

**Kabul Journal**  
by  
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**CHAPTER II – THE HOLIDAYS**

**New Year's Day, 2006**

I get out of bed and look out the window to find snow! The first snow of the year began during the night and continued throughout the day, sticking to everything except the streets. The snow picks up as the day wears on and knocks down the persistent smog that has hung in the air since I arrived two weeks ago.

I put on my overcoat and go outside. Looking from my balcony through the falling snow and mist, I am pleased to see that the snow has blanketed the Café-side Compound,



reducing the starkness of the closely-packed metal buildings and the overall industrial atmosphere inside the four walls topped with barb-wire and guard towers. Late in the day, the snow accumulates and clings to the barb-wire, softening the harshness of the endless metal coils running all around the tops of the walls.

Over half of the structures on the Café-side is housing, shipping containers that have been converted into living quarters. These are affectingly referred to as *hooches*. Most have been divided into two, dorm-like living compartments equipped with a bed, TV, small fridge and micro-wave, a sink, and small bathroom and shower. Some say I'm lucky to have an apartment and quietly wonder who am I that I rate. The other third of the compound are offices, one in which I work.

The snow, perhaps, is a good omen for the coming year. Particularly for the Afghans who have been quietly fearing that the 6 years of drought had returned. Last year, there was a lot of snow and rain, breaking the drought and restoring some order back into the subsistence farming economy that 85% of the population depends upon.

Warm temperatures and no precipitation made a pleasant December where we could set out on the patio in the noon-day sun in shirt sleeves. But no snow would mean no snow-melt and runoff in the Spring and near disastrous conditions for Afghanistan. The majority of the population lives in one of hundreds of river valleys, diverging water for

the past centuries to grow their crops and make their livelihood before the runoff abruptly ends with summer.

### Tuesday, December 20 - Caroling

I remember the email when it first appeared in my in-box with the invitation to come join in and go caroling around the hooches and the Embassy-side apartments. *Caroling around the hooches!?* Not for me! For me, this was going to be the year of no Christmas. I'd go to Afghanistan and forgo it – no electric train set under the Christmas tree for when the kids come over, no Christmas party with the Renaissance Gypsies playing their usual mix of traditional and Christmas songs, no Chinese presents and laughter with the Fipps's. No, I'd go to Afghanistan and leave Christmas behind.

I soon found that my attitude was common among the remaining staff at the Embassy. With everyone getting regular R&R's back to the States, many had choose to use it at Christmas, and the staff levels had drop nearly in half over the last few days.

Tuesday evening, I had forgotten about the carolers. I was working late in my office cubicle, along with just two others. Then, "*what do I ear, much to my surprise,*" is caroling. Then the 10 women, smiling and singing, coming walking into our hallway.



Some wearing Santa hats, singing in surprising harmony *Drummer Boy*, and bringing warmth and familiarity. And I smiled; all three of us smiled as we put down our work and chased the Grinch away, if only for a few minutes.

### Christmas Eve at the Ambassadors

What more is there to say, an informal and relaxed Christmas Eve open house at the Ambassador's, with fruit punch, wassel, beer or wine (your choice), and young men in formal waiter's outfits, circulating through the crowd with trays of snacks and sweets, The Ambassador resides on the top floor of one apartment building, the penthouse with a large, spacious kitchen larger than an entire hooche.

The Ambassador is a charming and experienced diplomat. His father also served as the US Ambassador to Afghanistan and dedicated the opening of the first permanent US Embassy building in Kabul. Was it just happenstance that his son, the current



ambassador, was here to dedicate the new Embassy Building which was completed a few months ago??

General Ikenberry makes an appearance, the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan. We exchange a few informal words as he fills his glass with the fruit punch, then he effortlessly joins the crowd, making small talk and occasionally being cornered by

someone with an issue of great importance (I'm sure) to discuss with him while they have the chance. With an air of intelligence, confidence and down-to-earthiness, I expect that he makes a good leader and inspires loyalty among our troops.



After the party, I headed over to the Embassy-side cafeteria for dinner, the ourdervors didn't quite do it for me. There wasn't enough time to walk over to the Café side cafeteria (where's the food's better) before it closes. Besides its 20 degrees out.

There are only two of us in the cafeteria, me and a soldier, Oscar, career, 20 years in the military. Oscar talks about his wife and 16 year-old daughter back in the States and how this will be the last post he serves without them (families are not allowed here). He



wonders how he can break the news to his daughter - there's been a change; the next post won't be Germany after all, but Alabama!

However, we're both were upbeat, and not overly sentimental, not sad at all, as we talked about family, fiends, being home and way, and what is important, while in the background, the TV showed George C. Scott as *Scrooge* going though his own self examination.

Back in my apartment, I feel very content, Christmas had come to Kabul! I think about the Grinch, turn on AFN (arm forces network), and once again laugh along with Bill Murray as he was *Scrooged*. No a bad Christmas eve at all.

## Christmas Day

I start the day watching *White Christmas* on AFN, then at 10 am head over to the Christmas Bunch in the DCM's (Deputy Chief of Mission) apartment. The DCM is away for the Holidays, but allowed the Embassy Employee Association to have a Christmas brunch in his quarters. The DCM lives on the top floor of another one of the three apartment buildings. Not as large or formal as the Ambassador's, perfect for this group.



Someone had brought a DVD and *It's a Wonderful Life* was playing on the TV. The movie was all but ignored as we talked, ate a strange combination of breakfast and late night snacks, and drunk coffee, diet coke or wine. The Ambassador came dressed in blue jeans and wearing tennis shoes, smiling as he poured wine to willing accomplices.



We joke that Santa Claus didn't come to the Embassy because he had no Visitors Pass, others say it's because of the armed guards all around.

Then, when the movie progressed to the part where George Bailey goes into the alternate reality, we all watched silently as George finds out what the world would have been like.... No sadness in our group, perhaps because we all believe or hope that we are or will make a difference by coming to Afghanistan.

### Christmas Dinner

When I walked into the Café-side cafeteria, I was amazed at the transformation. The staff went all out to make this dinner special. Holiday table clothes and Christmas napkins, and each place set with silverware and bottles of wine, waiting unopened to fill the real glass goblets. We all ate our turkey or ham in a festive atmosphere, and toasted to each others, new friends we have all made so quickly.



Back in my apartment, I once again turn on the TV to find *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. But the movie makes me sad, don't know why, it never had before. At supper, I heard others comment that watching that particular movie, not the others, made them sad as well.

## The Work Week

A short work week of 4 days, but what a week. This week, the meetings I had were with irrigators, agricultural agents, water engineers, instant colleges and comrades-in-arms. These are people I know and understand. We talk shop: what are the needs, what can be done in strictly technical terms. No politics or political correctness, like it should be!

But I was taken back. Each person I met with, at the Ministry or NGO (non-profit organization), is limited in their authority, either by their positions or the demands of their jobs. One is the former Deputy Minister for Irrigation, removed from his job by petty politics, who now manages projects for a NGO. Like most of the others, they must manage projects which consume all of their available time.

I, on the other hand, have no projects, no formal responsibilities besides advising the Ambassador and developing a strategic plan for water development. I'm the Senior Advisor for Water. I'm the one that has the unique opportunity through my position with the US Embassy, and as Dr Fipps from Texas A&M, to make sense out of the mess that the development and rehabilitation effort now finds itself.

I'm taken back by their expectations and faith (or is it hope) that I will be able to formulate a strategic plan, that I do have ideas and can provide direction, that I can forge cooperation among all the NGO's and international governments, so that we can move forward from the haphazard programs, quickly put together into something that makes sense and that will contribute to the long-term stability of Afghanistan and the betterment of the lives of the Afghan people.

Waleed who works for the FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) invites Verne and me out to celebrate New Years on Friday, to a restaurant recently approved by the UN for its staff. The RSO (regional security officer) refuses to give us the authorization, all restaurants are off limit to US Embassy staff due to security concerns.



So Verne and I go over to the UN guest house where Waleed lives. Small, more restaurant-like atmosphere, we eat the food from the buffet and talk about irrigation.

Waleed is originally from Iraq. His last FAO post was in Yemen where his family waits for his tour in Afghanistan to end. Like the US, the UN does not allow family members to accompany their staff in Afghanistan. Unlike the Embassy, the food is free, and so is the wine that Waleed freely pours.

## New Years Eve

What's New Years without a party? The flyer is posted all around the compound. *Black tie event (or closest approximation)*, at the Embassy Ballroom (not exactly, just the Embassy-side cafeteria, decorated of course).

*Ties and cocktail dresses?* I quieting plan on staying in and watching football. But then a few days later, new flyers state: "*Black-tie to jeans, join us for New Years Eve.*" I speculate that the people have spoken, too many rules already, no dress rules for partying in the cafeteria!



The cafeteria is transformed! A DJ plays music, then at 10 pm the light show begins. Some tuxes, some jeans, some evening gowns, and 4 DEA (drug enforcement agents) who come in traditional Afghan dress. Beer and drinks are \$2, and a party that could be anywhere (even here in Kabul) rings in the New Year!!





### New Year Day

The snow continues steady all day. The small flakes slowly acuminating on the trees and vehicles, and there's football games on AFN. The Café-side Cafeteria has a barbecue, moved indoors because of the snow, steaks and potatoes, free wine, and beer at \$1 a can. The Holidays in Kabul come to an end. There's something about Americans, we do seem to find a way to make it happen....



View from my balcony a few days after the snow stopped. The temperature inversion and smog are gone. Now we have clear skies and great views of the surrounding snow-covered mountains.