



Recollections of Urozgan, Winter, 1971-72
by
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Preface – The fragment of a story that follows is based on a letter I wrote to my wife, Pam True, in January, 1972 from Urozgan, Afghanistan. At the time I was one of two Peace Corps Associate Directors helping to run the Food for Work Program. The other was Al Nehoda.

I have edited out some personal passages and added explanatory foot-notes where appropriate. After almost 45 years I have very little accurate recollection of what actually took place, and even the letter may have had some inaccuracies. It ends abruptly, I guess because I suddenly had to send it on out to Kabul where Pam was. So, I have added a bit of a postscript to try to wrap up the events using my porous recollection and a calendar that I kept at the time which I still have.

I seek to share this because the immense difficulty of the task facing Food For Work Peace Corps Volunteers during that winter comes through a little bit in what I told Pam at the time. Later in 1972, the new Director, John Guyer, convened a meeting of all of us Food For Work types, I guess for the purpose of reviewing the whole

project and making decisions about how to go forward. During that meeting I recall that he invited a couple of Americans (I think) who had recently traversed the Hazarajat with a camera (and a donkey or some damn thing) and who wanted to describe the effects of the famine to us.

As if we needed that instruction. They were, in my view, condescending and superficial in their descriptions of the corrupt, non-responsive Afghan bureaucracy, and clueless about our attempts to effect change by working with it. "You all are part of the problem," they seem to be saying. I may have felt it necessary to give them a piece of my mind at the meeting. Others probably did as well. But, as I look back on it now, the truncated description of a few days during the winter up in the mountains that I had sent Pam made my point better than any arguing I may have done at the time. So, quiet belatedly, here is what I *should* have said:

Kandahar, Tuesday, December 28, 1971 – I said goodbye to Pam (who had come down to Kandahar with us) and got into the truck with Al (Nehoda), David Moats, Fritz Laurenovics and Ed Crawford, PCVs. With Eid Mohammed at the wheel (and believing himself to be in command, we set off north and a little bit east toward the mountains. As we crossed a wide desert, Al I got into it about the "morality" of this [Food For Work] program in general and the particular project we were now setting out to accomplish.¹ I like to argue with him because he is so smart, but takes extreme positions. A real laissez-faire type: "mind your own business and let others attend to theirs." No causes. Way more passive than me. We thrusted and parried to while away the time with the volunteers adding their often pungent observations

At the moment, I really can't articulate a clear idea of what it actually was we were supposed to be doing. I know that a Peace Corps volunteer, Paul Soderberg, and a German volunteer Roman Tyspar, were up in the remote mountains of Uruzgan Province working on Food for Work projects. They needed help of some kind, and Peace Corps Director Lou Mitchell had assigned Al and me and the volunteers to drive up there and report on and/or rectify the situation. As this account makes clear, we did neither.

We stopped in the middle of the desert at a place where they were making charcoal and where we found tea and some eggs swimming in grease. Al started that game, "my aunt Betty likes green but not red."

By evening we got to Tirinkot and found the hotel. Rather a large town where there seemed to be a lot going on. Al and I went to see the *mustufi* but were deflected by the Chief of Construction who suggested that we come the next day in "*wacht-i-rasmi*." We went to a tea house for a desultory meal and returned to the hotel where we were all in one room. Polack jokes occupied us until we went to sleep.

Tirinkot, Wednesday, December 29, 1971 – The construction guy came while we were having tea and summoned us to see the *mustufi*. But he (the *mustufi*) was at the airport (Tirinkot just got scheduled flights), so we went to the Director of Agriculture, who is also the Director of Provincial Development. This guy had seen Fritz in Kabul, but Al took over and in his flawless but strangely hesitant Farsi and explained our mission. Then word came that the Acting Governor was back and we

got back into the truck and went to his office. Again, the same scene. We looked fairly strange, I'm sure: Fritz in his Nuristani hat, Daoud with his red beard and secondhand overcoat, Ed looking moth-eaten and me, no doubt, looking very surly. The *mustufi* looked like Sutano, the nurses' driver, except less educated. His worn *karakul* hat was sideways on his head and his overcoat just barely concealed his *peron-i-tambon*. But again Al explained the whole business so that it made sense to them. They called ahead to Gezab to say we were coming and promised to come themselves the next day and to help us in whatever way possible. These formalities accomplished, we set off again. Eid informed me that he couldn't fill up the gas tanks without my "advice" for some reason, so we were delayed getting petrol, but this didn't really bother me. More discussion in the car about the obvious futility of what we were doing. Since I had disagreed with Mitchell originally about all of us going, I was uncomfortable defending the whole business, but I did my best.

Darkness fell as we were winding down through a long, tree filled gorge. The moon was spectacular against the jagged rocks, and I was happy. New territory, a sense of something solid and important ahead and people I liked to do it with. We called on the sub-governor when we arrived, and Al went through his talk again. The poor *hakim* was newly assigned, *deq* as hell, and obviously overshadowed by the *khan*, in whose house, across the Helmand River we were to stay. He gave us weak encouragement, the impression that he didn't know much when we asked him what villages were in his area, and Fritz a laugh when he said "it is good that you have come to see the difficulties of the government servants." We left Eid and the truck on the south side of the river in the bazaar and were escorted to the river bank, put on horses and led across.

One of the travel games in which Al specialized. I have no recollection what it involved.

As my horse (fortunately a patient, not to say somnolent nag) waded across the strong current I looked up and in the moonlight was a huge castle: four towers and seemingly tremendous walls. The dim light glowing in one of the outbuildings made me sure that this is where we were headed, and I gave way to a burst of romanticism. It was really fun to be doing this. And sure enough, we were led to this fortress and ushered into the guestroom. The *wakil*, a tall long nosed floppy haired Pashtun, was pleasant and very hospitable. We had the obligatory dinner, made the obligatory conversation and he retired. Al spoke to him in both languages and did most of our talking which was okay with the rest of us. The *wakil* didn't know much about what Paul was doing and showed even less interest. His questions, though intelligent, were masked criticisms, and Al sensed that he was not pleased by what was going on. We went to bed on sumptuous pillows. I remember thinking that we better get into something soon or what little momentum we had would evaporate.

Tirinkot, Thursday, December 30, 1971 – The day began pleasantly enough. We had scented tea, milk and nuts and talked about food over breakfast, as our group seems to always do. Then one of the *wakil's* servants led us to the ferry crossing where we were to meet Eid and get the truck across. He came presently, and called across that

he'd been here already and that the truck *definitely* cannot make it through the water which looked to be about crotch deep and flowing strongly. ("Ba khoda, na mesha!") I got pissed and told him to send our stuff over on the ferry (a small iron barge on a cable) and go back to Kandahar if he was afraid. While he unloaded the truck, we discussed alternatives: the *wakil* had told us that Paul was only 20 minutes or so off the road north, so we could walk or get horses or go back or stay where we were and send word. As usual, our discussion soon drifted to what we were *doing* here anyway and what is our *purpose*, etc. I was getting impatient with all this and went back over in the ferry to drive the fucking truck over myself if Eid wouldn't. But once he was told to do something, he shaped up, and we took the fan belt off, covered the plugs and distributor with plastic and plunged in. It was a bit tense, water coming in through the doors and all that, but we made it. I was exuberant, naturally; we loaded up and set off. It was noon by this time, so we stopped for a long lunch at the *wakil's* house.

Then on up the road towards Paul and the starving people. It was a damned hairy piece of driving. Switchbacks where there isn't room to turn, sloping, crumbling tracks hacked out of the side of a cliff, numerous fords across a fast and deep stream. Eid kept at it, though we had to get out often to put rocks behind the wheels when he had to back up several times to get around hairpin turns.

We got to where some people were working on the road who told us that Paul was "above" and that the road was totally impassable. Once again I got impatient – didn't look impassable – and pretty much forced everyone to keep going. We got through a couple of tight places on Eid's nerve and my stubbornness. It wasn't any sense of mission that was driving me.

This became a regular routine: one of us, the designated the "*kaleenar*," would get out and guide Eid backward to the edge of the cliff, yelling "*bas!*" when he had come back as far as possible, then the rock under the wheel, then "*buru bakhair!*" Repeat two or three times to get around the curve, then on to the next hairpin. How we thought lorries were going to traverse this road escapes me. onward; just a reaction to the obvious absurdity of the situation.

Al, I think, picked this up because, when we got to a bridge that was too narrow for our truck, he commenced hauling around huge rocks to fill up the *jui* while we sat and gave advice. The more hesitancy I sensed, the more I wanted to act, to get somewhere and to do something.

As we pulled away from the riverbed and began a hard ascent up a shaly cliff, the clouds began to thicken until just before darkness when it started to snow. We finally got to Tamazan where Paul and Roman Tyspar, the German, were spending the night. This is a tiny village in a barren valley right at the snow line which looks to have about zero going for it. Nonetheless, it has a *khan*, and they were at his house. Paul seems to have the situation pretty much in hand, has been working like hell and wanted a rest. He was glad to see us.

After some discussion during which it was painfully obvious that they needed the trucks with wheat on them, not a bunch of empty-handed helpers, we decided to go over the pass and about 30 km further into Dasht-i-Nili where their radio set was. This we managed to do with no small difficulty.

At eight or so, in thickening snow we found their headquarters, a Hazara house with one 10 x 20' room for all of us to sleep in. They gave us some tea, we had bread that we brought from Tirinkot and salami. We shared this and began what seemed like the 20th discussion of what to do. The road, although Paul and Roman were almost finished work, really wasn't something a lorry could get over. The great blue fleet of Peace Corps trucks which Mitchell had envisioned wouldn't get enough wheat up to where it was needed if they ran all winter. Roman, the German, kept saying "of course it's possible," which finally got Fritz really pissed. But Al came up with a workable solution: pay people to use their animals to go get wheat in Gezab, a four-day round-trip for which two *seers* per donkey could be given. We decided to radio this plan to Kabul in the morning and then start back to finish the road. We went to sleep cheek by jowl on a hard floor and with hardening feelings. It was a long day. I said "happy birthday, Pam" to myself.

Tamazan, Friday, December 31, 1971 – We woke up stiff and cramped. The first one to go out announced that there was four centimeters of snow on the ground and that it was still coming down heavily. I felt a strange sense of relief on hearing that and surmising that we would all be caught here for weeks maybe. Don't know why this was; something about privileged Americans finally having to throw their lot in with Afghanistan's most neglected people. What good would have come from that I don't know; in retrospect I can imagine only ugliness. We ate stale bread and tea (while Roman mixed up some kind of German breakfast for himself) and waited for it to be time to radio. Al decided that we should make a try to get back over the pass before the snow got too bad, and I agreed, but didn't really think we could make it. The radio didn't work, and at about 8:30 am we set off leaving 50 afs apiece with our host as a salve for our guilty consciences for leaving him stranded.

At first the road was completely indistinguishable in the snow and we had a lot of trouble. But we got on it thanks to Paul and Roman's idea of putting upright stones along the sides as they built it. We passed through a small village – Sangemum – where we found that there was no wheat at all on the bazaar.

We talked about it, and Al once again made the observation of me that he had expressed before: that the reverse of these lines is true; that my friendships tend to be temporary and easily eroded by circumstances. The past few days have tended to bear this out, and I have no answer for it except that I find it hard to separate friends from coworkers in this job, and I can never stop judging and re-judging the latter. It occurs to me that I am severely limited as a leader of people, but I won't get into that. David and I started to make up a parody on the Shakespeare sonnet, but gave it up.

But, hearts hardened, we went on. Fritz and I sat on the back of the truck to be ready with stones and because it was crowded inside. Soon we picked up four Hazaras who were walking to Kandahar to find work. They too sat in the back. I gave one of them my fur-lined *chappan* to keep warm. We made it over the pass and down into the rain though not without a lot of work. For the rest of the day we slipped and slid through rocks and gravel, mud and rain. There wasn't the accident that I thoroughly expected, just hard, uneventful work.

The rain had stopped, but a cold wind came up as Al and I got the car ready to cross. We got the truck covered up and drove in. For a moment I thought we wouldn't make it because Eid was driving straight across instead of diagonally downstream. But again we pulled out on the other side. The volunteers, who hadn't wanted to cross in the truck, also hadn't been able to get the ferry going because of the wind, and now were pissed because we crossed without them. I don't really know why we did, except that I was tired and figured to let them find their own way across. Paul and Ed waded, but Fritz and David refused to do that and walked away down the river bank. Al felt badly and tried to persuade them by wading out into the river himself, but I figured the hell with it.

We went to a tea house in the bazaar and got warm, and then Al and I went to see the Sub Governor's to try to telephone Kandahar, but the line was down. Al amazed the *hakim*, the Commandant and me with his tales about Libya (where he had been on the Peace Corps staff) for a while and then we went back to have dinner. The Commandant came with us to make sure the teahouse was all right (a face saving gesture for the *hakim* who didn't want to put us up). Fritz and David still weren't back, so we assumed that they had gone to the *wakil's* house.

We had dinner and relaxed by telling each other what we had been doing on New Year's Eve 10 years ago. Paul was in Thailand, and his adventures there were to become the theme of the evening. At about 10 o'clock, after we had gone to bed, Fritz and David came in exuding so much New Year's joviality that I figured they were stoned. They had gone to the *wakil's*, been fed and gotten across the river on horses. I asked them if they were pissed about leaving being left on the other side of the river, but said David said, "I don't know," so I let it drop.

We made a plan: Al was to return to Kandahar and get in touch with Kabul and we were to go back across the river and finish the road. This seemed to be agreeable to everyone, so I went to sleep awaking occasionally to hear Paul's commentary on catching cobras in Thailand and then once to celebrate the new year by passing around a last of the candy I had brought from Kabul. Another long day.

Tirinkot, Saturday, July 1, 1972 – Al made one more try with the telephone and then he and Eid left in the truck. Before going, he told me he thought it was ridiculous for me to stay. I partly agreed, but assumed that I would get folks started on the road and then leave myself. Paul wanted to get out, but I convinced him to stay long enough to introduce us to the people he was working with. I tried to call Roman in Tamazan where we had left him, but couldn't, so we set out on foot, crossing the river by ferry. I was carrying my sleeping bag in one hand and the red knapsack was on my back.

It was here that things began to slow down and I got a chance to think. The sheer lunacy of what we were doing dropped away as my mind was overtaken by sense of the enormous, unforgiving mountains looking down impassively at the struggling human beings attempting – not at all success-fully right now – to live among them. We walked very slowly, stopping often to rest, so that we didn't make it to where work was going on at all that day. Fritz was carrying too much, so we left some of his things at the house of Paul's head *bashi* where we stopped for lunch. It was nice for me to walk again, even though I was out of shape and got very tired.

At dusk we stopped at a house where Paul had stayed once and pretty much forced ourselves on the people there. They didn't know what to do with all of these foreigners, but were quite hospitable once we got in. Pashtuns. We stayed in the room with straw on the floor which was quite nice. A mullah sang prayers twice that evening and once at the crack of dawn. Some hanger on told me that he liked being in the Army because it taught him a lot: how to tell the big shots from the small fry, which I thought was an interesting thing to gain from soldiery. The day had been full of the usual com-plaints aggravated by the trials of having to walk. I sense that things had probably deteriorated too far to retrieve – all we seem to be talking about was eating and getting out – but I couldn't think of a way to rally our spirits. I was thinking about being a volunteer in Nepal: quiet, solitude, the sense of being on my own and not responsible for anyone else's effort. I wished I were walking there instead of among these bare, brown hills.

Tamazan area, Saturday, January 2, 1972 – We struggled out in pretty poor order. We walked even more slowly up the river until we got to a tiny teahouse with nobody in it. There we sat and asked someone to make some tea and extorted a half a piece of cornbread. Nothing I have eaten tasted bet-ter. Pretty soon. Paul's head man came up and we made another plan: David and Ed and I would keep going, and Fritz and Paul would stay here where they were to wait for Roman who was expected in the Jeep sometime soon. Paul would go back to Kandahar and the rest of us would spread out over the road to finish it up in a day or two and then go back to Gezab.

Walking with Paul's headman, Lal Mohammed, we covered ground much more quickly. In less than an hour we arrived at the place where they had their headquarters – another tiny house by the side of the road. I wrote a note to Roman and sent it on up the road with a worker. We were now about midpoint in the road. I spent the rest of the afternoon looking at the bridges that were too weak or narrow and checking the groups that were working. I got into a lively relationship with Lal Mohammed. He seemed eager to improve the road, to show that he could get work done, and to argue about what needed to be done. He is small and energetic, quick to laugh and possessed of the usual posturing sense of self-confidence. He had been a "Doctor," practicing some kind of dubious medicine or another, but the *hakim* had him kicked out ostensibly in the name of Hippocrates, but really because the *wakil's* family, who are mortal enemies of the "doctor sahib's" family, had put pressure on the relevant authorities.

This enmity is causing Paul problems; evidently the day we left to go up to Sangemum, the *mustufi* came up from Tirinkot to see us. We weren't there, but the *wakil* saw him and complained that Paul's work had fallen under the control of this Lal Mohammed and that he was allowing only his people to be workers. I discussed this with him in the evening; it was more than a bit chilling to hear him unfold the gory details of a Pashtun feud: ambushes, court actions, paid assassinations, raids and all kinds of other vendetta. I was worried that the fight would get into Parliament and reflect badly on Paul's work here, so I argued that a very close record had to be kept of workers' attendance, minimizing the chances of some-one complaining and giving ammunition to the *wakil*.

We were all very hungry and anxiously awaited the preparation of dinner which was chicken soup – a huge pot of it with lots of naan. Then tea. Ed and I smoked our last cigarette and I went to sleep beside the fire.

Tamazan area, Monday, January 3, 1972 – I was awakened at dawn by a guy building up the fire and putting two smooth stones in it. After these had gotten hot he jerked them out and covered each with a thick layer of dough and put them back in the coals. These he turned around until the dough was cooked and then he took them out, broke some open and we ate it hot with tea.

I spent the morning working on two bridges, really "showing" them how to do the bridge. Not much technical advice I could offer (what did I know?), but I did have some practical ideas which proved a bit useful. That's the way the Peace Corps is supposed to work, isn't it? Because this is where Nehoda pulled around all the rocks, we named it the Albert J. Nehoda Memorial Bridge. Soon the Jeep came, and Roman took David and Ed down the hill. I stayed because I want to see how the work ended up, help with anything I could and because I didn't want to go back to wandering aimlessly about.

The bridge finished, we started to walk down the mountain gathering workers as we went. Occasionally I had to talk to somebody but most of the time I just swung along by myself. I thought of Pam and of Kunduz. It was nice to be heading back.

Since most people spoke Pashto, I was not distracted by conversations. I also thought back to Nepal – how alone and free I was – and yet how haunted by that loneliness. Now I was on my own again away from entanglements and responsibilities, and it was refreshing in a way. But there was no doubt that I was glad it wasn't permanent. Pam and I are young yet, and complications and stress will come. Having a child is going to be interesting; I started to wonder whether we should be reading any books or whether we should go at it naturally.

A stop for lunch was a welcome rest but not much more, the fare being only naan and tea. Then we walked on further; I would point out places where the road needed work and the "doctor sa-hib" would detail a few men to do it. Others sang songs as they walked and one even played a flute. Quite a scene, I kept telling myself. At about 4:00 pm we got to his house. I was dead tired but glad I had gone in the Jeep. Paul was there, but others had all gone across the river "to see if Eid was back."

I sat next to the stove and tried to warm the stiffness out of my legs and got into an interesting discussion about marriage with Paul. He proposed that "marriage is death." I argued that, if it is, it is also a rebirth, or is a shifting to another part of one's personality and a satisfying of different needs. I found myself saying that I found marriage very comfortable in quieting, that such a final decision took most of the angst out of life – at least at first. Paul told me a rather wild story about his affair with a girl he got engaged to when he was 15 and she was 14. I have a feeling that his current kick is eccentricity. What he says about himself is no doubt true, but I sense a studied motive to shock, to play down the regular, scholarly part of his past and to trumpet the unusual. He has a very good mind and is not afraid to work.

Then we got to making plans. Program number at least 100 was to be: Paul to Kandahar for a few days, Fritz to Kabul, David and Ed to stay and do the work remaining here which wasn't much. We decided someone needed to stay to keep in touch with Roman, keep after the *hakim* about transport and storage of wheat, and maintain the confidence of the people that wheat was actually coming. Then I would be able to go back to Kabul.

Tirinkot, Tuesday, January 4, 1972 – Paul and I went part way up the road to blow up a stone which was in the way and to do the last bit of touching up. This was the last day of work, and at about noon he headed back to the river with a note from me explaining the latest plan to everybody there. I stayed to watch the stone work, which was quite interesting. With a pointed steel bar, they pound a hole about two hand widths into the rock, pour black powder into the whole and then close it up with gravel and mud leaving a wire sticking up out of it which they then slowly pull out, filling the hole it leaves.

Postscript – And this is where the letter ends. I don't recall why I had to stop in the middle or any of the circumstances around sending it. The way it ends is so frustrating. (How does this rock-blasting business work? Did I stay around to watch?) No recollection whatsoever of such a tantalizing detail. And not enough imagination to make up something plausible.

Pam had recently found out she was pregnant. Our son, Jesse True, was born in Kabul on July 11, 1972, about six weeks before we left the country.

My calendar shows that I stayed in the area for a week longer. But it shows prompts little in the way of recollections about what I was doing. There is the interesting "dancing boy" entry on January 10 which brings back a scene involving me, Eid and several other Afghan men sitting in a room in someone's house in Gezab drinking tea and watching a slight young performer dressed in filmy white *peron-i-tambon*. By the 12th I was back in Kandahar, Kabul on the 13th and Kunduz on the 14th.

On August 24, 1972, just over 45 years ago, Pam and I and Jesse left Kabul.

