

## **Peace Corps Memories: Building a School in Afghanistan**

Don Watts, RPCV / Afghanistan, written in Fall 2019

Within a month of my arrival in Kabul as part of Peace Corps, Cycle 13A, the Peace Corps office in Kabul asked me if I would be interested in designing an elementary school in the rural Panjshir Valley of Afghanistan. A local village leader in the Panjshir, known by the name Haji, had contacted the Peace Corps, asking for possible construction assistance. He agreed to provide the land for the school. It is not clear if he actually had legal rights to the school land but it was their village that wanted this school and it made sense that village land would be used for the village school. The name Haji is an honorary title for any Moslem who has returned from the Haj, the religious pilgrimage to Mecca. All Moslems are asked to make the pilgrimage once during their lifetime. In the early 1970's very few Afghans actually accomplished this goal. Haji was therefore the respected leader of his village.

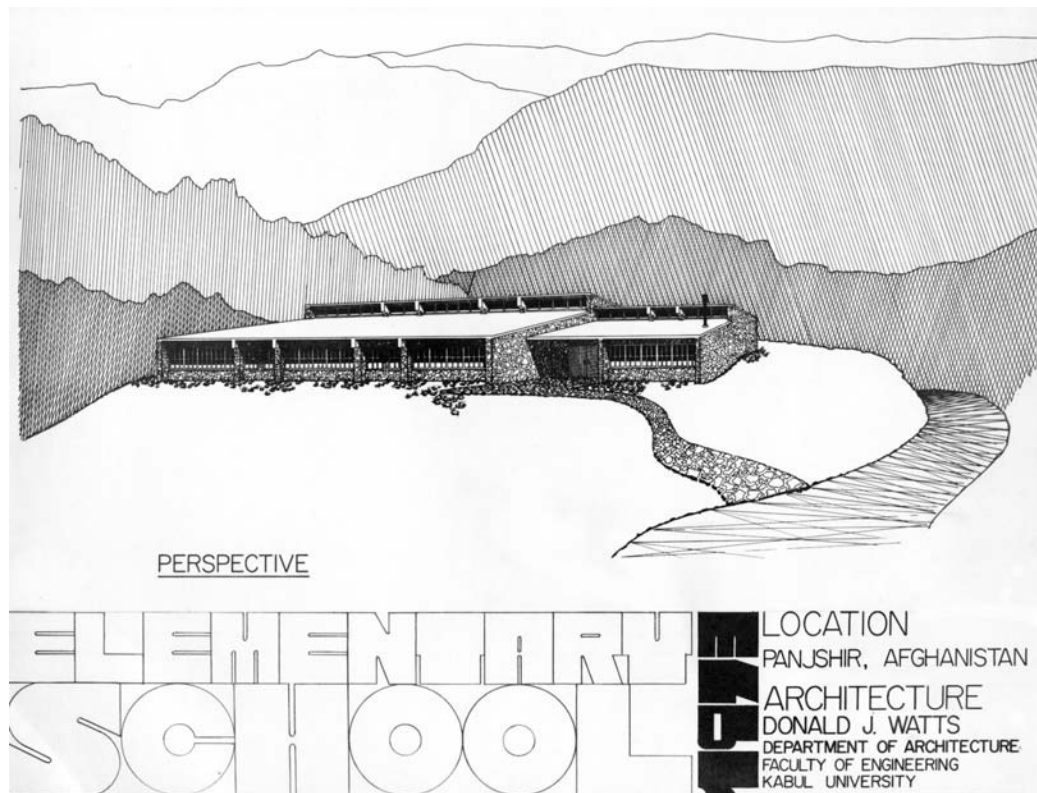
The estimated number of students who would use this new school would be between 150 and 250 students and it would accommodate grades one through six. It was desirable to include a living quarters in the school as well as a storage room and an administrative office. The design needed to use local construction methods and materials as much as possible but yet be of sufficient quality to last for a long time with normal maintenance. Within a few weeks of the inquiry, my Peace Corps supervisor, Mr. Abdul Matin, arranged a trip to the school site. It was a chance to see both the physical conditions of the building site and also meet the local people and see the local school conditions. My second letter home from Kabul refers to my shock at seeing the existing roofless stone shells then used as their school. It is important to note that in the 1970's only boys were educated in the public schools. Girls were educated within the private homes in this very traditional society.

My primary assignment was to teach in the architecture department of the Faculty of Engineering, Kabul University. I was in the midst of full time language and culture training and was living out of my backpack in a training house. I had no equipment for doing drawings, photography or printing. I expressed an interest in designing the school but explained my lack of an office. Peace Corps arranged for me to visit the USAID compound in Kabul where an engineering office was located. There were several American civil engineers on the USAID staff and they generously helped me set up a small drawing table with the necessary tools to develop my design. In a week or two I had developed my design and then spent several days doing some final ink presentation drawings. The engineers had their staff photograph and print my drawings. They were essentially 8 x 10 inch black and white prints that could be easily transported to Washington D.C. in search of funding. It was very unclear whether this project would ever be funded. I therefore limited my time to simple drawings that would show the design idea. I would later need to do detailed construction drawings IF funding materialized.



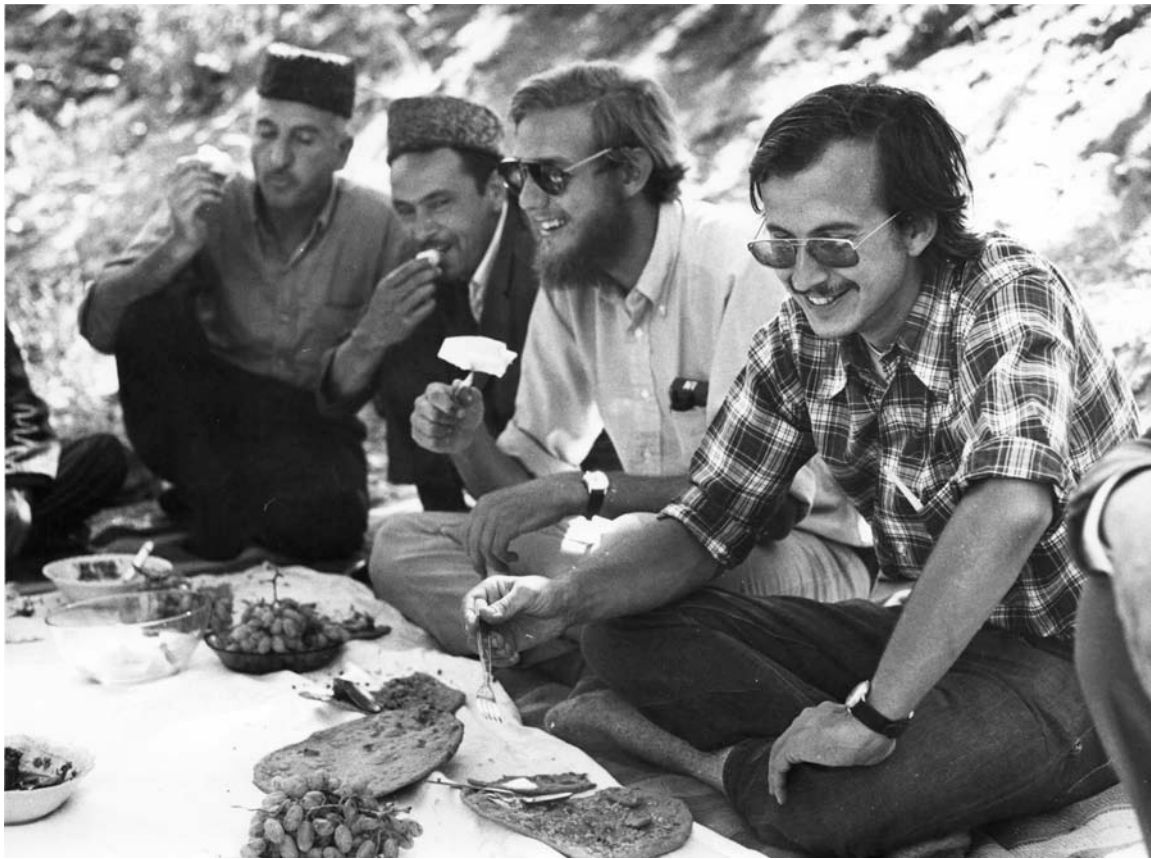
This is the Afghan teacher and his boys in one of the make shift school “shelters” that I saw on my first visit to the construction site. Note that the boys are looking at a picture of King Zahir Shah. This was a wise teacher knowing he was photographed.

Below are the three presentation drawings for the school. Note that this design includes an administrative wing with teachers living quarters, storage and an office. This wing was eliminated from the final design due to overall costs. Another change in the final design was using conventional flat mud roofs. Metal roofing was limited to only the most important buildings and certainly not in rural areas.



Local stone was to be the primary construction material, however the stone walls were to be laid in concrete mortar and not the traditional mud. Interior bearing walls were also of stone but the interior partition walls used hand made sun dried brick. The design allowed for large double size classrooms that could easily be divided into two smaller classrooms with additional brick partitions as needed. The construction site was sloped towards the south and called for a split level design. Interior stairs were needed and I decided to take advantage of this level change by creating a central commons room with built in benches for the students. Clerestory windows were used to bring natural light into the middle of this large building. It made the central corridor much more pleasant and also allowed more light into the upper level classrooms located on the north side of the building.

News of the funding for the school arrived in June 1973. An American elementary school in Virginia held a fund raising to support the cost of the school! I recall the sum being a little less than \$4,000. This sounds like an impossibly small amount to build a school but labor costs were only 65 cents per day per laborer, the building stone was free from the nearby mountainside, the sand and gravel came from the nearby stream. The major material costs were the windows, cement, wood roof beams and some steel reinforcing rod. The provincial governor and education minister came for the opening day ceremonies. Some Peace Corps officials plus a fellow volunteer accompanied me to the site. The fellow volunteer was going to live at the construction site and conduct daily supervision of the project. A celebratory dinner also occurred that day.



The feast occurred beneath some shade trees beside the mountain stream.



I am determining the location of one of the outside walls for the school in this photo.

Construction commenced with the digging of the foundation trenches. Because of the very cold location, the foundation walls needed to be one meter deep. Within a week of starting, I learned in Kabul of problems at the school site. In digging the foundation trenches, the workers intersected old burial chambers. No one knew this was a graveyard but it raised a moral dilemma. My Peace Corps advisor and I made a special inspection trip to look at the circumstances and discuss the situation. I jumped down into one of the trenches that had just nipped the head end of a tomb. It was a rudimentary stone vaulted chamber about the size of a casket. In it lay a human skeleton that was extremely old. The ribs had decayed to almost powder and there was no indication of who these people might have been. It was determined that those buried here were so old that they died before the time of Mohammed. They were therefore considered infidels. The village arranged for the local mullah to "consecrate" the building site to show respect for the dead and then construction could continue. I had to explain to the construction crew that they could not simply shovel loose fill into these tombs and that the foundation walls would have to begin at the base of any tombs, even if that made it deeper than the original one meter depth. I had learned from my apprentice work in Kansas City that all foundation walls must be constructed upon "undisturbed earth". The foundation walls were completed by the fall of that year. It was planned to complete the school in 1974. This would be my last full year of Peace Corps service and everyone wanted to get the job done. Construction started promptly in the spring of 1974 when weather permitted.

Peace Corps assigned one volunteer to always be present at the job site. During the first year, the volunteer was Bud Veasey. I do not recall what prior experience Bud had with construction but he could read construction drawings and had experience working in Afghan rural areas prior to this construction assignment. The following spring Bud had finished his two years of service and a second volunteer, Terry Kier, was assigned to supervise construction. Terry had started his Peace Corps service after I did and therefore would be in country after my departure. Terry had a good command of Farsi and could also read construction drawings.

It was my normal routine to visit the school construction site on Fridays, the Moslem holy day. This did not conflict with my normal teaching duties and other activities in Kabul. It was also the day off for my cook and housekeeper, Mirdad. Peace Corps would arrange a pickup truck and driver to take me to the school site. It was a good 2 hour drive straight north of Kabul. USAID had a great staff house about six blocks from my house and I often went there for a big American breakfast prior to the Friday morning trip. After many months of this, Peace Corps somehow found out about my routine and expressed their displeasure with my being "picked up" by my Peace Corps driver at the Staff House. It was considered too decadent for a volunteer to act this way. I argued that it was my only day off of the week and felt it was a small treat for my extra day of service. It turned out that Peace Corps administration was creating a new policy about using the Staff House in general. Things were getting strict. Rumors were that the USAID crowd was getting tired of having volunteers in their staff house and that is where the pressure came from.

I seldom missed more than two weeks between visits to the school. Of course there was no telephone or electricity in the entire valley so my visits were necessary to just see what was going on and give any guidance and moral support to Terry. There were few mishaps that I heard about. The most glaring one concerned the steel reinforcing bars that were to be used for the concrete lintels above the rows of



windows. Terry told me that he caught the masons trying to sell the steel in the local bazaar! They obviously had no experience with steel reinforced concrete beam construction and figured that since these re-bars would be hidden in the final construction, no one would miss them!! Luckily this disaster was avoided. Another tricky occasion concerned the roof beams. My Peace Corps advisor and I visited a large lumberyard on the outskirts of Kabul. I had determined the minimum size these beams needed to be and my advisor wrote his name in ink upon each of the beams. I was not at the school site when the beams arrived and many of them proved a little small and needed some reinforcement. I never knew if we really got the correct beams or if my calculations were wrong. However, the problem was ultimately solved.



Constructing the roof.



Making the mud bricks for the interior partition walls



This was during the wall construction and I was explaining where two arches would occur in the middle of the building.





My father, James M. Watts Jr., sitting in the commons of the school, fall 1974. Age 63. Natural light from the clerestory windows provide light and a view of surrounding mountain tops when standing at the top of these seats.





This is Terry Kier proudly standing in front of the nearly completed school. I did not take this photograph. Terry sent this photo to me years later.



A wide platform was added to the South front of the building. Afghan schools enjoyed gathering outdoors when the weather was good.



Panjshir Province is close to Kabul but still isolated within a narrow valley.

The Soviet invasion and the fate of the school:

Just four years after completion of the school, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Panjshir Valley is famous for being the home of Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as the Lion of the Panjshir. Massoud was the Tajik resistance leader who fought the Soviet invaders within the Panjshir between 1980 and 1985. The Soviets never conquered the valley even though they conducted heavy aerial bombing and invaded the valley with hundreds of tanks, heavy artillery and thousands of soldiers.

I always knew that my school was in a very commanding location. It was positioned on a small rise that looked southwards directly down the only road of the valley. It most surely received heavy damage by the Soviets. However, knowing the value of the sturdy stone wall construction and foundations, I always suspected that a new building would be built upon my foundations. It would not look the same and may not even be a school but the ruins would likely be put to some good use.

The Panjshir Valley of 9/11 and today:

On September 9, 2001, two agents of Osama bin Laden assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud. This was a prelude to what occurred two days later on September 11. Massoud had been warning the U.S. of a planned Al Qaeda attack on US soil since the summer of 2001. Immediately after September 11, the first American military to set foot in Afghanistan flew into Panjshir Valley to assist the Northern Alliance in the ousting of the Taliban Afghan government. Throughout the past seventeen years, ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams have invested heavily in reconstruction and improvement of Panjshir Valley. The U.S. military has provided the leadership in the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams for Panjshir Province. Even to this day in 2019, Panjshir Valley has remained perhaps THE most independent rural region that is very appreciative and supportive of Western assistance. They have built a large number of schools as well as other public buildings. Careful study of Google

Earth imagery shows a new building of the size, shape and location to match my school. Several small freestanding buildings stand a short distance to the west of the large building. It is very likely that these two small out buildings are communal toilets. One toilet would be for the students and one for the faculty. Separate toilets were never part of my initial school construction and were likely built many years ago. I can think of two good reasons why my school would be resurrected as a new school. First, it was a new and cherished school building before the Russians destroyed it and second, the original school was constructed and funded by Americans in the first place. Reconstructing the school would be a testament to long established good will between America and the Panjshir people.

Thirty years ago Ahmad Shah Massoud promoted schools for girls and ISAF has constructed girls schools in the Panjshir. I would be extra pleased if the foundations of my school now support a school for girls in Panjshir Valley. I simply do not know this level of detail. I would like to think that the people of Panjshir Valley remember Americans for what they helped build and remember the Soviets for all they destroyed. Like so many other volunteers, I consider these years to be a special time of my life.