

# **The Road to Jawand, 1971**

## **by**

### **Greg Kopp, September 2017**



I'm not confident of the dates when what I'm about to relate occurred. I had decided to extend for third year in Afghanistan, because my number in the draft lottery was 33. I asked to be assigned to teach English in Faizabad, a frontier town in Badakhshan Province, near the mouth of the Pamir Mountains in the NE of the country. The school year there began in the spring and ended as weather got too cold in the fall for students to be comfortable. Despite the fact that I was alone there, without another English-speaking person anywhere, I loved the town and my sense of living remotely and being able to survive, even thrive, in a very foreign culture. Faizabad was beautiful, with the Kokcha River rushing through the town, fresh air, little dust and its interesting people.

It was about the middle of that school year, sometime in the summer months of 1971, when John True approached me to discuss my transferring out of teaching into a new program called Food for Work. He had a compelling explanation of the program's purpose and what was entailed, but I was ambivalent. John's description of the job (organizing the villagers to work on water projects, paying for their labor in American wheat rather than money, likely having no stable place to live due to the travel involved) was not very appealing; nor was the thought of leaving Faizabad.

But he persevered with his 'sales pitch', and I began to think that he was not offering an opportunity but gently telling me, as a friend rather than an area supervisor, that I would be crazy not to do this! When he told me that David Moats had already made the decision to join up, I was convinced.

**What followed led to some of the most memorable, and fantastic, experiences I had during my 3½ years in Afghanistan.**

The FFW program gave its volunteers privy to the country and to its culture and people in a much more intimate, real-life way than teaching had ever done. And what happened that fall and winter with the Governor of Badghis Province stands out from the rest as among the most memorable.

I was assigned to Badghis Province, which is located on the Northern border of Afghanistan, south of Turkmenistan. At that time, getting there required driving 370 miles along the only dirt road between Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat. John and his wife Pam drove a Peace Corps truck to take David and me to Qala-i-Nau, the capital city of Badghis. We passed through Shiberghan, Maimana and arrived finally in Qala-i-Nau, and the seat of the Wali (Governor).

I was surprised to learn that the German and American Peace Corps were working together on this program, so the FFW program in Badghis consisted of David Moats, a German volunteer, and myself; and we each had an Afghan counterpart. I was assigned to Qala-i-Nau, David to Ghormach, and the German Volunteer to Qadez. I had some kind of ill-defined extra responsibility for the Badghis program, since I was the senior PC volunteer stationed in the capital city.

Anyway, I stayed in communication with the Governor, and he knew me to be the "point man" for FFW in his Province. I also had to be present at the government warehouse when wheat arrived so I could verify the count of "buji's" (bags, sacks) of wheat, as well as the total weight of the shipment. But each of us was to investigate possible projects, organize local workers, and confer with each other about which projects were feasible to start.

For my part, I saw how easy it was to find workers, because people were hungry and out of work. Between the demand to find projects quickly and my job to monitor a corrupt director of the provincial warehouse, I was completely occupied. A few months after we arrived I got concerned that I had little or no communication from the Qadez duo.

When finally I was apprised of their activities, I learned that the German volunteer and his Afghan counterpart had gone their separate ways due to a disagreement on between them on what projects to pursue. The Afghan counterpart, on his own and without support from anyone, had almost completed constructing a 50-mile long road that went from Qadez to a village called Jawand. It went through difficult terrain, with desert soils and lots of hills and valleys.

The Governor of Badghis was a stout man, rotund even; his face was always stern and no-nonsense, at least around me. He wore a Kabul style suit that was way too tight on his full body, and a karakul hat. He looked out of place in a remote place like Qala-i-Nau. For the most part, he was nice enough, professional, but aloof from our program. When he got word of the road to Jawand, however, he became very involved.

It was actually the first real interest in the FFW program that I had seen from him. He told me that Jawand had never had a motorized vehicle reach it, and he wanted to drive there himself. The road would be a major accomplishment if he could get there in his jeep. I read between the lines and concluded that it would also be good for his career to have this road. I was anxious about his inspection because I had no idea what condition the road was in, I had had no involvement in the decision to build it, and I was afraid I would bear some responsibility if it were a disaster. The Governor wanted me to go with him on this inspection ride. His plan was for us to leave early one morning soon, and to make the round trip in one day, which we both felt should be enough time to drive a total of 100 miles. So the Governor, his driver and I took off a couple days later for the unknown.

Spending a fair amount of time with him while driving through a desert was an experience. He and the driver sat up front, of course, and I was in the back seat. There was a fair amount of mindless banter, which was fine with me because it helped to kill the time. He wanted to know everything about American life: what our houses are like, especially kitchens and bathrooms. He loved to talk about food, asking me what my favorite Afghan foods were. Then he asked me about my favorite American foods, and if I really ate pork. Meanwhile, underneath us, the road was performing just fine. It was slow going and dusty, but there were no mishaps.

I recalled having seen a diagram of how a road should be built; it was a cross-sectional diagram of a road that was high in the middle and sloped downward on both sides. This road was definitely not like that, but the governor didn't notice and I wasn't going to point it out.

After a while, the governor told me we were stopping at an upcoming village where he had some work to do. I was glad to get out of the jeep, and thought it would be interesting to see the village. The driver stopped our jeep by a large crowd of men wearing turbans, gathered next to a corral. As we approached, the conversation among them quieted. The governor spoke out, asking where a specific man was. The man in question walked forward, obviously frightened; he bowed, and kissed the governor's hand. Despite his obeisance, the governor ordered that his shirt be stripped off his back. I learned that this man had been accused of stealing wheat from the local storeroom, and it was the governor's job to mete out a fitting punishment. There was loud discussion and yelling among the men; everyone seemed to have a strong opinion about his guilt or innocence. The governor listened to the arguments and ultimately decided, somehow, that he was guilty. Before he announced the punishment, however, he turned to me, whip in hand, to ask how many lashes I felt was appropriate. The crowd got silent to hear what the foreigner had to say. Frankly I was upset that any-body would steal wheat during this famine, but I sure did not want to be a participant in any Afghan justice system, much less state a punishment. So I deferred to the Governor's judgment. I did add that in my country we do not beat people for such crimes. I braced myself to witness something horrific. I remember thinking that no one back home, friends or family, would believe that I actually was having this experience. What century was I living in? Did I travel through a time warp? But the Governor, in his wisdom, decided not to whip him at all. There was some wordy pronouncement from him about the man having to pay for the wheat he stole, but nothing more.

My esteem for the Governor went up considerably after that decision.

Continuing our journey, I noticed there were places that looked like no work had been done at all. It was just desert. We drove on in the same direction until we eventually came to some disturbance in the dirt and called it our road. After about an hour of this, we could see up ahead that the road ascended a hill in the distance. From that perspective, we could see that a lot of digging had been done to get the road up the hill. It was a steep ascent, which caused all three of us some concern. When we arrived at the bottom of the incline we stopped the jeep to get out to survey the situation. The road looked really precarious, but the Governor decided that we had no choice but to go on, as turning back was not an option. I don't remember now the reasoning, but I stayed out of the jeep while he and his driver went up the hill. They got about half way up when the jeep stopped moving. Then I saw clouds of dust rising from all four wheels as the driver tried futilely to move the jeep forward or back. I was glad I wasn't in the jeep with them. So, there we were, in the middle of absolutely nowhere, stuck in the soft soil of our road and unable to proceed. There was no sign of civilization anywhere. We hadn't seen anyone since we left the village; the area was completely desolate. Time passed, and all I saw from the jeep was more dust. Finally the driver got out, walked the rest of the way up the hill and disappeared. The scene was bizarre. The corpulent Governor was sitting in his jeep alone; I was at the bottom of the hill, alone. The mid-afternoon weather was sunny and hot, I was sweating, and I had no idea how we were going to get out of this mess. With nothing else to do, I sat there feeling worried and pessimistic. After what felt like a very long a time, turbans began to appear at the horizon of the hill. About 40 or 50 men appeared, being led by our driver. They had come from no-where, it seemed, each carrying a shovel. These men hiked down the hill to the Governor's jeep, and began shoveling. In time I watched them attach a long rope at its mid-point to the middle of the front bumper of the jeep. They carried the two ends of the rope uphill, and the men divided into two groups, each taking a side of the rope. With loud grunts and curses, they were pulling that jeep, with the governor still inside, up the hill! It was like those movies about how the pyramids were built, where all the slaves pulled gargantuan stones uphill with ropes! I was stunned by what I was seeing. I trudged up the hill to the top where I saw that the men had already dispersed, and nowhere to be seen. The driver and I got back into the jeep ready to continue our journey with the governor. He was not very talkative after that. It was pretty clear to me that he was unhappy about what had just happened. But he was also determined to get to Jawand. Fortunately, there were no more problems along the way, and we finally arrived at the small village of Jawand by sundown.

Village elders were waiting for the Governor, and they served a festive meal for us, as Afghans know how to do. Afterwards he barked orders by phone to arrange his return trip the next day. He was NOT going back by that road. The plan was that a number of villagers would accompany our three-some, as we went back to Qala-i-Nau. After some discussion among the locals, we learned that we would have to divide into two separate groups because there were not enough available horses for all of us.

We also learned that about ten miles from Jawand along our return route, we would all have to climb by foot up a high gorge. Jeeps would be waiting at the top to take the Governor and those who went with him on to Qala-i-Nau. Someone would remain below with the horses to take them back to Jawand. He needed to go in the first group so he could insure that the jeeps would return to the pickup point to get the rest of us later on. After the plan was set, I called it a night.

By the time I woke up the next morning, the governor and his party had been gone for quite a while. I like riding horses, so I looked forward to that part of the trip. In fact, the horse ride was fun; my horse was strong and energetic, and I enjoyed talking to the others who went together in the second group. In all there were five of us. Along the way we ran into the man who was returning the horses from the first group. He told us that our Governor actually rode his horse all the way to the top of the gorge. (Today, I can see this was necessary given his girth and how steep the climb was. At the time, though, I wasn't so kind in my judgment, attributing his behaviors to arrogance and an abuse of power.) It was late afternoon when my party got to the gorge climb. We all got off our horses and left them tethered to trees, and began our climb. It was not an easy one; it took about an hour to get to the top. I know I was tired and thirsty when we got there. But I was also not particularly surprised that no jeeps were waiting for us as had been so carefully planned.

We sat as a group to rest and to discuss what to do. We were quite a ways from any settlements, and more than 25 miles away from Qala-i-Nau. Nobody seemed particularly upset about our situation, which helped me not to worry too much. Since the jeeps were probably just late coming to pick us up, the only thing we could do is walk in the direction they would be coming from. We decided to follow the tire tracks of the Governor's group, in hopes of intercepting the arriving jeeps along the way. The temperature was going down with the sun, and I thought it would be good to walk to keep warm. There was nothing we could do about being hungry and thirsty, since no one had brought any food or water. Thankfully, I had decent boots for walking the desert and a light jacket for warmth. My mood was good, and I enjoyed talking with my companions about the desert, their families, what we would each choose to eat if food were available, and how thirsty we were. The sun went down, and the sky grew naturally very very dark. There was no moon that night so the stars shone extra bright. We in the USA don't see night skies like this unless we are very far from any source of light. Even in Afghanistan, this sky was extraordinary. We also talked about the dangers we might encounter as we walked. They mentioned robbers as a big concern, but also dogs and wolves were possibilities. If we were to happen on another person walking in the desert, it could be very serious for us. Just then, as if on cue, we heard the howls of wolves in the distance. The dangers suddenly became very real to us all.

We walked and talked into the night for an untold distance. We had long given up hope that our jeeps would show up; it was too late in the night. By this time I was very aware of how hungry I was. I remember putting my hand into the pocket of the jacket I wore and feeling a rock there. I pulled it out to find that it was not a rock at all. Rather, it was a piece of dehydrated yoghurt that can be reconstituted to make Kichri Kurut. I showed the others what I'd found, asking if anyone was interested in sharing it. No takers! I wondered if my mouth might be too dry to soften it, but I was so hungry that I gave it a try. I will never forget how delicious it tasted, enough so that I felt a bit guilty eating it all myself. I offered it again, but still no takers. I left it in my mouth to melt slowly as I walked. Too soon, it was gone. The lingering taste was not creamy or tangy, but salty, and my thirst grew. A warm camaraderie developed among us, conversation was easy and silence was comfortable. My fear of those possible dangers abated until someone noticed at a distance what looked like a faint light. We couldn't make it out, but we kept eyes on it as we walked. The light didn't grow larger or brighter, but it was definitely a light. We finally got close enough to realize it was a small kerosene lantern, about the brightness of a single candle, called a "shaitan chirogh". Next to it was a lone yurt, about a hundred meters away from us. Soon we heard dogs barking; they had sensed our presence. Every one of us was alarmed, knowing that these dogs can be ferocious. Time passed, and we didn't sense that they were coming towards us; but a man emerged from the yurt with another small light, and walked our way.

There were a lot of words exchanged with the man while he was still a safe distance from us. The people talking in the dark were all trying to communicate to him that we are not hostile. We explained how we happened to be walking in the desert at this time of night, and the approaching man began to relax. I don't re-call what tribe he was from, perhaps Koochi. He was travelling with his family and a few animals. We asked if he could spare some bread and water, but he stated that he had no bread to share. He did offer us some water, and went back to his yurt to fetch it. He brought it to us in a porous clay water pitcher that sweats to keep the water cool; he handed us one glass to share among ourselves. It was too dark to see the quality of the water, and I was too thirsty to care. When I got my turn, I tasted salt but drank it anyway, glad to have whatever quenching value it had. We gave our thanks to this man, and took our leave as we headed on into the night.

The end to this story is rather an anti-climax. We walked for a long time more, and as dawn approached we came to a village. A phone call was made to someone in Qala-i-Nau, and eventually a jeep actually arrived to get us. I don't recall any apologies from the Governor or explanations of how the plan fell apart. I do remember this thought, though. I remember walking through the night marveling at how the Governor could be so callous or uncaring that he didn't send his jeeps as promised. I felt my ire at him. But like so many experiences in Afghanistan that were frustrating or angering, this adventure has far outlived my ire, and I look back on it now as one of those priceless experiences that I am so thankful to have had.