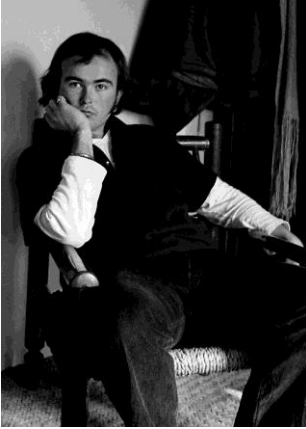


The Gospel According to Timothy and James:

by
Ron Dizon©2013



The summer heat of 1972 was the hottest in Ghor Province, Afghanistan. Combined with the three-year drought and famine, Chaghcharan was the last place on earth to which one wanted to be assigned a Peace Corps Volunteer, but someone had to do it. It was there I spent the summer with Tim McCormack and



Jim Mathewson, aka the M&M Construction Company, and known to the Afghan Department of Rural Development as Daftari Peace Corps' Fay Fay Wow Office (FFW – Food for Work).



Flying the 350 miles to Chaghcharan from Kabul on Bakhtar Airline's Red and Black Streamline Twin Propeller-driven plane was only a prologue to the expectation of an adventure I would experience with the M& M Construction Company (Mathewson & McCormack). Floating

through the 14,000 ft. mountain passes of the Hindu Kush in the Himalayas at 10,000 ft invoked great respect for the laws of physics that kept the craft airborne. For most Afghan passengers, chanting the mantra of "Allah Akbar" (God is Great) was their reverential instrument if a stairway to heaven became an option.



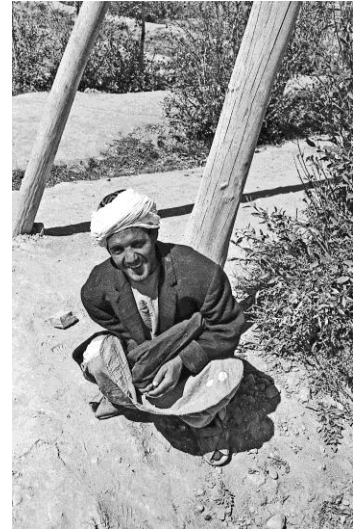


It was mid-afternoon when we landed at Chaghcharan. Four hours late, but late was better than never.

From the air, the town of Chaghcharan was camouflaged on an alluvial plain with the Hari River's D'Nealian signature defining the township boundaries. The city had, at most, forty adobe brick compounds, one Whitewashed Hotel and Government House, and assorted ducons (shops) in a desolate bazaar. As the twin-prop started its descent, nothing resembling a runway manifested itself. The only hint of a landing strip at the Chaghcharan International Airport (CIA) came on our 11 with a pair of flying tambon (Afghan pants) serving as a windsock denoting a westerly headwind.

Goats and other assorted livestock were first to deplane, given that they were not assigned seats, and chose to corral themselves by the exits. I could see from my window/aisle seat a blue International Peace Corps truck parking parallel to the ramp and hoped that my new partners, McCormack and Mathewson, would be there with a welcome wagon of local musicians and some local dignitaries for what I was carrying with me was a gift more precious than frankincense: Mail from Home! I wasn't expecting the unwanted greeter, the famous whirligig of the Hari River alley. Before I could take my first step off the plane, it slammed against me, swirling debris and dung and drying the sweat on my face into a Shiseido mask and coating my tusks with the sweet taste of Chaghcharan.

From my vantage point at the top of the stairs, I could see my two new partners sitting sheltered in the security of the blue International Peace Corp Truck, reveling in what must have made their day, but to them, I was the New Guy, an anointed Mr. Katchaloo from the East.



As quickly as it hit, the whirligig was gone leaving only a damaged ego in its wake and a good story for the USAID Staff House in Kabul as told in McCormack's fables. There was no local band, no local dignitaries, only Tim & Jim's Gentlemen's Gentleman, Ibrahim, who picked up my sheet metal cargo box containing all my worldly belongings and heaved it into the truck's bed. I was glad my cameras were safely housed in my padded Sierra Design backpack next to the highly prized staple of provincial Peace Corps life...a jar of Pakistani peanut butter.

It had been four months since I last saw Tim McCormack. From what I understood, he spent two weeks in the U.S. Embassy Infirmary recuperating from a virulent bout of bacillary dysentery and giardia. I didn't know Jim Mathewson very well, only that his first assignment was Chaghcharan, and he was a geologist from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. Tim's degree in history from Rockhurst College in Kansas City complemented the brain trust, and both of their academic disciplines qualified them as Provincial Disaster Relief Directors. My credentials as an Education/Psychology graduate specializing in photography created the needed balance in the very slow-moving business of Food for Work. Tim's linguistic "skill" in Dari with his high-scale extrovert temperament and Jim's prowess in the politics of Chaghcharan left me with the only responsibility of the office: recording their exploits in writing and on film.

Having roomed at the Sylvania Hotel with Mr. Tim during the Peace Corps Pre-Invitational Staging in Philadelphia, I was surprised to see that he'd lost considerable weight. According to Tim, he was down 50 lbs from his bout with dysentery, but the scarcity of food in Chaghcharan also served as a contributing factor to his lean physique.

Jim, as I had come to learn, was a mild-manner geologist. Everything he did was planned, calculated, and measured, a quality of character that added significant value to the trio and one asset I wished I had possessed. He was the group's anchor, where Tim and I provided the nightly entertainment.



My orientation started with a cursory exploration of the town where the fallout of famine and drought was unmistakable: the expression of famine etched in the faces of its children and inhabitants. Other families who migrated from different villages around Ghor Province were relegated to living in the caves carved out by the currents of the Hari River. It was rudimentary living, but it did provide shelter from the unrelenting heat of the high Afghan desert and the threat of wolf attacks.



Tim pointed out that 2 Belgian nuns were living at the Chaghcharan Hotel, buying bread in the local market and feeding and caring for those whose lives were betrayed by Mother Nature. According to Jim, the nuns' resources were limited, and soon they too would



have to depart, leaving no safety net for those left behind. But as one opportunity faded, The M&M Construction Company of Mathewson & McCormack

pitched another plan utilizing the wheat stored in the Provincial Warehouse, aka the Gudome.

The Gudome was located across the road from the FFW Office/House, with the women of Chaghcharan surrounding the facility daily, hoping the Governor would sell them the stored wheat. The only problem was wheat was trading at 85 Afghanis per seer, a price too dear even for those who afford the cost.



But, by the grace of Allah, call it consequence, call it destiny, one of the letters I brought from Kabul was addressed to Jim from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. In it was a note from the Charged Affaires regarding a story in the New York Times by James Sterba. Included in the envelope was \$400 in Afghanis donated by the People of the United States to the People of Chaghcharan.

It was an unbelievable detour in the chance that gave this new trinity of Peace

Corps Volunteers a reason to believe. But as Jim read the Epistle from the Embassy, food riots began across the road at the Gudome. The police had already set up barricades and used their batons as a deterrent to storming the Gudome.

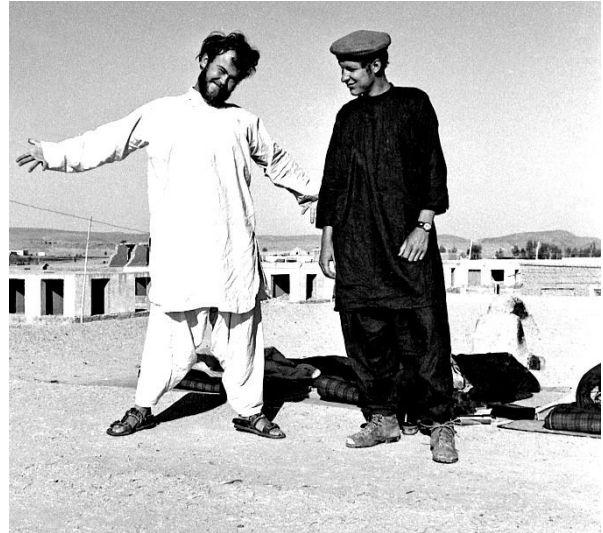


Tim negotiated a temporary solution with the police that allowed us to buy wheat for the bakers in Chaghcharan Bazaar and distribute the bread for free to the hungry. We solicited the Belgian nuns to assist in the distribution, which answered their prayers. We all knew at the time that

the solution was only transitory, and the thought of a Hindu Kush winter would be the messenger of a devastating consequence.

That was my introduction to Chaghcharan, with only sixty days until the brutal winter would force our Food for Work office to be closed.

The FFW Office was located in a compound on the central road east of town. It housed a two-story adobe structure with two main rooms on the first floor. The roof served as our central sleeping accommodation. The compound lacked vegetation, offering no shelter from the blistering 115, degree heat. The outhouse was located adjacent to the first-floor main dining room/office window serving as the main road to relief. Tim often referred to this corridor as the TashKnob (toilet) Road, one of his most notable Food for Work projects.



Although the accommodation was more minor than Spartan, it was a home for the three of us for two months in the summer of 1972. The Peace Corps Post, known to USAID as "Alpha Alpha 1", was also equipped with a USAID radio which we used to communicate to USAID the famine/drought conditions in Chaghcharan, Mymina, and Qual-i-Now. Broadcasting Rolling Stones songs on the "Good Morning Afghanistan, Show" offered some comic relief to our depressing reports about the provinces. Although it drew the ire of USAID Communications Officers, they understood levity's respite with the resulting camaraderie consequence.

Very few Food for Work projects were started or completed in July due mainly to the departure of the male population of Chaghcharan and outlying villages. The release of the men was reminiscent of the Dirty Thirties in the United States, the only difference being in Afghanistan, the Public Works Program was an unfunded mandate in the Great Afghan Depression. The viability of The Food for Work Projects was directly proportional to the labor force in the area, a fact understood by the Afghan Rural Development Department after their year and a half demonstration period. No men to work for food meant no Food for Work Projects. This epiphany recalled all the Peace Corps Food for Work Volunteers to Kabul in August of 1972, ending the FFW program and initiating The United States Agency for International Development's new project, Operation Help. At that time, the Peace Corps Director was reluctant to use the seasoned FFW volunteers. Still, at the insistence of the U.S. Ambassador, with counsel from the Operation Help Project Manager and encouragement of the King of Afghanistan, the Operation Help project moved expeditiously to feed the innocent victims of drought before the assault of the unforgiving winter of the Hindu Kush.



The jump-off distribution point for the Operation Help Program was Chaghcharan, who best hosts the first gathering of Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers, but Jim Mathewson and Tim McCormack. Because the window of opportunity for food distribution was closing rapidly, volunteers were flown

in from Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar. The only aircraft that could fly into Chaghcharan was **Bakhtar's Canadian DeHaviland Twin Otter.**

Because the flight schedules were so erratic due to weather and pilot issues, Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers would come in **either** on the morning flight **or** the afternoon flight, and sometimes not at all that

day, but always leaving Tim and Jim jilted at the airport altar. Going from Chaghcharan to other distribution points was also an **Either-Or** situation. Tim McCormack and Jim Mathewson named the volunteers coming into Chaghcharan **The Either-Or Otter Corps (EOOC)**.



Peace Corps/Operation Help Volunteers who worked in the Operation Help Program adopted the name at the Operation Help Party at Abe and Betty Ashcanase's Kabul home in December of 1972. What began as a Food for Work demonstration project ended in winning the War on Hunger. For the members of the Either-Or Otter Corps, knowing that their unselfish commitment saved countless lives and forged life-long bonds of friendships was well worth the tour of duty in a country called Afghanistan.

This ended the account of the Peace Corps' **The Either-Or Otter Corps**.

This is the **Gospel according to Timothy and James**.

[**Download the Operation Help Photo Book**](#)

