

Kabul Journal
by
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CHAPTER I - ARRIVAL

Friday, December 16, 2005

One week on the job here in Afghanistan and only two weeks since I left my home in Bryan, Texas. I look out my 5th floor apartment window here on the US Embassy compound.....yes, guards, guns, solders, barbed-wire topped walls, checkpoints and the smoke of the wood and coal fires as the Afghans try to stay warm in their houses during the cold, dark Kabul nights. Yes, I am here! Yes, it all is happening.....

Week 1 – Washington, DC (Dec 5-9)

The week in DC started with a required two day security training program that could have been done in one. The course took place on the remarkably beautify FSI (Foreign Service Institute) campus, someone's vision of a small New England college. On Tuesday, adding to the almost unreal romance of the FSI was the first of two snow storms that fell that week, which blanketed the Institute and the city into picture-card perfection.

Wednesday was my day at the Department of State for swearing in and meetings with administrators. The huge, intractable, unyielding and complex State Department bureaucracy was in sharp contrast to my meetings on Thursday at the Pentagon, and the amazing frank discussions with Department of Defense (DOD) officials on the failures of USAID and the State Department, and the critical nature of the Afghanistan mission.

The real highlights of the week were my strolls on the snow-covered National mall, and watching the sun set from the top of the Washington Monument. Then there was the dinner at the exclusive Metropolitan Club with the DOD Reachback Office family ("*a new, welcoming and encouraging family here to support you and your mission*"), and the long walk through downtown Washington on Friday looking fruitlessly for a camera store.

The second snow came on Thursday night, 4 inches to welcome my last and only free day in Washington. Then finally on the plane Friday evening, headed through Frankfurt to Dubai to spend Saturday night - one last night in a nice hotel, who cares of it is above the Federal reimbursement rate.

Week 2 - Kabul

On Sunday, Dec 11, the United Nations Humanitarian Charter Flight took off from Dubai 45 minutes late, putting us into Kabul about 3 pm. There were 6 of us on the plane headed for the Embassy. Four armored plated vehicles waited patiently for our luggage to be cleared through customs. Two were for the passengers, the other two for the armed escort, one SUV in the lead and the other as the chase car, bumper to bumper hurling through the rush hour traffic of cars, bicycles, pedestrians, donkeys; not stopping for anything, huddled together to keep other vehicles from cutting us off, and only slowing when it was absolutely necessary. Then, more quickly than seemed possible, we arrived at the heavily fortified Embassy Compound.

The sun was setting as we arrived at the Embassy. First the luggage was screened, then initial check-in where we traded drivers licenses for temporary badges, then to the Embassy building and questions – *where is your cable, how could you be sent to Kabul without a cable, how can permanent badges be issue*. Howard and I set in the Embassy waiting room for an hour, then we were given visitor badges and released into the compound. Finally the key to my apartment, and just before closing arriving at the cafeteria for dinner.

The next morning the reality of living in the compound became clear. The Embassy is in two sections separated by a road. Barb-wire tops the 8 to 10 foot high walls that surround both sides of the compound. On the Café side, guard house are placed at the corners like you would find on a medieval castle. On the Embassy side, besides on the wall, addition guard hours are on the roof of the apartment building. Vehicle barricades, gates and guard houses seal off both ends of the street that runs between the two sides of the compound. An underground and well lit concrete tunnel, wide enough for a small vehicle, provides easy and secure access to both sides of the compound.

The next four days both drug on eternally and went by too quickly. Meetings, paperwork, more meetings, and more paperworkBut I had three trips out of the compound this week, each a story in its own. The first to the Ministry of Mining and Industry where we ate Afghan food in the Minister's office during the lunch meeting. A demonstration prevented the driver from letting us out at the normal entrance. The 10-minute walk around the Ministry on a crowded sidewalk was the highlight of the week for me. The walkway was within the "the controlled area", controlled by Afghans in uniform and carrying semi-automatic rifles, so it wasn't exactly like being out on the street.

Then there was the long drive to the Ministry of Power and Water, located on the outskirts of town, and the long, dark drive back after the sun had set. Two hours of electricity a day doesn't light very many streets. The Deputy Minister served us tea while we talked and tried to stay warm in the unheated office.

The third trip of the week was to close-by Camp Eggers to meet with the PMI (Political Military Integration) group. Camp Eggers is a military base with a PX and a coffee shed with outdoor tables where I set with the PMI commander discussing nation building

theory while looking out on what seemed like a sea of armored plated humdees painted desert grey.

Saturday, December 17, 2005

Yesterday (Friday) is an official day off and most people here in the Embassy Compound actually do take it off, or just work a few hours. I went in for about 3 hours and spent the rest of the time cleaning the apartment, watching the Rockets beat the Sonics on the Arm Forces Network (AFN), and generally lying around the pad. Saturdays are “soft” days, officially our weekend, but a work day for the Afghan government. Most people at the Embassy work a shorter schedule than the normal 12 to 14 hours per day.

Today was a good day when I began seeing the possibilities of this job and the fear of being trapped in the Compound eased some more. Also, Erin got the paperwork sent, and Howard and I will receive our regular badges tomorrow following the security briefing - the RSO (Regional Security Officer) stopped me in the Café cafeteria and apologized for the problem in the paperwork and delay in getting the badges! The badge means that I will be able to enter secured rooms and attend top secret briefings here at the Embassy that relate to my work; but of more immediate concern, the badge will allow me to visit Camp Eggers unescorted and purchased items in the PX.

Today, Ed (Chief of Mission for my group), Howard and I met with Col. Toomey of the US Army Corps of Engineers whose professionalism and enthusiasm was truly inspiring. I couldn't but help admire his dedication to his job and our country, even after 20 years in the military. A good soldier, “*Yes Sir*” “*No Sire*” as if we were superior officers. As we were leaving his office, he expressed his appreciation to us for volunteering to come to Afghanistan – his appreciation of us!!

On the business side, the Corps works on a funded project basis, and they would very much like to continue and expand their work here. Howard (Senior Advisor for Energy) would like them to help construct power plants, transmission lines, a railroad. My interests are somewhat more modest – small dams, irrigation works and renovation of the major irrigation schemes in the country, reservoirs and flood control structures. More modest than Howard's, but just as large of an impact on a nation where 85% of the population depend on irrigation for their crops and livelihoods, diverting water from Afghanistan's five river basins as they have for centuries.

Sunday, December 18, 2005

Is it Sunday or Monday? It felt like both as I rode down the elevator and walked into the frigid morning air on my way to work. The first frost of the season clings to the vehicles and the newly planted rye grass in the “green” areas between the sidewalks. Along with the main Embassy building, the 100-unit apartment buildings is brand new, and workers are still running wires and pipes, putting up lighting and yet another metal gate. The landscape plants wait in a corner of the compound, standing in their pots, huddled

together as if trying to survive the cold Kabul nights. Days are pleasant with sunny skies and temperatures in the upper 50's, but once the sun goes down, the air here at 6000 feet cool off rapidly.

I've started taking my breakfast in the Embassy-side cafeteria. It has a more formal and less fun atmosphere than the Café-side cafeteria, but it's only a short walk from the apartment which is of benefit in the 20 degree early morning air, and the coffee is better. You buy credit and they deduct each meal, eliminating the need to carry cash and change. This morning there was a football game on – Denver and Buffalo playing in the snow. Football just doesn't seem right with a breakfast of cereal and coffee in a cafeteria, not like lying on the couch drinking beer on Sunday afternoon.

My worries about being trapped here in the Embassy compound eased some today. But it is true that the majority of Embassy staff rarely gets out, and then it's only to attend meeting somewhere in Kabul. We are allowed to travel in the Embassy's armored SUV's within Kabul, to the Ministries, NGO compounds and Camp Eggers without armed escort. But travel outside of Kabul requires armed escorts in a chase car or travel in a military convoy, so getting out takes effort. Then, you need a host on the other end with approved security and armed escorts if you are to leave the military installation where you will stay.

This morning, Joe, who coordinates the USDA program, made a phone call to Sharon, a Vet, a graduate of A&M and USDA employee on detail in Afghanistan. Sharon works in the Panjshir River Valley, a supposedly spectacular area populated with a minority culture that dates back ages, and the home of the leader of the Northern Alliance back during the war. By the end of the day, I had two enthusiastic invitations to visit and expressed hopes that I would spend the majority of my time in Afghanistan there. No real surprise, I'm an irrigation specialist in a land whose culture and livelihood revolve around water and irrigation.

Friday, December 23, 2005

Well, the second work week is finished – made it to another Friday. Woke up tired, with clogged sinuses and a headache. I'm told last night that winters aren't usually like this in Kabul. The air has been stagnant the last few weeks, causing a temperature inversion, trapping the dust, smog and smoke, creating the worst air I've ever experienced and seen - particularly in the mornings with a thick haze clinging to the ground and buildings. But around noon today, a slight breeze started from the southwest, and the air clear enough that I could clearly see the hills a mile or two miles to the east.

I have established a morning routine. Since today is Friday, I didn't bother washing, just threw on my genes, tee-shirt, sweater and coats, and headed over to the Embassy-side cafeteria. Almost no one around. This morning the Las Vegas Bowl was on – must admit that I now enjoy watching these games while eating breakfast. A game every

morning now that bowl season is in full swing, and NFL games on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday mornings as the professional season comes to an end.

Headed over to Camp Eggers at 10 am with a driver and in a vehicle I reserved yesterday. On Fridays, there's a sizable bazaar in the protected street that runs by the main entrance of the military base (joint-command, but mostly American forces). The street is cut off from traffic by military guard, again with semi-automatic rifles and heavily fortified bunkers.

My first stop was the PX. No one knows when cleaning services will be available and my apartment is getting rather dusty. Time for a mop, cleaning rags, spray stuff and whatnot. Then my first trip to the bazaar where Afghans selling their wares of rugs, wool hats, knives, various other traditional looking arts and crafts, and recent release DVD's (\$2 each). I bought a rug and speakers for my computer so I can listen to the web radio. AFN (Arm Forces Network) is OK, but I just can't get into watching TV.

Was a nice day to be out. Would have stayed longer and hung out in Camp Eggers, but Verne was with me and since he didn't have a picture Embassy badge, didn't feel right leaving him alone in the bazaar. Verne works for USGA and is here for a month supporting projects. We've been hanging out together, and he's been introducing me to the Water community of Kabul.

Yes! Howard and I finally got our Embassy "resident" ID badges, blue coded with our pictures. The blue means I can go everywhere unescorted in the Embassy Compound, including secured rooms in the Embassy building. One benefit is that I can just walk through the Embassy checkpoints, I no longer have to pull out the cell phone, send my briefcase through the metal detector, and walking through the people metal detector. This makes it much easier for me to walk across the street between the Embassy side and the Café side. Up until now I have almost exclusively been using tunnel.

The street that runs between the two sides of the Embassy compound obviously was once a major road. It starts from a crossroads circle with a 30 foot monument just to the north of here, and runs through a few miles of Afghan Ministry buildings, the Presidential Palace, and foreign embassies. Now, much of this street is restricted access, including the portion that runs between the two sides of the Embassy Compound. Pedestrians do still use the street during the day, so it's kinda nice to pass Afghans on their way to work, most dressed in traditional garments. It's my little bit of normalcy and freedom as I walk to my office over in the Café section.

Last night I accepted an invitation from a neighbor to stop by for a beer, along with about 6 other folks. Three of us were technical types, the others were career State Department Foreign Service. For them, serving in Afghanistan is a means to get a cush assignment in the future. I noticed that their concerns were quite different from mine, and they had no sense of urgency to try to get something done in the short time that they are here. Politics and goings on in the government was a central component of the conversation, the

Chinese, the Brits, the politics of Holland's aid - not the urgency and desperation of the people of Afghanistan.

Maybe I'm a little harsh, I've only been here two weeks and the tedious of living in the Embassy Compound, cut off from the reality all around us, hasn't gotten to me yet. For me, this isn't just another foreign assignment, one of many in a long State Department career, but a rare opportunity. Will the knowledge and skills I have obtained over the years be sufficient to meet the almost unimaginable challenges of Afghanistan? Will I be able to make a difference and contribute to the US Mission?

More good news. I received my second invitation to visit a PRT. This one is in Ghazan Province where the USDA agent needs help in putting in a drip project. So I will be headed down there in the next few weeks. So maybe, I won't end up like most of the US Mission, sitting around the Embassy Compound day after day, counting the days to my next R&R. A trip out of Kabul each week for the first 3 weeks in January – maybe it's an omen of a good year to come...

I do like my day off. Nothing to do, no place to go, forced R&R. On Friday's night the bar is opened. It's in the Rec Center on the Café side. Normally only pool tables and TV's, but on Friday night the bar opens with a DJ!! Haven't been yet, maybe tonight....