

Memories of Afghanistan

By

Susan "Stella" Ramsey



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 for-got 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 doc-tor, 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 an-other 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 pack-age, 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 ear-rings. 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 learn.

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 up-per 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 re-cycle 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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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 Ambassador's 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 over-threw 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 USAID 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!

Stella Ramsey, 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.