

men on the field in a foreign land!

Kabul
Sunday, March 28

After a good night's rest and a leisurely breakfast, we met in Robert's room at 9 A.M. for a longer than usual session of devotions since it was the Sabbath. Throughout the trip thus far, the majority of the group had been faithfully involved in morning devotions; it was a good way to start the day, even if at times it was held at an ungodly hour. More frequently than not, the Scriptures we studied each morning gave us direction each day. This daily reading and study was slowly but steadily building a strong foundation for each of our lives--shaping and remaking us into the "special" individuals God intended us to be. This in itself was a truly exciting adventure.

After devotions, we were on our own until 2 P.M. when we were to meet Neil and Graeme at the bus. Until then, Jen, Tanya and I would go walking. Again, due to the mud, we rolled up our pant legs, now in daylight, revealing "lollipop socks" of bright horizontal stripes, a recent Australian craze. How funny we looked.

Kabul was bustling with its open markets and vendors, their carts laden with produce. Burkha covered women darted in and out of shops. Open stalls of skewered meat roasting over open fires occasioned the streets and corners where locals stood chomping kabob.

Passing a bookstore window, I noticed an international edition

of Time magazine with Patty Hearst's photo on its cover. In 1974 three months before I left for Australia, on the CBS Evening News, Walter Cronkite announced her kidnapping. Now she had been convicted by a San Francisco jury for bank robbery. It seemed strange that even in this remote part of the world there was news of her.

Our walk brought us to an American sponsored school which taught English to Afghans. The school had opened to the public a large room with exhibits commemorating America's 200th birthday. Security was tight as they checked our passports and handbags. After viewing the display, I felt certain that my country was gearing up for a fabulous celebration on the "Fourth."

As we left the exhibit, an American couple from the religious sect Children of God approached us on the street. They were asking for money to buy freedom for Americans in Afghan jails on drug charges. The fate of these Americans was uncertain and appeared quite hopeless. The Children of God hoped to turn the tide by offering to pay for their countrymen's release--a sort of baksheesh arrangement.

We soon located a grocery store where a wide assortment of western goods such as canned meat, cookies and toilet tissue were sold. As most of us were running low on toilet tissue, that was the most important item we purchased, although it was terribly expensive. Outside the store, a vendor with his cart bulging with luscious inexpensive grapefruit stood calling us to have a look. It had been quite a while since we had eaten citrus, so we bought as many as we could carry; what a treat!

We then headed for the Istanbul Restaurant near Chicken Street for a cheap meal, a tip from the American couple. This establishment was sort of a Haight-Ashbury hangout and crossroads for the young traveler. Here we sat at crude tables on benches among hippie and cleancut customers, some local and others European, Australian and American, either sojourning in Kabul or passing through. All seemed absorbed in conversations of their experiences "on the road."

Our meal of creamed chicken over rice and dumplings, a cooked vegetable and apple pie was delicious and a bargain for the equivalent of 60 cents American. As we got up to leave, we walked by a wall covered with messages on scraps of paper and napkins.

One note advertised a cheap ride to Katmandu. Another requested information leading to the whereabouts of a certain person. A third scribbled the request for a ride to Istanbul.

We were at the bus at 2 P.M. As Graeme started the engine, Neil announced that we were on our way to the sports arena to watch a game of Buskashi, Afghanistan's national sport. He explained that Buskashi was played on a field larger than a soccer field. Two teams of skilled horsemen, sometimes with thirty or more on a team, competed to drop a headless bloated calf into their team's circle at either end of the field. The calf was killed the day before the game and covered with mud to become heavier. The movie, The Horsemen, starring Omar Sharif and Jack Palance depicted the story of this sport. Much of this movie was filmed in Afghanistan. This sport originated with Genghis Khan who, from 1218 to 1224, ruled one of the world's largest empires.

But then, instead of using dead animals, he used live prisoners.

At the arena, Graeme remained in the bus. This was part of his job in high risk areas, to stay with the bus to prevent vandalism.

Seated in the grandstand in the bone chilling west wind off the Hindu Kush, we watched the two teams, wearing heavy colorful jackets, warm pantaloons, durable leather boots and fur hats and mounted on Arabian and Persian steeds, gallop onto the field. They paused briefly to salute any dignitaries who might be present, and then galloped toward center field spacing themselves around the slain calf. Within seconds, they closed in over the animal and one player on a white mount swooped down and grabbed the calf's right hind leg, then cut loose from the rest of the horsemen, galloping toward his team's circle. Another player in hot pursuit caught the calf's tail. There followed a few moments of pulling and tugging between the two riders as the rest of the players caught up with them. The white horse player managed to secure the animal again, broke loose and, galloping at a high speed, dropped the calf into his team's circle.

We watched the game with fascination as the Afghans cheered on their favorite team. A very handsome army officer and his teenage son were sitting behind us concentrating on the game too. The father was no doubt elaborating on the skill and strategy used by the horsemen. Before the game was over, the biting wind caused many of us to return to the warmth of the bus where we waited for the others.

Back at the hotel, we cleaned up and dressed for a special

dinner which Neil had arranged at a restaurant owned by Germans. Many of the girls donned their new coats and jackets and put on clean jeans for the occasion as this was to be our last night in Kabul.

Entering the restaurant with its lively music, familiar framed scenes, decorative beer steins and cottage-like decor was like stepping into old Bavaria. Along with the Wiener schnitzel, chips and cooked vegetables, we enjoyed a fine German wine. The international flavor of Kabul was making inroads on our consciousness.

Returning to the hotel, there was still time for a visit to a Christian missionary couple's home. Robert had contacted them earlier. This provided a rare opportunity for us to mingle with Afghan Christians, but I stayed behind feeling I needed to pack and get to bed early.

Kabul (to Kandahar) to Kabul
Monday, March 29

By 8:30 A.M. we were on the road leading out of Kabul. Like the roads of many previous Asian cities, it was congested with pedestrians, carts pulled by man or beast, gayly decorated trucks like those in India and Nepal and a few cars.

I was sitting in the back seat of the bus browsing through the books as the theme song from The Exorcist began playing over the speakers. (An appropriate piece for the drama which was about to unfold.) All of a sudden the bus came to an abrupt stop propelling Tanya into Nino's lap; both had been sitting

in the center section facing each other. Fortunately they were all right, just a bit shaken. But what had happened?

In less than a minute, the bus was moving again. I looked out the back window and saw a small boy lying in the road kicking and flailing his arms as a crowd gathered around him. We must have hit him. Neil turned on the mike and stated calmly, "We will continue on despite the accident." We were all so stunned that we didn't know how to respond to Neil's seemingly callous announcement.

The bus continued at the same speed and within minutes a taxi carrying two policemen pulled alongside us. The police motioned for us to pull off the road and stop. Apparently Kabul had no police cars.

Perfect silence prevailed after the policemen boarded the bus. They checked Graeme's passport and then Neil's, and told Graeme to take a passenger seat. While one of them stood at the front of the bus facing us, the other policeman drove us to police headquarters where they escorted Neil and Graeme off the bus. All of this was accomplished in a matter-of-fact manner leaving the rest of us "in the dark" with our only instruction from Neil to remain on the bus.

Numbness gripped me at first. My mind raced with questions and projections. Would Graeme be jailed? Would this be the end of our trip? Bus trips had broken up before. If ours did, could we catch rides with other groups going to London or Katmandu? How much would a flight from Kabul to San Francisco be?

Now in charge, Robert asked us to pray for the situation,

especially for Graeme, Neil and the injured boy. Our anxieties lifted as the prayers began.

After three hours, Neil returned to the bus and Graeme followed fifteen minutes later. The police had taken Graeme's passport and driver's license. Neil had called the same hotel from the police station to arrange for accommodations. He then drove us there and gave us new room assignments. The bus was now grounded until the "accident" could be resolved.

I would be sharing a room with Jen, Tanya and Janet. We were pleasantly surprised to have a roomy suite on the fourth floor complete with our own bath, beds, a writing desk, two red upholstered chairs, a couch and a small balcony with a superb view of the Hindu Kush. The blankets on these beds were also heavy with dust, but again the sheets were clean. So we settled into our quarters, making the most of the remainder of the day and heading off for a cheap dinner at the Istanbul.

Kabul

Tuesday to Saturday, March 30 to April 3

We faced each day with hope and optimism. The police tried unsuccessfully to find the injured boy. Because there was no Australian embassy or consulate, Neil and Graeme tried to secure help from the English Embassy, but they did not want to get involved. Next, they tried the American Embassy which also refused to help. Their only other recourse was the Afghanistan Military General. After two solid days of waiting in his office, our leaders were finally granted an interview with him. They

presented their case and were told that it would receive his consideration and that he would contact them shortly.

Our questions as to why we drove away from the accident were eventually answered. If the bus had stopped, we would have run the risk of having it burned by irate Afghans or even inciting a riot. Therefore, we continued on for our own safety. The police escort back to Kabul proved to be our insurance for needed protection.

So waiting, wondering and praying, we spent our days in Kabul as before with daily walks to the Istanbul for our main meal and more browsing through the shops and bazaars. There was talk that some of our fellows might take a bus to one of the oldest animal markets in Asia located on the highway to Kabul Gorge. Among other interesting animals, they sold different varieties of camels there. However, when Neil heard of the idea, he discouraged its implementation. We were already in enough trouble, and he didn't want to borrow more.

I began reading Wilbur Smith's The Roar of Thunder about the Boer War in South Africa. Tanya was reading Dr. Zhivago and Janet, James Michener's Centennial. Jen was into the works of Thomas Hardy between her writing sprees. Unfortunately, she had become ill again and was in bed much of the time. Janet, with the use of her camping dishes, brought her warm dinners back from the Istanbul. Postcards, journal entries and correspondence also passed the hours. We had heard that Afghanistan's postal system was unreliable, so we would hold our outgoing mail until we reached Iran.

Neil had initially telexed Sundowners in London about our predicament, and they answered a couple of days later. Among other considerations, they wanted to accommodate the group's inconvenience with an overnight bonus trip into the Hindu Kush to Bamian Valley, important for its location on an old route used by Indian and Chinese silk caravans and significant for its site of the world's tallest statue of Buddha. Our leaders arranged for two local drivers and their minibuses to take us there. Neil and Graeme would have to remain in Kabul to continue negotiations with the General's office who had now made contact with the boy's family.

At breakfast one morning before the trip, Neil told several of us more about Bamian Valley and the ancient city. It had been a center of Buddhism from the 1st to the 6th centuries. In a sheer sandstone cliff that dominates the valley, Buddhist monks had lived in cave cells and had carved out two standing statues of Buddha. Pilgrims came from afar to revere these shrines. However, during the 800s with the rise of Islam, Bamian became a Muslim fortress. Then in 1221, the city and its environs were almost totally destroyed by the savage Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan.

Friday, April 2, the morning of our eighty mile trip to Bamian dawned cold and clear. Wearing our warmest clothes and carrying our shoulder and sleeping bags, we boarded the two minibuses around 7:30. Neil and Graeme waved us off to the mountains.

The further from Kabul we drove, the more primitive the conditions became with few signs of automation or technology. At times, the narrow and in places muddy and snowy roads slowed us to

10 MPH. These roads were not designed for large vehicles.

As in Nepal, the mountain region of Afghanistan impressed us with its neat and orderly cultivated fields. Forests of white alders had been cleared for farming. The tilling of the land was done by wooden plows pulled by horses and oxen. Farmers with wooden tools directed streams of snowmelt into narrow hand dug irrigation ditches. Through farming and gardening these people appeared to be self-sufficient.

After four hours of rugged travel, we stopped for lunch at a village of stone and adobe buildings and dwellings. Most of the homes were fortified by adobe brick walls, some ten feet high. Several picnic tables and benches stood in front of a few shops where some of us bought food for lunch. Fresh water flowed into a trough from a nearby pipe. The women here, as well as those we had observed thus far since leaving Kabul, wore colorful peasant clothes; only a few wore veils or burkhas. The men loitered more here than their city counterparts. Some carried rifles and shouldered bullet belts.

As Nino, Tanya, Jen and I sat eating at one of the tables, some ragamuffin children approached us to watch. A couple of men, squatting on the porch of one of the shops, observed us as well. One of them came over to question Nino in broken English about me. He asked if Nino were my husband. Ready as ever for some fun, Nino answered "yes" and that we were newlyweds. Jen, Tanya and I, embarrassed tried to keep straight faces through this dialogue. But when the man left, we burst into muffled laughter.

After lunch the girls took a walk in search of a suitable loo.

An almond orchard in full bloom proved the perfect setting.

The next break in the trip came at 3 P.M. in an isolated snowfield when the buses suddenly stopped and the drivers walked a short distance away, kneeling and bowing toward Mecca in prayer. The rest of us disembarked, only to be hit by flying snowballs from Ross. Brian started in too and it wasn't long before everyone was throwing snowballs. Even the drivers joined in good-naturedly after their prayer time.

As the snowballs flew, Jen and I began teasing Nino about the lunch incident. He smirked back giving me all kinds of excuses why he answered as he did. I left momentarily to get my parka from the bus. Returning, before putting it on, I swung at Nino with it for a teasing remark that deserved such an action. Pushing and shoving started, then grabbing me, Nino turned me around. I stepped back to get my balance, but instead fell into a snowcovered stream pulling him with me. The snowball fight ended and everyone applauded as we were dragged out of the water, our legs dripping wet and freezing cold. Nino returned to his bus and I to mine with Eileen who loaned me a pair of dry socks.

We arrived in remote Bamian Valley in late afternoon. It was devoid of people. There were only a few scattered adobe fortified dwellings and rows of alder trees divided the sparse fields surrounded by snow-dappled brown mountains and the sandstone escarpment housing the statues.

We were driven to the foot of the 2000 year old statue of Buddha, measuring 174 feet in height. Further away stood a sim-