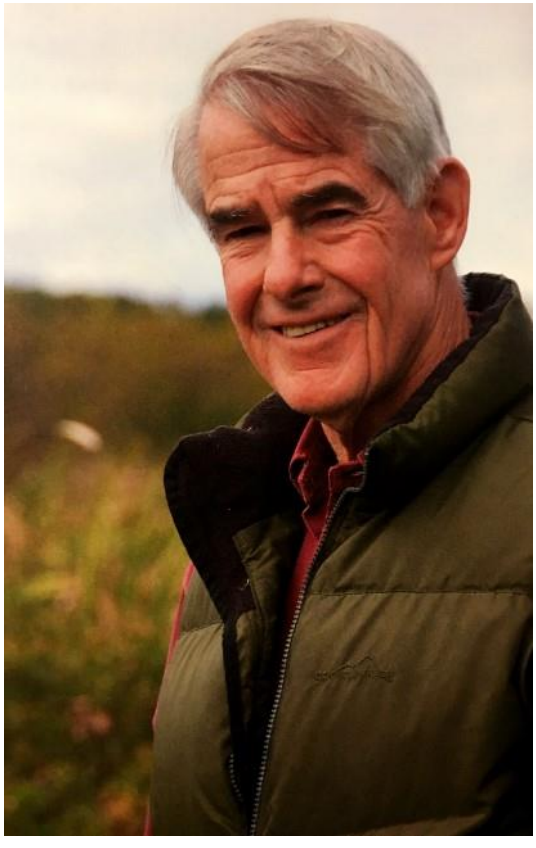

By Chris Bateman

I wrote this column for The Union Democrat *in Sonora, CA on Oct. 12, 2001 – a few days after the US launched "Operation Enduring Freedom," beginning an Afghan war that continues today.*

I also wrote a Democrat *piece on Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation in 1980, but I'm afraid that one has been lost to the sands of time.*
More amusing, however, is the letter to the editor which followed this piece. It pretty much reflects the poli-tics of our neck of the California woods. A couple of letter writers later came to my defense, but their work was not as entertaining as Brandon Hatler's

MY COLUMN:

WHEN I LEFT Afghanistan more than 30 years ago, I vowed to return.
Decades later, I figured, I'd fly back to Kabul with fading memories and what was left of my once-formidable Farsi vocabulary. I saw myself riding a truck over the Salang Pass and into Kunduz, where I taught English at an all-male boarding school during my Peace Corps hitch.
I'd walk the town's tree-lined main street, stopping to chat at teahouses, bakeries, shops and kebab stands. I'd go back to the DMA – my school – and ask whatever became of portly old Mr. Sayed, our principal.
I'd look for former students, now men in their 40s. I'd track down Anwar, a prodigiously bright 11th-grader who edited our nglish-language newspaper. I'd prowl Kunduz's dusty alleys, looking for the mud house I rented for $7.50 a month.

THAT DREAM has died. First the Soviets invaded. Then the Taliban seized power. And now the government that once paid me to teach Afghan high-schoolers is firing missiles at their homeland.

So instead of planning a return visit, I'm wondering what's left to visit.

Paved roads, electricity, telephones and running water, all scarce 30 years ago, must now border on non-existent. Bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age, as some have urged, might take no more than a few fire-crackers.
Then there's the human toll taken by decades of war and years of drought. In a country where life expectancy is 47, are even half my students still living?

How many have fled? How many are at war? Who among them is starving, injured or sick?

THE AFGAHNISTAN I knew was a bit player on the world stage. If it was noted for anything, it was the cheap hashish that made Kabul an obligatory stop on the counter culture's round-the-world trail.

Six hours to the north, I was teaching high-school kids who would likely take the few words of English they learned back to the family farm and shout them at sheep.

But my job was not without rewards.

Once a week my students and I would forget the curriculum. Speaking Farsi – mine became good enough to understand even dirty jokes – we'd talk about Muhammad Ali, Hollywood, Corvettes, the Ma-fia, Vietnam, Nixon and life in the U.S.

Americana? I brought it to my kids, who nearly rioted when issued never-before-seen Frisbees and squirt guns on a summer day.

EXOTIC VACATIONS were a huge Peace Corps fringe benefit.

Forget Honolulu. I chose Faizabad, a distant Afghan outpost at the foot of the Pamir Mountains. The place has seen few outsiders since Marco Polo left 700 years earlier.

Sheep scattered as our wheezing plane set down. At the bazaar, we outdrew a sword swallower, attract-ing a crowd of 100 gawkers.

The mayor assigned us a police escort. When we went fishing, cops dug our worms.

A few months later, we rented a 1958 Willys for a trip through the Hazarajot – Afghanistan's mountain-ous center. Sparsely inhabited by the descendants of Genghis Khan, the place is desolate, isolated and rarely visited. It took us two weeks to cover 400 tortuous, rocky, off-the-goat-path miles.

When the lone gas pump in a one-camel town called Chagcharan ran dry, the provincial governor gave us daily briefings on the fuel crisis. Can you see California Governor Gray Davis doing this for a handful of stranded tourists from afar?

SUCH HOSPITALITY was the rule in Afghanistan, even in its most distant reaches. That's why seeing this country recast as terrorism's international capital does not add up.

Sure, a huge, at-times unfathomable cultural gulf separated me from my students and neighbors in Kunduz.

But during my Peace Corps tenure, I'd like to think, that gulf narrowed by a few inches. At least for myself and the Afghans I grew close to.

That's why this distant nation's ongoing tragedy haunts me.

At this point I can only hope – far more for Afghanistan's sake than for my own – that someday I can again dream of returning.

(Alas, I think this San Diego reunion will be as close as I get.)

AND ONE READER'S TAKE:

To the Editor:

I am appalled by Chris Bateman's Oct. 12 article. If you are so worried about the Afghans, you should place your-self on a plane and go reside there, because we, the Americans, don't need you or your worries. We only have time to worry about ourselves and what is coming from them next.

It is ignorant liberal zealot mentalities like yourself that encourage Americans to cower to terrorism and just let this go without response. You can plainly see that Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan teach their people at a very young age to hate us.

The war on terrorism has begun. I resent your attempt to place a guilt trip on the American public. If you are not with us, you are against us. That holds true for anyone who lives in the USA, including you.

It is time to start acting like the super power we are and continue to bomb any country that harbors terrorists.

Brandon Halter
Sonora

Chris Bateman

RANDOM TAKES AND MEMORIES

Over the intervening decades I had devoted very little thought to my one year as a Peace Corps teacher in Afghanistan. So when my PC colleague Pat Nyhan asked me to share a few memories, I told her I would not have a lot to contribute.

Then I dredged up a stack of letters I had written to my parents during 1970, dusted off a pile of slides and Instamatic snapshots, and dug up a couple of pieces on Afghanistan I had written for the Union Democrat during my 38-year tenure at that Sierra foothills paper.

Suddenly, memory stimulated, I was off to the races. One thing led to another, and after four days pounding at my laptop, a promised vignette or two turned into a many-chaptered tome totaling nearly 5,000 words.

And led to the realization that 1970 was one of the most interesting, bizarre and wonderful years of my life – full of good friends and incredible experiences.

Pat, I've learned, is also a journalist and, for this particular reunion project, she's also an editor. Editors, I learned over my years in the trade, really don't like it when reporters pull this kind of dirty trick.

So my apologies to Pat and to any readers who dare slog through what she's left below.

Unusual customs

My cook in Kunduz was engaged to be married and looking for a wedding present for his fiancée. I mentioned that I could get him a watch from the States, and I might as well have offered him a new Cadillac.

Afzal was ecstatic, and I asked my parents to send me a dainty-looking women's Timex – which they did. But when I went to the customs station in Kabul to pick it up, an agent there shrugged his shoulders and told me it had been "lost."

I was angry and upset, knowing that the watch had been pilfered by one of the country's invariably crooked civil servants. Hearing the commotion at the counter, the office manager came my way with a solution. "A lot of watches come through here," he soothed. "I'll find you a nice new one."

I declined, instead searching for a fake Timex in Kabul.

Relaying the tale, I told my parents that the Afghans had made a "fine art out of combining incompetence and corruption."

Everybody's right

Did you ever notice this? I did.

Four of us were attempting to get out of remote Faizabad via the supposed twice-a-week plane to Kunduz that took off from the sheep pasture that doubled as the town airport.

We woke on the morning of our alleged departure, and our Faizabad innkeeper said the old De Havilland Otter would not be flying and was, in fact, nowhere to be seen. But a policeman countered that the plane was not only at the landing strip, but could take off at any minute. Neither of them were troubled by even a shadow of doubt, nor were any of the two or three more folks we similarly questioned.

Hedging our bets, we took a gaudi to the airport, where no plane waited. But three men at the airport separately swore that the plane would: 1. Arrive in minutes. 2. Would come in two days or 3. Was postponed for an entire week. All were dead certain.

We ended up riding a dump truck back to Kunduz. The driver absolutely guaranteed he'd make it in 12 hours. It took 17.

Want Uruguay? How 'bout Afghanistan?

When I applied for the Peace Corps, I listed South America as my first choice. Then came the South Pacific. And, OK, sure, I'd settle for Africa if need be.

I was assigned, of course, to Afghanistan. After I arrived, I learned through the grapevine that nobody who applies to the PC gets his or her first choice.

There were various guesses as to the logic behind this. Give an applicant his first choice, the thinking may have gone, and it would be too easy, too much like a vacation. Let's make these rooks at least a bit uncomfortable.

I don't think any of my PC colleagues actually requested Afghanistan, and a few confessed to not being entirely sure where the nation was when they received their acceptances.

Anyone who actually applied to come to Kabul, the Peace Corps (with some justification) may have concluded, were likely lured by the availability of cheap and very good hashish. So those folks were sent to Tonga.

So how did that work out?

Well, my colleagues at PC training in Kabul and I were fast learners, adaptable and opportunistic.

After 10 days of language and cultural training, a few of my new friends and I thought we had learned enough Farsi to buy hashish. So I joined a fellow trainee (who shall remain nameless) on a walk to one of Kabul's seedier bazaars and began tentatively inquiring about "chars."

Within 10 minutes we had made a win-win deal, buying a quarter-pound chunk of the stuff for the equivalent of 50 cents.

The guy who sold it to us without a bit of haggling was convinced he had royally ripped off a couple of American rubes. And my Peace Corps buddy and I thought we had made the deal of the century.

The only drawback? If the PC powers-that-be pulled a surprise drug raid on our training dorm, my co-conspirator feared, the chunk of hash we had bought "would be too big to flush down the toilet."

Fired up

Our illicit purchase notwithstanding, I graduated from training, was stationed in Kunduz and over the months that followed made frequent trips to visit fellow volunteers.

Toward the end of the school year, I was among several colleagues who paid a weekend visit to a couple stationed at the far reaches of the Peace Corps empire. Their home, on the distant outskirts of a place that was barely a town at all, was not likely to attract visits from the PC hierarchy.

So rather than pay an exorbitant 50 cents for chars in the wrong part of town (which out there was probably, like, one guy), they grew their own. And, of course, the crop was way, way more than this pair of teachers could possibly smoke.

When we arrived, it was fall in Northern Afghanistan and a chill was in the air. So, our hosts uprooted the substantial remains of their cannabis plot and lit it up. Yes indeed, the resulting bonfire warmed us up. And nobody minded being downwind.

A psychedelic postscript

I have no idea where we got the stuff, but a fellow volunteer (once again nameless) and I once dropped LSD in Bamiyan. We were flying high on acid while perched on the stone head of the 170-foot-high Buddha that overlooks the valley.

Luckily, we did not have to interact with any Afghans. Any such conversation would have done little to for-ward the Peace Corps mission.

Nevertheless, after several hours our trip was taking a ragged turn south. So we smoked huge amounts of hash to "come down."

A day later, remarkably, we were back at our schools teaching.

Me? A teacher?

The above vignettes notwithstanding, the U.S. government was not paying me to conduct experiments with Afghanistan's intoxicant of choice. Instead I was to teach English to its high-school students.

And for a year I did. I was assigned to the DMA, a Kunduz boarding school whose students lived in the province's distant corners and who – with a few exceptions – would not put the English I taught them to much use once they returned to the family farm.

Still, I was trained to teach English, and teach it I did. I drafted lesson plans, gave quizzes, forced these kids to speak my own language for minutes at time and encouraged the best of them to pursue proficiency in this international tongue.

But my most memorable hours in class came once a week, when English was off-limits and instead I told them about America in Farsi, occasionally with visual aids. I had my parents, for instance, send me copies of a *Sports Illustrated* issue with Muhammad Ali – a hero throughout the Muslim world – on the cover.

They also asked me if I was in fact a CIA agent working undercover. I strenuously denied this, but then don't all spooks?

My kids then moved onto sex, asking one at times envious question after another on America's loose morals. I never had Mom and Dad send over copies of *Playboy* to quench my students' considerable curiosity. Instead – and this was nearly as disruptive – they sent me a care package full of Frisbees and squirt guns. These were items none of my students had ever seen or perhaps even suspected existed.

Pandemonium broke loose on the DMA campus the day they arrived, and suddenly being in Mr. Chris's English class became very cool.

A Hard Day

Calling the roll was the easiest part of my day. I'd read off the names and the kids would answer "here." Or when one of their classmates was absent, they'd tell me he was sick, late getting back from home, or otherwise indisposed.

But when I got to Mohammed Jalil, a tall, confident student, there was deadly silence from the class. After many questions, it turned out he had been charged by the Kunduz police with burglarizing his father's house.

Jalil didn't do it, all his classmates attested, but the shame was more than he could endure and he shot himself.

Some teachers might seize this moment, engaging the class in an instructive discussion about how this young man's suicide was unnecessary and perhaps the fault of a misguided culture.

I didn't touch it. The rest of that day's class was uncomfortable and quiet. And I was left realizing how different we Americans were from our hosts.

Roots of a career

I've been a journalist for 45 years, and my musty resume says I began as a cub reporter in 1973.

But in reality I started at the top. As publisher of *The DMA Times* in Kunduz.

Armed with copies of *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* sent by my ever-obliging parents, I encouraged the best and the brightest of my students to start a school paper of their own.

But, as I had access to the principal's ditto machine, I was the publisher. Mohammed Anwar, a bright 11th-grader who could speak better English than I could Farsi, was the managing editor. We put out a few is-sues, none of which have survived the intervening decades.

I wish I could tell you how we exposed school corruption, administrators on the take, diplomas for sale and more, but I think we stuck to tamer stuff – like what a great guy and paragon of integrity Mr. Sayed, our principal, happened to be.

As for my journalistic career, it was all downhill after that. Never again would I be a publisher. Or have access to a ditto machine.

John True Vvisits

I knew our regional director would show up for one of my DMA classes someday. There would be no warning, no prep, no nothing.

John True's visit, during which he'd find out if I was really a teacher, would be a surprise. As it should have been.

I just hoped I'd get lucky that day, that my often-unruly kids would be decent, attentive and engaging for a change. And that I didn't have to shout, get flustered or appear way out of my depth.

Well, the day John showed up, I nailed it. Somehow, I was Mr. Chips for a day, beloved, respected and effective. For an entire 45 minutes. My kids were wonderful, and they had no idea who "Mr. John True" was.

It was like the general manager of a baseball team shows up, and a mediocre pitcher with a sky-high ERA somehow pitches a shutout, then gets a new contract and a raise from the GM.

Except I got neither of those.

Day of Reckoning

Classes were over and it was final exam day at the DMA. The rules were pretty clear: absolutely no cheating – unless you can get away with it.

And about half my kids – despite my earnest pre-test warnings and appeals to whatever latent sense of integrity may have lurked deep in their souls – tried to get away with it. Almost all of them succeeded.

The exam venue was a flat campus field with scores of desks for students in all of my classes. Although I think a couple of my fellow Kunduz volunteers helped me proctor, we were hopelessly outmanned.

Every time our attention was drawn to a kid glancing at a crib sheet, peering over the shoulder of a better–prepared classmate or reading pen scrawlings on his palms, a dozen more scofflaws took advantage of our momentary scolds by doing the exact same things.

And the Afghan teachers assigned to help us monitor that day? Don't ask.

At the DMA, ethics was a dirty word.

I drew some satisfaction, however, that many of my students, despite cheating, had a tough time with the test. “Meestar, meestar,” a knot of them chanted as I left school hefting a sheaf of exams in my arms. “Deeficult, deeficult, *too* deeficult.”

At least they chanted it in English.

Over the next several days about a half-dozen students who never paid attention to me in the classroom visited my house, offering some modest bakshish and a plea: “Please, Mr. Chris, don’t fail me on the test.”

Then Mr. Sayed showed up and beseeched me not to fail *anyone,* as it would cause too much trouble on campus, and higher-ups at the provincial education office might get wind.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “If those students studied, they’ll pass.”

Mr. Sayed was not assured.

I graded the exams, failed a half-dozen kids who gave way less than a damn, then departed for what I thought would be a year-end trip through India and Nepal.

That trip, of course, never happened. I never returned to Kunduz, but Mr. Sayed did. So I guess the DMA somehow escaped the campus unrest he feared my few F grades would have brought.

Either that or – as inconceivable as this may seem – those grades were changed.

The Rest of the Story

John True relayed this dialogue to me in a letter he sent several months after my departure.

John: Mr. Sayed, I'm very sorry to have to tell you that Mr. Chris won't be able to come back to the DMA next year. He had some difficulty with his family etc.

Mr. Sayed (after a long, flowing eulogy for Mr. Chris, in which he made it perfectly clear that he knew the *real* reason he wasn't coming back): Will you give us someone to replace him?

John: No. Mr. Sayed (after long pause): Well, then will you give me a quart of ditto fluid?

Boys on the Bus

As any of my fellow volunteers will tell you, my Farsi was not excellent.

But, as the months went on, it did improve. Exactly how much it had progressed became evident on a bus ride in Kabul near the end of my year in Afghanistan.

A guy near me was telling his seatmate, in hushed but audible tones, a dirty joke. An anatomically specific dirty joke. And when he hit the punch line, I burst out laughing.

The guy looked at me in stark disbelief, and I knew I had arrived.

An Olympic sport?

Early in my year-long stay in Afghanistan, I was lucky enough to see a buzkashi match on the outskirts of Kunduz. It left me convinced that this country's gruesome, violent national sport should be part of the Olympics.

Odds are long that Kabul will ever host the games, but the addition of buzkashi would give its athletes the inside track on a gold medal. Think about it: No other country even plays this blood-sweat-and-goats sport (although it would be amusing to see nations like Finland, France, Ireland or the Lesser Antilles attempt to field teams).

Sure, we'd have to deal with PETA and other animal activists who might have problems with the 30 or 40 decapitated dead goats needed for Olympic competition. Sure, we could placate them by offering to instead use live goats, but that might backfire badly.

Better, perhaps, to simply point out that baseball – which has been an actual Olympic sport – uses a ball covered with the hides of dead horses.

Speaking of horses, about 30 riders and steeds are involved in buzkashi. Each team's goal is to drag a head-less goat carcass from one goal (a flag on a pole), around a second, very distant pole, then back to the first. Opposing riders use any and all means to pry the increasingly fragmented goat from the opposing riders. All carry whips, which they more often used on enemy riders than on horses.

Chains and other weaponry, we were told at the Kunduz match, were only recently banned. "It's game of ac-tion and violence," I told my parents in a letter.

But, as the field measures about 400 yards square, the action and violence were often so far away from the grandstands that we had time for lengthy discussions about politics, Vietnam, music, travel plans, the intricacies of the NFL playoffs and a host of other topics as the dusty, gory chaos unfolded a quarter-mile away.

If you didn't pay attention, however, you might look up to see 30 horses and, somewhere among them, one dead goat hurtling headlong toward you.

Near as we could tell, buzkashi has no clock, no penalties, no time outs and no refs. At times tempers flare and scores of reserve riders gallop from the sidelines to join the fray. Finally – and we actually saw this in Kunduz – cops armed with billy clubs wade in, clobbering riders and horses alike.

"What?" you may now be scoffing. "That kind of thing has no place in the Olympics!"

Hear me out. First, I'm convinced the U.S. could field a half-decent buzkashi team made of rodeo cow-boys, NFL linebackers and ripped, tatted-up MMA stars who could be taught to ride. For the sake of the better-to-do, we could add a few snooty polo players who aren't afraid to use their mallets.

NBC could add goat cams and gin up a bunch of stats on animal (and human) parts torn loose, length of lacerations inflicted and whip strokes delivered per minute. Retired Afghan buzkashi riders could be "color commentators." You get the idea.

Finally, answer me this: Wouldn't you rather watch a buzkashi match on TV than badminton, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronized swimming or dressage (whatever that is), which are actual Olympic sports?

Harazajot

Since I left the Peace Corps at the tail end of 1970, I've traveled around the world, climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, hiked South Africa's rugged Otter Trail, bicycled across the U.S., scaled Mt. Whitney and Half Dome, and trekked through the Himalayas in Nepal.

But none of that comes even close to the wild adventure of crossing Afghanistan's Hazarajot in a 1955 Willys.

The company was much of the reason: David (then Daoud) Moats, Fritz Laurenovics, John and Dona Templeman, and Chris and Pat Nyhan, my best Peace Corps friends, were all in. Sheer adventure was the rest.

Where we planned to go was terra incognito. We asked about the roads through Afghanistan's mountain-ous middle and got answers ranging

from “Really, really bad” to “What roads?” No other volunteers that we knew of had taken the trip. But somehow Kadir, the driver we hired, swore he could get all of us from Kabul to Herat in less than the two weeks we had for semester break.

That was a lie.

The trip was uncomfortable, scary, desolate and way, way out there. If that Willys had plunged off a cliff – and at times it got close – our loved ones would still be wondering what happened to us.

That said, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Many folks do the things I mentioned at the top of this story. Almost nobody does Hazarajot. Heck, *National Geographic* barely got there.

Even starting the trip was not easy. How do you even wedge seven PC volunteers and a driver into a ’55 Willys?

The answer: You put two in the front with Kadir, three in the middle and two in the rear cargo area. Our gear, I think, was strapped on top.

The front may have been the scariest, because you could see exactly how close those looming cliffs were. The cramped middle was tough on knees and backs. The rear had great legroom and views, because we kept the gate open. But for the same reason, storms of road dust poured in, forcing us to either wear bandanas or gag, spit and swear for mile after mile.

After Bamiyan and Band-i-Amir (tourist destinations not all that far from Kabul), we left the mildly beaten track for the Great Beyond. When we pulled into a camel stop called Garm Auw (my spelling) on our third day on the road, it was like the circus had come to town. Within minutes, the town’s entire Hazar population sur-rounded and stared, intently and open-mouthed, at us.

Think about it. Few cars and trucks pass through Garm Auw and the last time one with foreigners (including two women!) had passed through was likely… never. The townspeople were friendly enough, considering they were looking at alien life forms.

The experience would be repeated again and again as we crossed pass after pass and traversed valley after valley in a vast, desolate area left behind by the ages. On the plus side, we always found food and sometimes dirt-floor accommodations at the settlements we passed through. And not once were we threatened or intimi-dated (except by those cliffs).

But because of barely negotiable roads and almost daily Willys breakdowns, progress was slow. About 10 days into the trip, we arrived at the Minaret of Jam, a majestic, 200-foot-high, spire built in the late 12th century alongside the Hari Rud River.

It took a detour off the alleged main road and, as I remember, a trek down a donkey trail, to get to the minaret. We climbed a set of narrow stone stairs to the top and signed a guest register put there in the mid-1950s, shortly after the minaret became known to the outside world. There were about 30 names on it.

We were still on schedule when the Willys sputtered and clanked into Chagcharan, the capitol of Ghor Province. We camped by the Hari Rud as Kadir drove into town for gas. There was none.

And there would be none for four days. It wasn't because we didn't ask.

Every day we sent a delegation to visit the portly, always agreeable provincial governor. We'd tell him we were Peace Corp teachers and that it was absolutely essential that we get back to our schools in time for the beginning of the semester.

This urgency was not exactly reflected at our laid-back encampment on the Hari Rud. As our colleagues made their fervent pleas, the rest of us basked in the sun, took refreshing swims and talked about just how great our trip had been.

Meanwhile, the governor each day promised the gas tanker would arrive either that afternoon or, at the very latest, early the next day. His repeated promises eventually came true.

We drove back to Kabul on the paved road through Kandahar, arrived at our schools several days later – and were reprimanded for our tardiness by the PC brass.

A very small price to pay for such an adventure.

Our Mission

Our urgent plea to Ghor's provincial governor may have a few of you wondering how much our classroom work was valued by King Mohammed Zahir Shah's government back then.

Although I wasn't among the volunteers who lost sleep pondering this question, a few of my more commit-ted colleagues decided to put the king's minister of education on the spot.

"Don't be foolish," he reportedly told them. "You're not here to teach English. You're here to be resident Americans, and it doesn't matter what you do."

To maintain the proper diplomatic balance in the then-neutral country, the minister explained, there must be one American for every two Russians in Afghanistan. That was what was important.

Seem preposterous, simplistic, crazy?

Well, it worked until the Russians invaded and that 2-to-1 ratio went *way* out of whack. Then we invaded in 2001 and stuck around, so I'm pretty sure that once-golden ratio is still nowhere near 2-to-1.

So the formula worked until it didn't work. And I don't think – the minister's comments notwithstanding – it affected how we Peace Corps teachers did our jobs.

My abrupt departure

I was crushed, devastated, overwhelmed.

One day I was celebrating the end of my first year as a Peace Corps teacher at a party with my fellow volunteers. The next day, along with seven or eight colleagues (I've forgotten the exact number), I was summarily thrown out.

The vacation trip to India and Nepal I had planned with a PC buddy?

Gone. Teaching at a new post in exotic Faizabad for my second year? Forget it.

Instead I wired my parents in Chicago: "BACK WEDNESDAY MORN. NO EMERGENCY."

The reason? As I had during most every other weekend party during my year of PC service, I joined my colleagues in partaking of hashish at our year-end bash. It made the music sound great and the conversation flow. Only this time a fellow volunteer blew the whistle on us.

The Peace Corps brass acted quickly.

Although hash was the drug of choice in Afghanistan, cheap and widely available, using it was against PC regulations. No, the Corps did not actively enforce this rule, and some might even say it looked the other way.

But not when a case was served up on a silver platter: We didn't lie, and justice was swift. We were given plane tickets home and in two days we were all gone.

"It was drugs, wasn't it??" thundered my dad when I arrived home a few days before Christmas.

My mom was in tears. And my brother, who had two years earlier been busted for pot in Colorado, gave me a look that roughly translated as "Sure glad I'm not you today."

Things weren't pleasant at home, although a letter John True sent to my parents (I still have it) attesting that I was a decent guy and dedicated teacher, helped a lot.

Still, it took me better than year to recover. Fearing no reputable employer would hire me with this black mark on my record, I moved to California and took a series of marginal jobs where backgrounds were not checked. This did little to rehabilitate my crippled resume

So I finally screwed up my courage and applied for a newspaper job.

Lucky for me, the publisher was desperate. When I told him of my abrupt dismissal from the Peace Corps for using drugs, he shrugged.

“Everyone has a few skeletons in their closet,” said my new boss, and I began a 38-year career at *The Union Democrat.*

Meanwhile, dismissal of the Kabul Eight (or Nine), apparently become something of a legend among volunteers remaining in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is a story full of twists, turns, nuance, intrigue and more than enough blame to go around.

After a few years as a “reputable” journalist (this was decades before “fake news”) the stigma of my dis-missal faded and I began to tell the story with relish, humor and probably more license than I should have.

At times I’ve considered reconnecting with everyone involved (including the rat, who with more-than-ample justification was thrown out himself). In interview after interview, I’d get to the bottom of this surre-alistic period piece, then tell it like it was.

But then I’d have to file a Freedom of Information Act request and go over sheaves of heavily redacted documents to ferret out the truth. This could take years, and at 71, I may not have years.

So I’ll settle for getting together with you, my fellow volunteers, in San Diego (thanks, Bill, for making it all happen) and reliving all the adventures of my very eventful year in Afghanistan.