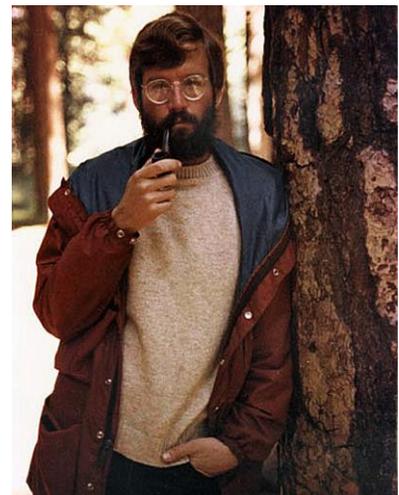


“WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT’S BEEN...”
(from a song by The Grateful Dead)



as recounted by Don Meier - RPCV

(Hey, folks, I couldn't make this stuff up even if I wanted to.) It started off like any ordinary New Year's Eve, even though it was the next to last one of the millenium. I had invited some close friends over to my apartment for dinner to kick off the evening's festivities. I was delighted that an old buddy of mine from my Afghanistan days in the early 90s, Bill Bergquist, had been recently reassigned to the location of my current assignment in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, as the Chief of the UN Office of Coordination of Hu-manitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). I jokingly referred to him as "Wild Bill" because of his free-spirited nature and good humor.



Bill Bergquist RPCV 1972- 1974 1

He had become something of a living legend in his own right because of his commitment to the cause of freedom in Afghanistan from the time of his service there as a

Peace Corps Volunteer in the early 70s until his more recent position as a United Nations official in Herat and Kandahar, which had become the heartland of the extreme fundamentalist Taliban faction. Many of his friends and followers admired him because he frequently wrote accounts of his views and adventures for an Afghan newsletter that enabled others less fortunate to relive his experiences vicariously. In fact, some fifty former Volunteers from Alaska to Maine had attended a reunion the previous autumn to honor his dedication to the Peace Corps spirit.

To round out the evening's group, I had invited Peter Goosens, the Director of CARE International, and his gracious wife, Eileen, along with their nine year-old daughter, Joanna. We were also celebrating Bill's good fortune in having his contract extended from a short-term assignment of three months to a full year during his recent mission to UNOCHA headquarters in Geneva. He had been seconded here by his office in Pakistan due to the perception that it was too dangerous for an American to be working in Afghanistan after the bombings of the suspected train-ing camps of the reputed Islamic terrorist, Osama bin Laden, in August 1998. In his typically generous style, Bill had brought over a few rare delicacies for this part of the world, including some chevre (goat cheese) and smoked salmon. We indulged in a hearty meal of tortellini and garlic bread washed down with some spectacular Laphroaig single malt whisky and sprinkled with intense conversations.

Afterwards, Bill and I headed over to the party that had been arranged by the UN Mission of Observers to Tajikistan (UNMOT) on the rooftop of their office. This was really the only game in town that night, especially since they were offering the added attraction of rides home in an armored vehicle until 2:30 am, well after the usual curfew time of 9 pm in this periodically strife-torn city. The occasion was not disappointing as expected and well attended by those expatri-ates who didn't have the opportunity to get away for the holidays. Having already rung in the New Year in the usual manner at the appropriate time, I decided to wander on home at around 1:15

am. One of my last memories was of Bill looking particularly dashing in his tuxedo, dancing the night away with some of the young girls there, which would have been totally inconceivable in fundamentalist Afghanistan.

The next morning around 10:40 am, I received a phone call from Peter with the startling news that Bill was dead! Although he didn't have many details at the time, apparently Bill had somehow fallen at the UNMOT building and died on the spot. I was shocked to my core and immediately stopped ironing my shirt since that seemed like such an irrelevant activity. My mind was reeling with thoughts of disbelief interspersed with lingering images and doubts about what I could have done to alter this horrible outcome. An intense loneliness and sadness welled up inside me and I broke down in an uncontrollable torrent of tears as I hadn't done since the death of my father some twenty-four years ago.

Nonetheless, I decided to attend the day's pre-eminent social event, a New Year's Day brunch at noon, because I thought that at least it would give me a chance to console with some friends rather than just stay at home and mourn by myself. Gradually, I began to piece together the details of Bill's tragic demise. It seems that he had gone down-stairs to answer nature's call and, upon returning to the party, he had somehow lost control and tumbled backwards down the stairs. In the process, his neck was snapped causing almost instantaneous death. His body was discovered in a pool of blood a short time later by a guard at the bottom of the stairs.

In the meantime, I had been in contact with the UN Resident Coordinator, Paolo Lembo, who was trying to make the arrangements for Bill's transfer back home to the States but was dismayed to find out that his next of kin couldn't be located. I offered to go to the US Embassy to check his registration records. However, since it was a holiday and the Consular Assistant, Natasha Pilipenko, couldn't be reached easily because her home phone was out of order, I went back

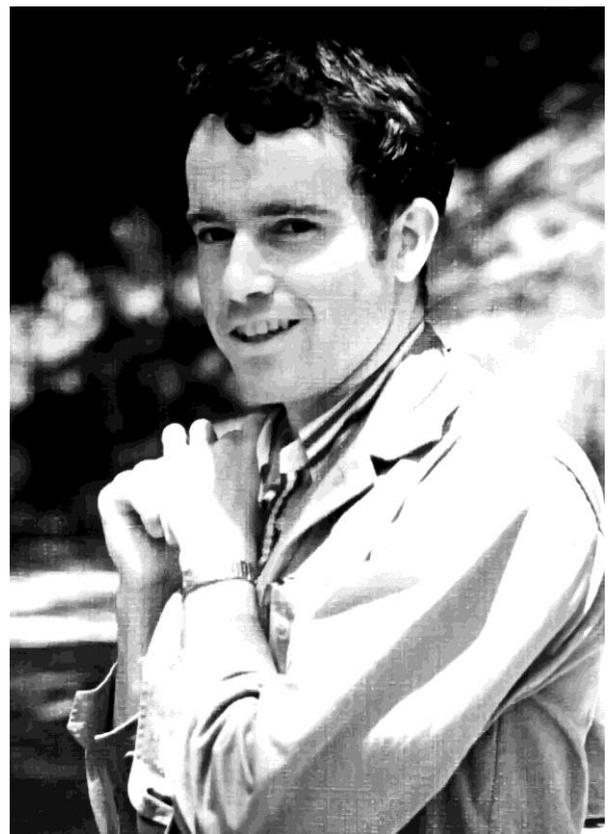
to the party to await her arrival. Then I had another idea. Bill's landlady at his apartment was the aunt of his Project Assistant, Lola Atabaeva. This time I was able to reach her and made arrangements to enter his apartment with them so that we could search for an address book or passport with a notation of whom to contact in the event of an emergency. Upon arriving at his place, sure enough, we were in luck at last! There were his passports (US and UN *laissez-passer*) along with an address book. I was relieved and hopeful that we must be able to find some relative here.

Next I delivered these documents to Mr. Lembo at his residence so that he could start dialing any likely candidates on his cellular phone. That's when we began to run up against a brick wall. No one responded at the number of his emergency contact. Although there was someone named Bert Bergquist in the directory, all that Paolo got was what sounded like a business answering service. Since I was aware that Bill was from Arizona, I suggested that he try some numbers from that area. He actually did find an elderly lady who said that she was indeed Bill's aunt, but she admitted that she hadn't seen him for years and wasn't in regular contact with him. At long last, we reluctantly gave up the search for the evening, still hoping that someone would return the messages later. Meanwhile, Natasha called to report that she had checked Bill's records at the Embassy and had discovered that in the section where he was supposed to fill in the name of his next of kin, he had written, "None." A somber note if there ever was one.

The next morning upon arising, I was astonished to see that a heavy snowfall had accumulated overnight. Immediately, I thought about how if Bill were here, he'd probably start a good-natured snowball fight or build a snowman. With that equally joyful association and grim reminder of a fallen friend, I tried to pull myself together again. Paolo Lembo had organized a memorial service at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Dushanbe at 11 am and I was putting the final touches on a eulogy that I had started preparing the previous night. Ever the faithful

friends, Peter and Eileen showed up in plenty of time so that we could slosh our way out to the church near the airport. I introduced myself to the Argentine priest and greeted many of the fifty or so guests who also braved the weather. The Requiem mass was fairly straightforward, but I was a bit put off by the gospel reading and its seemingly inappropriate references to the antichrist for an audience of diversely mixed faiths. Paolo delivered a heartfelt statement during the mass reflecting on his association with Bill in Afghanistan in the early 90s and I read my eulogy at the end. Then it was back out into that lonesome world once more to try to make some sense out of this quirk of fate.

The search for the elusive next of kin turned out to be an empty well since none could be located. However, during my steady stream of emails to various people about this dilemma, someone finally suggested that I contact a newsletter to which Bill was a regular contributor published by the Friends of Afghanistan, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer organization. At last we hit pay dirt! The publisher, Nancy Cunningham, put me in touch with a fellow named Paul Bitter. When I informed him of our inability to reach any of Bill's family members to finalize arrangements, he pointed out that Bill was practically like an adopted member of his family and an uncle to his two children. Paul was not only the executor of Bill's estate, but also was in possession of his will and handled his financial matters.



Paul Bitter RPCV 1972-1974 1

Furthermore, he offered to receive the remains in the States and to take care of the funeral arrangements in Maryland. Couldn't ask for much more than that, so UNDP squared away everything with him as the obviously authorized representative.

During the next few days, I was in touch with Paolo about various matters related to arrangements for the return of Bill remains and his personal effects. However, I was caught totally by surprise when he asked me on Tuesday if I would accompany Bill's coffin back to the States on Thursday morning. On the one hand, it was the kind of responsibility one can't refuse lightly. But on the other, I still had to get permission from my employers, a Tajik government organization implementing a World Bank project, where I was working on a consulting assignment. Fortunately, my boss was very sympathetic and agreed to let me go if I finished a draft proposal before my departure and deliver it to headquarters in Washington. Without hesitation, I tackled that task and submitted it on Wednesday afternoon just before the close of business.

Bright and early on Thursday morning, I was raring to go and racing around finishing last-minute details. The UN Resident Coordinator's vehicle collected me and I was given a package of documents to carry and asked to sign a receipt for \$12,600 in cash that I was supposed to deliver to Bill's beneficiary in the States. Then the driver picked up Paolo and we headed to the Dushanbe airport. I took a few photos with my new digital camera to pass the time while waiting for the truck with the cargo.

When the two crates arrived, I couldn't believe how big and heavy they were. The zinc coffin was encased in a sturdy wooden box that tipped the scales alone at 704 pounds (320 kg) and took six strong men to load it into the rear cargo bay of the UNMOT plane, an Antonov-26 (a converted Russian military aircraft). The box of personal effects was almost as impressive, weighing in at 408 pounds (185 kg), that

apparently contained just about all his worldly possessions in Dushanbe, down to his toothbrush and underwear. After a lot of grunting and groaning from the makeshift pallbearers, we finally lifted off at 9:30 am on our way to Almaty, Kazakhstan. Accompanying me on the flight was Kurt Schober, UNMOT Travel Officer, who imparted all sorts of useful tidbits and generally helped pass the time on the rather noisy journey in the belly of this beast which contained only those two awesome crates and a row of benches on either side.

Upon arriving in Almaty three hours later, we were met by Folke von Knobloch, the Austrian Airlines representative, who was a characteristically businesslike German himself. While unloading the boxes, he asked me what I wanted to do with my two pieces of personal luggage and I told him to just check them on through with the cargo since I couldn't be bothered with them at the time. Then he whisked Kurt and I through some back entrance of the VIP lounge with great panache bypassing the customs section altogether as someone who obviously knew his way around. I spent the rest of the day at the airport while he was running back and forth taking care of customs clearance for the cargo. Finally, he gave me a lift to the Kazakhstan Hotel with instructions to be at the air-port by 1:30 am for the 3:30 am departure. After checking in, I went for an early dinner so that I could try to catch a few winks before heading back out to the airport. However, around 6 pm, von Knobloch called me with the distressing news that some flunky Kazakh customs official had refused to allow the release of the coffin at the last moment without inspecting its contents. He advised me to get some sleep and said we would deal with it in the morning.

After a fitful night, I started trying to make some phone calls on my own to anyone I thought might be able to help. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to reach anybody directly, although I left messages with Kurt Schobar, Paolo Lembo and the American Embassy to Tajikistan in Almaty. I met up with von Knobloch at 10 am at my hotel for a Business Roundtable sponsored by the US Embassy to Kazakhstan, at which quite fortuitously the new American Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Richard Jones, was attending as his first public occasion. When the meeting was over, von Knobloch buttonholed the Ambassador about this grave issue that involved a deceased American citizen with UN diplomatic immunity. He considerately offered his support and promised to send someone from the Embassy to look into the matter.

We then proceeded to the Austrian Airlines office downtown where von Knobloch made some strategic calls to his KGB contacts and the Chief of Customs, who finally relented and agreed to release the cargo on this evening's flight. Just like the epitome of the efficient German, with the impression of those huge boxes still fresh in his mind, von Knobloch checked freight handling capacity of the originally scheduled flight between Vienna and Geneva. As it turned out, the small commuter plane couldn't handle these two behemoths, so he had to reroute my flight through Atlanta, Georgia, on Delta Airlines, from where I would double back to Washington, DC. While von Knobloch was rewriting my ticket, Knut Otsby, Deputy Resident Representative for UNDP Kazakhstan, had caught wind of this incident and informed us that he was sending a representative from his office to the airport too.

Confident about regaining the upper hand, we headed on out to the Austrian Airlines cargo office at the airport where he spent the better part of the afternoon running around to eight different locations gathering a profusion of signatures and stamps in a process that normally would require only two steps. We chatted with the UNDP assistant, Vlademir Dodengeft, who was conducting his own investigation. At 5 pm Mark Burnett, Vice Consul of the American Embassy, arrived and asked if he could be of any assistance. I showed him my documents with the sealed manila envelope stuffed with cash that I had received in Dushanbe. Since I didn't want to be personally accountable for this money while clearing customs in the States, I asked that he send an official cable to the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the States explaining my situation, which he graciously agreed to do.

Having already stirred up a hornet's nest at the airport and then getting it calmed down again, we decided to call it a day since it seemed that our mission had been accomplished. One thing for sure is that I wouldn't want to be in the shoes of the customs official who had delayed the shipment the previous evening. Whether he was just trying to follow some new orders in the absence of a higher authority or whether this was a sinister ploy to solicit a bribe over a dead man's body will probably never be known. What is clear, though, is that this incident had flagrantly provoked the attention of the United Nations offices and the American Embassies of two countries (Tajikistan and Kazakhstan), the KGB and the Kazakh Chief of Customs. I can only hope that if justice is served, that unfortunate soul was immediately reassigned to some lonely, godforsaken outpost on the Kyrghiz border where he wouldn't have the opportunity to make that mistake again.

Upon arriving back at the hotel, I received a call from Knut Otsby, who wanted an update on the day's progress. After

giving him a brief rundown, I explained my concern about apparently having entered Kazakhstan without passing through the usual customs formalities. Since I didn't want any further delays, I asked if he could send me a letter on UN letterhead acknowledging my mission and authorizing my travel, which he consented to provide. I called Matluba Turaeva, the UNDP Tajikistan Administrative Officer, and informed her that I realized that I didn't have an official copy of the death certificate with a stamp mark, but only a photocopy. Apparently the original had been sent on to UNOCHA headquarters in Geneva for processing his life insurance policy,

but I assured her that I would try my best to get by with whatever documents I had in my possession. Then there was nothing to do but grab a bite to eat and catch whatever sleep I could before getting back up at 12:30 am so that I could be at the airport at least two hours before departure.

Fortunately, von Knobloch had risen above and beyond the call of duty and met me in his cargo office at the airport around 1:20 am. He dashed off to chat with the Minister of Transport for a few minutes before returning to escort me through the dreaded customs. He recommended that I go through the VIP lounge, even though it would cost \$50 for that dubious privilege. Although I was somewhat nervous, he advised me sagely that after having lived in the Soviet Union for many years, "The abnormal is easy, it's the normal that's difficult." And sure enough, he got my boarding card and I passed through passport control without a hitch. After breathing a sigh of relief, I partook of the only amenities in this exalted area – a cup of tea and a pastry – before departing into the bitter winter's night for boarding at 3:30 am.

No sooner than I had stepped outside, though, than I was informed by an Austrian Airlines employee that some more officials wanted to check my documents again. When I reached the plane, a couple of young, Russian-looking military officers demanded to search all the papers, which I

immediately handed over to them. I mentioned that we had already obtained clearance from the Chief of Customs, but they replied curtly that they were from the Immigration Department instead. Since it was obvious that they couldn't read English, they told me to board the plane and wait for them at the entrance. A few minutes later they appeared with another officer and ordered me to give them Bill's US passport and UN *laissez-passer*. I informed them that they had been returned to his office in Dushanbe on the UNMOT flight as is customary in these cases since he no longer had need of them and the relevant agencies had every right to reclaim them according to their regulations.

As if that weren't enough, one of them noted that his LP had expired on the photocopy that I did have. "Well, it doesn't really make much difference now, does it?" I commented dryly. After more than a half an hour of this grueling inspection, they finally confiscated the photocopies of his LP and death certificate before disappearing.

When the airplane door was sealed and the engines were revving up, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. Shortly thereafter, the gracious stewardesses in the business class section were serving me a bottle of fine 1990 Tat-tinger champagne as a sort of victory celebration. A weird sensation came over me with the realization that my friend's body was just below me in the bowels of this plane instead of sharing a drink with me as we had done so many times before. However, I was comforted by the thought that at last we were finally on the way home and would probably arrive in Washington, DC, just in time to make the memorial services to be held in nearby Maryland on Sunday at noon.

Bill was renowned for his punctuality, often being the first person to arrive a party, and the thought of him being late for his own funeral was unimaginable.

In Vienna, the Delta Airlines agents were very accommodating in assuring me that the cargo had been loaded without any problem. After liftoff, the captain announced that we would be flying against strong headwinds, but that we should still arrive in Atlanta in would be flying against strong headwinds, but that we should still arrive in Atlanta in about elev-en hours. I explained my situation to the stewardesses who were also most sympathetic. They promised to radio on ahead to the airport and request customs clearance for the cargo at my final destination in Washington rather than at my point of arrival in order to expedite the delivery of the human remains to the funeral home. Upon touchdown, I was met by a Delta Cares passenger service representative who whisked me through immigration and customs about as promptly and painlessly as could be expected. I proceeded to the Delta Crown Business Class Lounge and spoke to an agent who informed me that the coffin would be loaded last so that it could be unloaded first. Made perfect sense to me, so I settled into the lounge to catch a little rest before the last leg of the journey to DC.

Around 7:30 pm, I boarded the plane and sat next to the window where I could observe the cargo being loaded up a side ramp. However, the monster box never appeared and the loading ramp was finally hauled away. While ponder-ing this unforeseen occurrence, I heard an announcement requesting the Delta Cares passenger to step forward. The crew regretfully informed me that the coffin was too large and heavy to be loaded in the side cargo bay, although the box with his personal effects and my two pieces of luggage were already stored on the plane. Despite their promises to try to ship the coffin on the next available flight, that wasn't good enough for me.

I immediately decided to deplane and personally make sure that it was taken care of properly since we were rapidly running out of time.

I raced to the passenger service agent's desk to discuss the possible alternatives, but none were very promising. It seemed as if the problem was that a large enough plane was not heading in that direction this evening. After badger-ing the poor guy for some time, his colleague finally suggested that I get something to eat and come back around 10:30 pm. Meanwhile, I called Steve Tourkin, another friend of Bill's who was helping with the reception arrange-ments, and explained the cause of the delay as well as the lack of a solution at that moment. When I returned for the last time at 11 am, the PSA said that he had tried to rent a hearse, but the driver had inexplicably driven away. Ulti-mately, though, he rented a regular truck that would carry the coffin for the ten hour drive to Washington leaving around midnight. I only had a half an hour to catch the last flight to Dulles Airport in DC, so we raced over to the gate of the departing plane and I just managed to board in the nick of time.

The next morning, Paul Bitter, my primary contact and apparently Bill's closest friend, met me at the Holiday Inn around 10 am and we went off to the cargo area to clear the shipment. At long last, luck was finally on our side. The coffin was being transferred to the awaiting hearse just as we arrived with the documents for the one hour drive to the funeral home in Riverdale, Maryland. Unfortunately, however, the box with his personal effects and my luggage had been inadvertently diverted to Philadelphia and no one was sure when it would wend its way back here. Paul took care of the necessary formalities and we headed off for our rendezvous with Bill at his final destination.

We arrived at the Chambers Funeral Home only a half an hour before the memorial service was scheduled to begin and I had a brief opportunity to meet some of Bill's eclectic friends – an odd assortment of international development professionals, hash house harriers and even a couple of his former girlfriends.

During the service, Paul and Steve delivered their eulogies, followed by the one that I had prepared in Dushanbe. Quite spontaneously, people started popping up from the audience narrating their ardent personal experiences and associations with Bill over the years. It was a deeply emotional and enlightening encounter for me as well as un-doubted for many others also. We careened between laughter and tears until everyone that wanted to had a chance to speak their piece. Interestingly enough, although there was no formal religious individual present, the funeral home attendant said that it was the most touching service she had ever witnessed.

Afterwards, there was an open casket viewing for those who wanted to partake of a last glimpse of their beloved brother. I was surprised that the undertakers has been able to bring him around to a presentable shape since Kurt had warned me that the embalmers in Dushanbe had struggled unsuccessfully to suppress the bleeding from his ears. As a final gesture, his remaining stalwart friends closed the casket, draped the UN flag over it and left him in solitary peace. Then, in this atmosphere of emptiness and loss, there was nothing to do but to carry on as he would have wanted us to do in any circumstance. We congregated nearby at his favorite Indonesian restaurant and solaced our anguish by sharing our memories.

The rest of this story is relatively anticlimactic. I was finally reunited with my luggage a day before my departure back to Tajikistan. Bill was cremated and we cherished the hope that his ashes might someday in more stable times be returned to the Afghanistan that kept calling him back like a mythological siren all his life.

