Peace Corps Afghanistan Volunteers Newsletter San Diego 2017

THE DIRECTOR OF THE PEACE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

September 26, 2017

Dear Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Afghanistan:

Congratulations on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of your training! Thank you for your service to the people of Afghanistan. During the late 1960s and early 1970s you achieved the Peace Corps' first two goals of providing trained men and women to carry out development projects throughout Afghanistan while promoting a better understanding of Americans on the part of the Afghan communities where you lived and worked.

The Peace Corps' Third Goal is equally important: "To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans." You have supported this goal throughout your lives in your varied careers and experiences. The fact that sixty of you are reuniting and celebrating your service after more than five decades speaks volumes of your commitment and support to the mission and goals of the Peace Corps today.

On behalf of the entire Peace Corps family, we wish you a successful and enjoyable 55th anniversary reunion, and thank you again for your service and ongoing commitment to the Peace Corps.

Sincerely,

Sheila Crowley
Acting Director

FOREWORD

In August of 1961, five months after President Kennedy's executive order establishing the Peace Corps, Ghana welcomed its first volunteers. Programs began the following year in twenty-six other countries, and the kingdom of Afghanistan was among them. That year nine volunteers entered the country and, until the program ended in 1979 following the assassination of the United States ambassador, over 1600 volunteers had worked in villages and cities across the country.

2017 marks the 55th anniversary of the arrival of Peace Corps in Afghanistan. Those of us whose stories you are about to read served there in the early 1970s. As the years have passed, and we former volunteers march past the end of our working lives, the conviction has grown that we are, despite our commitment to our work there, forever indebted to the Afghans. We had college degrees from the best institutions in the USA, but Afghanistan was our university of the world. As we observed their tolerance of our idealism, we learned how to be more practical, as we watched the slowness of their government bureaucrats, we learned how to be patient, and as we better understood ourselves, we learned how to laugh. Living inside this ancient culture taught us that, while this culture could change over time, it was not likely to abide by any timetable our naïveté and enthusiasm might impose.

Many years have passed since the last Peace Corps volunteer left Afghanistan. As we who worked there read about the chaos and destruction that has descended upon the country in the past decades, we recall a very different place. We recall the beauty of the rugged Hindu Kush, the green forests of Nuristan, the jewel-like mosques in Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, and the dignity of a durable people. We recall enjoying a traditional hospitality more total and complete than anything we could have imagined.

The experience of Peace Corps volunteers around the world has typically involved intense identification with the lives of the people we serve. The stories you are about to read reflect that involvement. I believe that much of this writing derives from a sense of gratitude. Afghanistan made itself – as a culture, as a country, and as a people - a gift to us Americans who had the privilege to serve there.

Bill Mittendorff

Afghanistan 1969-1972

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Memories of Afghanistan

By
Susan "Stella" Ramsay

When I joined the Peace Corps in 1971, they sent me to Afghanistan. I was 27 years old. It was still exactly as James Michener had described in his book *Caravans*, which I read when I was 17. The story in *Caravans* took place during the 1940's; and, when I arrived in Kabul I knew that nothing had changed.

As the plane circled Kabul to land, I looked out the window and saw the bleak Afghan countryside. No buildings. Just hills.
When I got off the plane and walked toward the terminal building, I heard a group of people yelling my name from the airport balcony. I looked up and saw about a dozen Peace Corps Volunteers waving furiously, there to greet me, each wanting me to work with him or her. I had been told in Washington before I left that with my expertise, as an administrative assistant, I could have my pick of six jobs that were vacant.

I piled into a pickup truck with about six volunteers who drove me into the center of town to the Peace Corps office. Along the way, I saw the mud-brick Afghan homes, herds of goats, sheep, and camels, the drab colors of the buildings against the stark white piles of snow. I asked myself, *What have you gotten yourself into*? It was the second of February, Ground Hog's Day, and the snow was waist high.

It was freezing cold and we could see our breath when we talked. I was taken to my Peace Corps training house and plopped, together with my baggage, amid five other women who had arrived about a month before I did. The Peace Corps usually sends new volunteers together in groups called Cycles. If I remember correctly, I was somewhere around Cycle 11 or 12 -- I think they called me Cycle 11-1/2 because I was my very own Cycle. The women in my training house were nurses. I was an administrator. A few days after I arrived, a group of about thirty, new Peace Corps volunteers, all men, whom we called "Food for Workers" arrived, and I think they were Cycle 12 or 13.

My training house was a real eye opener, a real introduction to life in Afghanistan. First of all, it smelled strange because of the fuel that was being burned for heat -- kerosene, wood, and sawdust. The house was made of stone, and it was COLD even in summer. The main room for sitting was heated by a small wood stove, stoked by one of our two *bachas,* or servants. That is where the six of us ate our meals, did our homework, our beauty routines, etc. On the floor were "*toshacks*," those Afghan all-purpose pillows for sitting and sleeping. That was our commune room.
Upstairs there were two bedrooms with beds of straw mattresses. Somebody in Washington forgot to tell me to bring a sleeping bag. Three women slept in each room. I was the one in our room whom the bed bugs bit. In the other room, one other woman also had the honor of being bitten by bed bugs

I wonder why they picked on just the two of us. Upstairs was the bathroom which had a toilet, sink, and shower head -- no stall, no tub, just a shower head which sprayed the entire bathroom when used. In order to have hot water, one of the servants had to build a wood fire in the stove to heat the water, which took a couple of hours for the water to be warm enough to bathe in. Wood was expensive and was rationed for trainees, so we took a communal shower bath -- all six of us women together -- once a week. That's right. Once a week. Together. It was so cold on that stone floor that we didn't stay in there for very long, either. We were in training for 6 weeks. Can you imagine taking 6 showers in 6 weeks? It was so cold that we slept with our clothes on. The upstairs bedrooms were not heated. Heat was too expensive.

A few days after I arrived, I had an appointment for medical orientation with the Peace Corps doctor, Dr. Dean Johnson, who happened to be trained as an ob/gyn and was father of five girls.

Dr. Johnson walked over to the window of his second-floor office in the Peace Corps office and pointed to the Afghan man down on the street selling oranges and told me to watch him. The man had a dirty rag in his hand, which he was using to wipe the oranges so that they were nice and pretty and shiny, piling them into the cart, making a nice display to attract customers. After a couple of minutes, the man blew his nose on the rag and then wiped his face and beard! Dr. Johnson told me that I had to be very careful of every single thing that I ate and drank, and still I was going to get sick, which I did in about three days! Amoebic dysentery was common amongst volunteers, as were intestinal worms of various kinds, and salmonella, and one volunteer caught malaria (and survived). A staff member was diagnosed with tuberculosis. I lost 44 lbs. in three months because I had amoebic dysentery. It was as if God said, "Zap! You've got a new body!" I was thrilled because the pounds simply melted away. Now I say "effortlessly," but at the time I was really sick.

My six weeks of training was with my own private teacher, six hours per day, 5 1/2 days per week. It was grueling. With a private teacher, you have to pay attention all the time. No goofing off. It's just the two of you, sitting together eye to eye at the table. Training consisted of memorizing dialogs in the Afghan language, Farsi. The first time I was given the assignment to try out what I had learned in class, I remember praying that the shop keeper would keep up his side of the dialog that was on the lesson sheet. He did. It was a thrill to have an Afghan understand what I was saying! It was also thrilling to understand what he said back to me! I had another lesson that was supposed to teach me how to talk on the telephone, for office work, but I kept giggling and could not pretend that it was a real live phone call because the teacher who was calling me was standing almost next to me. In addition to language lessons, I was given lessons in the Afghan culture. Since Afghanistan is a Muslim country, there was a lot to learn about how women are expected to dress (cover all your skin if you can; otherwise, you will get pinched and/or spat upon) and act (low key), and to be sure to use only the right hand when eating, the fine art of bargaining for everything you have to purchase, including food.

Across the street from the Peace Corps office was the Chicken Bazaar, or Chicken Street, which is where you went to buy a chicken when you felt like eating chicken for dinner. I only went there once. After that, I always sent my servant. Little did I know that you select whichever live chicken you want, and they kill the chicken right there in front of you. If you want the dead chicken to be plucked and gutted, they will do that for you for an additional fee. Yikes! I figured this out by watching. When it was my turn to place an order, I told the man what I wanted and that I would be back in fifteen minutes. Then I took a walk around, went to the yoghurt shop across the alley, while the deed was being done. When I returned, he handed me a package, and all I had to do was pay him and go home and cook the chicken. I guess he was used to the way foreigners wanted their chickens prepared.

I rode my bicycle (which I bought for $10 from a volunteer who was leaving the country) everywhere I went. One day I rode into a crowded street and had to jump off my bike and walk with it because the street was blocked with people. A *chadri*-covered woman spotted the solid gold camel earrings I always wore and loved them. She tried to touch them. Thank goodness I was six inches taller and quick enough to swerve away from her grope. Her admiration for the earrings attracted the attention of many more women, and all of a sudden I found myself surrounded by a dozen chadri-clad Afghan women, all wanting to see and touch my camel earrings. Trying not to panic, I kept walking, keeping my bike as a barrier to fend them off, searching for a way out of the crowd. At last, I was able to pass through the crowd to an opening where I could jump back on my bike and speed the heck out of there with both earlobes still intact and both earrings still hanging from my earlobes. Whew!

Major purchases took months of bargaining to get to a reasonable price. I bought jewelry this way and a *geelam* (striped, woven, colorful carpet), and even then, Marty Kumorek, a Peace Corps staff member who had been there for years, told me that I had paid too much.

After six weeks of training in Kabul, during which I learned the basics of their language, Farsi, and the Afghan culture, I was given an oral examination to be sure I had learned what I was slated to learned.
The exam was tape recorded by the examiner, an employee of the Afghan Ministry of Education. I passed the exam with flying colors, I think, because when I asked somebody to explain a sharp reply to one of the questions, when the examiner asked me, in Farsi, "Are you married?" [r-u-see kardane?]," my instant sharp reply was the Farsi equivalent of "Why are you asking me that question? [chi maksad dorine?]" because according to the Afghan culture, it is an impolite question to ask anyone, especially a woman. The examiner was taken aback, did not know what to say to me, and when he recovered his composure, stuttered, in Farsi, "I did not have any particular intention when I asked you that question."
He passed me! With no reservations! I was sworn in as a volunteer. There were a few Volunteer trainees who had to return to school to learn the language better. I was lucky. I had had a good private teacher.

My first job was a teaching at the Peace Corps Secretarial School. This was supposedly the only Peace Corps school in the entire world. It was located just around the corner from the Peace Corps office above a jewelry shop. The school's 100 students were young adult Afghans, mostly college graduates, because we taught our classes in the English language and the way for Afghans to learn English was to go to college. Therefore, they were in their early twenties and also the upper class of Afghan society. There were about 75% men to 25% women. Many of them were married and parents.

I taught typing, on manual typewriters, and Office Procedures, which consisted of various systems of filing, business correspondence, record keeping and basic secretarial skills.

We had no typing paper to give the students; they were told they had to bring their own. Each student showed up with paper bags from the trash can behind a bakery (the bags were stained with grease spots or jelly); they opened out the bags and typed on the unused side. The other side was discarded memos from the American Embassy trashcan. In Afghanistan, they really recycle and recycle!
In addition to teaching, I also decided to create an entrance examination to the school to make the process of selecting new students easier. When I arrived, there was no process in place. A few days before a new semester was due to begin, a hundred hopeful Afghans would just show up and crowd into the school's office to apply for the dozen or so vacancies that semester. I have no idea how they were selected before I arrived on the scene. The four other teachers and I put our noodles together and created tests for their written, verbal, and comprehension English skills to make the selection process easier.

For my next Peace Corps job, I was asked to attempt to organize the chaotic office of an Afghan government official - the president of the Central Authority for Housing and Town Planning - whose name was Mr. Abdullah Brechna. What a riot his office was, and what an honor it was to be selected for this job. I was the only woman in the entire complex of about a dozen buildings, including offices and housing, and was called "the Russian Apartments" because it consisted of concrete-block buildings built by the Russians. I was unsuccessful at organizing the office because their method of conducting business is hundreds (or thousands) of years old, and it does not lend itself to organization. But the officials were happy to have me amongst them, and it was an eye-opening experience for me.

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One day the president of the Central Authority for Housing and Planning, his assistant, Dr. Fakhir, and several U.N. Consultants took me with them to Mazar-I-Sharif to attend the ceremony of the opening of the water project that had been built by the Japanese government for the Afghan government. It was an official ceremony attended by several dozen Afghan and Japanese men, and me. While I was standing there during the ceremony, it occurred to me that maybe I should feel strange or out of place or something since I was the only woman. But I didn't. I felt honored and very special. We drove to Mazar-I-Sharif in a caravan of six or so government vehicles with drivers, with us sitting in the back seats. The caravan stopped about halfway there at a little inn; I was escorted into the building and led down a hallway to the door of a small room with a toilet that looked like a throne for someone very important, and I was left alone. How nice of them to take care of me like that. I think the others must have gone in the bushes because I saw no other toilets on that trip.

After the attempt to organize the office, I was invited to stay on at the Central Authority doing other work with a team of United Nations experts who were creating the Afghan government's ten-year plan (my introduction to socialism). My job was to study and organize the bids that had been submitted by foreign companies for a proposed system of new roads, for Afghanistan didn't have many paved roads in those days outside of the major cities. There were German bids submitted in Deutsche marks; Japanese bids submitted in yen; Swiss bids submitted in Swiss francs. I had to distill all the bids down into one common denominator. It was like a giant jig-saw puzzle. And I was successful.

For another Peace Corps Volunteer assignment, during an emergency relief project called "Operation Help," I was asked to assist a U.S. Government official, Abe Ashcanase. Thousands of *Koochis* (Afghan nomads) were starving as a result of a drought, and the U.S. Government spearheaded a program, at the request of the Afghan government, to save them, by requesting donations of money, food, clothing, blankets, and medicines from other foreign countries who had embassies or representation in Kabul. Because it was an Afghan-government-sponsored project, the Afghan army sent an official jeep to pick me up from home and take me to work every day. The project began in the fall and continued through winter and on into spring. Do you know how cold it is in Afghanistan during the winter? Well, the snow is waist-deep, and the outside temperature is about 10 degrees. Try riding in a jeep that has no windows or doors on the sides in that weather!

Aside from my Peace Corps Volunteer work assignments, there was an active social life in Kabul amongst the members of the foreign community. We socialized at the weekly "all-you-can-eat" Friday buffets at the Intercontinental Hotel and also at the American Ambassador¹s monthly open houses, during which we Peace Corps volunteers ate Ambassador and Mrs. Neumann out of house and home. Every once in a while after leaving Kabul, I would see Ambassador Neumann appear as a guest expert on the Lehrer MacNeil News show on TV because he was a professor at George Washington University.

Another social escapade that I participated in was a production of "H.M.S. Pinafore" where I made many friends outside of the Peace Corps. One of these was Sam Lewis, who played the boatswain in "Pinafore" and who was, at the time, the Deputy Chief of Mission for the U.S. Embassy in Kabul (No. 2 man after the ambassador). His wife, Sally, directed the production. Years later, I saw Sam on TV back at home during the Carter administration. He had become the U.S. Ambassador to Israel during an important time in our history during the era when President Jimmy Carter was arranging the peace talks between Menachem Begin of Israel and Anwar Sadaat of Egypt. Sam Lewis played a very important role in our country's history, and I have photos in my scrapbook of us singing and dancing in that production of "H.M.S. Pinafore."

In the spring of 1974, when I had just a few months left before completing my Peace Corps contract, a coup d'état occurred, during which the Afghan army overthrew the King of Afghanistan while the King was in Rome. The leader of the coup was the King's cousin, and he took over managing the government. This was surely the beginning of what was to become the Russian takeover in 1979. *Time* Magazine termed it "the bloodless coup." From that time on until I left several months later, there were Afghan soldiers on the streets of Kabul carrying machine guns. I stayed safely at home as much as I could. One of the American employees of U.S.I.S. (U.S. Information Systems) Jerry Verner, and his wife Lois, were my neighbors in Karte Char, near the Blue Mosque (*Masjiddi Hajji Yakoub*), so I always knew if there was any danger for us foreigners, which there wasn't.

One morning I awoke to complete silence in the neighborhood. This was very strange because I lived at a very busy intersection in *Karte Char,* directly across from the Blue Mosque (*Masjiddi Hajji Yakoub*). The neighborhood was full of *Nan* (bread) shops, vegetable sellers, a butcher shop, and kebab shops. The intersection served as a traffic circle, and the taxis would beep their horns as they rounded it since Afghan taxi drivers drive with their foot on the gas pedal and their hand on the horn. I got out of bed, walked to the window, looked down from my third-floor flat, and saw, parked in the traffic circle, an army tank. There were a couple of soldiers sitting on top of the tank with rifles in their hands and other soldiers sauntering around the street. Not one other person was to be seen. The shops were closed. Usually in the morning there were children getting water from the public water spigots. Nobody was around. I got dressed and bravely went out as usual and rode my bike the couple of blocks to the Verners' compound, where Lois whisked me inside and had me stay with them for next few days until we were told by the U.S. Embassy that the coast was clear and we could proceed with our lives. Since Lois' husband Jerry worked at USIS, we were getting the word directly from the American Embassy. That was fortunate, because the phones weren't working, and the airport was closed, for about a week.

When we were able to congregate once more at the Peace Corps office, I heard one volunteer tell the story of being with a group of volunteers who had left the US AID Staff House late, the night of the coup. They were walking in *Karte Se*, looking for a taxi, when a tank drove by, stopped, and an Afghan stepped out of the tank and asked where the home of the royal family was!

Note: Susan Ramsey, a.k.a. Stella, graduated from Audubon High School in 1962. Always adventurous, Sue braved where some would have liked to visit in those days, had they possessed her nerve, as the Peace Corp was considered a lofty pursuit in the age of our idealistic President, John F. Kennedy, and the turbulent years that followed. Whether Sue's travels contributed to her early demise at the age of 65 is anybody's guess, but the Afghanistan stressful lodgings and general environment might have affected her health. Through mutual friends, Sue and I re-acquainted by email a year before her death. She emailed me this piece, as well as other memoirs. I was delighted when she granted me permission to post them on my website. I judged this one as informative and appropriate.- ram

Stella Ramsay, 65, (Susan Estelle Ramsay) of Hudson, died peacefully on Tuesday morning, August 3, 2010, at Harborside Healthcare – Crestwood in Milford, surrounded by her loving friends.

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Arch de Triumph - Paghman (Destroyed by the Taliban)

Mir Bacha Kot, Afghanistan

By

Bill Mittendorff

August – September 1970

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The richest love is that which submits to the arbitration of time. - L. Durrell

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I have the fortune

To have been befriended

By a poet.

Until we

Come together again,

Bill, peace.

- Hugh

October 1969

August 15, 1970

2 eggs - 4 afghanis

2 drawstrings - 6

thread -1

6 buttons - 1

I picked up my peron and tambons in Charikar Friday and have been wearing them since around the house. It took 7 m of cloth to make them; it's like walking around in a tent. The secret of comfort, though, is simply not to wear any underwear.

August 16

Some days I am sure I will be carried out of this country in a straitjacket. I don't care. I fled this afternoon from Mir Bacha Kot (which is called Sarai Khwaja by most) – when I felt I could not manage to teach at all – to Charikar to visit Kerry Brace and Vince Marsicano. Good company. The simple fact that I could move was itself a source of relief. It has been too easy to shut myself away in my room after school each day.

August 17

This is somebody's birthday, but I don't know who's. It is also a much better day than the one before. Morning is the most critical time of the day and this morning was completely successful.

FULL MOON

I was studying my Farsi lessons with Naim in one of the empty class-rooms this afternoon when I looked up to the door and felt Janet walk in. It surprised me that the sensation of her presence was both so sudden and so real, and also that her presence was a source of warmth and comfort. We have both been wondering about the change these two years will bring us.

Aug 18

All of us teachers from Lycée Mir Bacha Khan went to the Kabul airport this afternoon to greet our principal back from Beirut. There weren't enough seats on the bus we had rented, so a few of the teachers had to stand. They goosed each other all away to Kabul and back.

Aug 20 Independence vacation begins

Things to hold onto or store away for a while:

Seeing Denise Behar as someone who is just beginning to know American young people well.

Steve Thewlis' guitar playing

Janet's women's Lib article

How much Khan Zaman reminds me of Michael

Mantu to at the Shah Mahmud restaurant

Reading about America in Chris's Rolling Stone and the letter from Peter

Sunset with a bunch of good people at Balai Saer

All the lights strung out across the avenues during Jeshen

Conversations and questioning's about this C.O. business and a realization that my philosophy strives mightily to make me into a complete man. Now to determine if it is possible to approve of everything every man does.

David and Allison Weir talking relaxed and happy.

Kunduz melons

Bill Mooney's outbursts of anger and frustration

Sept 1 Tuesday (school resumes)

They found my dog about a week ago. A guy came by the house just as I was leaving (on the 20th) and told my caretaker Abdullah that he had seen it. He would show it to us if we gave him 100 afs. I gave him the 20 I had promised to anyone who found it but demanded that Abdullah pay the remainder because it was his younger son Raoul's fault that he got out.

After I had left, Raoul went down to see it with the finder and tried to get it back. The farmer who now had the dog said he bought it from a guy in Kabul. Once it was impressed upon him that a good dozen people, including several of the teachers and the akim sahib himself knew the dog, and after the akim sent a soldier along to make sure he acted properly, he handed it back. So I've got my dog again. Which is nice. His name is Gorg (wolf).

dog food 152 afs

lunch 12 ½

eggplant 4

onions 1

yogurt 8

total = 179

Today feels like the first day of fall. The sun is notably lower in the sky than it was when I left before Jeshen. The dust is still here but the wind is now northerly and carries with it the perfume of change.

Sept. 2 Wednesday

pen 15

ruler 2

½ tomatoes

I am finishing Clea, an extraordinary book.

Many of the teachers live in villages too far to allow a daily commute, so have rented small rooms in Sarai Khwaja for the school week and return to their families Thursday evening. It

room and found him with the Manon and Ghollum Ali eating almonds. We finished them off and started on grapes brought from the vines behind the school. The mowen invited me to dinner at

the school but, realizing that he had no money, asked to borrow 10 afs. We laughed and both agreed it was a ridiculous way to invite someone to be your guest.

I had the three of them over to my house for tea and, after sunset, we returned to the school to wait for the babas (caretakers) to fix the meal. We hadn't waited long – sitting on the broken down couch in the mowen's 6 x 10 room – when Naim arrived in good spirits and asked us to go back with him to his home. He had not been to school for the first two days and I heard later that he had taken his whole family to Kabul for a wedding. He had returned alone – I don't know why – and asked us to keep him company. One of the babas for the school brought the dinner of peppers, eggplant and tomatoes up to his house from the school. It was quite an enjoyable evening, for we talked quite a bit. I learned the Persian names for the planets from Ghollum Ali and talked about the disappearance of tradition in the face of modernization.

Whenever the mowen, Abdul Wakil, makes a joke about me he talks very fast. I never understand him but we both end up laughing because I mimic his rapid-fire delivery to his face

Sept 3 Thursday

Energy is as important as preparation in daily confronting the pupils with learning.

Lunch 14 afs (choinaki)

Sept 4 Friday, our day off

Taxi and buses to Kabul 25 afs

After getting my mail from the Peace Corps office in Shar-i-Nau, I went to see Chris and Pat Nyhan in Karte Char, having been asked to return a tape of theirs by Chris Bateman. I had never visited them before and, as it will probably turn out, may never be able to visit them again. Chris and Pat have decided to quit after winter vacation. They don't like their jobs at Kabul's Habibia High School, which they attribute to (1) the prevalence of bribery among the students, and (2) cynicism among the members of the faculty. As they tell it, due to Habibia's reputation as the capital city's preeminent high school, it attracts large numbers of rich but disinterested students. The teachers and administration are unable to resist the temptation of augmenting their meager government salaries by selling grades.

What's more depressing is that the students, aware of their teachers weakness, retain no respect for them. Pat related an ugly incident from midterm examinations. Noticing two students copying, she walked up to them and seized their papers. The uproar caused by this attracted the Proctor who had been helping her. The argument became heated and several more students rose in protest. The students laid hands on the Proctor and, as Pat related, they almost came to blows. In sum, they feel that teaching at Habibia is a joke.

They surmised – as best anyone can imagine a world outside his own experience – that they might have found teaching in one of the provinces much more rewarding. But set against any hopes they might have had for a transfer was the Peace Corps' institutional reluctance to transfer anyone. And they admitted to a growing desire to move on to something new: Chris wants to get a Masters degree in Russian in England and they see nothing to keep themselves here.

[Christopher and Pat were among the original 17 trainees in cycle one with me, Francie Williams, Bill Mooney, and David and Alison, but they returned to America shortly after their arrival here to attend the funeral of a close relative and started training again with cycle 2 in the middle of December, 1969.]

After conversation, we listened to music and they introduced me to Savoy Brown and Boz Skaggs, which I enjoyed very much. The most surprising thing about the evening was how we became involved in a lengthy, good-humored, almost academic discussion. Chris asked, "if you had to pick 10 books to take with you to the moon which would you take?" And we kept at it for at least an hour.

I left Kabul in late morning and by one o'clock had arrived in Charikar, sixty kilometers north of Kabul, intending to fulfill a somewhat vague promise to visit Ghollum Ali at his house. I passed the afternoon in pleasant conversation with Kerry Brace and Vince Marsicano who, like the Nyhans, were in cycle 2 and arrived in Afghanistan just a few months after me.

About 5:30 I decided to at least make a desultory attempt to locate Ghollum Ali's house. I did not want to be treated to dinner because he is not a wealthy man – making only his teacher's salary of 1500 Afghanis a month or so. I often had trouble reconciling the 3500 per month we were allowed. The city of Charikar revealed itself as much bigger than I had conceived it and, finding his home – "near the mosque," was all he had said – led me to three of the 20 mosques in the city and down innumerable lanes. The lanes were so narrow that the mud brick houses rising above them two or three stories blotted out the sun a good hour before sunset.

It was quite dark by the time I knocked at the door, but Ghollum Ali himself answered and greeted me warmly. He and his son Saxi ushered me into the guest room. All the while he chuckled, and his broad smiles exhibited the many missing teeth in his round face. After the appropriate formalities, he had asked me rather circuitously why I had not come early in the day – at 11 o'clock as he believed he had said. It became apparent to me that he had prepared a special lunch and had waited the good part of the morning at the serai to meet me. My heart sank in shame. I protested feebly that I had not heard him indicate any special time and had not expected anything more than a cup of tea. Even so, I knew that my protestations and apologies could never excuse the trouble I had caused. I was once again made aware of how ignorant I was of my place in this society and the social responsibilities this entailed.

Thankfully, the warmth of Ghollum Ali and his family consoled me. The evening, what was left of it, was quite amiable. He opened his trunks of books and displayed them proudly: astronomy meteorology, geography, history, religion and grammar were there. While geography is his main subject of instruction, he said he felt obligated to know where to be able to find the answer to any question the students might pose. I have seen few individuals so in love with knowledge as he. Abdul Ghafoor "Fizeek" (nicknamed for his subject, physics), who had also waited most of the day for me, arrived shortly after Ghollum Ali had revealed his printed treasures. He brought with him a melon, which we enjoyed over some pleasant but desultory, due to the hour, conversation.

The degree of hospitality I enjoyed this evening is typical, and the Afghans pride themselves upon it. I enjoyed the welcome I received and hope to make more such visits. I find, however, that only a few other volunteers here are on terms with the other teachers that might allow socializing after school. Perhaps it is my relative isolation that allows this to happen.

Thursday, September 17

I went to the gardens in Paghman today with my 11A class. I had suggested earlier in the week that we have a picnic before the weather got any colder, and they wasted no time in arranging it. Fifteen students and I arrived after dark, carried our pots, food, blankets and wood to the end of a broad concrete plaza. We settled down and set up our camp at the foot of a pool that reflected the snowy Hindu Kush looming above.

A tambour player, whom I didn't know, had come along and was accompanied by Zainullabuddin on the drum and Anjamuddin on the flute. Sayeed Chaju Shah danced for us and then, during a pause in the music, plopped down in front of Poyenda Mohammed, grinned, and pulled him into the center. Chaju sat down in his place and Poyenda danced.

Munir was in charge of cooking the pilau so he and his team stayed behind while we took a short walk. We found a spot overlooking the lights of Kabul below. A few clouds were in the sky and the light from the moon, almost full, flashed through them as they passed over us and away from the mountains. We returned to find that three foreigners had arrived and were engaged in conversation with those who had stayed behind, happily practicing their English. We invited them to eat with us, which they were delighted to accept. They were following the world traveller circuit to India and had only been in Afghanistan for two days. I am sure that the music, dancing, food, and playfulness of my students amazed them.

Around twelve they left us, but shortly after we had pulled our blankets around us, the quiet was interrupted by the intrusion of a malang, or crazy man, dressed in rags. He stumbled noisily among the sleeping students and shouted insults at all and sundry. We fed him, laughed at him, and he soon left. We tried to sleep again but he reappeared. Tempers soon became frayed, and Sayeed Mir Jan became especially annoyed at the insults. In frustration, he struck the malang who, greatly offended, left again. At his third and final visit, the students only laughed at his insults, consoled him for being manhandled, and finally hustled him off into the darkness.

On the way back to our village the next day, Mohammed Rasoul asked if I might not want to live with him and his family. The students and teachers had often expressed to me their concern that I was so far away from my own family. Being alone, in this culture, is a terrible thing. I felt honored by the sincerity of his offer and touched by his concern, but declined with as much gentleness as I could muster. I knew that being his guest would (1) compromise my position as his teacher and (2) compromise the freedom of movement and activity I had begun to enjoy.

Wednesday, September 23

Naim invited me, Ghollum Ali, Siddiq & Sardar to lunch: good things like pilau, shurwa, boroni, yogurt and salad. Then he brought out local grapes and tea with sweets. What a spread it was!

Just after lunch and, quite unexpectedly, I was informed that an American had arrived from the north and went out to the road to greet him. My Peace Corps friend Chris Bateman had arrived with bag in hand and stopped on his way to Kabul.

It's always a big shock to have a new foreigner in my village. During summer vacation at the end of July, Bill Mooney and Francie came up together to visit me. Francie created quite a stir, although I never heard much from the community. All three of us could sense a quiet tension as I walked through the bazaar with her that day, and I wondered again how a woman could handle the stress of living in a place like this. I took them down to show them my school. Finals were going on and the mowen and a few of the teachers were there. We fed the two of them grapes and tea. Everyone except the mowen sat there stone-faced and silent. All the big, noisy men with their dirty jokes were transformed by Francie into a bunch of awkward schoolboys attending their first mixed party. I think they were both relieved when the took the taxi back to Kabul.

Chris asked to stay the night and I was happy to have the company, despite the poverty of my hospitality. My house is one room and much too small for two people. I can't really entertain anyone here because there is nothing to do but talk, and because I have nothing nice to offer them in the way of interesting food or entertainment. Chris paid no mind to his surroundings, however, and we talked about all kinds of interesting things: hospitality, John True, loneliness, music, what our friends were doing in America, and vacation plans for winter break. It had been about a month since I had had a decent English conversation, and it was truly delightful. After listening to some new tapes: "Boz Skaggs," Dylan's "self-portrait," Van Morrison's "Moondance," and Delaney and Bonnie, Chris put on a spoken tape with news related by the friend who had sent him all this music. Chris's friend talked about Stanford, Nixon and the draft, the changing mood of the nation, getting married and finding a job in N. J. – all the things Imight be doing in two years. It seemed very distant. Like the moon.

Thursday, September 24

Swept through classes, obtained permission to be absent from classes on Saturday, and joined Chris in Kabul at three. I found that Jim Carlson (cycle 2, teaching in Gardez) was coming with us to Logar province to visit Jim and Donna Templeman. After a brief visit to the Peace Corps office where Dr. Rollins gave me three shots – gamma globulin for hepatitis, cholera vaccine and a tine (TB) test – we left and arrived an hour and a half later in Baraki Barak. The sun had set just before our arrival, silhouetting the long, low mountain to the west. One of the two planets we saw in the now dark, clear sky was exceptionally bright, leading me to suppose it Venus.

As we looked for the Templeman's house, Jim told stories of Gardez with a dryness and droll amusement that heightened my awareness of us as strangers in this time and space.

> "One tribe of Pashtuns invaded the village of another tribe when the men were away and kidnapped the women. They must have had a ball with them. So the other tribe got itself together and made a surprise attack on their village. There was some kind of advance warning, and everyone who could, ran away and hid. So when the others got there all they could find were the children and old people. They killed everyone they could get their hands on. When the governor heard about it he said that this was too much (even for Paktia, I guess). So he called in some jets and bombed the village of the tribe that killed the people. The governor, I guess, was second in command in the Army."

Friday, September 25

The next morning Donna made us all pancakes, which I hadn't enjoyed for several months. It was very relaxing to be in a family, and the morning passed in conversation. Eventually, we decided on a picnic, and we walked to the bazaar in search of a gaudi to carry us to a village which was rather distant but, John assured us, worth seeing. Somehow we never got there and after dismissing our gaudi, stopped for tea, melon and pomegranates. Feeling refreshed, we walked back to their village. While the weather was pleasantly cool, the bright autumn sunlight warmed us, and we enjoyed the clattering of the yellowing poplars along the irrigation ditches as we strolled between the now-fallow fields.

Saturday, September 26

The Templemans are one of three couples that will probably leave Afghanistan after vacation. The Strohs, Chuck and Mary, want to go to graduate school. Chris and Patricia Nyhan have the same plan. John suggested that married couples might need different things than single persons and have different challenges in this strict Muslim culture. He admitted further that they may not be as willing to experiment, or to keep an experiment in living going when it no longer promises much.

Chris, Jim and I returned to Kabul and went first to the post office customs clerk where Chris was to pick up a cheap watch his mother had sent. Needless to say, the watch was not there, but we did run into some interesting people while waiting interminably for them to inform us of the fact. A guy and a girl from New York, both very hip, were mailing stuff back home: postins, posters and purses. The only thing I remember them saying was that their trip was an around the world package deal where they got a year and a choice of itinerary for $1280. It will be a long time before I forget the effect they had on me. They seemed to be ambassadors of the modern world with all its pleasures, excitement, mobility and freedom, and contrasted dramatically with the company, however pleasant, that I had kept this last long, slow weekend in Baraki Barak.

Sunday, September 27

I returned last night to my village and little house north of Kabul. Naim, the dear soul, let me stay for tea and conversation even though he had guests himself.

1# tom 2 ½ afs

1# pot 2 ½

1 # pomegranate 4

Wednesday, September 30

John True stopped by unexpectedly for and visited for an hour or so. I enjoyed talking to him and was more relaxed than at his first visit a couple of months prior. He brought news of those in the north: David and Allison in Taloqan are happy with their site and their neighbors, but not their jobs; Dave Moats is bored to death in Khanabad and would transfer to Faizabad next year if the Peace Corps and the Royal Government of Afghanistan would let him. Francie, the only single woman in our group, chafed against the constraints of the life she must lead as a model of decorous femininity.

Thursday, October 1

I struggled through a letter to long-lost Hugh, from whom I had not heard in some time, hoping as I wrote that he would ignore the clumsiness of my words, ignore my feigned contentment, and respond with news of Minnesota and my old friends. I found no mail at the Peace Corps office, but there met Denise Behar and was introduced to Chris, a volunteer from India who had finished his contract and was heading home.

During tea inside the Kamran Restaurant, I invited the two of them and two other British tourists up to Sarai Khwaja the next day. Chris had been at Denise's during Jeshen and had wanted to see an Afghan village, but had never made any plans.

Bought margarine, jelly, milk & curry powder.

Friday, October 2

The four of them arrived late in the morning. Colin and Carolyn, the two British people, were on their way back to England and had only a short time to spend in Afghanistan. The chartered bus they were riding, however, had killed a motorcyclist and seriously injured his passenger in Jalalabad so they and twenty others were held over pending the results of the police investigation.

They enjoyed tea and the excellent local grapes at my house, then we walked through the bazaar, along the highway and down to see my school, Lycée Mir Bacha Khan. They were impressed by the fact that the school had concrete toilets, but (for the lower grades anyway) mud classrooms. It being Friday, school was not in session, and we continued east past the school to the nearby village of Karenda, where I had promised a visit to a former student.

I had first visited Karenda one quiet August day when, out in the countryside for an aimless stroll, I came upon Khwaja and his friends, equally aimless. He and his friends insisted, as Afghans will, on offering me refreshment. He took me to meet his young brothers and sisters, then served mulberries and yogurt sweetened with sugar. We sat up on the roof, within reach of cooling breezes. I enjoyed my afternoon, but later heard from my fellow teachers that I should not mix too freely with those beneath my status. Sardar Khan, a neighbor of Khwaja, and respected elder teacher at my school, was the most critical. I was sensitive to these opinions, as I needed to be, but Khwaja had, some weeks before, transferred to Qalai Muratbeg high school and, as he was no longer my student I did not feel I could refuse to visit him on the grounds that it would compromise my impartiality as his teacher.

These concerns were soon proved moot, when Gul Mohammed, a cadet from the Kabul military academy, whose father was a rich landowner, met the four of us on the same path to Karenda. I had met Gul Mohammed previously. Mohammed Wasim, a fellow English teacher, and I were leaving school one afternoon and were passing through the bazaar when he asked with a boldness brash even by Afghan standards, if would serve him lunch. I replied by asking if it was an Afghan custom for guests to invite themselves to dinner. The cadet laughed, as did Wasim somewhat more cautiously, but I believed that my point was taken, and ordered kebab for all of us. After lunch, I took them home for tea and served them some rice pudding I had just made.

I wasn't especially happy to meet Gul Mohammad again, who had proven so abrupt and intrusive at our first interaction. After brief pleasantries, he asked what our plans were for the afternoon. I replied that I had told Khwaja Ahmad that I would pay him a visit. He pointed out that I hadn't said I would bring four other people and asked me if this might not be an inconvenience for him. I had to admit that he was right. Gul Mohammed suggested that we accompany him to his father's home, which was not far off, and partake of his hospitality. It certainly seemed to be the best plan, and after a brief debate within myself, we followed him. The guest room he ushered us into impressed us all. It was on the third story of a huge mud brick home with windows open to three sides and views to the back garden, the vineyards and the groves of poplars. It was all very green and the breeze brought us the sent of gul-e-patani, petunias. As we relaxed upon the cushions, Gul Mohammed brought out his collection of guns. The old, engraved, double-barreled shotgun he showed us was kept loaded for thieves, he said, but what really fascinated Chris was a pair of British percussion-cap muskets. These muzzleloaders were manufactured in1860 and each was stamped with the British crown and the initials "VR." He said they still used all three of them every year.

The general himself joined us when lunch was brought in shortly thereafter. I was amused by the reactions of Colin and Carolyn as they sat uncomfortably on the cushions and attempted to eat the shurwa, pilau and boiled eggs without utensils. They were good-natured and our host soon brought them spoons. To my surprise, Sardar Khan, solicitous and friendly, joined us halfway through lunch. It appears he was the general's cousin. I wondered later if he had learned of my visit to his village and conspired with Gul Mohammad to waylay me before I could meet Khwaja.

After tea, grapes, walnuts and raisins we were all delightfully groggy, but it was getting on towards late afternoon and the four of them had a dinner to attend back in Kabul, so we cut it shorter than any of us wanted. Just before we departed we stepped into the garden, where Gul Mohammed picked a good 15 pounds of grapes for them to take back to Kabul. It was a wonder to see the amazement on their faces. Just before saying goodbye they took a few pictures of the old general, cadet Gul Mohammed and the general's other son and daughters.

I was disappointed that their visit was so short, because I had never really been able to show them my home, the public garden, or the view of the long, verdant Kohdaman Valley from the hills at the bottom of the village. But their visit was refreshing and amusing. Refreshing because I saw the village and my life here through the wondering eyes of newcomers and amusing because, well, because foreigners are such strange people.

Tuesday, October 6, 1970

For some time, the teachers at my school had been discussing my need for an Afghan name. Today Wakil ("mowen"), Naim, Khwaja Saheb, Rahim, Shah Mahmud, Gholum Ali, Sidiq and Sardar decided to give me one. The naming ceremony was to be at an informal gathering in the park and was to be followed by a party at my house. I figured that this was a good deal. After all, my nickname "Bill" meant "shovel" in Farsi, and I was curious to see what they might come up with, considering that their biggest challenge would be avoiding a Muslim name.

It took only a few minutes of discussion to decide that nmy Afghan name would henceforth be "Soor Gul", meaning "red flower" in Pashto. Sardar even wrote it out for me on a paper that I held for the photo.

Recollections of Urozgan, Winter, 1971-72

John True

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 footnotes 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 Hazarajot 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

1 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.

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.

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.”[2] 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.

2 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.[3]

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 impassible – 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

[3] 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. I saw a kid in bare feet carrying a girl who had been

horribly burned. The impulse to get her some medicine from a kit died before I acted. “Why prolong it for her,” I thought. No smoke was coming out of any of the houses.

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. I sat outside most of the time but was

Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove . . . .

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.

At around four, we got back to the river. 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 successfully 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 complaints 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 better. 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 at 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 vendetti. 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 someone 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 and 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.[4]

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 sahib" 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.

[4] 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.

Kathamann

May, 2009

Mon posta Aghanistan deq shadom
As ateriky mon zendagi kadom onja
baraye do salas, tagriban chel sal pesh.
Mon besyar jawan bodom; bist salas.
Bismillah Rahmani Rahim.

Salamalakum, chaturisti, hubisti,
jonnie juris, bahassti, honeton hubus?
Mon kar kadom duftari Peace Corps
de Shari Naw.
Mon senfi Farsi yad gerefton
de Kalofatalahan.
Beser tuklif kay Farsi yad gerefton.
Laken in ali, beser Farsi yadom raft.
Inshallah.

Mon posta Baba, Bibijon, Asyajon, Quasem,

Nasrine, Faima, and Faiqua deq shadom;

familiy Afghani de Karteh Seh mon zendigi kadom.

Mon tushocks bish kadom. Desta ras baraye nan.

Desta chap baraye tashnab.

Bibijon pokhta bulani ba gandana wa

catalou. Maza dot.

Alhamdulillah.

Mon posta Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif,

Charikar, Pulikumri, Gardez, Khanabad,

Baghlan, Herat, Maimana, Khost deq shadom.

Hup should kay shumara dedon.

Hup joy boot.

Farq na makona. Par wa nace.

Mon posta Afghanistan deq shadom.

Santa Fe

I am sad about Afghanistan

because I lived there for two years

about forty years ago.

I was very young; twenty years old.

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate,

the Merciful.

Peace be to you. How are you? How is your body?
How is your home? I worked at the Peace Corps office
in the new city. I studied Farsi in Kalofatalahan.
It was difficult to learn Farsi. But now, much Farsi
is forgotten. If God wills it.

I am sad about Baba, Bibijon, Asiajon, Quasem,
Nasrine, Faima, Faiqua; an Afghan family I lived
with. I sat on mattresses. One eats with the right
hand. The left hand is for the bathroom. Bibijon
cooked bulani with leeks and potatoes. It gave good taste.
Thanks be to God.

I am sad about Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif,
Charikar, Pulikhumri, Gardez, Khanabad,
Baghlan, Herat, Maimana, Khost.
I'm glad I saw you. These were good places.
A national slogan:
It makes no difference.
It makes no difference.
I am sad about Afghanistan.

When a thing is lost, the Afghans say: da jebbie mas
It's in my pocket.

When something or someone departs, the Afghans

say joyish sabz, may its place be green

I am sad for Afghanistan, but Afghanistan is in my pocket.

May it become a green place.

Tashakor

Thank you.

Kathamann

Bande-Amir

TORPIKAI AND THE TEDDY BEAR

It was the summer of 1968 and we were Peace Corps volunteers in Kabul, Afghanistan. Like many years before and after, we're sure, there was then a gaggle of children selling socks outside the Peace Corps office in Kabul. I think we called the socks "Socks, Mister? socks" because, no matter how many times we PCVs would decline the invitation to buy, the kids would always run up to us as we approached or came out of the Peace Corps office door shouting "Socks, Mister?"

There were several young children selling Socks, Mister? socks, all pretty scruffy and most, if not all, cute, charming, and endearing – as well as persevering. One of these aspiring entrepreneurs was a little girl named Torpikai. She was probably around six or seven years old, maybe even a bit younger. And, she was a very cute, very endearing, and very personable little girl, with a sweet, vivacious smile and a positive personality. Of all the kids, Torpikai was our favorite.

One day we came to the Peace Corps office and, as usual, were surrounded by the Socks, Mister? kids. But, Torpikai was missing. We asked where she was and one of the kids told us that she had been hit by a car and was injured. We couldn't determine how badly Torpikai was hurt but this was obviously very bad news. A day or a few days later we found out that Torpikai had not been too badly injured and that she was recovering in her family's home.

We realized that we had to do something for Torpikai to show that we cared about her and missed her. After a bit of thought, we decide that we would try to find a teddy bear and take it to her. Our memory tells us that we had no idea whether there was such a thing in Kabul as a teddy bear, where one would find one if there were, or even whether an Afghan kid would even know what a teddy bear was. But, we looked around town and found a shop that sold some very sweet teddy bears.

After buying one of the teddy bears that was almost as cute as Torpikai, we realized that we didn't know where her family's home was. Memory tells us that we asked one of the other Socks, Mister? little girls to take us to Torpikai's home – which she did. Torpikai's family lived up on one of those Kabul hills covered, at least then, with pretty meager houses and other ramshackle buildings. With our guide, we climbed the hill on a path that weaved among the houses until we reached Torpikai's home. We met Torpikai's parents and, in our less-than-highly-developed Dari, we explained that we were Peace Corps volunteers, that we knew Torpikai from her socks selling, and that we had a present for Torpikai. They were welcoming and showed us into their house.

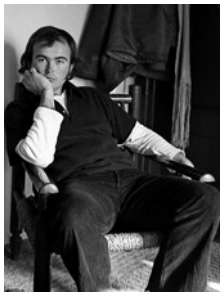
We found Torpikai resting in her bed. She was surprised to see us but she had her usual radiant grin that lit up the room. One of us took the teddy bear out of its bag and handed it to Torpikai. We need not have wondered whether Afghan kids know what terry bears are all about. Torpikai immediately hugged the teddy bear to her and the smile on her sweet little face grew even more radiant. The teddy bear was a great hit! – it did its cheer-up work as well as ever could be hoped.

Julie Kesler and Tom Grant

The Gospel According to Timothy and James:

Chronicled by Ron Dizon©2013

The summer heat of 1972 was about hottest on record in Ghor Province, Afghanistan. Combined with the three year-drought and famine, Chaghcharan was the last place on earth one wanted to be assigned to as 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 a great respect for the laws physics that kept the craft airborne. For most of the Afghan passengers, chanting the mantra of "Allah Akbar" (God is Great) was their reverential instrument in the event 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 town had, at most, forty adobe brick compounds, one Whitewashed Hotel and/or 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 tambons (Afghan pants) serving as a windsock denoting a westerly head-wind.

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! What I wasn't expecting was 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 Chagcharan.

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.

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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 pickup my sheet metal cargo box containing all my worldly belongings and heaved it into the bed of the truck. 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 and from what I understood he spend 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 with a specialty in photography definitely 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 the he'd lost a considerable amount of 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 learn, was a mild-manner geologist. Everything he did was planned, calculated and measured, a quality of character that added great value to the trio and one asset I wished I had possessed. He was the anchor of the group, where Tim and I provided the nightly entertainment.

My orientation started with 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 other 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 Afghan high desert and the threat of wolf attacks.

Tim pointed out that there were 2 Belgian nuns living at the Chaghcharan Hotel who were 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 to them the stored wheat. The only problem was wheat was selling 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 Chagcharan.

It was an unbelievable detour in 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.

It was Tim who negotiated a temporary solution with the police that allowed us to buy wheat for the bakers in Chaghcharan Baazar and to 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 the closure our Food for Work office.

The FFW Office was located in a compound on the main road east of town. It housed a two story adobe structure with two main rooms on the first floor. The roof served as our main sleeping accommodation. The compound was absent of any vegetation, offering no shelter from the blistering115 degree heat. The outhouse was located adjacent to the first floor main dining room/office window serving as 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 less than Spartan, it was a home for the three of us for two months in the summer of 1972. The Peace Corps Post, know 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 Chagcharan, 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 the respite of levity with the resulting consequence of camaraderie.

Very few Food for Work projects were started or completed in July due to, in large part, to the exodus of the male population of Chaghcharan and outlying villages. The departure 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 half demonstration period. No men to work for food meant no Food for Work Projects. It was this epiphany that 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 called Operation Help. At that time, the Peace Corps Director was reluctant to use the seasoned FFW volunteers, but 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 assault of the unforgiving winter of the Hindu Kush.

The jump-off distribution point for the Operation Help Program was Chaghcharan and who best to host the first convocation 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. Leaving Chaghcharan to other distribution points was also an Either Or situation. It was Tim McCormack and Jim Mathewson who named the volunteers coming into Chaghcharan as 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 Food for Work demonstration project ended in a victory in 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 Peace Corps' The Either Or Otter Corps.

This is the Gospel according to Timothy and James.

An Afghan Memory

Food was always important in our daily lives. You didn't always know just what was on the platter. I taught at the Higher Teachers College in Mazar-i-Sharif. We had boarding students from the villages; just young men, of course, so there was a cafeteria where we teachers ate the same lunch everyday. One day, I commented on how delicious the mutton was, that it tasted better than what I could prepare. The teachers stared at me, then, at one another. Finally, Nasim-Sayb, my counterpart, spoke. "Miss Nancy, that is not mutton you are eating; that is camel meat." I probably looked surprised, but we all laughed, and I continued to enjoy the camel stew. At least, I never had to eat crunchy baked sparrows for dinner, as fellow volunteer Chris Fuchs did.

Nancy Benson

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 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 anybody 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 nowhere, 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 recall what tribe he was from, perhaps Kuchi. 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.

Nyhans Exit Afghanistan, ba Taklif

Letter from Chris Nyhan to PCV Friends

Sept. 13, 1971

Dear Fritz, Vince & Daoud, Jim, Ron, Bill & Rafiqs:

Salaam Aleikom! Chetor-i-staid? Khub-i-staid? Esab-Ketab chetor-ho-est?

Hello from Berkeley, land of freaks, communes and us. We have a tale of serendipity, calamity and laffs to regale youse, but probably this offering won't be as well received as the latest output from one L. Ferraro. How are you all? Are you making it down the home stretch? According to our calculations, *Jeshen-i-Istaqlal* has just faded, and with it glorious memories of host-country nationals whooping it up in traditional fashion at the local *Jeshns*. Has Pancho put in any more apocryphal appearances?

Before I ask more questions, I will give you a summation of our last weeks in Kabul, in case you didn't hear of our adventures in leaving our adopted *watan*. (I have told the story a few times since we got back to Amriko several weeks ago and for youse I don't want to leave out any details because I know you will enjoy (?) them vicariously). Anyway, after you guys went back up north following that party at Karte Char, we put in our last week or so at our jobs, tried to get exit visas in advance, then took off to Nuristan with the Thewli and the Brannons.

Part I: while I was still working at USIS, I started to get our exit visas in advance, as we were planning a trip to Nuristan and then leaving the country a few days later. (Just about that time, a new policy went into effect at the Ministry of foreign affairs (to be referred to afterward as MFA) which was that all correspondence received in any office there had to first be recorded at the archives (no laugh). Anyway, one day I typed up a letter on USIS letterhead to be signed by Ed Bernier, and with the translated copy in Farsi, to the cultural affairs office of the MFA, requesting their help in getting us visas. I went to that office and was (what else) sent to the archives, where my letter was: first rejected because the passport #s were incorrectly transcribed on the Farsi version and then, lost in that office.

After a long wait, during which I observed the proper way to get things done (Louis Dupree was at the same place, with the same problem, and got around it by swearing at the *chaprastee* in English, Farsi and Pashtu), the letter came out and I took it to the cultural office, where I waited to speak with the modir. The modir told me he didn't know USIS or Bernier, and that I had to go to the Embassy and get a letter from them. Which I did and returned an hour later. When I got back, I had to wait another hour for modir to get around to me again; during the course of that hour, he called up the wife of the USIS Director and, in English, apologized for his wife's inability to attend a certain function that week. Anyway, when he hung up, he repeated that he didn't know USIS or Bernier or Brescia (the Director).

At that juncture, he informed me that the letter I had brought from the embassy (which,

incidentally, had to be brought to the archives and entered) was not correct because it did not have a number. I laughingly replied, "Well, does that mean I have to go back and get another letter?" You know what the dude answered. Back to the embassy. Get a number somehow (they didn't want to give me a motherin number). Back to the archives, back to the cultural office. They said come back tomorrow.

Mañana came and went (three times). Then I was sent to the economic department of the MFA to check on any duty-free goods on our PC passports (remember this — this will be a be crucial in a few weeks). They say I don't need anything from them. On to the visa office of the MFA. Where the god damn baccha tells me to come back tomorrow before I even show him my letter. Back to the archives. Back to the visa office. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow.

I asked the guy to make the visas good starting two weeks from that date. He refuses. (*Na mesha,* natch.) Anyway, he smiles, keeps the letter and tells me that since I am helping Afghanistan (and could I figure out any super, Western way to teach them English in my remaining two weeks – you all probably know this guy, is the one with classes who always speaks to all the *xarejis* in German, whether they know it or not). So, I leave the letter in his desk and we start to plan for Nuristan.

Part II: The Thewli and Brannons and us start to find a Land Rover for Nuristan (after the near debacle with Mr. Ali's Jeep in Hazarajat). Get this: Pat's former boss's (from AID cook's brother has a LR which we can have cheap (1200/day). We plan to exit Kabul on Monday at 9 AM. At 11 AM the driver comes and says he is not driving. At three he comes back, saying he hasn't found a driver, and if I want to help him look, maybe we can leave that night. Anyway, we look, we come up with a tank-i-teil driver who is willing to go.

We start out from Kabul, but he gets lost in Kabul (which to me, as an experienced Afghan safarer isn't a good sign). On the way to Jalalabad, we find out there are no breaks in the LR, and that the tank-i-teil driver is blind in the left eye, which comes close to killing us all (more than any other of many harried times in Afghanistan) on the way through Kabul Gorge. We spend a crazy night in J'bad at Frank Light's, who has a koochi gardener (with family).

We leave at dawn, and an hour from J'bad the LR breaks down the first time (loose battery connection). That gets fixed in an hour and we continue. Two hours later we stopped again (water in the spark gaps), and we have to help the halifa open the toolbox. Later that afternoon, just beyond Chako Serai we broke a spring clamp which had been broken at least once before, so D. Brannon had to ride a local bus (you can imagine what this is in Nuristan – not one of your Kabul-Mazar expresses, this is a real local) back to Chako Serai to try to find a welder to fix the clamp.

Miraculously he comes back that night and we set out the next afternoon, this time with me driving because, in addition to being blind, the halifa really couldn't drive. Suffice to say that I (my days with the Boston Red Cab notwithstanding) managed to crack up the LR, snapping the rear axle in the process. Do we take the easy way out and try to limp back to Kabul and escape the nightmare which is Afghanistan or do we face adversity, seize the moment, and push on? Naturally we go back.

On the way back, however, I managed to lose our passports (just mine and Pat's) in a local chaikhana. But this isn't discovered till we reach J'bad, and the teahouse was four hours back and I'm sure the passports will never be seen, even though I could offer a generous reward (yak shanzdai-pulee. I am very afraid since I have seen notice in Embassy warning lost pp can take three weeks to be replaced. The embassy is nice (unbelievable) and we get new ones the next day. Now, we figure, I can merely go back to the visa office of the MFA, and picking up where affairs were, get exit visas in the a.m. and we are on our way, although the bandits who rented us the LR will be hot on our collective ass. Right? Wrong!

Part III: (where Chris and Pat go crazy and come close to murdering various modir, rayises, etc.). Upon returning to the German rayis at the visa section, I am informed he has lost the old letter. Well, I smile and wait hours while he eventually finds it, but, alas, since we have new passports he can't issue us the visas. What, I say. Do I have to start this whole idiotic process again? Of course. Only this time, the Afghan RGA ministries will swallow me with a vengeance.

I go back to the embassy and the archives, the cultural office, the archives, and back to the visa office, who tell me I have to go to the economic department again, since I hadn't had a letter from them the first time. They sent me to the Ministry of Commerce to check on the times we entered the country on the old passports to check to see if we had brought duty-free goods in with us. We get to the Ministry of Commerce on a Wednesday morning – timing has become important now as (1) We are avoiding the guys who rented us the LR, who want money for the axle, and the rent for two weeks, since the broken LR is still stranded in the hills of Nuristan and these cats know where we live and are bugging us every what waking minute; and (2) Tom Kelty and two other folks are leaving Af. at this time, and if we go with them, we can rent a taxi together to the Iranian border (their exit visas are only for 10 days and they only have about four days left).

So anyway, we get to the Min. Comm. on Wed. a.m . We go in a bit nervous because we are now on our third set of passports (old regular ones, PC – which we surrendered when we quit PC – and new ones – to cover the ones which were lost). And on one set we had entered that we brought in a tape recorder, which we have sold and don't want to bring out. We asked them to check their records (which isn't out of line, since it is an archives ministry). They tell us we can't and ask to know where and when is the last time we entered the country. We tell them and they say we have to go to Torkham and get a maktub from them re our last entry. And then to the airport on the first entry (all the ones in between didn't seem to count for some strange reason).

We go through the ceiling at this point, and go to USIS and the embassy, appealing for help. The embassy says to baksheesh them. I tried. No go. In the space of an hour, what has seemed like an absurd idea (that we go to Torkham) now seems logical so we grab a taxi and start off for Torkham. Which in June is pretty fucking hot. We also have a time problem, as it is now 1 and we don't know how late the border office is open. We get there, and state our business. And the guy there is a real gigolo type (Habibia grad, natch). And says make yourselves comfortable, it'll probably take a few days at least to check on what we need. We smile and hope against hope that we can get in that day and back to Kabul that night as the prospect of spending a night in Torkham or J'bad isn't very nice in June. Somehow they managed to find what we need (that we entered with nothing and we go off to Kabul, confident that the next morning, Thursday, we can wrap it all up.

We get to the Ministry of Commerce at eight, but of course, no one else is there till nine. In the office we were in (which happened to be the auto assessment office, for some reason), the vital occurrence occurred – one person took pity on us and decided to help us. We didn't have to go to the airport (they thought because we hadn't brought in anything one time, we wouldn't have brought in anything the other time). This guy escorted us to at least 10 offices (some two and three times) and we got all we needed.

On to the Ministry of Interior visa office, where they tell us to come back Saturday. After repeated small talk, English lessons and promises to send half the staff English Farsi dictionaries from Amriko, they decided to see if they couldn't finish us by 12 (it's Thursday). At 11:45 nothing had happened and we got really pissed off and started to scream a bit, which did the trick. They rushed us through, but wait! We had to go to the polis to get the visa stamped.

We grab the hundredth taxi of the week, and hurried over there where they told us come Saturday. We pleaded and they helped. But alas the modir was at a funeral and we'd have to come back Saturday. One guy relented and told me where the moodier lived so I went there to have the PP's stamped, which miraculously, he did, so we could plan to leave early Sat. a.m.

But meanwhile, the bandits of the Land Rover rental were still to be reckoned with. That night they bugged us and threatened to go to the embassy and polis, as they knew we were going to split soon. Pat had the good sense for us to split that night (at least in the early a.m. the next day) which we did, going to Alix Crandall's at 4:30 a.m. with a taxi full of junk. So we hid out there until the next day when we split Kabul, but didn't breathe until we cross the border at Herat 30 hours later. There is a lot to that story, but I can't do that one now.

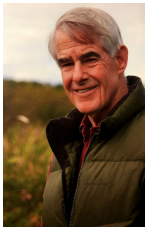
MAKE SURE THE PC GETS YOUR EXIT VISA WHEN YOU LEAVE. YOU'LL LOSE YOUR MIND (AND MAYBE YOUR ASS TOO.)

So, that's our tale of woe and laughs of course. Here we are in crazy California drinking iced coffee with shir yakh, but we would swap for some Ghazni gold any time. We find out here there's nothing we really missed in Amriko and a few things we really miss about Afgh. now. We traveled for seven weeks in East and West Europe, then a month with family, and we've been here for about two weeks feeling strange everywhere, but especially here. Vince, we haven't looked up Gospozha Presniakova yet, but maybe in the future. There's a lot of good sounds (informally) on campus, and think Daoud's flute would kill 'em. Fritz, we have the black box aks from Baghlan in our head, where it probably belongs. We think of a lot of good times, lots of good talk, and lots of good dope when we think of youse. Wie'll be interested to hear how you all are doing. Funny stories will do us good too. If you can, Fritz, send us a copy of the Louis tape. We'd love to hear it.

No word from Templemans, Chris B. or Thewlises, but we expect to see any/all of them in sometime future.

Chris

By Chris Bateman



I wrote this column for The Union Democrat *in Sonora, CA on Oct. 12, 2001 – a few days after the US launched "Operation Enduring Freedom," beginning an Afghan war that continues today.*

I also wrote a Democrat *piece on Afghanistan after the Soviet occupation in 1980, but I'm afraid that one has been lost to the sands of time.*

More amusing, however, is the letter to the editor which followed this piece. It pretty much reflects the politics of our neck of the California woods. A couple of letter writers later came to my defense, but their work was not as entertaining as Brandon Hatler's

MY COLUMN:

WHEN I LEFT Afghanistan more than 30 years ago, I vowed to return.

Decades later, I figured, I'd fly back to Kabul with fading memories and what was left of my once-formidable Farsi vocabulary. I saw myself riding a truck over the Salang Pass and into Kunduz, where I taught English at an all-male boarding school during my Peace Corps hitch.

I'd walk the town's tree-lined main street, stopping to chat at teahouses, bakeries, shops and kebab stands. I'd go back to the DMA – my school – and ask whatever became of portly old Mr. Sayed, our principal.

I'd look for former students, now men in their 40s. I'd track down Anwar, a prodigiously bright 11th-grader who edited our English-language newspaper.

I'd prowl Kunduz's dusty alleys, looking for the mud house I rented for $7.50 a month.

THAT DREAM has died. First the Soviets invaded. Then the Taliban seized power. And now the government that once paid me to teach Afghan high-schoolers is firing missiles at their homeland.

So instead of planning a return visit, I'm wondering what's left to visit.

Paved roads, electricity, telephones and running water, all scarce 30 years ago, must now border on nonexistent. Bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age, as some have urged, might take no more than a few firecrackers.

Then there's the human toll taken by decades of war and years of drought. In a country where life expectancy is 47, are even half my students still living?

How many have fled? How many are at war? Who among them is starving, injured or sick?

THE AFGAHNISTAN I knew was a bit player on the world stage. If it was noted for anything, it was the cheap hashish that made Kabul an obligatory stop on the counter culture's round-the-world trail.

Six hours to the north, I was teaching high-school kids who would likely take the few words of English they learned back to the family farm and shout them at sheep.

But my job was not without rewards.

Once a week my students and I would forget the curriculum. Speaking Farsi – mine became good enough to understand even dirty jokes – we'd talk about Muhammad Ali, Hollywood, Corvettes, the Mafia, Vietnam, Nixon and life in the U.S.

Americana? I brought it to my kids, who nearly rioted when issued never-before-seen Frisbees and squirt guns on a summer day.

EXOTIC VACATIONS were a huge Peace Corps fringe benefit.

Forget Honolulu. I chose Faizabad, a distant Afghan outpost at the foot of the Pamir Mountains. The place has seen few outsiders since Marco Polo left 700 years earlier.

Sheep scattered as our wheezing plane set down. At the bazaar, we outdrew a sword swallower, attracting a crowd of 100 gawkers.

The mayor assigned us a police escort. When we went fishing, cops dug our worms.

A few months later, we rented a 1958 Willys for a trip through the Hazarajot – Afghanistan's mountainous center. Sparsely inhabited by the descendants of Genghis Khan, the place is desolate, isolated and rarely visited. It took us two weeks to cover 400 tortuous, rocky, off-the-goat-path miles.

When the lone gas pump in a one-camel town called Chagcharan ran dry, the provincial governor gave us daily briefings on the fuel crisis. Can you see California Governor Gray Davis doing this for a handful of stranded tourists from afar?

SUCH HOSPITALITY was the rule in Afghanistan, even in its most distant reaches. That's why seeing this country recast as terrorism's international capital does not add up.

Sure, a huge, at-times unfathomable cultural gulf separated me from my students and neighbors in Kunduz.

But during my Peace Corps tenure, I'd like to think, that gulf narrowed by a few inches. At least for myself and the Afghans I grew close to.

That's why this distant nation's ongoing tragedy haunts me.

At this point I can only hope – far more for Afghanistan's sake than for my own – that someday I can again dream of returning.

(Alas, I think this San Diego reunion will be as close as I get.)

AND ONE READER'S TAKE :

To the Editor:

I am appalled by Chris Bateman's Oct. 12 article. If you are so worried about the Afghans, you should place yourself on a plane and go reside there, because we, the Americans, don't need you or your worries. We only have time to worry about ourselves and what is coming from them next.

It is ignorant liberal zealot mentalities like yourself that encourage Americans to cower to terrorism and just let this go without response. You can plainly see that Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan teach their people at a very young age to hate us.

The war on terrorism has begun. I resent your attempt to place a guilt trip on the American public. If you are not with us, you are against us. That holds true for anyone who lives in the USA, including you.

It is time to start acting like the super power we are and continue to bomb any country that harbors terrorists.

Brandon Hatler

Sonora

Chris Bateman

RANDOM TAKES AND MEMORIES

Over the intervening decades I had devoted very little thought to my one year as a Peace Corps teacher in Afghanistan. So when my PC colleague Pat Nyhan asked me to share a few memories, I told her I would not have a lot to contribute.

Then I dredged up a stack of letters I had written to my parents during 1970, dusted off a pile of slides and Instamatic snapshots, and dug up a couple of pieces on Afghanistan I had written for the Union Democrat during my 38-year tenure at that Sierra foothills paper.

Suddenly, memory stimulated, I was off to the races. One thing led to another, and after four days pounding at my laptop, a promised vignette or two turned into a many-chaptered tome totaling nearly 5,000 words.

And led to the realization that 1970 was one of the most interesting, bizarre and wonderful years of my life – full of good friends and incredible experiences.

Pat, I've learned, is also a journalist and, for this particular reunion project, she's also an editor. Editors, I learned over my years in the trade, really don't like it when reporters pull this kind of dirty trick.

So my apologies to Pat and to any readers who dare slog through what she's left below.

Unusual customs

My cook in Kunduz was engaged to be married and looking for a wedding present for his fiancée. I mentioned that I could get him a watch from the States, and I might as well have offered him a new Cadillac.

Afzal was ecstatic, and I asked my parents to send me a dainty-looking women's Timex – which they did. But when I went to the customs station in Kabul to pick it up, an agent there shrugged his shoulders and told me it had been "lost."

I was angry and upset, knowing that the watch had been pilfered by one of the country's invariably crooked civil servants. Hearing the commotion at the counter, the office manager came my way with a solution. "A lot of watches come through here," he soothed. "I'll find you a nice new one."

I declined, instead searching for a fake Timex in Kabul.

Relaying the tale, I told my parents that the Afghans had made a “fine art out of combining incompetence and corruption.”

Everybody’s right

Did you ever notice this? I did.

Four of us were attempting to get out of remote Faizabad via the supposed twice-a-week plane to Kunduz that took off from the sheep pasture that doubled as the town airport.

We woke on the morning of our alleged departure, and our Faizabad innkeeper said the old De Havilland Otter would not be flying and was, in fact, nowhere to be seen. But a policeman countered that the plane was not only at the landing strip, but could take off at any minute. Neither of them were troubled by even a shadow of doubt, nor were any of the two or three more folks we similarly questioned.

Hedging our bets, we took a gaudi to the airport, where no plane waited. But three men at the airport separately swore that the plane would: 1. Arrive in minutes. 2. Would come in two days or 3. Was postponed for an entire week. All were dead certain.

We ended up riding a dump truck back to Kunduz. The driver absolutely guaranteed he’d make it in 12 hours. It took 17.

Want Uruguay? How ’bout Afghanistan?

When I applied for the Peace Corps, I listed South America as my first choice. Then came the South Pacific. And, OK, sure, I’d settle for Africa if need be.

I was assigned, of course, to Afghanistan. After I arrived, I learned through the grapevine that nobody who applies to the PC gets his or her first choice.

There were various guesses as to the logic behind this. Give an applicant his first choice, the thinking may have gone, and it would be too easy, too much like a vacation. Let’s make these rooks at least a bit uncomfortable.

I don’t think any of my PC colleagues actually requested Afghanistan, and a few confessed to not being entirely sure where the nation was when they received their acceptances.

Anyone who actually applied to come to Kabul, the Peace Corps (with some justification) may have concluded, were likely lured by the availability of cheap and very good hashish. So those folks were sent to Tonga.

So how did that work out?

Well, my colleagues at PC training in Kabul and I were fast learners, adaptable and opportunistic.

After 10 days of language and cultural training, a few of my new friends and I thought we had learned enough Farsi to buy hashish. So I joined a fellow trainee (who shall remain nameless) on a walk to one of Kabul's seedier bazaars and began tentatively inquiring about "chars."

Within 10 minutes we had made a win-win deal, buying a quarter-pound chunk of the stuff for the equivalent of 50 cents.

The guy who sold it to us without a bit of haggling was convinced he had royally ripped off a couple of American rubes. And my Peace Corps buddy and I thought we had made the deal of the century.

The only drawback? If the PC powers-that-be pulled a surprise drug raid on our training dorm, my co-conspirator feared, the chunk of hash we had bought "would be too big to flush down the toilet."

Fired up

Our illicit purchase notwithstanding, I graduated from training, was stationed in Kunduz and over the months that followed made frequent trips to visit fellow volunteers.

Toward the end of the school year, I was among several colleagues who paid a weekend visit to a couple stationed at the far reaches of the Peace Corps empire. Their home, on the distant outskirts of a place that was barely a town at all, was not likely to attract visits from the PC hierarchy.

So rather than pay an exorbitant 50 cents for chars in the wrong part of town (which out there was probably, like, one guy), they grew their own. And, of course, the crop was way, way more than this pair of teachers could possibly smoke.

When we arrived, it was fall in Northern Afghanistan and a chill was in the air. So our hosts uprooted the substantial remains of their cannabis plot and lit it up. Yes indeed, the resulting bonfire warmed us up. And nobody minded being downwind.

A psychedelic postscript

I have no idea where we got the stuff, but a fellow volunteer (once again nameless) and I once dropped LSD in Bamiyan. We were flying high on acid while perched on the stone head of the 170-foot-high Buddha that overlooks the valley.

Luckily, we did not have to interact with any Afghans. Any such conversation would have done little to forward the Peace Corps mission.

Nevertheless, after several hours our trip was taking a ragged turn south. So we smoked huge amounts of hash to "come down."

A day later, remarkably, we were back at our schools teaching.

Me? A teacher?

The above vignettes notwithstanding, the U.S. government was not paying me to conduct experiments with Afghanistan's intoxicant of choice. Instead I was to teach English to its high-school students.

And for a year I did. I was assigned to the DMA, a Kunduz boarding school whose students lived in the province's distant corners and who – with a few exceptions – would not put the English I taught them to much use once they returned to the family farm.

Still, I was trained to teach English, and teach it I did. I drafted lesson plans, gave quizzes, forced these kids to speak my own language for minutes at time and encouraged the best of them to pursue proficiency in this international tongue.

But my most memorable hours in class came once a week, when English was off-limits and instead I told them about America in Farsi, occasionally with visual aids. I had my parents, for instance, send me copies of a *Sports Illustrated* issue with Muhammad Ali – a hero throughout the Muslim world – on the cover.

They also asked me if I was in fact a CIA agent working undercover. I strenuously denied this, but then don't all spooks?

My kids then moved onto sex, asking one at times envious question after another on America's loose morals. I never had Mom and Dad send over copies of *Playboy* to quench my students' considerable curiosity. Instead – and this was nearly as disruptive – they sent me a care package full of Frisbees and squirt guns. These were items none of my students had ever seen or perhaps even suspected existed.

Pandemonium broke loose on the DMA campus the day they arrived, and suddenly being in Mr. Chris's English class became very cool.

A hard day

Calling the roll was the easiest part of my day. I'd read off the names and the kids would answer "here." Or when one of their classmates was absent, they'd tell me he was sick, late getting back from home, or otherwise indisposed.

But when I got to Mohammed Jalil, a tall, confident student, there was deadly silence from the class. After many questions, it turned out he had been charged by the Kunduz police with burglarizing his father's house.

Jalil didn't do it, all his classmates attested, but the shame was more than he could endure and he shot himself.

Some teachers might seize this moment, engaging the class in an instructive discussion about how this young man's suicide was unnecessary and perhaps the fault of a misguided culture.

I didn't touch it. The rest of that day's class was uncomfortable and quiet. And I was left realizing how different we Americans were from our hosts.

Roots of a career

I've been a journalist for 45 years, and my musty resume says I began as a cub reporter in 1973.

But in reality I started at the top. As publisher of *The DMA Times* in Kunduz.

Armed with copies of *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* sent by my ever-obliging parents, I encouraged the best and the brightest of my students to start a school paper of their own.

But, as I had access to the principal's ditto machine, I was the publisher. Mohammed Anwar, a bright 11th-grader who could speak better English than I could Farsi, was the managing editor. We put out a few issues, none of which have survived the intervening decades.

I wish I could tell you how we exposed school corruption, administrators on the take, diplomas for sale and more, but I think we stuck to tamer stuff – like what a great guy and paragon of integrity Mr. Sayed, our principal, happened to be.

As for my journalistic career, it was all downhill after that. Never again would I be a publisher. Or have access to a ditto machine.

John True visits

I knew our regional director would show up for one of my DMA classes someday. There would be no warning, no prep, no nothing.

John True's visit, during which he'd find out if I was really a teacher, would be a surprise. As it should have been.

I just hoped I'd get lucky that day, that my often-unruly kids would be decent, attentive and engaging for a change. And that I didn't have to shout, get flustered or appear way out of my depth.

Well, the day John showed up, I nailed it. Somehow I was Mr. Chips for a day, beloved, respected and effective. For an entire 45 minutes. My kids were wonderful, and they had no idea who "Mr. Johntrue" was.

It was like the general manager of a baseball team shows up, and a mediocre pitcher with a sky-high ERA somehow pitches a shutout, then gets a new contract and a raise from the GM.

Except I got neither of those.

Day of reckoning

Classes were over and it was final exam day at the DMA. The rules were pretty clear: absolutely no cheating – unless you can get away with it.

And about half my kids – despite my earnest pre-test warnings and appeals to whatever latent sense of integrity may have lurked deep in their souls – tried to get away with it. Almost all of them succeeded.

The exam venue was a flat campus field with scores of desks for students in all of my classes. Although I think a couple of my fellow Kunduz volunteers helped me proctor, we were hopelessly outmanned.

Every time our attention was drawn to a kid glancing at a crib sheet, peering over the shoulder of a better–prepared classmate or reading pen scrawlings on his palms, a dozen more scofflaws took advantage of our momentary scolds by doing the exact same things.

And the Afghan teachers assigned to help us monitor that day? Don't ask.

At the DMA, ethics was a dirty word.

I drew some satisfaction, however, that many of my students, despite cheating, had a tough time with the test. “Meestar, meestar,” a knot of them chanted as I left school hefting a sheaf of exams in my arms. “Deeficult, deeficult, *too* deeficult.”

At least they chanted it in English.

Over the next several days about a half-dozen students who never paid attention to me in the classroom visited my house, offering some modest bakshish and a plea: “Please, Mr. Chris, don’t fail me on the test.”

Then Mr. Sayed showed up and beseeched me not to fail *anyone,* as it would cause too much trouble on campus, and higher-ups at the provincial education office might get wind.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “If those students studied, they’ll pass.”

Mr. Sayed was not assured.

I graded the exams, failed a half-dozen kids who gave way less than a damn, then departed for what I thought would be a year-end trip through India and Nepal.

That trip, of course, never happened. I never returned to Kunduz, but Mr. Sayed did. So I guess the DMA somehow escaped the campus unrest he feared my few F grades would have brought.

Either that or – as inconceivable as this may seem – those grades were changed.

The rest of the story

John True relayed this dialogue to me in a letter he sent several months after my departure.

John: Mr. Sayed, I’m very sorry to have to tell you that Mr. Chris won’t be able to come back to the DMA next year. He had some difficulty with his family etc.

Mr. Sayed (after a long, flowing eulogy for Mr. Chris, in which he made it perfectly clear that he knew the *real* reason he wasn’t coming back): Will you give us someone to replace him?

John: No. Mr. Sayed (after long pause): Well, then will you give me a quart of ditto fluid?

Boys on the bus

As any of my fellow volunteers will tell you, my Farsi was not excellent.

But, as the months went on, it did improve. Exactly how much it had progressed became evident on a bus ride in Kabul near the end of my year in Afghanistan.

A guy near me was telling his seatmate, in hushed but audible tones, a dirty joke. An anatomically specific dirty joke. And when he hit the punch line, I burst out laughing.

The guy looked at me in stark disbelief, and I knew I had arrived.

An Olympic sport?

Early in my year-long stay in Afghanistan, I was lucky enough to see a buzkashi match on the outskirts of Kunduz. It left me convinced that this country's gruesome, violent national sport should be part of the Olympics.

Odds are long that Kabul will ever host the games, but the addition of buzkashi would give its athletes the inside track on a gold medal. Think about it: No other country even plays this blood-sweat-and-goats sport (although it would be amusing to see nations like Finland, France, Ireland or the Lesser Antilles attempt to field teams).

Sure, we'd have to deal with PETA and other animal activists who might have problems with the 30 or 40 decapitated dead goats needed for Olympic competition. Sure, we could placate them by offering to instead use live goats, but that might backfire badly.

Better, perhaps, to simply point out that baseball – which has been an actual Olympic sport – uses a ball covered with the hides of dead horses.

Speaking of horses, about 30 riders and steeds are involved in buzkashi. Each team's goal is to drag a headless goat carcass from one goal (a flag on a pole), around a second, very distant pole, then back to the first. Opposing riders use any and all means to pry the increasingly fragmented goat from the opposing riders. All carry whips, which they more often used on enemy riders than on horses.

Chains and other weaponry, we were told at the Kunduz match, were only recently banned. "It's game of action and violence," I told my parents in a letter.

But, as the field measures about 400 yards square, the action and violence were often so far away from the grandstands that we had time for lengthy discussions about politics, Vietnam, music, travel plans, the intricacies of the NFL playoffs and a host of other topics as the dusty, gory chaos unfolded a quarter-mile away.

If you didn't pay attention, however, you might look up to see 30 horses and, somewhere among them, one dead goat hurtling headlong toward you.

Near as we could tell, buzkashi has no clock, no penalties, no time outs and no refs. At times tempers flare and scores of reserve riders gallop from the sidelines to join the fray. Finally – and we actually saw this in Kunduz – cops armed with billy clubs wade in, clobbering riders and horses alike.

"What?" you may now be scoffing. "That kind of thing has no place in the Olympics!"

Hear me out. First, I'm convinced the U.S. could field a half-decent buzkashi team made of rodeo cowboys, NFL linebackers and ripped, tatted-up MMA stars who could be taught to ride. For the sake of the better-to-do, we could add a few snooty polo players who aren't afraid to use their mallets.

NBC could add goat cams and gin up a bunch of stats on animal (and human) parts torn loose, length of lacerations inflicted and whip strokes delivered per minute. Retired Afghan buzkashi riders could be "color commentators." You get the idea.

Finally, answer me this: Wouldn't you rather watch a buzkashi match on TV than badminton, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronized swimming or dressage (whatever that is), which are actual Olympic sports?

Harazajot

Since I left the Peace Corps at the tail end of 1970, I've traveled around the world, climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, hiked South Africa's rugged Otter Trail, bicycled across the U.S., scaled Mt. Whitney and Half Dome, and trekked through the Himalayas in Nepal.

But none of that comes even close to the wild adventure of crossing Afghanistan's Hazarajot in a 1955 Willys.

The company was much of the reason: David (then Daoud) Moats, Fritz Laurenovics, John and Dona Templeman, and Chris and Pat Nyhan, my best Peace Corps friends, were all in. Sheer adventure was the rest.

Where we planned to go was terra incognito. We asked about the roads through Afghanistan's mountainous middle and got answers ranging from "Really, really bad" to "What roads?" No other volunteers that we knew of had taken the trip. But somehow Kadir, the driver we hired, swore he could get all of us from Kabul to Herat in less than the two weeks we had for semester break.

That was a lie.

The trip was uncomfortable, scary, desolate and way, way out there. If that Willys had plunged off a cliff – and at times it got close – our loved ones would still be wondering what happened to us.

That said, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Many folks do the things I mentioned at the top of this story. Almost nobody does Hazarajot. Heck, *National Geographic* barely got there.

Even starting the trip was not easy. How do you even wedge seven PC volunteers and a driver into a '55 Willys?

The answer: You put two in the front with Kadir, three in the middle and two in the rear cargo area. Our gear, I think, was strapped on top.

The front may have been the scariest, because you could see exactly how close those looming cliffs were. The cramped middle was tough on knees and backs. The rear had great legroom and views, because we kept the gate open. But for the same reason, storms of road dust poured in, forcing us to either wear bandanas or gag, spit and swear for mile after mile.

After Bamiyan and Band-i-Amir (tourist destinations not all that far from Kabul), we left the mildly beaten track for the Great Beyond. When we pulled into a camel stop called Garm Auw (my spelling) on our third day on the road, it was like the circus had come to town. Within minutes, the town's entire Hazar population surrounded and stared, intently and open-mouthed, at us.

Think about it. Few cars and trucks pass through Garm Auw and the last time one with foreigners (including two women!) had passed through was likely... never. The townspeople were friendly enough, considering they were looking at alien life forms.

The experience would be repeated again and again as we crossed pass after pass and traversed valley after valley in a vast, desolate area left behind by the ages. On the plus side, we always found food and sometimes dirt-floor accommodations at the settlements we passed through. And not once were we threatened or intimidated (except by those cliffs).

But because of barely negotiable roads and almost daily Willys breakdowns, progress was slow. About 10 days into the trip, we arrived at the Minaret of Jam, a majestic, 200-foot-high, spire built in the late 12th century alongside the Hari Rud River.

It took a detour off the alleged main road and, as I remember, a trek down a donkey trail, to get to the minaret. We climbed a set of narrow stone stairs to the top and signed a guest register put there in the mid-1950s, shortly after the minaret became known to the outside world. There were about 30 names on it.

We were still on schedule when the Willys sputtered and clanked into Chackcharan, the capitol of Ghor Province. We camped by the Hari Rud as Kadir drove into town for gas. There was none.

And there would be none for four days. It wasn't because we didn't ask.

Every day we sent a delegation to visit the portly, always agreeable provincial governor. We'd tell him we were Peace Corp teachers and that it was absolutely essential that we get back to our schools in time for the beginning of the semester.

This urgency was not exactly reflected at our laid-back encampment on the Hari Rud. As our colleagues made their fervent pleas, the rest of us basked in the sun, took refreshing swims and talked about just how great our trip had been.

Meanwhile, the governor each day promised the gas tanker would arrive either that afternoon or, at the very latest, early the next day. His repeated promises eventually came true.

We drove back to Kabul on the paved road through Kandahar, arrived at our schools several days later – and were reprimanded for our tardiness by the PC brass.

A very small price to pay for such an adventure.

Our mission

Our urgent plea to Ghor's provincial governor may have a few of you wondering how much our classroom work was valued by King Mohammed Zahir Shah's government back then.

Although I wasn't among the volunteers who lost sleep pondering this question, a few of my more committed colleagues decided to put the king's minister of education on the spot.

"Don't be foolish," he reportedly told them. "You're not here to teach English. You're here to be resident Americans, and it doesn't matter what you do."

To maintain the proper diplomatic balance in the then-neutral country, the minister explained, there must be one American for every two Russians in Afghanistan. That was what was important.

Seem preposterous, simplistic, crazy?

Well, it worked until the Russians invaded and that 2-to-1 ratio went *way* out of whack. Then we invaded in 2001 and stuck around, so I'm pretty sure that once-golden ratio is still nowhere near 2-to-1.

So the formula worked until it didn't work. And I don't think – the minister's comments notwithstanding – it affected how we Peace Corps teachers did our jobs.

My abrupt departure

I was crushed, devastated, overwhelmed.

One day I was celebrating the end of my first year as a Peace Corps teacher at a party with my fellow volunteers. The next day, along with seven or eight colleagues (I've forgotten the exact number), I was summarily thrown out.

The vacation trip to India and Nepal I had planned with a PC buddy? Gone. Teaching at a new post in exotic Faizabad for my second year? Forget it.

Instead I wired my parents in Chicago: "BACK WEDNESDAY MORN. NO EMERGENCY."

The reason? As I had during most every other weekend party during my year of PC service, I joined my colleagues in partaking of hashish at our year-end bash. It made the music sound great and the conversation flow. Only this time a fellow volunteer blew the whistle on us.

The Peace Corps brass acted quickly.

Although hash was the drug of choice in Afghanistan, cheap and widely available, using it was against PC regulations. No, the Corps did not actively enforce this rule, and some might even say it looked the other way.

But not when a case was served up on a silver platter: We didn't lie, and justice was swift. We were given plane tickets home and in two days we were all gone.

"It was drugs, wasn't it??" thundered my dad when I arrived home a few days before Christmas.

My mom was in tears. And my brother, who had two years earlier been busted for pot in Colorado, gave me a look that roughly translated as “Sure glad I’m not you today.”

Things weren’t pleasant at home, although a letter John True sent to my parents (I still have it) attesting that I was a decent guy and dedicated teacher, helped a lot.

Still, it took me better than year to recover. Fearing no reputable employer would hire me with this black mark on my record, I moved to California and took a series of marginal jobs where backgrounds were not checked. This did little to rehabilitate my crippled resume

So I finally screwed up my courage and applied for a newspaper job.

Lucky for me, the publisher was desperate. When I told him of my abrupt dismissal from the Peace Corps for using drugs, he shrugged. “Everyone has a few skeletons in their closet,” said my new boss, and I began a 38-year career at *The Union Democrat.*

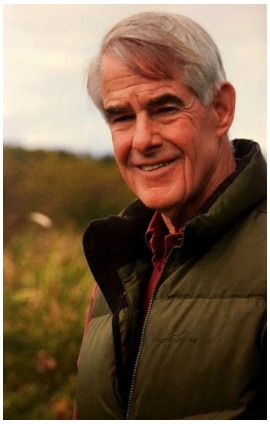
Meanwhile, dismissal of the Kabul Eight (or Nine), apparently become something of a legend among volunteers remaining in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is a story full of twists, turns, nuance, intrigue and more than enough blame to go around.

After a few years as a “reputable” journalist (this was decades before “fake news”) the stigma of my dismissal faded and I began to tell the story with relish, humor and probably more license than I should have.

At times I’ve considered reconnecting with everyone involved (including the rat, who with more-than-ample justification was thrown out himself). In interview after interview, I’d get to the bottom of this surrealistic period piece, then tell it like it was.

But then I’d have to file a Freedom of Information Act request and go over sheaves of heavily redacted documents to ferret out the truth. This could take years, and at 71, I may not have years.

So I’ll settle for getting together with you, my fellow volunteers, in San Diego (thanks, Bill, for making it all happen) and reliving all the adventures of my very eventful year in Afghanistan.



Through the Looking Glass in Kabul

By Pat Nyhan

Chris and I were the first people ever to choose Afghanistan for a Peace Corps assignment, due to its reputation as a hardship post. Just the thing for us! The most different place on earth from our own country, which we couldn't wait to escape.

The U.S. was at a peak of disillusionment with the Vietnam War, undergoing the largest antiwar protests in history. We didn't trust our leaders, who lied to us. So we were not stereotypical Peace Corps volunteers in 1970-71. Idealists, yes, but cynical.

Now here we were far away, marveling at Kabul.

"I can't believe this is a capital of a country," I wrote to friends. It looked like something out of the Old Testament or Arabian Nights: kids running with colorful kites through the mud-walled streets; koochis passing through town on camels with bold, spangled women riding high; the sweet scent of mulberry wood smoke and corner nan shops filling the air; stars twinkling brightly in the winter sky over snowy mountains.

We were enchanted.

But even in training, we couldn't escape the U.S. entirely. When Vice-President Spiro Agnew visited Kabul, in January 1970, we wanted to mount a protest, but demurred in deference to our hosts. We voted to have a few volunteers make a quiet statement by handing over a batch of our letters to Agnew. Meanwhile, some 1,000 Afghan students angrily marched through the streets.

"An AP reporter on the scene blew up what happened into a wild story about PC instigating an Afghan demonstration. Agnew got mad and threatened to do away with PC here," I wrote my folks.

Although Chris and I wanted to be assigned either to Kabul University, or the opposite – a "real Peace Corps experience" in the atroff -- we were posted to Habibia High School, an American-built school in Kabul with boys of elite families who had never had a female teacher.

It was wonderful, at first. Although the mullah teachers disapproved of me, lowering their heads if they passed me in the hall, I was protected by the principal and fellow English teachers, who welcomed us warmly in the teacher's room. The men were eager for modern ways and knowledge about America.

We chatted amiably each day at break time, when they sometimes consulted us on matters of grammar. "What's the difference between 'over' and 'above'?" one repeatedly asked. They quietly consulted Chris about birth control methods. We chuckled together during Ramazan when they mischievously sent out the baba for watermelons and we ate the forbidden treat behind a locked door so the students wouldn't know.

Our department chair, Abdul Rahman Seljuki, set a gracious tone. An elegant, goateed scholar, he was descended from the Seljuk dynasty in Herat. When we visited his home one day, he showed us samples of his brother's famous calligraphy and enlightened us about the dynasty's flowering of the arts. Young fellows slipped quietly in and out, serving us a feast. To complete our happiness, Seljuki put on a record to listen to as we sat cross-legged on the carpet: "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain When She Comes

We were charmed. Even when I had to teach for a few weeks without our textbook, "Afghans Learn English," because the old baba who guarded the book room thought books were too valuable to be given out. I dreamed up dialogs to practice the kids' spoken English, which they found a hilarious change from their former rote memorization.

They kindly let me know that the silly get-up I had been wearing to school to be culturally correct (a pant-suit, raincoat and headscarf) could be ditched. When I arrived each day, they shot to their feet with, "Good morning, Mister Teacher!" We just loved each other, or so it seemed.

The giggly but respectful boys were sweet 10th graders, well-dressed pairs sitting side-by-side, sometimes holding hands or smelling a flower picked on the way to school. Always helping each other. Always obeying the class captain, who set a studious example and kept order.

The best captain was Abdul Ahad, a gentle giant worshiped by the boys. But one day, he laid his head on his desk and fainted. The boys rose up as one and carried him home, where he died that day of hepatitis. He had never let on that he was sick.

"Don't cry, teacher. It was his time," said the boys.

Yunos was another born leader, eager to ask and answer questions and encourage the others to follow. When he fell silent after a few months, I was mystified. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong. At the end of term, I caught up with him on his way home and begged him to tell me.

"One day, two bad boys in our class threatened me with a knife at my throat. They told me they would kill me if I supported the teacher by speaking," he said, with tears in his eyes.

The bad boys were two "gigolos" who were slick older fellows in sharp suits at the back of the class, fomenting trouble. In fact, they had done time in the notorious Kabul Jail. They had gone to the principal to protest having a female teacher, but he came to class and made an impressive speech about respecting "our guest" and scolded the class. It later turned out the issue wasn't having a female teacher; it was that I discouraged cheating, and since the gigolos never studied, they perceived their ambitions to win academic scholarships thwarted.

.Our enchantment began to wear off during semester exams, when wholesale cheating broke out.

“The boys who didn’t buy the exam from Ministry officials beforehand, talked and copied openly all during the exam,” I wrote friends back home. “They told Chris and me they would demonstrate against us because we didn’t give out answers in the exam like the Afghan teachers.

“ ‘This is Afghanistan – not America. We help each other here,’ they told me.

“Just one English teacher was tough – a Pakistani who helped me proctor my worst class. The boys were so frustrated during the test that they almost walked out when I tore up two papers, and physically attacked the Pakistani at the end of the exam.

“Students regularly beat up on teachers at Habibia, and last week one hit the principal. What happens? A few pay-offs, then nothing. In the case of the Pakistani, the administration was embarrassed because it was in a foreigner’s (my) class, so they made a big show of efficient punishment. In the end, a few boys kissed the Pakistani’s hands and feet in apology, paid off someone, and went free.”

A few years ago, I visited Seljuki during a lovely afternoon at his home in Falls Church, Va., where he had built a successful new life after fleeing Afghanistan’s wars. As a school inspector after Habibia days, he had seen the same corrupt system everywhere in the country, he said.

“At least our principal was honest,” I offered.

“He was the biggest bribe-taker of all,” Seljuki laughed.

By April 1970, Chris and I were becoming more and more disenchanted with our jobs, and we hadn’t found a way into the culture to make friends, to balance our growing negativity. Our solace was our times with close Peace Corps friends, whom we saw when they came into Kabul or on glorious, hair-raising road trips around the country together. We thought we might have been happier in the atroff, away from Kabul’s politically heated atmosphere.

The next month, the mullahs went on the rampage. My reports home grew more worrisome to my folks:

“For the past 10 days they’ve been demonstrating against the government and the forces of change in general. The original cause was an article in a government newspaper praising Lenin on his birthday. The mullahs thought it a poor idea to honor an atheist. This turned into a widespread campaign to do away with certain liberalizations of women’s rights and erupted into a tragic incident: a gang of boys from our high school, urged on by the mullahs, attacked 20 or 30 female teachers near here and threw acid in their faces – allegedly because they were wearing short skirts and no veils. One woman has died.”

Other Habibia students stormed out of school to protest the mullahs, shouting to us to hurry home until the trouble was over as a mob surged through the streets. We could only vaguely make out the reasons for Kabul's unrest.

"Last year school only met for four months due to sympathy strikes with the university, which follows many conflicting political winds. University students profess Maoism and Soviet socialism by turns, but nonetheless baksheesh their way to American scholarships like crazy," I wrote.

"We're convinced the Peace Corps and all American aid here is a waste. Afghans don't like or respect us much. The Minister of Education told some Volunteers recently, 'Forget about being good teachers. It doesn't matter. You're only here to balance the Russian presence.' "

Cynicism was in the air in Kabul, compounding our disillusionment about our own country. "We listen to Voice of America and BBC with horror at the reports of Nixon's push into Cambodia and the resulting violence at home," I wrote.

"Maybe cumulatively over many, many years the combined efforts of foreigners here will make a difference, but it looks recently as if Afghanistan will end up in the hands of the Russians. They've been putting more pressure on the king, and there are hundreds of Russians walking around town."

That spring, I began volunteering at the Kabul Times, the English-language (non-news) paper that published under censorship by the royal palace. As I did some copy-editing and wrote a few stories, I kept an ear out as the two Afghan gents sitting near me discussed their communist views in low voices. It felt ominous.

The paper ran only light stories written almost entirely by the editor under various made-up bylines. I enjoyed this comical example of a "Through the Looking Glass" side of Afghanistan, where things often turned out not to be what they seemed.

On Thanksgiving Eve, we hosted a feast, with turkey and trimmings, for our Volunteer friends. We exchanged stories of disillusionment, with our jobs and/or Peace Corps itself. Those in isolated postings wanted more support from our local office. We felt impatient with some aspects of the program that seemed pointless. It always felt good to let off steam with our pals, and to admit that we hadn't had as much luck as we wanted with our jobs, or socializing with Afghans, or dealing with setbacks in what was, no question, a "hardship post" in terms of physical and mental health.

That night, hash was smoked, as it always was when we got together. This time, Chris and I didn't participate, because we were busy with hosting. But one poor fellow who had been out in an isolated place for too long ate some hash brownies and had a dangerously bad trip. That dealt with, the party ended. We didn't know how bad it had been.

The next day, Chris and I headed for a month-long vacation in India. Throughout that time, we wrestled with quitting the Peace Corps. We loved the country, the people, the adventure. We just felt stymied in our jobs by the systemic corruption. Were we projecting the disillusionment with our own country that we had trailed with us?

In the end, we decided to quit the Peace Corps, but remain in Afghanistan and find other jobs. We felt elated.

"You're about to be busted," warned our great friend Fritz on the tarmac of Kabul Airport when our flight landed in December 1970. Off we went to meet with our country director, Lou Mitchell, who was firing us for hosting the party, and – as we learned – had sent home everyone at the party, precipitating baffled, angry responses from the Volunteers' colleagues in the schools they taught in.

"What? A little hashish smoking? And we have to lose our best teachers?" was the furious response.

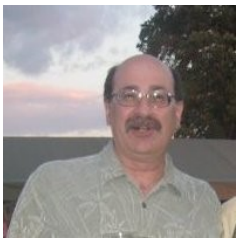
"We're resigning," we told Mitchell, explaining our reasons, which had nothing to do with the incident at our place, so much worse than we knew when we left for India: our friend's medical evacuation and wholesale firing of all those other friends of ours.

This was the final disconnect between Peace Corps and us, but not between Afghanistan and us. Chris and I found other jobs, he running an English language program at USIS, I in an office of an AID program at the Afghan Institute of Technology. We worked happily on until September 1971, when we exited the country "ba taklif," after a wild misadventure with our pals to Nuristan [see Chris's account].

What remains most vivid is not the job struggles and general disillusionment of the times, but the bonds we forged with our Peace Corps friends to deal with them. And affection for the Afghans, the most welcoming of people, even if we didn't always get them, through the looking glass.

Pat Nyhan mentored Afghan refugees in Maine in the 1980s and does so currently in Washington, D. C., where she writes for the Peace Corps Community for the Support of Refugees: www.pcc4refugees.org.

By Andy Sussman



1. The overwhelming sense of wonder and anticipation with every one of the stops of Cycle 10's Boeing 727 24-hour charter flight (Philadelphia-Gander-Prestwick-Rome-Istanbul-Beirut -Damascus (all 15 minutes of that hop)-Baghdad-Tehran-Kabul, realizing that we were getting closer and closer to Mars.

2. Heat and dust, followed by heat and dust, leavened occasionally by dust and heat.

3. Growing confidence as my Pushtu began to improve, and much more confidence after arriving in Jalalabad and quickly learning that Pushtu was really hard, Dari was much easier, and I could get by 90% of the time with Dari -- which I began to pick up on the street.

4. The best bread, melons and hashish, and the most hospitable people on earth. (Sorry, Iran.)

5. My students-- 9 girls, aged 15-19 from Jalalabad, Laghman and nearby villages, at a new nursing school -- first of its kind. Realizing that I was the first man with whom they'd ever been in a room without a male relative, and dealing with it by announcing that I was their brother, and getting them to buy it.

6. A very annoying 5 year old kid loudly "Mister Katchaloo"-ing me down the street until I turned and flicked open my Afghan-made switchblade knife, and the improper but genuine satisfaction of watching him running away down the street as fast as he could, howling and pissing himself.

7. The best sales pitch I've ever heard, at a Nangrahar village specializing in the manufacture and sale of weapons, where a 10 year old kid stuck a derringer in my face and asked: "Hey, Mister -- Do you want to buy this gun?"

8. Live geckos on the walls of the house to keep down the bugs.

9. WTs and their enthralling and sometimes ridiculous travel stories. When bored with one another, I or one of the roommates would go down to the bazaar and, when a bus with some on board arrived, offer a place to stay and food for the night in exchange for them. We stopped after an appalling incident with a French couple, whose dream was to get to Pakistan, buy a bunch of heroin, return, sell it and start a commune in Provence. They left, and returned 2 weeks later, broke, having given their money to a friendly chap who promised he'd be "right back with the stuff." Their new plan was to prostitute her here and there en route back to scrape together travel funds -- with no apparent knowledge of the local going rates in any of those countries. We gave them 400 afs for bus tickets to the Iran border on condition that they never show themselves in Afghanistan again.

10. Fishing with Afghan friends in the time-honored traditional local way -- tossing a lit stick of dynamite into the Kabul River, and then wading in to collect them.

11. Finding the point at which servant theft was tolerable but not a firing offense. Firing one who liked to peek into our bedroom windows at night.

12. The unjustified but real feeling of comradeship with Afghan strangers at a teahouse in the cold moonlit darkness of Balkh, waiting for a morning bus.

13. Visiting friends in Lashkar Gah and galloping with them on one of their horses through the ancient deserted city outside of town.

14. Projectile diarrhea -- and later, Doc Johnson signing my copy of his medical guide for PCVs, dedicating the chapter on that ailment to me.

15. Feeling safer on the streets of Kabul at 1 am while looking for a taxi than I ever did in New York.

16. The night of Eid, when I and some others climbed onto the roof of Jalalabad's Green Hotel and lit off a very large bottle rocket. It went up and blew up, and the large, bright embers slowly drifted down....straight for the wooden roof of the Pakistan consulate -- and this when tensions were very, very high with India. Realizing that we might have just started a war, we ran as fast as we could towards the horizon. The embers burned out two feet above the roof.

17. Dana Bonnin.

18. The Afghan spreading the excellent bazaar rumor that the American Medical Mission Sisters (nuns and nurses), who had a portable altar for when a visiting priest might pass through, thought they had God in a box.

19. Friendships that have stood the test of time, in particular Bob DeSoucey, and the Fotis (now just Mary -- Sebastian died way too young), and the Shaeffers, and Gary Fenton.

20. The single best thing I learned from Afghanistan and the PC = how to deal effectively with others who differ completely from you, on their own terms. Both served me well later during my years in Iran, and more so when I began to practice law.

Andy Sussman

SMALLPOX STORY
AFGHANISTAN SUMMER 1968

Kristina Engstrom

A SMALLPOX STORY

Driving in from the Kabul airport after a numbing flight from the States, the first things to strike me were the heat and the light. It was July, and the heat was dry. Clear, unwavering light illuminated the mountains surrounding the city, but at eye level, dust was everywhere. It lay in thick, shifting blankets on the dirt roads, and for the first time in my life, I thought about why it was nice to have pavement. Dust covered all forms of transport - the old clunkers of trucks and buses, the sweet-faced donkeys, the cranky camels. Even the birds were dusty. Afghanistan's color was beige.

In my first hours, I saw fat-tailed sheep being herded through the early-morning streets and soldiers holding hands. I saw young city girls wearing white head-scarves, black stockings, and black trenchcoats in the summer heat. Everyone was lean, except maybe the women. With them, you couldn't tell because they wore chaudries that covered them from the tops of their heads to their ankles. I wondered how the children frolicking around these ladies figured out which ones were their mothers, but they did.

I waited for the calls to prayer and finally heard them, and after a day, I also began to sort out some of the smells - cooking fires fueled by wood and dung, roasting meats, human waste.

Once the jet lag wore off, I also began to feel excitement. Excitement from all the different people in the bazaar and the things they had to sell. Excitement from believing that once I knew a little more about the place and the language, I would feel that I belonged here as much as any other new city.

I felt fear too. Fear of walking in the mucky streets in open-toed sandals. Fear of being purse-snatched. Fear of that ubiquitous beggar whose tongue flopped above the empty space where his jaw had once been. Fear of the sickish twinges in my gut that would be the precursors of diarrhea. Fear of being foreign. Fear of looking afraid.

The year was 1968, and I was in Afghanistan gathering information for a training program to prepare Peace Corps Volunteers to vaccinate people in Afghanistan against smallpox. For centuries, smallpox had swept through towns and villages all over the world leaving two out of every five of its victims dead and those who

lived blinded or, at best, marked for life with pitted scars all over their faces. In Afghanistan, as in 33 other countries at the time, smallpox was endemic.

In 1967, the Afghan government asked the Peace Corps to provide women Volunteers for the country's vaccination program. The American women would be teamed up with Afghan health workers, most of whom were men, to travel through the country, the Volunteers vaccinating women and children, their counterparts vaccinating the men. At the time, the government believed that village men would not allow strange men, health workers or not, to approach their women to vaccinate them; and there weren't enough Afghan women health workers to do the work.

My job in Afghanistan was to learn as much as I could about the life and work of the Volunteers who were already doing this work so that we could train a new group to continue the project. This story describes some of the things that I learned.

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> Hundreds of flies. Cocky bastards. Afraid to open my mouth to talk - they fly in. No one else is swatting them so I try to sit quietly. We are at a health center that includes a school where Afghan girls are being trained to be health workers. We are waiting for the center supervisor to come and tell us that we can go out to a nearby village and vaccinate.
>
> The girls are young - ages 14 to 18. They giggle. One sits on the bench next to me, turns toward me, and looks me over - her face six inches from mine. From time to time, she feels my clothes. It is hard not to flinch.
>
> I am so uncomfortable sitting there that I start to hate things. I hate the flies, I hate the girls, their inquisitive hands, their staring, their giggling. I hate the whole damn thing. I am glad that I have only two months to spend and not the two years that Peace Corps Volunteers commit to.

No vaccinator could go out to the field without obtaining permission from government authorities along the line - national, provincial, town, village. Formal permissions from provincial and town officials were embodied in a document called the "mactube". Vaccinators paid for mactubes with time, by waiting as long as it took, and, for the American vaccinators, by providing entertainment to whomever happened to be around.

Volunteers had to "learn how to do nothing", as the wise young

Afghan poet, Saddhudin, told me. Learn to hang around for a day to see an official who would decide where you would vaccinate, when, and with whom. Learn to do nothing the next day when permission granted was withdrawn and today's plan scrapped. Learn to wait three or four hours in a roadside teahouse for a ride to the next town, while the men eating there, and you the only woman, toss hard candy to you as they might throw peanuts to an animal in a zoo.

Volunteers learned to take the edge off the waiting by packing books in their knapsacks along with that more critical item, toilet paper. They learned how to sleep sitting up, to watch the people watching them, and talk with the people, almost always men, who gathered around these "haragies", or foreigners, wherever they were.

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I have my camera out as we enter a community near Kabul, and the children lead me to an old man sitting on the ground. He has a goiter engulfing his neck and is dazed. A trickle of blood is coming out of his mouth. The children are laughing and ask me to take his picture.

A woman in a remote village in the north injured her leg. The wound became infected, and the woman was unable to cope silently with the pain. Because she was making so much noise, her neighbors moved her from her home to a bedless, windowless, doorless mud hut, set about 100 yards off from the rest of the houses. When we arrived on our vaccination rounds, we agreed to visit the woman to see if we could do anything. She was quiet as my Peace Corps mentor, Sharon, entered and hunkered down on the floor to look at the wound and talk with her. In the end, Sharon could only advise the relatives to bathe the wound and use clean rags to wrap it, knowing that these prescriptions alone were difficult: water, soap, and even rags were not easy to come by.

In another place, an old woman asked us to help her daughter. The younger woman sat on the floor warming her legs under a low, quilt-covered table placed over a pot of hot coals. She looked feverish. She was thin, had a harsh, dry cough, and probably was dying of tuberculosis as her mother said. The mother had done all that she could do and all that could be done. And we could do nothing but say we were sorry and leave.

Volunteers saw people with dysentery, acute respiratory infections, fevers of unknown origin, eye diseases from the kohl rubbed around children's eyes to make them beautiful, and skin

infections. They saw kids who had lost one or both feet after falling into hot ovens dug in the ground to bake the bread called nan, the people's major sustenance. It did seem the will of god, insh'allah, that anyone lasted their alloted span of 42 years.

Some made their way to a hospital - like the man who rode a donkey for three days to get to a place where someone could set his broken leg - but these were the strong and the lucky. Generally, people made it, or didn't, on their own. Medical attention was so rare outside the cities that it was virtually non-existent.

Stoicism was the norm; people who made a fuss about pain were either isolated or disciplined. Doctors were known to slap unanesthesized patients who made too much noise during surgery. Many people suffered in this demanding country, and it was impolite to draw attention to your own problems.

In some cases, the problem was one of not getting there sooner to prevent disease. When a father held up his blind and scarred daughter to show the team what last year's smallpox outbreak had done, vaccinators could assure themselves and the father that his other children were not likely to see smallpox again. In most situations, however, timing wasn't the problem, lack of resources and ability were. It took skill to explain this to relatives, emotional fortitude to say no.

How helpless and sad Volunteers felt. For the first time in their lives, they were in situations where life did not necessarily mean hope.

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When the team arrives in a community, men, women, and children gather around to see the new people - especially the strange-looking ones dressed in tombons and perons (baggy trousers tied with a drawstring and a long tunic).

After getting themselves and their babies vaccinated in the compound in which they have gathered, the women hunker as close as they can get to the action. They squat shoulder to shoulder, because being physically close to your friends is nice and, besides, it is easier to discuss the foreign creatures that way.

A small group gathers around a dark, handsome fortune-teller sitting on the ground. The fortune-teller refuses to have a vaccination, for to puncture her skin would mean that the djinn in her body would have a way to escape and she would lose her powers.

In the best of circumstances, when a vaccination team arrived in a place, the mullek, or village chief, would round up all of the people in a central location and organize them in queues, men and women separate. It was usually easier to do the men because they would stand in line, roll their sleeves up, hold still while being vaccinated, and leave their sleeves up and refrain from touching the vaccination site until the vaccine dried.

Women, on the other hand, didn't always understand the concept of queuing. Like everything else, you have to learn to stand in line, but they had never been to school, to a post office or the movies (neither existed in rural Afghanistan), or any other place where they would see such a thing.

Some clients needed to be persuaded to accept a vaccination. Scientific explanations didn't work, but sometimes telling people that the team was sent by the government or was representing the King did.

For the most part, though, it seems that people submitted to the painless procedure because it was something different in their lives, or they wanted to show how brave they were, or they felt they could not refuse. One woman who wouldn't have any part of it, for example, changed her mind when the vaccinators turned down her invitation to take tea and got on their horses to leave. The shame of it was too much, and she capitulated. The vaccinators got off their horses, vaccinated her, and were served a lovely tea.

At another place, Sharon and I traded a vaccination for a tattoo, having been convinced by our prospect that, if we were going to make holes in her skin, it was only fair that she make holes in ours. I am very proud of my little tattoo, made with a sewing needle and thread moistened in water, then dipped in ashes from the fire, and drawn through the skin. The rubbing alcohol that we liberally splashed on our arms before and after the operation may have prevented infection, but it must have been our fate not to get tetanus or hepatitis or something.

In the end, almost everybody got vaccinated, except for the woman with the djinn, the women who chased me out of their rug-weaving room with screams of terror and six-foot long poles, and a few others.

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A day's travel from Mazar-i-Sharif to the town of Acrapruk by jeep and lorry, through dry, barren, brown-gray hills. Along the way, sitting on a rug on the mudbrick platform outside a teahouse, drinking tea from glasses, talking with

the men, and watching trucks, donkeys loaded with wheat, and people on foot going by. A teen-aged boy sits with us for two hours, haltingly trying the English he has learned in the high school in the provincial capital. I talk to him as Sharon discusses something with the men in her excellent Farsi. As we are about to get in the jeep for the last leg of the journey, the boy runs next door to a little store and buys one piece of writing paper to give me as a parting gift - just the right thing from one educated person to another.

Talking with people on the road and in the villages was quite different from talking with townspeople.

Village men seemed comfortable with the Peace Corps vaccinators. They asked where the Volunteers were from, and a few people in the more isolated places wondered how long it would take to walk home. They asked about livestock and crops in America, the weather, and were most curious about American marriage customs, what these seemingly eligible young women were doing unmarried, and what on earth their parents could have been thinking to let their children go so far.

When the vaccinating was done for the day, men tended to monopolize the team, leaving women and children on the fringes, just beyond hearing range. To make up for this, Volunteers ate with the women rather than the men who ate first and best, but this was only after they were accepted as bona fide women. To do this, the more flat-chested Volunteers took their shoes and socks off and had their feet checked out.

The women, too, asked about marriage customs and, even more persistently, why the Volunteers weren't married. They wanted to know how Volunteers took care of their personal and hygienic needs while in the field. They admired the Volunteers' jewelry and asked to have it, usually in trade if an outright gift didn't seem to be forthcoming.

They were interested in families and liked looking at photographs. They didn't ask much about American houses or food, maybe thinking that ours were the same as theirs. They didn't ask about schools either; village girls didn't go to school.

Once Volunteers arrived in an area, people would come long distances to see them. One middle-aged woman walked for six hours, down from her mountain home, across the valley below, and up the next mountain where we were staying. She sat and talked for a few hours, got her vaccination, and began the trip back. I'm not sure how she knew that the team was there, but the country people were said to communicate from mountain to mountain by yodeling, like the Swiss.

Townsmen, on the other hand, were less interested. They stared at the uncovered faces of the Volunteers and ridiculed the bargains that Volunteers thought they were striking so successfully in the bazaar. Sometimes, "peshak", meaning cat, a euphemism for whore, would be shouted at foreign women by unseen men.

In cosmopolitan Kabul, a woman did not have to be foreign to encounter trouble. There was a terrible period when radical mullahs were said to be throwing acid on the black-stockinged legs of little girls as they went to school.

Generally, the more anonymous a Volunteer was, the more likely she was to be abused with name-calling, spitting, and goosing. In the places where she lived, she was the teacher of people's children or the nurse in the hospital and thus a valued member of the community. In villages, where she travelled as a vaccinator, she was too much of a real person in need of food, shelter, and friendship to be hassled.

***

We asked for eggs one day because the villagers had given us nan and tea for dinner the night before and that morning for breakfast, and now for lunch it was nan and tea again. An hour passed before we were told that there were no eggs. Later we learned that a little boy had been sent to nearby villages to find eggs for us, but no one had any.

That night, while we waited for the evening meal, which we intended to eat gratefully no matter what, we visited with the women. They dyed our hands with henna to mark the festive event, and we talked about America and Afghanistan and our lives and theirs. The sun went down and the moon came up, it was getting late, and we still hadn't eaten. Just as we were asking about the delay, the women brought us a large tin basin full of the soup they had been making for us. The soup was made of mutton and roghan (sheep fat), and nan was served as a utensil for eating it.

The soup tasted and smelled like the food that I had had in Lalme before being wretchedly sick, and the smell of the mutton and the sight of all that roghan made my tongue fly up. But I ate. I ate all that I could and then some. Sharon ate twice as much, but we still didn't make much of a dent in the soup.

Our hostesses were upset. They had killed a sheep for this meal to make up for our disappointment at lunch, and now we weren't eating it.

In the end, they took what we hadn't eaten and gave it to the children, who were wild with delight.

From time to time, the Peace Corps talked about sending their vaccinators out with canned field rations to avoid being a burden on the people. Although eating rations would also reduce the high rate of intestinal illness among these Volunteers, they rejected the idea. They didn't want to weigh down their knapsacks with canned goods. They didn't want to set themselves any more apart from the other vaccinators and the soldiers who often travelled with them. Most important, they believed that it would be insulting to the people to reject their hospitality, no matter how little was available. So most Volunteers learned to eat what they were given, just like their mothers had taught them.

Even so, the farther Volunteers were from familiar foods, the more fondly they were remembered. In the poorest villages, an egg to go with the nan and tea was a treat even if it was served floating in a sea of roghan. In towns juicy kebabs cooked barbeque fashion were available; and, in provincial capitals, you could find Cokes, even if they were warm. In Kabul, almost everything was available, even for a non-Moslem. Volunteers would crash the USAID snack bar and get cold beers and hamburgers - what bliss! - even though they could still not have pasteurized milk or ice cream, lettuce or other uncooked vegetables. You had to go to Peshawar in Pakistan or even farther afield for those things.

Some excellent meals were available on the road, though. In one town we stayed in the home of a sub-governor, the person who governed part of a province. He and his wife were educated people from Kabul, and I think that our presence cheered them enormously, especially the woman, who didn't like wearing the chaudri, which she would have to do in the town, and hence left their compound only rarely. She had the full figure and the clear, white complexion to show that she was a well-to-do city girl. And, best of all, she was a fantastic cook. She and her servants, one of them an orphan girl of ten who took care of the couple's children, worked all day slicing and chopping vegetables and meat and cooking them over wood fires.

We ate the magnificent meals on a mudbrick platform covered in thick carpets in the middle of the compound. The compound was full of trees and flowers, kept green by the deep stream that ran through it. It was one of the most beautiful and restful places I have ever been, an oasis. Sharon and I slept on that platform at night.

In Kabul you could get well-cooked meals too, and Westerners could get alcoholic beverages. The Government of Afghanistan had built a wine factory to take advantage of the grapes that were

being cultivated so successfully in some of the river valleys near Kabul. While these wines were intended for export, the government would sell it retail to non-Moslem foreigners. Although they tasted kind of raw, they were popular among Volunteers because they were cheap.

Not so, distilled liquors. These one bought, discreetly, from "robber barons", the shopkeepers who, it was said, bought it from house boys who stole it from the American and other embassy homes in which they worked. It was very neat; the embassy people would buy the stuff at their commissaries, which supplied it in quantity, tax-free and duty-free; then it found its way to the robber barons where people who didn't have access to a commissary could find it. Most Volunteers left it alone, if not on principle, on the grounds of expense: a bottle of scotch cost nearly as much as a Volunteer's monthly living allowance.

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After 20 days of vaccinating in the hinterlands of northern Afghanistan with two male counterparts and a soldier, Beverly, a Volunteer, returns and tells us:

> I slept outside every night but two. In one village, the men refused to give us any horses or donkeys for transport to the next settlement. I saw that they had animals, but they said that these belonged to men in the next village. I got mad then and asked the women whether the men from the next village also got them pregnant, since obviously there were no men here.... We got the horses.
>
> I never went to the john during the day. Since there was no place to go except the bare hillsides, I just waited until dark.
>
> I took two baths during the trip. Once I bathed in the river, the soldier standing guard for me.
>
> Every night and morning, I sat on my tushak [a thin mattress] and did my routine - brushing my teeth, washing my face, putting hand cream on, etc. - with all of the men of the village standing around me watching.
>
> I didn't mind not being able to hear or speak English, but being dirty drove me nuts.
>
> I was living in a different world, a different century.

Beverly came down with hepatitis shortly after this trip and

never went out again.

She finished her tour in Afghanistan, although a few other Volunteers became so ill that they had to return to the States. Most stayed. They stayed because they were what people said they were - the few, the proud, the strong - or thought they should be. A few revelled in their wild reputations and, arriving back in Kabul after a vaccination trip, were like sailors in port. Others were more restrained but also proud of the job they were doing; but all, at one time or other got tired of the sickness, the heat, the cold, the dirt, the waiting, the staring. Why didn't people just quit and go home? As one Volunteer told me, "No one left because no one left."

I went back to the States after this trip and prepared a group of about 20 women to work as vaccinators. The last part of their training took place in-country in cold, snowy January. Based on this field experience, some of my group quit. Others took different jobs in Afghanistan, like teaching or nursing. Those who stayed with the program made vaccinating trips for awhile but then switched to other jobs when the Government and the World Health Organization learned that females were not needed to vaccinate women. These Volunteers monitored the work of other vaccinators, investigated suspect cases of smallpox, organized field offices, and did other administrative work.

Five years after the second group of Volunteers joined the vaccination program in Afghanistan, in 1974, WHO announced that Afghanistan had seen its last case of smallpox.

On 9 December 1979, the Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication declared that smallpox had been eradicated from the face of the earth. For the rest of their lives, the Volunteers who participated in the vaccination program could say that they had played a part in this. And for the rest of theirs, the Afghan people would know that, whatever other horror was waiting for them, they would never get smallpox ....

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Food for Work

By Frank Light

Saturday, September 27, 1971

Baqi clears his throat. These are uncertain times for Farah's director of provincial development. For years he's done next to nothing. But then he had next to nothing for a budget. Change comes hard, and that's what we represent. He clears his throat again before introducing our team to the governor, just back from Kabul. The governor speaks better English than Baqi or anybody else we've met in the province. And certainly nobody dresses like him—pressed gray suit, dress shirt, jeweled, broad-band ring on index finger, no tie, no belt, no socks, leather sandals. It tells you he wasn't born to money. Not urban money, anyway. Big fish in a small pond, he is not used to foreigners. But having been briefed by the minister without portfolio, he wants to help. The stakes are high, for the rains have failed, and when the water table falls below collection points, irrigation ditches go dry. Rather than dig deeper, the farmers are saying it's God's will.

Well, not everyone has been so accepting; violence is on the upswing. Afghan against Afghan in most cases, but five Westerners have been murdered this year. Lest blame shift toward the government, the minister together with the UN Development Program announced "Food for Work." The US and other donors will supply wheat, a staple (along with mutton and rice) of the local diet. Underemployed farmers will work for it, so as not to become dependent on the dole. Given corruption and other inefficiencies, the payout would never reach the intended recipients without foreigners at the end of the pipeline. Those foreigners need no special expertise. They only have to be, and behave like, disinterested outsiders. Just the job for the Peace Corps, for people like me.

I tell the governor about the projects we've surveyed. Our team consists of one German and three American volunteers plus three Afghan engineers. A week into it, we're ready to go "live." Begin immediately, he says. He'll sign the paperwork later. The people can't wait.

A school well and the municipal karez head the list, *karezzes* being underground irrigation canals common to this part of Afghanistan. We'll round up the workers, let them choose their foremen. That should require about half our team. Baqi can take them in his pickup.

A politician more than an administrator, the governor assures us he'll be there for the opening ceremonies.

I note we couldn't have done it without Baqi.

Flattery makes him stand taller. His hair's been brushed.

Excellent, the governor says. By then we've reverted to Pashto . The people are hungry, he adds. How much are we paying them?

Baqi and our team have been going back and forth on this. If you pay too much, he cautioned, nobody will work on anything else. He turns to Al, who faces straight ahead, placid and silent. Al is Peace Corps staff, here only to observe. It's on me to speak. Based on advanced age (twenty-seven) and time in country (one year), I've been designated team leader.

UNDP recommended one seer, I report. Seven kilos. That's for a day's work.

On its way, he confirms. Nimruz has wheat but no program like ours. Can we start one there?

That's for the minister to say.

The governor there—it's just south of us—is this one's friend. He stopped to see him on the way here. Apparently our governor promised we'd go to that province next. And, oh—he smiles a sharp smile and clasps his hands together—he's heard we're interested in Gulistan and Purchaman, up in the highlands of eastern Farah.

I was going to mention that. The team discussed it, and not for the first time, at breakfast. I say we could go as early as today.

He nods, saying check with him if we want to go farther than Gulistan.

Shouldn't we? I ask. Purchaman lies beyond Gulistan.

Wait until you've seen Gulistan. That might be enough. He laughs from deep in his throat. Don't promise more than you can deliver, he warns with no sense of irony. And don't let the khans trick you into doing things just for themselves.

He ought to know, he admits. He's a khan himself. A feudal lord. But from the eastern part of the country.

One more thing, he adds. Never drive after dark.

Bandits?

From Iran, he elaborates in English. Not Farah. Farah people no thief. Trick, yes. Thief, no.

Farah is one of four provinces in the initial phase. The Peace Corps is providing twelve volunteers in all, the Germans two, and the ministry of provincial development thirty "engineers," most of them recent high school graduates. We foreigners trained for ten days, emphasis on math, surveying, teambuilding, and cultural/political sensitivities. Emergency response, lives in the balance—we were stoked, our Afghan counterparts not so much. They showed little interest in going out (or back) to the sticks. For two months only, they were assured; home for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. New hires, they're at the bottom of the pecking order. Even in their youth they have the cynical air of those accustomed to broken promises.

Nobody we knew had ever been to Farah. A two-day drive from Kabul, it was a blank space on the map between Kandahar and Herat. Afghan staff vaguely recalled two volunteers in the provincial capital several years earlier. Communist demonstrators drove them out. The same thing happened more recently to a representative of the World Food Programme. Kabulese who knew Farah at all called it the Red Province. The Peace Corps never went back. The minister gave us a pep talk. Farah should rejoin the fold.

Baqi stays in town with the other half of the team while two Afghan engineers, fellow volunteer Charlie, and I, along with a functionary from the development office, pile into Al's Travelall van, Al at the wheel. He drove up from Kandahar because this is a pilot project with high-level interest. His chatty side comes out when we're by ourselves, when he holds forth on topics that can range, as they do today, from Persian poetry to Mullah Nasruddin, subject of many an Afghan folktale. A mullah is the Islamic equivalent of a village priest. In some tales Nasruddin is a fool. In others he's clever. Afghans like it both ways. What strikes me as a contradiction seems as normal as night and day to them. And to Al, for that matter. His banter makes the long, rough ride bearable for our engineers.

The development functionary watches closely as those two revel in the give and take. He didn't know foreigners could be so much fun. We didn't recognize him at first. He's a quiet, dusty guy Baqi failed to introduce at the office. We should have insisted. Named Amin, he probably does all the work.

It takes both spares to get us the seventy clicks to the paved highway between Herat and Kandahar. Ghulam, the older and more serious of the engineers, and Amin pitch in on the tire changing, as do Charlie and I, though clearly Al has done this many times on his own. The younger engineer, Mahdud, squats in the shade of the Travelall, cracking jokes that elicit strained smiles from Al and Ghulam.

Fingers crossed, we cruise the 125 kilometers down the paved road to Delaram, where we refresh ourselves at a teahouse while a repair shop patches the tires. It gives us a chance to ogle two tourist girls off a bus making a rest stop at the teahouse next to ours.

WTs, the Peace Corps calls them. World travelers. That's a pejorative, and we've been told to keep our distance. They eye us back in a way that implies they're open to alternatives. I tease Charlie about it, and Mahdud joins in. Charlie—gangly, trusting, a year out of college, and new to Afghanistan—practically blushes. His curly blond locks, sideburns down to the jaw, probably caught their attention. Like me and like no one else in Farah, he wears glasses. They aren't Peace Corps issue; there's a flare to them, a gold-like plate on the earpieces that flashes in the sun. And he's tall, you can tell even when he's sitting. Al's tall, too, but he's broad at the beam and naturally tonsured. A man who dangles his prayer beads over the table isn't going to attract just anybody. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to. We all know that talking to them would burst the bubble. Peace Corps volunteers—PCVs, we call ourselves—don't have much standing among WTs. We're straight. That's their pejorative. Hips sway and jewelry jangles as the WTs sashay onto the bus. Every male in a hundred yards, and I see no other females, is taking it in. Two Jesus lookalikes get on behind. They must

have been over by the shops. Hashish, laissez-faire, low cost of living, and an exotic locale have marked Afghanistan for the hippie trail. Fifty dollars will buy a bus ticket from London to Kabul. Another twenty-five will get you to Kathmandu, the ultimate in peace, love, and harmony. This is not one of those buses, however. The other passengers are Afghan. Finally I spot a few local women, their faces pressed to the back window. No bathroom break for them. Leaving a cloud of exhaust in its wake, the bus pulls onto the road for Kandahar.

Our tires are still getting patched, so we have a second round of lukewarm Fantas. A Coca-Cola bottling plant opened, to great excitement, in Kabul this summer. Tea is cheaper and a time-honored tradition, but those who can afford it spring for brand-name effervescence, a connection to the world outside.

Al can't be much older than me though he looks it, not only because of his bald spot and middle-aged spread. I mean he gives the impression he understands how he—and we—fit into the scheme of things. He spoke Hungarian at home as a kid, in college he majored in German, and before Afghanistan he'd been an Arabic-speaking volunteer and then–Peace Corps staff in Libya. He admits he should be checking on the other volunteers he's responsible for, but it's not every day he goes on an expedition like this. His other volunteers are teaching school or have been at their jobs for more than a year. He claims they're better off without him. More independent .

This trip gives him an opportunity to talk to Afghans outside their shops and offices. He drops puns in Pashto as well as Dari, the country's other main language, and even our counterparts defer to him on etymology. Now, while we retrieve our tires, they want to talk about WTs. Because travelers tend to linger in Kabul, Mahdud's home town, he's looking for pickup lines. He says, with a laugh to show he's joking, he'll start by saying I love you.

Better to say you're rich, I advise.

No, Charlie says, tell them you have a farm.

Really? Mahdud asks.

Say you grow your own.

Mahdud strokes his longish hair while he ponders that. Endowed with the air of a favorite son, he's not poor. Recently shined shoes and a sheepskin jacket bought with money his father gave him as a going-away present confirm it. Both also confirm he is not rich. Rich men, or their sons, don't come to a place like this on a job like this. I wouldn't call him middle-class, either, with all that implies. I'd say he's a young man who would like to be, once he discovers how, on the make.

Delaram is in Nimruz province, but a road out the back leads to eastern Farah. We get off the pavement there, hoping the tires hold up. Proceeding cautiously, it takes us three hours to cover the sixty kilometers—nearly all of them uphill—to Gulistan. The uneven terrain hints of some prehistoric, or prospective, upheaval, and the scattered plants that texture it emit the dull sheen of pressed flowers, the ground so hard-baked and untrodden it keeps the dust down. The lowlands were sandier, shiftier, better adjusted.

A trickle, the first surface water we've seen in the province, flows in a streambed the road follows for the final leg of our journey. There's enough water in that stretch to nurture livelier flora and even a few houses. A girl trit-trots out from one with a jug on her shoulders. Seeing us, she slows down to watch. She remains in that position, diminishing into the horizon. Grows her own, Mahdud quips.

The highlands have crept up on us. They're more rounded, less jagged, than the ridges near Farah town. A hint of green illuminated by the late afternoon sun mixes with gray on the upper slopes. More houses, and then Gulistan town appears. Hills rise behind its one street, pinching the view. There's a teahouse and a few shops, most of them closed.

The acting district chief steps into the street. Unlike the other men in sight, he wears Western slacks and the sport coat expected of government officials. He's young, not much older than Al. He'd been watching a shop that sells cigarettes, candles, salt, soap, and sundries, doing it for his brother who went home—he gestures toward the other end of town—for dinner. Anyway, he knew we were coming and invites us into the district reception hall. He leaves the shop untended, confident that no one he knows—and we're the only strangers—would take advantage.

We enter a room the size of the governor's office but without the furniture. We take turns going to a stone outhouse in the back and then sloshing our hands in a rivulet down from the street. The water is clearer and cooler but not necessarily cleaner than that which we drew from our well in Farah town. In a redundant but appreciated courtesy, a servant brings an ewer, basin, fresh bar of soap, and hand towel into the room. He pours; we wash. Like us, he leaves his shoes at the door. He returns with bread direct from the oven and then goes for the rest of the meal, which he sets on a plastic mat in front of cushions that line the walls. We sit cross-legged, Afghan style. The stew is made from fat-tailed mutton like that which we had every day in the lowlands, though this version contains more onion and less potato than we're used to. Between mouthfuls we describe the program to our host, who's already eaten and so takes only tea.

The district chief went to see the governor, he says. He doesn't know how we missed him.

He bids us goodnight, and we sleep where we ate. I keep my legs warm under my sleeping bag while I write in the journal our country director asked me to keep for "lessons learned." Knowing there'll be no time for that, I do it for myself, for the discipline. Not until I flick off the flashlight do I realize the lantern that the servant brought after dinner has gone out. Although the district office has a generator and a lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, they're conserving fuel in case the governor visits. He came once, his inaugural tour.

The entire crew is asleep. It can't be that late but I'm not sure. I left my watch and other nonessential gear in Kabul. I needed it last year when I taught English in a village outside of Jalalabad. The school had no electricity, so we synchronized with Kabul Radio. In Farah farmers go by the sun, moon, and stars. That works because it rarely clouds over. Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin wear watches, as do Al and Baqi. But when will Charlie and I get another chance to live without a timepiece? There's no escaping it: the counterculture extends even to us straights, even to Gulistan.

Used to be, American kids followed in their parents' footsteps. Only headstrong or desperate youths set off in the opposite direction. Nowadays it's the majority. Last winter my father wrote to see if I was interested in taking over the coal, feed, and lumber yard that had been in the family since the Civil War. My grandfather was getting old, and they had an offer for the land.

I knew that'd be coming, eventually. I just didn't expect it so soon, and from so far away. They worked five days a week, half day on Saturday. Because Grandpa couldn't run things by himself anymore, my father hadn't taken a vacation in eight years. The day my draft notice arrived he told me I was making more than he ever did. I was a junior accountant, one week out of college, and he hoped I'd do the smart thing, the safe thing, with the Reserves or the Guard.

Sell, I wrote back.

He'd seen the signs. He just wanted to make sure.

This summer the new owners tore everything down. They're replacing it with a self-service gas station. My grandfather retired to his rose garden, and my father found work at an insurance company. Neither has much regard for the Peace Corps because they associate it with Kennedy. They have the same problem with Vietnam. They're old-fashioned conservatives who oppose all foreign entanglements.

I go for a good-night pee behind the outhouse. It is early, I can tell, because lanterns and candles flicker in the street. The elevation gain has brought us a half mile closer to the stars. It makes them appear sharper, their twinkle crisper. A subtle but pervasive glow emanates from the ground itself. No need for flash-lights. Like the ridgeline above, they narrow the vision. The farther I get from town, the clearer I think I think. It was the same in Vietnam. As an auditor there, I checked on others. Advised them, really. This beats that. We're the instigators here.

Sunday

We divide into two groups so we can cover more ground. Charlie, Mahdud, Amin, and a few elders go down the valley. Ghulam, Al, the acting district chief, hangers-on, and I head upstream to survey potential projects. The main type we can support is re-covering creek-bed karezzes the locals call chalks.

We will try to give the same amount of work and of course pay the same rate to each village. They want it done with mortar and cement. No can do, we tell them. Transport is expensive, and cement is one and done. Local materials would be all theirs, and they could replicate the process.

Each of our two groups finds itself at a meal prepared by a separate village. In one sense our hosts can't afford it. In another they can't afford not to try and build a bond. We're creatures of our cultures, and theirs requires them to welcome strangers.

Midafternoon our two groups run into each other in the street. Charlie, with support from Amin and Mahdud, has kept on message. He may seem callow but he's solid, seemingly impervious to pressure. Mahdud does better when his colleagues from Kabul aren't around to impress. I suspect Amin helps with that. Amin may be a nebbish—he sure looks the part—but he knows a lot, and he doesn't seem to be gaming us the way his boss Baqi usually is.

We go over our assessments with the acting district chief. We like that he doesn't try to push us into pet projects or big ones beyond our competence. He lets us use the district phone to call the governor. The governor wants to talk with him first. Bali bali, the acting district chief keeps saying. Yes, yes. Maybe he can't speak freely because we're standing right next to him. Or maybe that's what you say to the governor no matter what you're going to do, or not do.

I get on the line to describe the projects. In the morning we'll look at a few more. The governor says he told the chief to go ahead with anything that meets our approval. He's champing at the bit. This is prelim, I explain. Baqi needs to sign off.

Baqi works for me! the Governor practically shouts. I put a few inches between the phone and my ear. What he doesn't say is Baqi also reports to the minister in Kabul. And what's his name—the governor pauses—works for Baqi.

Amin, I say.

Is he giving you problems?

No, no. But the farmers have to choose their foreman. The foreman has to agree to the specs. The chief will follow up.

The governor snorts.

He's been great, I attest. In the meantime we'll return to Farah town, double-check the math, complete the forms, set priorities, coordinate the teams, arrange for wheat deliveries, and then send a couple of guys here to get the earth moving. Might take a few days.

The governor tells me to head back after tomorrow's lunch. See him that evening.

I remind him we haven't gone to Purchaman.

There's a pause.

Governor?

It's on the other side of the mountain! he exclaims, his voice made both rougher and smoother by the connection. How would you get the wheat there?

Isn't there a road?

Not much of one, he says.

We got this far.

It's your decision.

Aren't they hungry, too?

They don't use karezzes, he answers.

Chalks, I guess.

Another snort.

Asked what they do use, he says there's a schoolhouse in need of repair, a new roof or something, and they'll probably show us wells they haven't maintained. The parliamentary representative from the area—the Wakil—keeps asking for roads. And guess who owns the only private vehicle in the district? The governor chuckles. That's our little secret.

Monday

After finishing on-site inspections and devising an overall plan for Gulistan valley, we load the van, follow the road past where we hiked the day before, and take a fork that leads north up the ridge to Purchaman. Gulistan the town and then the valley recede from view. We keep climbing. Far above, from what appears to be the crest, a solitary figure stands in our path, legs spread, arms folded, watching us. Wrapped in a cape blacker than anything we've seen in this province, the man looms like a prophet here to urge our repentance.

A white turban adds to the effect. He's huge, with a salt-and-pepper beard the size and shape of a wreath. The glimmer in his eyes brightens, as though reflecting the sun on his face, with our approach. He doesn't need to squint because he's looking down at us coming up. Finally, as we rise to his level, he shades his eyes with his hand. Behind him a second man is bent under the hood of a Russian jeep. They're not on the ridgetop, as I thought from lower down. Higher crests have come into view. The man in black flaps his hand for us to stop, as if we could pass this spectacle by.

And so we meet the Wakil. He was traveling to Gulistan when his jeep failed. On the downhill side. That makes him laugh. He swats at the dust on his cape, the little there is of it. The road here is green with grass and gray with rock. This is not the Farah of the lowlands, where no one would consider such a get-up. Good God, the cape is *wool*. Unfastened, like something Dracula or a bullfighter might affect, it accentuates girth and gesture. Under it he wears *salwar kameez*,, the combo long-sleeve tunic and baggy trousers common to the area, his a silky white that matches the turban on top .

Saying he has responsibilities as a host—no American has ever come this way before—the Wakil insists on accompanying us. His rollicking voice picks up the merriment in his face, the crinkling around his eyes. Although the acting district chief told us the phone to Purchaman was out, and we've seen no transmission line, the Wakil acts as if he'd been waiting for us.

You can't be surprised, Al notes, if you have no expectations. For a man like the Wakil, something always comes along. He ensconces himself on the middle bench, forcing the rest of us to squeeze together. With that cape and what's under it, he takes the place of two. He breathes heavily and is already telling Al which way to go. For all his joviality we foreigners have taken an instant dislike to the man. Speaking only when spoken to, Al rubs the back of his neck with one hand while keeping the other on the wheel. Charlie—half smile, eyes cocked—goes silent. The word wakil can mean lawyer, and the man is so much better off than the people we've been sent to help.

We're not the only ones to get our noses out of joint. His oblivious, imperious manner has Mahdud and Ghulam muttering to each other. Only Amin seems unperturbed, but then he has no one to confide in, and he's not one to show his hand. It 's the Wakil, not Amin, who mentions they've met—last year in the Governor's office.

He leaves his driver with the busted jeep. No wonder it broke down. Switch-backs are for sissies: this road heads straight up. It is barely differentiated from the mountain. With the new rider's extra weight, our Travelall suffers vapor lock many times over. On several occasions we have to get out and walk.

Roads help everybody, the Wakil declares as he strains to keep up. Truckers. Taxi drivers. Us. Look at yourselves, he says between huffs and puffs, his hands propped on his knees. Don't be tired. Russians.

Russians?

He smiles, lifting his eyebrows. The exercise has turned his complexion ruddy. Farmers, he adds. Traders. Police. With a real road maybe even the governor might visit! That gets him laughing.

You and he friends? I ask as we wait for Al to bring up the Travelall.

That keeps the Wakil laughing.

Covering all bases, he quizzes Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin about Food for Work and how they got into it. Meanwhile Charlie has been asking our counterparts about rural engineering. They teach, he learns, and it gets Ghulam and Mahdud out of their funk. We go for hours without sign of people, houses, or vehicles.

The sun to our rear balances the cool, almost subalpine, air. Each high point we approach leads to speculation that Purchaman lurks just over the ridge. That too makes the Wakil laugh. He knows the barren saddles that lie between.

At last Purchaman reveals itself, low and with barely enough cohesion to qualify as a town. Row upon row of slate-colored mountains rise behind it to the east. They get higher as they get farther. Is that snow? I ask. It could be haze. Or clouds.

Yes, Mahdud affirms. Bamiyan mountains have snow all year.

Appropriate to the conversation, he's donned his new jacket. Posteen is the word for it; in Kabul tourist shops sell them. He tugs the fleece-trimmed collar tight around his neck. In Bamiyan men may actually wear posteens without preening.

Ur uzgan, Ghulam counters. No snow.

Mahdud says he's been to Bamiyan. He should know.

Amin mentions a mountain in Farah has snow. He saw it on the drive here. Had he known of our interest, he would have pointed it out. We were busy with the carburetor then.

Mahdud asks if I know the Dari word for snow.

I say the Pashto.

Dari, he insists.

Every volunteer knows it: barf, which is also the brand name for the country's detergent. We have a box at the house.

He says it. He laughs and then translates the English into Dari for the Afghans. Their smiles suggest they're embarrassed for him.

We spend the night in the district capital, again all in one room as arranged by the Wakil, who sleeps elsewhere. The District Chief checks in before dinner. Not so dapper as his counterpart in Gulistan, he wears the same dun-colored salwar kameez as nearly everyone else. On him they could pass for pajamas. He has no projects in mind; he recommends asking the villagers. I don't think he takes us seriously. He speaks in Dari, which Mahdud and Ghulam prefer. Al says it's closer to the modern Farsi spoken in Iran than to the Dari you hear in Kabul. He translates for Charlie and me.

We dip bread into sautéed vegetables—eggplant and squash—unavailable in the lowlands. Ghulam nods a grudging approval. He, Amin, and Mahdud are anxious to return. They don't want to get between the Wakil and the governor.

Amin, a small man in his thirties, his short hair and beard already turning gray, has the look of a guy who isn't going to get anywhere in this world except through longevity.

Baqi sent him to get out of going himself. I remind him he's the director's field representative. We need his buy-in. He thinks about that. It's better than a flat-out no.

Tuesday

Ghulam and Mahdud are first to rise. The blankets they slept under drape across their shoulders, and a steel-blue sleeveless sweater under Ghulam's sport coat lends color to his wardrobe. Mahdud's elbows press into his posteen for warmth while he and Ghulam rub their hands together like cowpokes around a campfire. Seeing me peek out of my sleeping bag, Mahdud booms good morning in Pashto.

The sun streams through the window, capturing cream-colored motes in its rays. I pull on a sweater that had been my father's until the moths got to it. My trousers are old dress greens, my boots government issued for the jungle but just as good in the desert. Charlie goes out in a light jacket and comes back patting his arms. His cheeks are rosy. Having sweltered on Farah's plains, he's disappointed. He thought there'd be frost.

You can see your breath, I console him. Even inside. Now we know why the Wakil wears a cape.

A servant carries in warm bread and hot tea that ease us through the chill.

The district chief slips out of his sandals and comes in. After the greetings, most of them in Dari, he asks a question I don't understand. He asks again.

Pashto! Mahmud interjects. He (meaning me) doesn't know Dari.

The chief smiles. We told him that last night. In Pashto he asks if we'll do wells. Yes, indeed. Schools? Anything to get the wheat out.

He addresses me as Enjunyair Sayib: Mr. Engineer. No, no, I explain. That's our counterparts. They're comfortable with the title. They earned it in school.

Ghulam describes the program more fully than we did over dinner, Mahdud commenting from time to time, and Amin fills in from his department's perspective. They do it in both Dari and Pashto. The chief's eyes glaze over.

Enter the Wakil, cape and all. You think this place is poor, he says, having figured how to work us, you ought to see the next valley—Lerband . He'll show us.

The district chief wags his head, meaning he'll stay, thank you.

Steep and rugged, the road is too much for the van. We have to abandon it near the top of a pass. Just as well, Al remarks. We're running low on fuel.

As on yesterday's route, grass grows among the rocks. These higher elevations must get more rain, or dew. The descent is gradual, parallel to the ridgeline and with a view of Lerband all the way down. The village at the bottom strikes us as very beautiful. The Wakil's eyes beam to see us take it in. Willows and poplars line a streambed. Above it, houses separated by mulberry trees form a checkerboard. The buildings are not so bunched as in Gulistan or even Purchaman.

We don't see a single shop. Our arrival draws residents into the one street, which bends and dips with the lay of the land. In order of proximity to us, boys, girls, men, and a few women stare. They've never seen the like.

Tsangaye, I say, Pashto for how are you?

Charlie says it, too.

Staire mashay, I persist. Don't be tired.

Boys titter to hear such an acce*nt.*

I say it again.

A man repeats it back to me like you're supposed to. He's a farmer, brown-bearded and gaunt with gaps in his teeth. Barefoot. Heck, they're all farmers or shepherds, most of them clothed in gray—a pale gray, like the rocks at our feet. The boys' outfits are darker, like wet stone, probably because they're newer. The girls and women get red, green, and black. No washed-out colors for them.

The man and I shake hands. Everything good? How's the health? The family? So on and so on. We keep shaking.

Other men step forward. We're all shaking hands. I even hear Ghulam and Mahdud talking Pashto. Like Charlie and me, they can get by if they have to. Then they burst out laughing—they've discovered the farmers' first language is Dari.

Remember the roads, the Wakil implores. He's afraid we're turning into tourists. Remember how you had to walk here.

Representative doesn't really capture his status. Educated in Herat and then Kabul, he's a khan-and-a-half. Lerband happens to be his home village, a fact he failed to mention until we set foot in it. Elders greet him, holding his hand in theirs. One drops to his knees to kiss it. He takes credit for bringing aid-givers from America and engineers from Kabul. Lord of the manor, he invites us to dinner and then goes off to alert the womenfolk.

That leaves us with the villagers. Their focus is the soil, and you might think they'd ask for more than forty meters of "chalk" to cover in a dry ravine. Then you realize our unexpected, incomprehensible visit can't overcome a lifetime of making do. Initiative, if any, must come from the Wakil.

Villages are like people. Each has its own personality. The next one over wants a karez. They saw our procession filing down the pass and sent elders to investigate. Not as close to the Wakil's heart as Lerband , they try harder.

When he comes out to see how things are going, Al expresses concern about time. He has meetings in Herat, and the Peace Corps director will want an update. Al knows we can't just eat and run. We have to look at some projects. The Wakil understands. He arranges for horses and tells the women we'll be dining early. He says he'd go with us but doesn't want to get in our way.

The horses are blanketed but unsaddled. Thankfully, because the trail is narrow and rocky, they also happen to be docile. Although we Americans would find walking easier, it would be rude to decline the offer. Besides, we'll probably never get to work on horseback again.

The villagers want to clear out a collapsed karez with dynamite, but we don't do dynamite. We remind them the more man-days they put in, the more wheat they'll earn. They don't say yes or no. They're wondering if it's negotiable.

You'd think they'd jump at the chance. Only the Wakil, resting at his homestead, carries excess poundage. Even he is far from obese. Nobody is starving that we can see. These are poor people who have cinched their waist cords a knot tighter. But when they're hungry, Al reminds us, they're more susceptible to disease. They've started to eat their seed grain as well as the sheep, their principal store of wealth. The price of mutton has fallen. The animals are leaner. There's a push to sell before they lose more weight and the price falls further. The farmers appear to lack energy, Al says, because they're conserving it, hunkering down.

They have no experience with foreigners, and the little they've had with their government was not fruitful. They're wary of tricks, of Mullah Nasruddin in disguise.

Prospecting, the Wakil informs us. Someday we'll all be rich. He laughs.

Coal? I guess.

Mercury, he thinks. Al knows the word. They have a permit from the Ministry of Mines.

They nod greetings but don't respond to English, Dari, Pashto, or smiles. Unshaven, they are as gray and dirty as the farmers. Good bet we are too. Because the mullahs just recently permitted mirrors, the only kind in circulation are rearviews on vehicles, and Afghan drivers adjust the angle to reflect themselves. The fascination with their own visages makes travel an even greater adventure than it already is.

It seems every adult male for miles has come to see the Americans. We brief the district chief, and then the Wakil, in a voice too low for eavesdropping, does it from his perspective. He starts chortling. His belly quivers. The chief chortles, too.

Dinner is served in the great room. I don't know how they determine who gets to eat, but it's done without argument. Those who make the cut have more gray and less white to their beards than we've seen on our interlocutors in the lowlands. Did the old guys stay home? Or do they just look younger? Or don't live as long?

. *Whatever, right hands make fast work of a slow-cooked meal, then our hosts rise to do the atan*, the national dance. With their strong encouragement we foreigners join in. Everybody goes round in a rhythmic circle. Bob and weave, twist and turn, it's an Afghan hokey-pokey, hands down when in, high when out. Twirling and clapping is permitted. Go get 'em, Al! Even Charlie lets loose. You can hoot. You can holler. You can make eye contact. You can fix off in space. Just when I think it doesn't get much better than this, for Afghans as well as Americans—Russians, too—that this is the definitive Peace Corps moment, the recruiting poster we all signed up for, the Wakil loudly asks me to teach the people of Purchaman *my* country's national dance.

Ah, I confess, we don't really have one.

Ah, the men around him respond, you just don't want to teach us.

What about our Soviet friends? I parry. Maybe they have a national dance.

The Wakil looks one way, I another.

Sorawi! a man calls out the word for Soviet. *Sorawi*!

Our northern neighbors have slipped out.

Charlie shakes his head to say he can't help. Al watches from the back, taking mental notes. His sly smile makes me think he put the Wakil up to this.

Maybe it's a secret, someone pipes up. The superpowers don't want to share.

Okay, I announce as that notion gains currency, everybody get in line. Behind me.

I teach them the bunny hop.

Hands on hips, step to the left. Do it again. Step to the right. So nice we're gonna do it twice. Hands on hips of the man in front of you, take one hop back. Three hops forward.

Bali, bali.

In a barely lit room reeking of sweat, grease, mutton, tobacco, dust, and kerosene, these grizzled mountain men take to it with a verve I never would have imagined. On the hop hop hop the whole room quakes. It's the boys' night out. They're doing something nobody else in this country has ever done. Or even heard about. No mullahs present, and anyway Mohammed never banned the bunny hop. Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin find themselves in the mix—it's inescapable —but, like the men of the office they are or will become, hold something back. Caught poking their heads in the door, the Russians have to join in too. Part of them revels in it, and part of them looks as if, even here, Big Brother might be watching.

Don’t worry, Al says later as our team beds down in the great room; my lips are sealed.

Wednesday

The servant arrives with bread and tea. The chief follows, asking about our plans. Finally the Wakil rolls in. No tea, thanks. He’s had his. With a shake of the shoulders and an exuberant sigh he carves a space for himself between Ghulam and the chief. Hop hop hop, he says with a wink. Nobody picks up on it. Instead, we cycle through the greetings. All business. He looks us each in the eye. No roads? he asks.

I nod.

That brings a chuckle. He knew it. So he’s been talking to the chief, who’s been talking to the people, and they’d be most appreciative if we could help with karezzes. This time he’ll serve as our escort. No horses this time. It’ll be on foot.

The chief tags along, and as we make our way up the valley I realize I underestimated him. The farmers who approach us talk to the Wakil—he’s hard to avoid—but they also seek out their district chief. I reckon they see him as more likely to follow up, and in his deference to their wishes he’s a democrat by default. Maybe the Wakil is, too, by extension.

.

The karezzes turn out to be more ambitious than he indicated. We thought he was talking rehab. The farmers want new ones, from sources way off in the hills. We're determined to start small, especially this far from home.

Our entourage grows with each stop, as the citizenry would rather join our traveling show than hang back with the same boring, bleating sheep and unyielding, unforgiving soil. Many of them don't even own the fields they tend. The village headman does. Or somebody in Gulistan, Delaram, Kandahar, wherever. At my insistence we press on to the village where the school has fallen into disrepair.

It needs a new roof, the Wakil states as we enter the outskirts. He's looking around for it as are we, only he's pretending he isn't. That could explain his lack of enthusiasm.

And doors, the headman takes over. Glass for the windows, he adds. The snow stays all winter.

I ask if there's a teacher.

Yes.

How many?

Two. Sometimes three.

Boys only?

Yes. Grades one to five.

I turn to the villagers. Is it a priority? I ask.

.The men nod perfunctorily. They look to the Wakil, the chief, and their head-man for clues while trying to make sense of our presence. They doubt this will come to anything.

How many have sons in school? I ask, daughters being out of the question.

Most raise their hands. It's tentative, though.

Are they there now? More hesitation. I call their bluff: Let's go see.

They smile at each other.

Mahdud shakes his head no.

It's a long walk, the Wakil interjects, reasserting his primacy. His face above the beard glows like Old St. Nick's, and sweat glistens on his forehead. Earlier he handed his cape to the chief, who passed it to his factotum to carry.

For a village school?

The Wakil points up the valley. The governor wanted it there.

Your friend.

The last governor.

The teachers went to Herat, a villager says.

Farah, the headman corrects. He means the provincial capital.

To get their salary, the chief explains.

We take a pass on the school.

What the villagers really need is wells. It's a rare family that hasn't lost at least one child to disease. One beat-down farmer lost all four of his to what sounds like dysentery. They drink from the same ditch they wash in. Comes from the hills, he says. Good water. There's a plea to his voice. He wants affirmation. I ask if he'd like a well. He shrugs. Wells are seen as a convenience, not a necessity, a help for the women more than the men. The idea would generate greater interest if we supplied drills, pumps, concrete, and dynamite in part because it makes the work easier and in part, I think, because materials provide an opportunity for pilferage. It may also be a boys-with-their-toys thing .

Wells are risky, the Wakil explains. You may or may not strike water. A new well can rob from an existing one. Without equipment to go deep, the water may or may not be clean. It may or may not last through the dry season. People won't use it if another source is closer. Irrigation benefits only the landowners. They're already rich. Like me, he adds, laughing. And you too. He slaps the headman on the shoulder. Someday you'll be as rich as me.

The headman frowns at such talk in front of the villagers. His expression, indeed, his whole bearing, recalls the farmer in American Gothic.

Al checks his watch. We have to be going.

No meal? the headman asks. He finds good and bad in that but mostly finds it hard to believe.

We'll be back, I promise. Speaking of hard to believe.

Despite downcast faces, slumped shoulders, limp grips, and affectless voices, everybody shakes hands and says the right things because it's what you do and you never know.

I know one thing. We're going to try.

Farmers along the path move toward us and then pause. Our determined strides make clear we're not stopping.

The Wakil waves as he passes. Salaam aleikum.

Waleikum salaam, they reply. Staire mashay, they add if they're Pashtun.

He dabs his brow with the tail of his turban, though the pace is not so brisk he can't talk. Roads offer the surest return and the broadest benefit, he argues. Build a road and the vehicles will come. Fertilizer in, crops out. Maybe even the education department will send the salaries! That gets him laughing again.

Gravity pulls us along. He asks if I know Baqi.

Do you?

His smile says yes and maybe even favorably.

He slows down to get in step with Al. Those two have hit it off.

I should appreciate being left by myself and in front like this. I think best when walking, in silence and outdoors. But the peasants' scrutiny reminds me that for them this is no walk in the park. They're looking for relevance. On the way up Al talked me into the trickle-down approach. The most we can do is avert starvation and help improve the infrastructure. When and if that happens, social pressure will spread benefits to the poor. We cannot work directly with the peasantry. They defer to the headman, and headmen rarely let us out of their sight. Malik is the word even foreigners use to capture their status. Maliks are deputized villagers who, like the district chief, can be called to account. *The Wakil, in contrast, reports to no official, as near as we can tell. Sure, he knows people in high places. And his landholdings allow him to live large by local standards. As case in point, he's made the pilgrimage to Mecca, thereby earning the honorific haji sayib*, which adds to the homage that comes from being the parliamentary representative. Obligations come with that status, however. They seem to take up more time than money.

Never, in those few moments I've found myself alone with the sharecropping majority, have I been able to elicit any suppressed yearning for land reform. They will have to make their own revolution, for we outsiders can do nothing without the government's connivance. Europe might have been like this 800 years ago.

Mr. Light, are you sad? That's Ghulam. He and Mahdud hustle to catch up. Afghans believe solitude leads to despair.

Not anymore, I say with a smile. I start to add we're together even when we're apart and then I realize the opposite also holds true. Neither of them wants us taking on projects here in the back of beyond. Ghulam sees the need but won't stand up to Mahdud. I ask if they've taken good notes.

Everything! Ghulam exclaims. He and Mahdud show me the results. Ghulam has more writing, in a neat Dari script, while Mahdud relies more on sketches.

Very good, Mahdud says in English. Anybody can use it.

You two are the experts, I say.

They shake their heads and tell me in school they studied roads, bridges, wells, and irrigation canals but nothing about karezzes. They'd never seen one before Farah.

The Wakil is right, Ghulam adds. Purchaman needs a road.

Want to be in charge of it? I ask.

You're in charge, Ghulam snaps.

We'll talk later, in private. Some of it's me, team leader who talks too much at decision time. And some of it's the system. The one he bought into, the only one available, is riddled with workarounds.

Mahdud smiles the smile of the unbeholden.

At least Amin has been helpful, always ready to explain our program to the locals. I don't think he's worked outside of the office before. Yet he and the district chief seem to know each other. All four hands are clasped in goodbye when we get to the Travelall, and both officials are more animated than I've seen them. I ask Amin about it as we board: they were classmates at the province's only secondary school, in Farah town.

The van strains on the climb from Purchaman. No vapor lock, but Al worries we'll run out of gas. And, knock on wood, no flat tires since Delaram. We're going too slow for that. A last, wistful look at the mountains to our rear prompts me to ask Amin about Farah's own snowy mountain. It lies ahead but is obscured by clouds, the first we've seen since Kabul. They're dry clouds formed, it would seem, from dust off the flatlands that stretch deep into Iran. With no pollution or moisture to sustain them, the sun burns through. He explains the snow was in prior years. The little that fell this winter didn't last.

Volunteers aren't allowed to drive. Only staff. Al drives on, coasting all the way, while his passengers drift into daydreams and naps. The Wakil's jeep and driver are no longer where he left them, but he is unconcerned and of course finds them again in Gulistan. We get there on fumes, buy what little gas they will sell us, and siphon it into the tank. There we hear the Governor has been transferred. We're also told UNDP has descended on Farah town. They want us to return today, but it's getting dark, and we remember the now-departed governor's warning about bandits. We'll leave at dawn, too early to meet the district chief. He's due back tomorrow or the day after, or he might stay to greet the new governor, the acting chief isn't sure. He knew we'd be coming—the Purchaman chief got through on the phone. Chicken tonight, the first we've had in Farah. Proof, Ghulam says, his eyes on mine, the lowlands need us more.I waggle the leg bone I've been gnawing. Truth is, I'm loving this more than I should.

Later

Charlie was eager to get out on his own, Amin was also starting to like the separation though he had no say in it, and Mahdud surprised everyone by volunteering to go back. With help from the Wakil and the district chiefs, they completed all that we surveyed and then some, the task made easier because the villagers were grateful and isolation spared them from invidious comparisons.

UNDP brought revised forms, ice cream in a cooler, and two beers apiece for us Westerners. They then left for Herat, as did Al. The next day, at our first wheat distribution, a riot erupted because some claimants had the same name, they wouldn't line up, not every claimant's coupons matched the stubs we gave the granary manager, and he couldn't read our writing in any event. Students unfurled red banners demanding work, wheat, and bread. Men carrying shovels gathered behind. They marched, they chanted, and in the midst of all that Baqi assaulted the acting governor, a weightlifter who could have squashed Baqi like a bug but who was politic enough to let me hold him back. Baqi was summoned to Kabul.

Once the new governor arrived and we revamped procedures, everybody wanted in, even after we lowered the pay rate. By then influence peddlers were promising friends, family, and men of means a position at the head of the queue. Our landlord tried to evict us. Accusations were made, pressures brought to bear, and our town team was stoned when it limited the number of diggers on a ditch. Their engineer quit. Ghulam quit. I got so sick I stopped eating for a week going on two. The town doctors said it was malaria. The minister without portfolio and the UNDP's country director helicoptered in, unannounced, to check on progress. I asked for a medevac. Thin to begin with, I was down to skin and bones. Al returned the day after that. He said the whites of my eyes were orange, like a pumpkin. My urine was as opaque as Fanta. Hepatitis, he diagnosed, and he drove me to Kabul.

As Eid al-Fitr approached, the minister recalled the teams for redeployment. The program was expanding into nine more provinces. To keep up with demand the Peace Corps brought in a new wave of volunteers who were redirected to other countries when Pakistan impounded the wheat. Another group arrived after the Paks relented. The US aid agency got involved, and Peace Corps Washington replaced our country director. The wheat would be given gratis, no labor required. Food for Work was rebranded Operation Help. Conditions got worse, far worse, before they got better. The drought ended, sort of, and after a while the program did, too.

As for me, I lay low through New Year's and then led an all-Afghan team into a province at the other end of the country. Before going I heard the rains had returned to Farah, with a vengeance. The river rose from its once-dry bed and flooded the capital. The locals blamed it on us. We had upset the natural order of things.

The Mysterious Disappearance and Discovery of Tom Grove

By

David Scheinman

Al Eastham peered at me across his desk in the US Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal. "The situation for Tom Grove looks bad," he said. I was in Al's office because I had seen a large picture of Tom on our Peace Corps bulletin board with the ominous heading, "Missing in Nepal. Please contact the US Embassy if you have information about Tom." I had information.

I'd serendipitously met Tom, and his female trekking companion from California (whom we have not been able to locate), on my way down the mountain from my Peace Corps home in Shabru besi. Tom was trekking to the Langtang Valley. I was heading to Kathmandu. The Langtang trek is one of the three most popular treks in Nepal. The area had just been declared (1975) a national park due its rugged natural beauty. At the end of the Langtang Valley towers Langtang Lirung, a 23,711 foot peak. It is the world's 99th highest mountain. The valley is idyllic and provides ideal trekking through oak and rhododendron forests. An extra treat is a cheese factory at the end of the trek at around 12,000 ft.

We passed on the trail, said "hi, "recognized our American accents, and stopped. When Tom mentioned he was an RPCV from Afghanistan, we realized we shared much in common and talked for an hour. I also learned he was from Hagerstown, MD, just 75 miles west of York, PA, my hometown. We wished each other well and hoped we'd bump into each other again.

Al provided the troublesome details about Tom's disappearance. One evening in a local bar a Nepali had been trying to sell Tom's personal effects. Fortunately, a few Nepali security personnel attached to the embassy were there as well. They grabbed the seller, questioned him, and then turned him over to the police.

The seller said he was selling Tom's belongings on behalf of a Mr. Sunwar. Sunwar lived four days east of Kathmandu on foot. I assumed Al sent some security guys out to question Sunwar. "Nope, we aren't authorized to do that. Even detaining the guy at the bar was illegal."

"So where are we," I asked. Al said, "Nowhere." He turned all the information over to the local police. The investigation was led by an Inspector Prem. Complicating matters was a pair of gruesome murders that had recently occurred near Kathmandu and a series of tourist murders taking place in Southeast Asia and India. Two Americans were found burned to death and Al had no idea whether the person who committed these murders was also implicated in Tom's disappearance. The situation was very confusing. And Al was a rookie consular officer from Dumas, Arkansas. Many State Department officials begin their careers as consular officers.

In Hagerstown, Tom's parents were anxious, confused, terrified, and grabbing at straws. Bits and pieces of news erratically arrived from Al via the State Department's Consular Affairs Section in Washington. Al would cable Washington and the office was supposed to pass the news onto the Groves. But the Groves were sadly at the end of the information distribution chain.

The prognosis was poor. Tom was missing and his personal effects were being sold. A serial killer may have been on the loose. Al wasn't authorized to search for Tom. All he could do was urge the local police to investigate. But the local police had little interest in searching for one of the many trekkers reported missing at the time. Al said there was always a long list of missing persons. Some were quite happy remaining "missing." Others could have been at the bottom of ravines, never to be found again.

"So what if I search," I asked. "I speak Tibetan and Nepali, have just completed three and a half years as a Peace Corps Volunteer, know the cultural and physical landscapes, and have the time. Can I volunteer?" I felt very sympathetic to the Groves. As their desperate pleas for information came across Al's desk, I envisioned my own mom and dad hanging by the phone in York, PA wondering if I was alive or dead – and feeling completely helpless.

The Groves, the State Department, and even the local police supported my search. I was soon joined by Tom's good friend and fellow Peace Corps Volunteer from Afghanistan, Jim Hicks. Jim and Tom had spent two years together after leaving Afghanistan. They had traveled in Nepal, India, and Malaysia and eventually worked together for two years in Australia.

By January of 1976, Tom had left Australia for Nepal to complete the Everest trek. Tom and a group of Afghanistan RPCVs had started the trek two years earlier, but abandoned it after realizing that crossing the treacherous 18,875 foot Tesi Lapcha Pass was too dangerous. They decided to take a seldom-used, but scenic, route to Everest through an area called Rolwaling. But crossing Tesi Lapcha required crampons, ice axes, and technical skill. Plus, a German trekker had just died there of altitude sickness. The leader of this earlier trek, an RPCV from Afghanistan named Nelson Chase, was a very experienced mountaineer. The tragic death of the German – and that some members of the group were very sick – caused Nelson to decide to turn back. In Australia, Tom decided to complete the Everest trek by a more conventional route. Then he'd return to Hagerstown after being away for five years. Everest was the missing jewel in his climbing necklace.

Jim had already left Australia and was wending his way home through Thailand and Southeast Asia when, in Bangkok, he received a shocking letter from his dad saying that Tom was missing in Nepal. Jim hopped on the next plane to Kathmandu to search for Tom.

Jim and I met in Al's office. We briefed him and then made plans to search for Tom. The only clue was that Sunwar had provided the goods. Subsequently our sole option was to find Sunwar. We had nothing else to go on.

Al obtained clearances for us to investigate and Inspector Prem sent a police officer with us. Soon we were on the bus to Lamasangu, a small town east of Kathmandu which was where the road ended. That's where Edmund Hillary had begun his epic trek and climb in 1953. Today the road extends 187 KM. from Kathmandu to Jiri.

We tumbled off the rickety bus and began walking in the late spring heat. We had a picture of Tom and showed it to everyone we passed. Though helpful and sympathetic, no one recognized Tom. Had he even passed this way?

We reached Sunwar's village full of trepidation. Did he even exist? Had the guy selling Tom's belongings in the bar lied? We asked villagers and soon were face to face with Mr. Sunwar. And indeed, Sunwar admitted giving his friend the goods to sell on his behalf in Kathmandu. But Sunwar said he was only a middleman!

After lengthy questioning, all Sunwar said was that he had received Tom's goods from another village near Jiri, three days away. After discussing the pros and cons of continuing eastward, we decided to walk back to Kathmandu to plot our next move with Al. We planned on staying out for a week. Staying much longer – with no way to contact Al – would have sent Al and the Groves into a panic.

We were in Al's office pondering our next move when the phone rang. It was Inspector Prem. The conversation went like this:

Al: (covering the mouthpiece and whispering conspiratorially) It's Prem. He's discovered that Tom's travelers checks were cashed in Hong Kong and passed through the bank branch at the airport. Prem wants our OK to torture all the bank tellers.

Us: We can't do that! Tell Prem it's up to him. What's he have in mind?

Al: Prem wants to beat the soles of their feet with stinging nettles.

Us: (quickly conferring) Tell Prem if that's what it takes to find Tom, we're OK, provided it's a normal Nepali police technique.

Al: Ok Prem, do what you have to do

We were still making little progress. We discussed trekking to the village Sunwar suggested. It was a long shot, but it was our only shot. Jim and I were determined to find Tom. We told Al and the Groves that this time we could possibly be gone for up to a month chasing down leads – if we were fortunate enough to obtain new leads. Prior to leaving Kathmandu, we fortuitously received one.

Prior to leaving, I went to the Tibetan Buddhist enclave at Bodnath and met a Tibetan lady friend who coincidentally told us her dad was a Lama in our search area. So now we had two contacts– the Lama and Sunwar's supplier. And that was it. Our chances were slim at best. Tom had been missing for two months and no new evidence had turned up.

The Second Trek

When in Kathmandu, we learned that a trekker on the Everest trek – which was our route – had been robbed and beaten. This was highly unusual. Something peculiar and sinister was happening on the Everest trek.

The village Sunwar mentioned was off the main trekking trail and near Jiri. Today the bus goes straight to Jiri. It is 187 kilometers from Kathmandu. Along the way our routine became quite routine. We'd greet villagers in Nepali – later Tibetan as we climbed into Sherpa country (*Sher Pa* means eastern people in Tibetan), explain our mission, and show Tom's picture. Soon a pattern emerged. People were genuinely sympathetic, especially when we said Tom had a twin brother and his Dad Arthur was the Pastor of a church in Hagerstown.

But no one had any information. We appreciated everyone's concern, but we were beginning to lose hope. That changed when we arrived at the village Sunwar had mentioned.

The village had a very different aura. People were guarded, stone faced, uncooperative–some were even belligerent – and acted like they were hiding something. This was very different from the reactions we'd repeatedly received from other villages. It was as if we were in a pirate hide out – a thieves' enclave.

Soon we met the Lama, my friend's dad. He had a long wispy white beard, wore a maroon lama cloak with a faded yellow shirt, and easily could have been 80 years old. We chatted in Tibetan. Then he said something about Tom that changed everything:

"I had a vision of your friend. His head is in one place, and his body is nearby."

Where, where, we asked? He pointed to the tree covered mountains that surrounded the village. We begged for specifics. We received only generalities. But the negative reactions of the villagers and the Lama's vision were the only breaks we received. At least we finally had more than what Sunwar told us. We concluded that any follow up investigation should focus on this village.

Jim and I decided to trek all the way to Everest. Tom would have wanted that. Tom loved the mountains. He felt at peace there. He'd spent time in the Colorado Rockies, loved hiking in the mountains of New Zealand, and had decided to end his five years abroad by completing the trek to Everest that he had abandoned three years earlier with Jim and fellow Afghanistan RPCVs. He completed the Annapurna trek on his first visit to Nepal and felt he had nothing to worry about. His earlier trip to the Himalayas had been idyllic.

Though the odds of discovering more useful information were stacked against us, we were still hopeful and wanted to tell the Grove's that we had done our best to find Tom. We eventually reached Namche Bazaar, the famous village and main trading center in the heart of Sherpa country. The Sherpas are the traditional guides and porters for Everest expeditions. Everest is literally in their back yard.

Eventually we dragged ourselves up to the top of iconic 18,200 ft. Mount Kalapathar, a site across the river from the Everest Base Camp. This had been a challenging high altitude six day trek.

It was the rainy season and we were miserable. It was cold, damp, muddy, slippery, cloudy, and we had experienced constant headaches due to the thin air. Plus, I couldn't sleep. Looking at the stunning Himalayan peaks from Kalapathar, we felt a huge sense of relief and accomplishment. We also longed for warm beds, hot showers, and good food.

We decided to fly back to Kathmandu from the airstrip at Lukla, an eight day trek from Kalapathar. We'd been looking forward to flying to Kathmandu and avoiding the incessant steep, slippery ups and downs as we crossed a never ending series of river valleys. There were also blood sucking leeches to contend with when we walked through grass. I always carried a small container of salt to scatter on any leeches that were feeding on me. The terrain was rarely even. We were either climbing up from a river – or down to another one.

Lukla is now the starting point for 95% of the people on the Everest trek. Flying from Kathmandu to Lukla, round trip, shaves a full two weeks off the Everest trek. Flying into or out of Lukla is both spectacular and nerve wracking. The small plane lands on a slanted plateau and slows down by rolling uphill. The plane subsequently takes off by taxiing downhill. Then it falls off the plateau and drops a few hundred feet before beginning to climb out of the valley.

When we finally arrived, we were cold, wet, hungry, and miserable. Lukla was socked in by clouds. Flights were infrequent and unscheduled – and fights over the limited seats were frequent! Grumpy frustrated trekkers fought for space on the small planes. As a plane landed, a pushing and shoving match would begin. Tired of waiting in the cold rain for a plane that might never come – and the pushing and shoving that definitely would come if a plane landed - Jim and I decided to walk all the way back to Lamasangu. This took nearly nine more days! When we finally arrived, we'd been away around five weeks and walked nearly 400 miles. We were exhausted. We climbed onto the first bus and happily rode into Kathmandu.

<u>Solving Tom's Disappearance</u>

In Kathmandu our search ended. We briefed Al and wrote a report advising future investigations to take a much closer look at the uncooperative village where the Lama told us about Tom. Jim headed back to Thailand and I hopped a bus to India.

In Hagerstown the Groves were busy. They contacted numerous government agencies, departments, politicians, and high ranking State Department officials. They worked the phones day and night. Eventually their net hauled in a gem – their Republican congressman Robert Bauman. Fortunately Bauman had a card to play with then President Ford.

During the summer of 1976, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan were in a close fight for delegates to the Republican convention. Bauman was a delegate. Neither candidate had enough votes to secure the nomination. Hence they were trolling everywhere for delegates. The head count kept shifting as some delegates were lured, enticed, turned, and won over when presidential favors were dangled.

Bauman, a staunch conservative, supported Reagan. Since each delegate counted, President Ford called Bauman, asked for his support, and asked what he could do to win Bauman's vote. "Find Tom Grove," said Bauman.

Ford asked for the details. Ford then called Marquita M. Maytag, his political appointee to Nepal. Maytag was married to Bud Maytag, heir to the Maytag appliance fortune and CEO of Continental Airlines. Marquita had visited Nepal as a tourist and had fallen in love with the country. As part of her divorce settlement with Bud, she had asked to be named ambassador. Bud was a major GOP donor – so her wish was granted!

One morning Ambassador Maytag received a highly unusual personal call from President Ford. He asked her to immediately visit the head of state, King Birendra, and request him to find Tom Grove. He told her this was a high priority request. That morning Maytag left the embassy compound, drove to the palace, and had an emergency audience with the King. This was a top secret operation. Al and the rest of the embassy staff were kept out of the loop. "Things were just crazy that morning. I'd never seen anything like it my whole career," said Al when we spoke on June 15, 2012. "And even as an ambassador I never received a call from the President."

The King called his chief of police who retrieved our report from Inspector Prem. Prem later complained to Al, "What have you done to me? I have to report about this case to the Palace every day."

The Chief organized a group of around thirty crack policemen and ordered them to the area Jim and I had suggested investigating more thoroughly. Soon after they arrived, a terrified young girl shrieked, "They killed him. His head is buried there and his body is over here." She was right. Tom was buried where she said. Arrests were made and a fellow named Sunwar – not the Sunwar selling Tom's belongings – was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

This news arrived after I'd returned to the USA in September, 1976. I'd already met the Groves and we even drove to the State Department and met Adolph "Spike" Dubs, a senior undersecretary who was later ironically killed in Kabul, Afghanistan during a kidnapping attempt in 1979 when he was Ambassador there. Another ambassador wasn't named until 2002 due to security concerns

<u>How and Why was Tom Killed?</u>

Thieves tried stealing Tom's belongings while he slept. Along trekking routes in rural Nepal, accommodations often consist of beds arranged in an open sided lean to with no door. Tom probably awoke while being robbed and tried fighting off the thieves. Unfortunately, he was outnumbered and in the ensuing struggle, he was killed.

In 1976, very few trekkers visited Jiri. Hence Tom was probably the only trekker in the area when he was robbed. And the robbers thought he was easy prey.

Tom had inadvertently ventured into an area that had a reputation amongst Nepalese for being lawless and violent. These behaviors subsequently provided the launching pad for the nascent Maoist movement of the late 1980's and 90's which controlled the trail from Jiri to near Lukla. These Maoists forced trekkers to pay fees at various checkpoints. Though there were no Maoists in 1976, the village where Tom was killed was already known for its violence and lawlessness even then. We had no idea of this until Al told me this June. Hence, becoming violent Maoists was an easy transition.

Epilogue

Al Eastham recently retired from the State Department after a 35 year career. He is a senior fellow in International Relations at his alma mater, Hendrix College (1973 BA Philosophy) in Conway, Arkansas. He rose through the ranks to become ambassador to Malawi and later Congo. We were very fortunate that Al was the consular officer. He provided guidance, support, and always put finding Tom at the top of his to do list. He was instrumental in clearing our search with the Nepali police.

I spoke with Al for nearly three hours on June 15, 2012 and he added new information to Tom's case.

Al was very emotionally committed to finding Tom. When Tom's remains arrived in Kathmandu in a box, he decided to cremate them himself in his backyard. This was because he didn't trust the people along the river who cremated bodies that arrived without mourners or that were exhumed. Unsupervised, they could call any set of ashes Tom's.

Al said he had met Tom at the embassy when Tom collected his mail. The clerks noted a minor omission in Tom's passport so Al was called to examine it. He subsequently ordered a new passport for Tom. But neither Jim or I have the slightest recollection of Al telling us he actually knew Tom. Had they met, I'm sure we would have recalled Al telling us that had met Tom. Al said the village where Tom was murdered was well known amongst locals as a lawless, violent place. It was a village to avoid.

Tom's twin brother Tim is a professor of Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences at MIT. He has a Ph.D. from Harvard. Tom and Tim were ironically born in York, PA my hometown. My family knew Groves in York related to the Hagerstown Groves.

Robert Bauman, who railed against the declining morals in the USA, was charged with soliciting sex from a 16 year old male prostitute on October 3, 1980. He pleaded that he was an alcoholic and immediately admitted himself to rehab. Though running from a safe Republican district, Bauman lost his seat in the November, 1980 election to a Democrat. He is currently the legal counsel to the Sovereign Society, a libertarian group. In 1986 he wrote, *Gentleman from Maryland, the Conscience of a Gay Conservative*.

David Scheinman received a Masters of Professional Studies (MPS) at Cornell University in International Agricultural and Rural Development. In 1980 he went to Tanzania on a USAID contract. In 1984 he opened a consultancy in Tanga, Tanzania and remained there for 20 years until returning to the USA in 2004. He resides in Houston, TX.

Jim Hicks received his MBA from the University of California, Berkeley. He lives in Portland, OR and works in the energy sector.

There really was a serial killer on the loose when we were searching for Tom. Thinking he may have played a role in Tom's disappearance was quite plausible. He is currently in jail in Nepal for a murder he committed on Al's watch in 1976. Here is the Wikipedia entry:

Hotchand Bhaonani Gurumukh Charles Sobhraj (born April 6, 1944), better known as Charles Sobhraj, is of Indian and Vietnamese origin, who preyed on Western tourists throughout Southeast Asia during the 1970s. Nicknamed "the Serpent" and "the Bikini killer" for his skill at deception and evasion, he allegedly committed at least 12 murders. He was convicted and jailed in India from 1976 to 1997, but managed to live a life of leisure even in prison. After his release, he retired as a celebrity in Paris; he unexpectedly returned to Nepal, where he was arrested, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment on August 12, 2004. The Supreme Court of Nepal has finally convicted him and ordered life imprisonment. This decision was made on 30 July 2010.[1]

While Sobhraj is widely believed to be a psychopath, his motives for killing differed from those of most serial killers. Sobhraj was not driven to murder by deep-seated, violent impulses, but as a means to sustain his lifestyle of adventure. That, as well as his cunning and cultured personality, made him a celebrity long before his release from prison. Sobhraj enjoyed the attention, charging large amounts of money for interviews and film rights; he has been the subject of four books and three documentaries. His search for attention and his overconfidence in his own intelligence are believed responsible for his return to a country where authorities were still eager to arrest him.

"WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT'S BEEN…"

(from a song by The Grateful Dead)

as recounted by Don Meier

(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 Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). I jokingly referred to him as "Wild Bill" because of his free-spirited nature and good humor.

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 training 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 expatriates 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 downstairs 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. 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 Antanov-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 airport 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 Tattinger 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 eleven 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 pondering 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 badgering 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 arrangements, 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. Ultimately, 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.

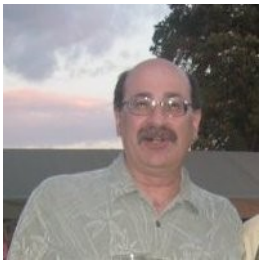
The next morning, Paul Bitter, my primary contact and apparently Bill's closest friend, met me at the Holiday Inn around 10 am and we went off to the cargo area to clear the shipment. At long last, luck was finally on our side. The coffin was being transferred to the awaiting hearse just as we arrived 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 undoubtedly 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.

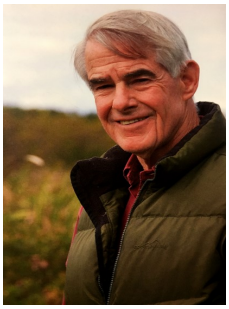
The rest of this story is relatively anticlimactic. I was finally reunited with my luggage a day before my departure back to Tajikistan. Bill was cremated and we cherished the hope that his ashes might someday in more stable times be returned to the Afghanistan that kept calling him back like a mythological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

Andy Sussman



Pat Nyhan

Chris Bateman



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