

7 Afghanistan--Assorted Crises

Peshawar, Pakistan, to Kabul, capital of Afghanistan
Friday, March 26

Before dawn, we were awakened by the plaintive cry of a muezzin from a nearby mosque calling the Muslims to prayer. Though we had been in predominantly Muslim territory for several days, this was the first morning we had been awakened in such an exotic and exciting manner--a foretaste of a natural phenomenon which, like the camel and mule caravans, would soon become commonplace as we traveled further into the world of Islam.

At breakfast, Neil told us that today we would be crossing the "no-man's-land" of the ancient and historical Khyber Pass. In bygone days, it had played a significant role linking the East to the West and Africa to the Orient. Worn down by the great armies of Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, Babur, Nadir Shah and the British and by the thousands of caravans which played a major role in the commerce of the day, it was still of strategic consequence to both Pakistan and Afghanistan and their respective neighbors.

We left Peshawar around 9 A.M., and within the hour entered an area affording a panoramic view of this barren brown mountain pass and its trails and British built two-lane highway. The military patrol and its buildings were also in full view. Graeme pulled the bus to the side of the road for a quick photo stop, warning us not to direct our lenses toward the patrol. About thirty feet below us a long mule caravan was ending its eastward trek through the pass. Of all things, it was carrying a shipment of standard western toilets, their tanks and stools burdening the disinterested animals as they wound their way up the gradual incline toward us.

At the entrance to the pass, Neil paid a total of thirty-four rupees. He explained that the majority of Afghanistan's population consisted of various tribes and, of more relevance to us, that the fiercely independent mountain tribes in this region controlled the pass and paid little regard to international regulation; on occasion they ambushed travelers. Neil teasingly told us that he hoped our payment of one rupee apiece to the patrol would insure our protection through the twenty-eight mile pass. Also he noted that we might even see some nomads who, ignoring the red tape of passports and identification papers, moved moved freely back and forth from one country to the other.

Although apprehensive on the one hand about the drive, I was thrilled on the other hand to be driving through an area which at one time was very familiar to Alexander.

The road conditions were quite good considering our past

experiences. Many bridges, culverts and tunnels broke the monotony along with the occasional shepherd and his flock of karakul sheep nibbling the sparse mountain grass. Some mountain ranges, 2000 to 3000 feet high, were topped by defensive citadels. Every home was fortified by stone walls with openings for rifles. Stone plaques commemorating battles waged for control of the pass were carved into the mountainsides near the road. The threatening pass was full of unknowns, but in the end left us unscathed.

Frolicking fun filled the bus during this drive initiated by Ross and "Wolfman" Brian who coined the phrase, "Tunnel Time." Josi, Boris and several of the younger girls were prime targets for such fun. Fortunately for me, I was probably one of the prudes Jen had referred to in her sketch of Brian, so I was not bothered. The object of "Tunnel Time" was simple--to cuddle the girls while driving through the dark tunnels, and there were plenty of tunnels. Approaching each tunnel, shouts of "Tunnel Time" would echo from one end of the bus to the other as Ross and Brian roamed up and down the aisle for their next tunnel sweetheart/victim. So it went on our drive through the famed pass--juvenile fun prevailed.

From the pass, the road crossed a wide windswept plain where in the distance, small caravans of nomads were camped. The rugged looking people reflecting their surroundings, their tents made of hides, blankets and patches of cloth and their grazing camels conjured up a captivating scene reminiscent of James Michener's

Caravans. Again a photo stop was in order, so, with a warning from Neil to be quick about our picture taking, we were back on the bus within five minutes. Already several of these nomads were running toward us, but we did not linger to meet them.

To our surprise, the Afghanistan border processing took less than an hour. Graeme now began driving on the right side of the road. Sitting in the driver's seat on the right side of the bus, he could no longer see oncoming traffic when behind trucks or buses. Therefore, Neil now began sitting in the left front seat to direct Graeme when passing large vehicles.

As we continued our northwesterly drive, Neil began briefing us about Afghanistan. Most of the nation's 17 million population were Sunni Muslim. The nation's literacy rate was around 10 percent and it had an average life expectancy of approximately forty years. About one-third of her people belonged to the Durani tribe, a mixture of Semitic and Iranian stock, who spoke Pashto. According to legend, the Durani were descendants of the Jews taken into Babylonian captivity in 597 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar II. To this day many refer to themselves as "Ben-i-Israel" meaning "Sons of Israel."

Geographically, Afghanistan is dominated by the Hindu Kush Mountain Range, an extension of the Himalayas. This landlocked country's strategic location had been its undoing for centuries, causing it to be ruled by various foreign empires. Parts of today's Afghanistan had been within the realm of the great Persian Empire,

later becoming part of Alexander's Empire. As late as the 18th century under the dynasty of Ahmad Shah, a united kingdom was established which encompassed most of modern Afghanistan. The 19th and early 20th centuries found Afghanistan becoming an international problem when both England and Russia contended for influence in central Asia precipitating the Afghan Wars. Only in 1973 did it become a republic after a military coup.

Neil concluded his talk by saying that the Soviet Union's interest in this southern "neighbor" was profound owing to her supposed need for access to such regions as the Persian Gulf. Consequently, the Soviet Union spent ten years building the Salang Tunnel (11,000 feet above sea level) and the modern road from its border to Kabul.

From Jalalabad we traveled over the modern Kabul-Jalalabad, Torkham Highway built by Americans bringing us into the awesome Kabul Gorge fifteen miles east of Kabul. The highway clung to the mountainsides below which a branch of the Kabul River roared. I was mesmerized by this natural phenomenon of uncompromising rustic beauty as I repeatedly gazed from the torrents of the river below to the towering geological formations above.

Late in the afternoon we arrived in Kabul (Population: 500,000) located in a high narrow valley of the Hindu Kush, 5890 feet above sea level. Again the hotel had not received Neil's telegram stating our arrival time, so we remained in the bus across the street in a muddy parking lot while he arranged our accommodations.

Back in another remote society, we had caught Kabul in its spring thaw where mud puddles and mud and a brisk wind off the snowy peaks were the order of the day. From the parking lot, we looked on a muddy street of rundown yet enterprising businesses and hotels. Despite Kabul's size, there were few motorized conveyances, and more men than animals pulled and pushed large wagons and carts. The people, some with Mongolian features, sloshed around the street in their long dress intent on the business at hand. The men wore makeshift apparel of ragged jackets and baggy pants overlaid with long warm robes. Dinky turbans or skull-caps were their headgear. Most of the women were enshrouded in burkhas, heavy garments of durable cloth which rested on their heads leaving only their hands and feet exposed. Their vision was considerably impaired as this costume allowed only tiny slits or a sheer cloth screen to see through. Seeing these "walking ghosts" was startling at first sight.

Neil returned to the bus with our room assignments and told us that Kabul was a rest stop and there would be no organized tours. He warned us to beware of the open sewers along the streets which were a real tourist hazard for breaking legs and arms. Again he stressed that we should not eat salads as the vegetables were washed in the sewer water.

Although feeling much better, I was still weak and found the climb with luggage to my third story room exhausting. This time I shared a room with Jen and Mary, a clerk from a country town in New South Wales.

Like the interior of the hotel's whitewashed walls, the walls of our room were soiled with dirt and grime. A bare light-bulb shed light upon our spartan room containing three beds and a dresser. On closer inspection, the sheets were clean, but the blankets were laden with years of accumulated dust, so we handled them gingerly. The one redeeming feature of our humble abode was the window view of the snowcapped Hindu Kush and their lower brown slopes supporting a residential area of adobe box-like dwellings.

The bathroom was down a concrete hall and would be shared by twelve women. It consisted of a sink, a standard toilet without toilet tissue and a shower spigot logistically centered in the ceiling which from experience we knew would drench the entire room when used. This was definitely not the Kabul Inter-Continental Hotel, but sleeping here would no doubt be more memorable when reflecting on our stay in Kabul.

At 7:30 P.M. we congregated in the first floor hotel dining room. The low ceilinged barren concrete room was supported by square columns to which floor to ceiling black draperies were tied. With little time and effort, the room could be transformed into several smaller rooms.

After we were seated at two long tables on one side of the room, bottles of Pepsi were placed before us. Then, each of us was served a generous platter of rice mixed with saltanas, nuts, carrots and seasonings. A succulent sauce with bits of meat was ladled over the rice. Our first overland experience with pilaf was superb!

Kabul
Saturday, March 27

Breakfast was served between 7:30 and 8:30 in the second floor dining room similar in arrangement to the first floor dining room. The tables were attractively arranged along the sunny east wall of curtained windows with a view of the parking lot and the busy street below.

Today we had our choice of egg preparation--omelets were the most popular. French toast was also available. Good bread and excellent chai rounded off a delightful breakfast served in this cheery room.

I planned to spend the day resting, propped on pillows viewing the lofty mountains from my window. My roommates had sightseeing plans, including visiting the tomb of Babur on the west slope of Sherdarwaza Hill and the "noon gun" nearby which sounded daily at twelve. If time allowed, they would also visit the mausoleum of Nadir Shah. Others in the group planned to see the downtown bazaars and the Presidential Palace. My desire to join them was great, but rest was what I needed, so rest it was.

During the day, the bathroom was in constant use, especially the shower, and I wondered if there would be enough hot water left for me. The availability of hot water often determined whether I would shower or not. At times, I just couldn't cope with a cold shower. Fortunately for me, the water was hot when I showered in the afternoon. What a luxury hot water had become!

I was dressed and ready for dinner when Jen and Mary returned from their outing full of chatter about the interesting spots they

had seen. As Jen left the room to shower, Mary continued telling me about Kabul. Her enthusiasm about this city and travel in general transformed her rather plain face into one of vibrance. Her long hair was always pulled back in a pony-tail, and her wardrobe revealed that clothes were not her first priority; God seemed to be that and travel was next. I soon learned that taking the overland had been a longtime dream of hers. Years of saving \$10,000 from her clerking job in a small grocery store had now launched her on her travel career. At twenty-seven, she could have been the wealthiest member of our group. I was impressed by her keen determination and shared her great joy. She, like so many of her countrymen, wanted to see as much of the world as possible and had prepared long in advance to do so.

With pant legs rolled up because of the mud, Jen, Mary, Tanya and I joined Brian and Nino to locate a restaurant in the old section of Kabul. Here some of the streets reminded me of those in early western American films. The shops were loaded with woven rugs and carpets, furs, priceless rifles and guns decorated with intricate designs in gold, silver, brass and mother-of-pearl. Jewelry, semi-precious stones and embroidered goods were available here too. But again I was drawn to the fox and wolf furs, just looking this time, which were even more striking than those in Srinagar, although their treatment was up for debate. Fine carpets were spread in front of some of the shops, muddied by the constant traffic, yet proving their durability.

We soon arrived at Chicken Street, a street and area noted

for its transient international youth subculture. Once it was the main market for selling chickens, now it provided marvelous shops of antiques, goods and restaurants. We eventually found the Marco Polo Restaurant recommended by Neil, who had reminded us that this Venetian had also trekked through parts of northern Afghanistan. We were pleasantly surprised by the European atmosphere of this quiet and charming establishment, enjoying its continental delicacies at reasonable prices served by a very courteous waiter.

By 10 P.M. we were on our way home. The streets of Kabul were quiet, not full of the anxiety that the group had felt in Lahore, Pakistan. Perhaps if the fellows hadn't been along or if our numbers had been smaller, it would have been different.

Climbing the stairs to our room, Mary, Jen and I were stopped on the first landing by Abdullah, one of the hotel staff. He had suffered from smallpox when younger, but his beaming outgoing personality camouflaged his facial defects. He invited us to join a wedding celebration being held in the breakfast room. Being tired, we politely declined the invitation. However, half an hour later already snug in our beds with Mary sound asleep, Jen and I quietly discussed the cultural opportunity we were missing. So with minimal noise, we got up, dressed and went to the celebration.

The room had been partitioned by several black drapes for the affair. And when Abdullah met us, it was clear that we were not to go to the room where all the men were. He took us behind one of the drapes and introduced us to the very young bride, her

mother and two sisters who were seated on wooden folding chairs. The anxious bride, wearing a lovely white satin gown and veil, reminded me of an American bride. Abdullah brought in two more chairs and the mother asked him to bring us some chai. Our attempt to converse proved useless, so we relied on gestures to communicate with these ladies. It was still too early in the celebration for the bride and groom to see each other. Therefore, every now and then the bride would peek through the drape opening at her betrothed.

On the other side of the drape, an Afghan band was playing as men, dancing together, performed the animated dances of their ancestors. Those sitting at the tables, including three attractive unveiled women wearing white lace scarves, were singing and clapping to the music. There was much laughter and gaiety. These people appeared to be better off than the average person we saw on the street.

The festivities looked as though they might continue indefinitely, so we prepared to leave. Just as we were wishing the bride our best and thanking them for the chai, in stepped two jean-clad American women in their twenties. After introducing ourselves, we learned that they worked for the United States Information Agency and had recently been sent to Kabul on a two year assignment. We spoke to them briefly, repeated our goodbyes and left.

How exciting this whole little episode had been! To exchange friendliness between east and west, to enrich one another, even if only for a few moments! And then to meet one's own country-