam. For a very reasonable price, you got a clean cloth to wrap around your middle regions, a towel, and plenty of nice hot water.

Ali, as we called him, woke up before dawn every morning. He was working on a water supply diversion project that directed a mountain stream into the city water system. Like most Aghan cities, the water system was mostly open ditches along the roads which eventually emptied into the river. It involved pouring concrete under water, a feat that amazed me.

Our servant was a teenage boy, about 15 years old, who handled housework, shopping, cooking and cleaning enthusiastically and quite competently. During his down time, he sat in the corner and played with ingenious little squeaky toys made from condoms.

There was a couple who taught the TEFL classes at the local school, and a single volunteer who worked as the TEFL teacher in a small school about 20 miles to the east, at the village of Baharak, a small bazaar east of Faizabad. He had a difficult assignment in a very remote town.

His students were not interested in learning English. To engage them, he taught them American street slang. Instead of "Hello. How are you?" his students greeted each other with "What's happening, man" and answered, "Not a damn thing".

He once stuffed his Afghan currency behind a beam in his ceiling. When he needed the money a few weeks later, he discovered that mice had chewed the bills to shreds.

Ali and Wolfgang had a few projects backed up and needed our help to recruit the crews and help manage the construction. They intended to use grant wheat to finance the workers.

The first project was to repair and rebuild a stone masonry bridge across a seasonal stream, and in the center of town.

Rock masonry was a perfect type of construction for that area, as the province had a huge supply of rocks. The only problem was breaking up the big rocks into little rocks. Naturally, Afghan men were very skilled with sledge hammers, and considered the task a macho game.

We began to organize labor, and all the administrative stuff involved. Unfortunately, the folks refused to work for wheat. They wanted cash.

We developed an ingenious, and probably illegal strategy, to keep things moving. We got the wheat from the warehouse, took it to the bazaar, and sold it. We prepared the pay envelopes and distributed them to our crews once a week, which made us very popular.

We worked at several similar projects over the months — in addition to the bridge, we helped improve an irrigation dam for a village on the other side of the river, and a few miscellaneous projects near the outlying villages.

The Great Snowball Fight of Faizabad

When winter moved in construction was mostly suspended as the whole place was snowed in. One morning after a major snowstorm, we walked through the bazaar, where several of the shopkeepers were shoveling the snow off the roofs of their shops. We loaded up with a generous supply of snowballs and pelted the men on the roofs.

They did not miss a beat and immediately returned fire, laughing at us and shouting for their friends to join the fight. Soon half the town was engaged in the snowball battles. After an hour or so, we declared a truce, and continued past the governor's offices, to the airstrip at the edge of town where a small squadron of young soldiers was quartered in a dinky wood frame building.

The soldiers were all huddled inside around the wood-burning stove.

We reloaded with a fresh supply of snowballs, and knocked on the door. As the door opened, we showered the room with a barrage of well aimed shots.

They barreled out the door, without their weapons, thank goodness, and staged a very spirited defense. Exhausted, we parted with smiles and handshakes all around.

But apparently the citizens had mixed feelings about us. When we walked home from the office in the evenings, through the twisted alleyways of the city, grade school boys ran out of their homes and followed us, screaming, "Mr. Katchaloo!" They say children repeat in public what their parents whisper at home. Perhaps there may have been a reservoir of ill will towards the pale foreigners who lived in their midst. It was annoying, but the kids considered it a great game. In offices and in the bazaar, the Afghans were always polite.

As the ground thawed in the spring, huge boulders rolled down the mountains. One smashed Ali Kaupp's new water diversion dam, leaving many neighborhoods of Faizabad without water. From our patio, we watched the boulders break off the mountainside high above the Kokcha River, and tumble down the mountain. They bounced off the road and hit the river with a very impressive splash.

These events usually caused very little damage. Once, however, a landslide totally blocked the road, which created a huge emergency, as the town was cut off from the rest of the country.

In response, the provincial government mobilized every available soldier. They were divided into several teams. As one team furiously cleaned the dirt off the road, the others sat in the shade. Every 30 or 60 minutes, a supervisor blew his whistle. The shovelers passed the tools off to another group, and sat down.

To remove the larger boulders, a small team pounded holes in them with star drills and sledge hammers, and dynamited them into manageable sizes. The explosions were sensational, and the whole town gathered on the opposite bank to watch.

It was an inspiring demonstration of coordination and hard work. They managed to move a huge amount of material, and reopened the road in a few days.

Operation Help Comes to Town

The Food for Work Program was intended to alleviate the hunger in the country until the drought had ended and the village storehouses full again. After more than a year, it was obvious to the national government the program was not distributing wheat fast enough to have much of an impact on the country and launched a nationwide relief effort called Operation Help.

The resources mobilized for Badakhshan were impressive. We watched convoys of trucks arrive, loaded with sacks of wheat. A fleet of small pick-up trucks arrived to transport the grain to the villages.

I moved to Baharak, the small bazaar town at the end and the entrance to the Wakhan Corridor. The team lodged in rented rooms and worked with a young English couple who worked with the British volunteer service, and supervised the operation in the province. Their names have been lost among the detritus of my memories, but I do recall that they were newly wed, and the Mrs. had a tongue sharp enough to draw blood.

Luckily, I was not the target of her sarcasm. She directed most of it at her husband.

I ran interference for them with the truck drivers and directed loading and dispatch. It was a big day when the drivers proved they could drive up the river bed, to distribution points deep in the Wakhan Corridor and back in one day. Even though the total distance, both ways, was about 80 miles, that was a very rugged 80 miles.

The operation did not take more than a few weeks. As suddenly as it appeared, Operation Help disappeared back down the road.

I heard that this relief initiative was a success, from the Afghans perspective because they gave the wheat to everybody. No income qualifications, work requirements, and so on. There's a very important lesson in there somewhere.

Operation Help received a huge amount of publicity — illustrated articles in major national publications, etc. Our Congressman even sent my family a letter of commendation for my contribution. My Mom was immensely proud of that, and mentioned it at every family reunion.

The End of my Tour — and an Era

About the same time, the Food for Work program received a terrible review from an individual connected to the US Embassy, and the entire operation was axed. I and all the other Food for Work volunteers were ordered to return to Kabul.

When I learned that the entire program was canceled, I was less than two months from my termination date. I asked the local Peace Corps management for an early termination, as I was completely burned out after 22 months bouncing around the country, trying to make sense of it all.

I was told they needed clearance from the Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, which would take several months. As a result, I settled in with a few other ex-food for workers in a Kabul neighborhood, and waited for my discharge.

The latest group of Food for Workers to arrive in Kabul were in the provinces for only a few months before the program was terminated.

Shortly after I left Afghanistan in 1973, King Zahir Shah, who had ruled the country since 1933, abdicated. His cousin, Mohammad Daoud, took control of the country. A Russian army invaded from the North in 1978. Some time during these events, the Peace Corps packed up and went home. The Americans returned with guns in 2001.

Afghanistan has been called the graveyard of empires. The US failed to learn from Alexander the Great, Ghengus Khan, the British, who launched three disastrous invasions, or the Russians, who left in 1989 after ten years of fighting. Almost two decades later, US soldiers are still stationed in the country.

The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.

The coup that put Daoud in power was the beginning of many decades of turmoil and suffering in that country. I imagine the place changed more in the next 40 years than it had since the Muslim armies swept in from the West and Gengis Khan and his armies overran the place from the East.

I know in my heart, however, that somewhere in Afghanistan, a wealthy, provincial Haji is bamboozling some hapless bureaucrat, a bus is stranded on the side of the road with an empty fuel tank, and men are hanging around the tea house, dipping snuff, smoking cigarettes, and sipping hot, sweet tea.

I grew immensely during those two years, and I look back on them fondly, as I suppose most RPCVs do. The Peace Corps office in Kabul became, for us, a kind of half way house, to ease our transition into that strange, rugged world in the provinces, and a refuge for us. My fellow Peace Corps volunteers became some of my best friends.

In the ten years the Peace Corps operated in Afghanistan, about 1,000 volunteers served in the country. They taught in provincial schools, vaccinated villagers against smallpox, managed Food-for-Work programs, or worked in many other occupations. They, along with thousands of Afghan immigrants who fled from the violence that destroyed their country, preserve the memories of an era when Afghanistan was at peace with itself, with its powerful neighbors, and reached out to the rest of the world.

I remember how the Peace Corps management, Al Nehoda and John True, the regional directors, and Lou Mitchell, the country director, navigated the US State Department and the Afghan bureaucracies so effectively. And, of course, Robert Neumann, US ambassador to Afghanistan until 1973, deserves a mention for his steady and principled leadership. They all made me proud to be an American citizen.

Most of all, the Afghans themselves earned my eternal respect for their incredible survival skills and hospitality. It was a feudal society, where a few landowners controlled the land and the peasants did the heavy lifting for very little more than subsistence. It's amazing that these people could show such great generosity and warmth to me and the other young westerners who came to live and work with them. I'm not quite sure if I improved their country, but I know they improved me.

— The End —