

A JOURNEY HOME: TO KABUL AND BACK AGAIN

THIRTY YEARS AND THREE WARS AFTER HIS FIRST SOJOURN IN AFGHANISTAN, AN FSO RETURNS, TRYING TO SORT OUT THE COUNTRY'S IDYLIC PAST FROM ITS HARSH PRESENT AND POTENTIALLY BRIGHT FUTURE.

BY CHRIS BROWN

The white U.S. embassy truck ground its gears and grudgingly bore our family's worldly possessions over the slate-gray mountains. A searing sun pierced the thin, dusty air over the Khyber Pass as our caravan wound its way from Islamabad to Kabul.

Before us, a wheezing '57 Chevy swayed and groaned under its load of some 15 Pashtun tribesmen — all of them bristling with rifles and side arms and perched on every available inch of space. The car's trunk, wedged agape by passengers' rifles, supported the weight of a few more tribesmen on top. For them, this was nothing unusual — just a taxi ride from Peshawar to the Afghan border crossing at Torkham.

Slowly, we scaled the plateau to Kabul's high plains. We passed two forlorn factories on the outskirts, and wound through the color and bustle of this rock-ringed town that would be our family's home for the next five years. Finally, we reached the USAID mission director's residence in Kabul's Karte-Seh suburb. Tuning in to Radio Afghanistan, I heard for the first time the bluegrass-meets-Ravi Shankar twang of Afghan music and knew I was going to love this place. The year was 1972.

The few years that followed were rich in geographic and cultural discovery. They ended with the final notes of the sitar music that a fellow senior and I played at the American International School of Kabul's 1974 graduation ceremony.

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His father, Vince Brown, served in his last government assignment as USAID director in Kabul from 1972 to 1977.

Kabul Revisited

Thirty years and three wars later, I looked from the window of our chartered U.N. aircraft at the stark snow-dusted peaks that separate Pakistan from Afghanistan.



The author poses where his locker once stood at the American International School of Kabul in February 2002.

I was finally coming home to Kabul. The plane swooped and spiraled with a familiar sense of drama as it descended between the steep snow-blanketed slopes surrounding Kabul. Familiar, too, was the resounding thump and squeal as the landing gear made contact. The aircraft lumbered along the rutted runway and finally came to rest in front of the remarkably unchanged terminal.

Fittingly, I had sat next to another returnee on the flight. Son of an influential Pushtun family, he had graduated from my rival school, the American-sponsored Habibia High School a few years earlier than I. Now a senior officer of the United Nations Development Program, he was returning to the country of his birth. We marveled at the three vintage Afghan Air Force biplanes that still occupied their corner of the taxiway — their backs broken, pressed to the ground like crushed dragonflies.

An hour later, the embassy minivan whisked me into Kabul's fragile vortex of conflicting hopes and ambitions. In the blur through the window I was amazed at the rebirth of commerce — especially the colorful, homemade satellite-TV

dishes, pounded and soldered together from carefully matched Coca-Cola cans or flattened bug spray aerosol containers.

We soon reached the dusty but still-impressive U.S. embassy (which had reopened in December 2001). We paused at the heavily fortified back gate, and the U.S. Marines waved us past concertina wire and sandbagged machine-gun nests. Cruising past the embassy's incongruously quaint and beat-up fleet of 80s-vintage Volkswagen Passats, we reached the chancery. This American landmark had miraculously survived nearly a decade behind closed shutters and locked doors.

Standing once again beneath the imposing eagle emblem suspended over the front door, I paused. Phantom memories filled the driveway with a motorcade of armored black Cadillacs. I remembered standing in that very spot as a teenager, with my family and the rest of the American community, to bid farewell to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger after his talks with then-President Mohammed Daoud.

Chuckling, I recalled a bit of Brown family folklore that endures from that visit. My father accompanied the secretary to a high-level meeting on aid to Afghanistan. Devouring his host's planeload of cookies, Kissinger promised project after project over my father's repeated low-key reminders about resource limitations. Finally, he paused, looked squarely at his host and remarked, "You know, I make a habit of eating a Foreign Service officer or two for breakfast each morning."

Now, on this cold February day in 2002, the embassy was once again in the news. Aging and in disrepair, it was stretched to the breaking point, serving at once as office, barracks, residence and dormitory. I joined a small, tough contingent of Marines and civilians with surprisingly high morale in spite of the hardships.

Everything happened on its premises — on the chancery's two floors and basement, in the adjacent bunker, or in two or three recreational vehicle "trailers" parked out back. Civilians slept side-by-side, up to eight to a room. The ambassador's "residence" was a single room down the hall from his office. Over a dozen men shared a single shower stall in a small restroom with two toilets and a sink. (Early risers enjoyed a distinct quality-of-life advantage over those who chose to shower late.)

We took meals together, mostly standing up, in the crowd-

ed kitchen in the bunker. Breakfast consisted of coffee, peanut butter, jam, fruit and traditional Afghan nan (flat bread). Lunch rarely deviated from lamb stew, rice and nan. Dinner was soup and more nan. But nobody went hungry and the mealtime conversations were hilarious.

Back to High School

As the week's business in Kabul drew to a close, I set out after my last meeting on a private pilgrimage to my teenage home and school. My driver, Javed, and I left President Hamid Karzai's downtown offices and ventured into one of Kabul's most thoroughly devastated areas — the bombed-out expanse of once-elegant homes, schools, clinics and restaurants now simply known as "West Kabul."

The sun glared off the cratered asphalt of Darulaman Boulevard — once the leafy "Champs Elysees" of Kabul's elegant Karte Seh and Karte Char districts. Slowly the remnants of familiar vistas swung into view.

Demazang Circle, the boulevard's stately starting point, was eerily silent. A car or two swung lazily around its central monument. Suddenly, I noticed the surrounding buildings' caved-in roofs and damaged doorways. Their windows looked blindly down at us as we began picking our way around the craters and potholes of this once-grand three-mile avenue.

Where trees once sheltered pedestrians and carrot-juice vendors, dust devils scurried over roadside ditches and rubble-strewn stretches of beige and gray. Further back stood a row of large homes, punctuated by occasional three-story office buildings, schools and clinics. There were gaping rocket-holes in the walls and no wood or glass in most doors and windows.

As we wove along, I took heart in the occasional freshly renovated house or office, typically displaying a sign announcing "Red Crescent Society" or some other relief organization. We passed the once-grand Habibia High School — home to thousands of Afghanistan's most promising youth in the 1960s and 1970s and alma mater to my newfound friend from the Islamabad-Kabul flight. The satisfaction that it was still standing tempered the tragedy of its burned-out interior and complete lack of windows or doors.

Finally, we approached my old high school, the American International School of Kabul. Next to the still-operating Noor Eye Clinic stood a strange, walled compound. Its sev-

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eral acres were dotted with the roofless remains of the two-story gym, and the two parallel wings where the elementary and high schools used to be. Crushed, upended cars stood in place of the school's two distinctive front gates.

Here I met Sher ("Lion") Mohamed, a proud and cheerful neighbor with a job at the Ministry of Commerce. He remembered our school and said that it was safe to walk around the compound. It had been cleared of land mines, he told us.

I shook his hand and thanked him as we parted. His firm grip and broad smile almost concealed the three missing fingers — a reminder of how few Afghans have been spared the marks of their nation's 23-year ordeal.



The author tuning up for a sitar recital at the American International School of Kabul in 1974.

Finally back on AISK grounds, I relived unforgettable times. We took photos standing in the high-school hallway where my locker used to be, under the connecting covered walkway where the big yellow school buses used to drop us off each morning.

Then, on the far end of the property — where our football team used to go down in defeat to the U.S. Marines with some regularity in the 1970s — I noticed a brand-new, still-unfinished four-story building. Afghan kids and teachers were converging on it and, drawn to them, I made a heartening discovery. Although Kabul's schools were on their long winter break, some

parents had hired two teachers to run vacation English classes at this new school that now stood where mine had been.

The teachers knew that an international school had operated there. They asked me to say a few words to the class, and thankfully, my rusting Dari obliged.

I told them how glad AISK alumni would be to learn that students were still going to school there. I told them how deeply most of us — kids from all over the world who had studied there from the 1950s until the Soviet invasion in 1979 — had been influenced by our time in this proud and independent country. I wished them well, and left somehow satisfied, knowing that new things can take root on the ruins of old.

Return to a Vanished Home

Late now to return to the office, Javed and I pulled over briefly beside a major Kabul landmark — the former Soviet Embassy. Heavily damaged in years of civil war, it had become home to refugee families squatting in the shells of offices and apartments.

Behind a corner of the once-imposing 10-foot wall that surrounded the USAID mission director's residence across the street, I surprised a turbaned and bearded grandfather and his two 6-year-old grandsons. It appeared that the place had found a new purpose: public latrine for these unfortunate families.

My gaze followed the remains of the front wall, where the grape trellis and glass greenhouse used to be. Not a trace. Not a blade of grass in the front yard. Not even a stump or root to mark the trees that I knew had once stood there.

Only then could I take in the house itself — once an elegant two-story villa with balconies and awnings, built by a cousin of Afghanistan's royal family. Now, a pile of rubble with only the distinc-



USAID/Kabul Director's residence in 1976.

tive chimney remaining to prove that it had ever existed.

From around the corner, where two or three homes had escaped the years of shelling and combat, an Afghan doctor with the Red Crescent Society picked his way over the rubble. He had heard of my family. He remembered when the Soviet news agency, TASS, had taken over the house after the Americans left in 1978. "The neighborhood's gone downhill a bit since your days," he said, "but please join me for some tea."

Asking if I could instead pay him a proper visit on my next trip to Kabul, I said goodbye, with hand on heart in that dignified Afghan tradition of lengthy and ceremonial greetings and farewells.

As Javed and I drove back across town in silence, I took stock of Afghanistan and its changes over the years. Conflicting impressions swirled: idyllic past against harsh present, misery and devastation in West Kabul against economic rebirth downtown, hope for national consolidation against hardened ethnic and regional rivalries.

Dawn Yields to Daylight

Back at the embassy, sleep was elusive in the cramped cot in what I believe used to be the economic section (now the men's dorm). I awakened as the early rays of dawn filtered through the grimy, barred window near my head.

Kabul's jagged, snow-covered

mountains filled the vista, radiating a fragile pink glow in the sunrise. The effect was serene, even hopeful. Could a peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan rise from these ashes, I wondered? Could such a deserving people find hope of prosperity through economic opportunity and trade under present circumstances?

Almost afraid to shatter the moment, I quietly searched for my camera. Seconds later, turning back to the window, it was already too late. The glow had vanished. Instead, white daylight glared from the slopes like sun off a mirror.

How perfect, I thought — the essence of Afghanistan's dawning moment. It makes you wonder how long we have before Afghanistan's fierce centrifugal forces reassert themselves with full vigor, and once again threaten to scatter the wisps of hope and opportunity still clinging to Kabul's thin dusty air. ■



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