

# RECALLING PAST CRISES AND EVACUATIONS: PART II

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AFSA MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES SHARE MORE EXPERIENCES RELATED TO  
EVACUATIONS AND LIFE AT POSTS LOCATED IN DANGER ZONES.

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**Editor's Note:** *Last month, we presented some of the thoughtful and moving responses to our call last November for AFSA members and their families to share brief vignettes relating to evacuations and life at posts located in danger zones. Here are more of their responses. Again, our thanks to all who shared their experiences.*

— Steven Alan Honley, Editor



## **We're Number One**

In the mid-1960s, Venezuelan guerrillas shot up Embassy Caracas, kidnapped the minister of the interior and tortured him gruesomely to death, and otherwise did their best to destabilize a still-nascent democracy. One Friday afternoon, I, a USIA press officer on my first tour, was told in an embassy meeting that I was the guerrillas' number-one candidate for kidnapping. I was given a canister of mace for protection and told to vary my route to work, home and other destinations. As it happened, I was already planning to leave the next morning, with my wife and three young children, for a much-needed week's vacation at a remote, isolated retreat on the eastern Caribbean shore. Go ahead, our security officer said — if you really want to.

We did, and after passing several checkpoints manned by Venezuelan soldiers who waved their submachine guns energetically, I edged our Rambler station wagon, with family inside, onto a homemade raft that was to be poled across a last river in the far boonies. The captain, a tough-looking hombre brandishing a thick pole, came to the driver's window for payment and a gruff charla (chat). The front of his T-shirt sported an emblem for elite Ministry of

Interior troops; when our Charon turned and walked away (to take us further into the sticks), the back of his T-shirt was revealed: a large "1." Shades of the Friday briefing! My wife and I exchanged looks.

The crossing went well, but on finally rolling up a sandy pathway to the super-rustic Club Miami, it turned out that we were the only customers for a week under the palms. Our decent-sized one-room cabin — open plan, cots only — had wooden half-walls and screens to the roof; simple for anyone to penetrate, right? Now, where was that mace? But after a good swim and dinner that first night we were soon lulled to sleep by the quiet creep-and-retreat of the waves.

A little before 2 a.m., I sat upright in the cot. A scratching sound from the other side of the half-wall continued; guerrillas working toward the front door? I reached over and touched my wife's arm. When she awoke, I put a finger to my lips, pointed toward the half-wall and eased out of my cot to crawl on hands and knees to the wall. I inched up the wall, drew

in my breath and peeked through the screen. Instead of a guerrilla with an AK-47, though, a big-horned cow was scratching his flank against the outside of the wall.

The next afternoon, we watched a small biplane slip in over the palms, land on the primitive strip behind Club Miami and taxi up. Now what? Who steps out but Charlie Reed, a U.S. Air Force friend from Caracas, just checking up on us. In the end, we had a "number-one" rest, but always — then and later, especially for three years in the Soviet Union — there was the awareness of those who weren't so lucky.

*Eli Flam*

*USIA, retired*

*Port Tobacco, Md.*

***Instead of a guerrilla with  
an AK-47, the noise I heard  
was a cow scratching his  
flank against our cabin.***

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### It's a Small World

There is just one moon  
And one golden sun,  
And a smile means  
Friendship to everyone.  
Though the mountains divide,  
And the oceans are wide,  
It's a small world after all.

That was the song that we awoke to in the Disneyland Hotel on Jan. 16, 1991, the day the Gulf War was declared. We had just been evacuated from Pakistan, and somehow the saccharin-sweet melody and lyrics did not compute with what we had experienced in the months leading up to the war and on our 36-hour flight from Pakistan.

Although the government of Pakistan officially supported the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf War, most Pakistanis rallied behind Saddam Hussein. Tensions hovered in the orange zone, and I remember feeling like a potential target because I was American. I would drive a circuitous route to my friend Fran's house to avoid driving past the Iraqi embassy. Fran decided to take a proactive approach to the Iraqis — she waved at the guards as she drove by, hoping that international politics would not be played out at the individual level.

The evacuation had started with a surreptitious knock on the door by our USAID deputy executive officer at 3 a.m. on Jan. 14. He had been working around-the-clock trying to get all the tickets in order for the chartered flights out of Islamabad. The plane hopscoched from Islamabad to Karachi to Bangkok to Manila to Tokyo, and finally to Los Angeles, where we planned to overnight before my husband departed to Washington, D.C. The boys and I planned to return to Salem, Ore., where our sons had been enrolled in elementary school.

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*In Saigon, we were  
greeted by cheerful  
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short order.*

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Our strategy was to put the boys in a school they were familiar with. We needed a respite from too much reality, so we decided to spoil ourselves with some fantasy before being separated for six months.

I remember feeling a disconnect with the 24-hour news coverage from CNN about our enemies, the Iraqis, and the "It's a Small World" melody blasting from the loudspeakers advocating brotherly love. More than oceans divided the allies from the Iraqis. Recent history suggests that a gulf still exists between them and us, but I'm hopeful that common sense can prevail to prevent yet another war in Iraq. As the lyrics go, "There's so much that we share, that it's time we're aware, it's a small world after all."

*Pam Anderson  
Dhaka, Bangladesh*



### Evacuating Nha Trang, Vietnam

April 1, 1975

When the North Vietnamese launched their military offensive in Vietnam's central highlands in March 1975, we at the consulate general in Nha Trang did not know that within a month, the presence of

our South Vietnamese allies and of the United States would be swept away from our region — indeed from all of the northern half of South Vietnam. But at the least, from the onset of the offensive, it was clear that the military initiative was in the North's hands and that there was no early prospect of a southern counteroffensive — though consulate management vetoed reporting this, apparently because such judgments would not have been well-received by embassy leadership in Saigon. And quickly enough it became apparent that the South Vietnamese not only were retreating on a wide front, but were on the verge of being routed.

In these circumstances, early and effective planning for an evacuation should have been our priority. The mindset coming from the embassy, however, was to project full confidence in our allies. This in turn was taken to mean that evacuation planning and implementation should be downplayed. Efforts at evacuation began, but without full urgency.

Early on April 1, we learned that the South Vietnamese military command had departed Nha Trang. We left helter-skelter the same day, improvising a helicopter landing area at the consulate and taking those Vietnamese employees with us who had the good sense or good fortune to be near at hand. As we departed, Nha Trang was falling into chaos; I vividly recall marauding South Vietnamese soldiers pointing their weapons at us as we choppered away.

In Saigon, we were greeted by cheerful embassy dependents who appeared to have little sense of what we had just been through — or that they would be going through the same in short order. Ambassador Graham Martin received us at the embassy, affirming bravely that a reduced South Vietnam —

“Cochinchina” — would be viable. I was invited to stay on in the embassy, but sensing that our evacuation from Saigon would be at least as improvised as our departure from the north, I chose to leave as soon as I could assemble a new wardrobe (my possessions having been left behind in Nha Trang) and acquire a plane ticket.

The lesson here is the obvious one, that policy goals and evacuation planning may appear to conflict, posing difficult choices. My own view is that by failing to give evacuation the priority it deserved, we made the wrong choices in Vietnam in 1975. Indeed, I believe we made wrong policy choices in Vietnam going back to the 1950s, but that is another story.

*David Adamson  
Washington, D.C.*



### Starting Off with a Bang

On June 16, 2001, my husband and I left our life in Los Angeles to go to Washington, D.C., where I would begin my new career in the Foreign Service.

Three weeks later, I was given my first assignment: Islamabad. We were scheduled to leave for Pakistan on the first of November. However, following the events of Sept. 11, I was notified by my career development officer that Pakistan was under ordered departure status, and since my position was classified as non-emergency, I would remain in Washington until further notice.

My first assignment in the Foreign Service, and I was evacuated before I even got to post!

By December 2001 the ordered departure was lifted for employees only; family members remained under evacuation.

It was hard leaving my husband

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in Washington and going to my first assignment alone. I didn't know what to expect in many ways, since the entire experience was brand-new for me. During my two-day journey to Pakistan, I experienced a wide variety of feelings and emotions. In addition to starting this exciting new career/life solo, I left not even knowing when my husband would be able to join me.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted with warm, open arms. Yet even though everyone did their best to make me feel comfortable and welcome, I could sense the sadness, loneliness and low spirits in people throughout the embassy. I adjusted by throwing myself into my job and working seven days a week, trying not to focus on being separated from my husband, as hard as that was.

Two months later, the ordered departure for family members was lifted. My husband was able to join me in Pakistan!

Then, three short weeks after his arrival, there was a terrorist attack at a church near the embassy, and within a week, Pakistan was once again under evacuation status. My husband had to leave after a brief, three-week reunion.

Shortly thereafter, it was insinuated that Pakistan would become an unaccompanied post once the evacuation was lifted. I immediately submitted a request to curtail, went back to Washington under evacuation status and was given a new assignment to New Delhi.

We were scheduled to leave Washington on June 4, 2002. Three days before that, India went into an authorized departure status due to tensions with Pakistan. Once again, I was caught up in an evacuation before I even got to post! Fortunately, that evacuation was short-lived and was lifted in July.

Thus, I found myself in evacuation status three times less than a

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***I found myself in  
evacuation status three  
times in my first year  
with the Foreign Service.***

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year after entering the Foreign Service.

Even though all the uncertainty and living in limbo during the first year was hard for me, it was even more difficult for my husband. During each evacuation, he was unsure whether he should find a job, take some courses, or just wait, since evacuations can be in effect for one month, or up to six.

In essence, a year of ongoing evacuations set him back a lot as far as his job situation was concerned. However, now that we are settled in New Delhi, we cling to the hope that we have "paid our evacuation dues" and can enjoy the remainder of our tour in India evacuation-free!

*Kyla J. Seals  
OMS, Political Section  
Embassy New Delhi*

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**Adversity Brings  
People Together**

During 35 years in the Foreign Service I was blessed never to have been evacuated from a post, as mine was always one of those "essential" jobs. But I well remember being told, soon after arriving at my first assignment, to read the evacuation plan. It went into great detail about how the Marines would back up through the embassy in case security was breached, ending up in the Communications Office. We could "use the bar from a bar lock safe to

protect ourselves or hide under a desk or behind a cabinet and hope not to be detected." Soon afterward, things got a little dicey and schedules for evacuation were drawn up. One of the teenage dependents told me she'd be leaving on the first plane and asked me when I would leave. I answered, "I don't think I *do* leave."

I did, however, experience life at several posts during evacuations. My experience was that everyone became closer.

I went to Cairo while our mission there was still an interest section rather than an embassy. Nearly everyone lived on the compound and anything that happened included everyone assigned. During my tour, the Kissinger visits and the peace talks took place, the cover came off our eagle and the flag went up, and we became an embassy. The personnel who were there before this happened had a special closeness.

During Desert Storm, I served as information management officer in Damascus. The embassy staff became quite small and there was a special comraderie evident. I remember one weekend when I offered to let TDY Information Management Office operators and technicians come over to my house to wash clothes. I then decided to cook dinner and called around for anyone not working to come by for spaghetti. The TDY personnel were astounded to find the ambassador, DCM and various other officers showing up. While it is true that relationships are normally tighter at smaller "hardship" posts, circumstances such as these make them even more so. I'd like to say, too, that once you've had an experience like this with anyone, your friendship is always just a little stronger.

*Judy Chidester  
Las Cruces, N.M.*

*The embassy evacuation plan suggested we “use the bar from a bar lock safe to protect ourselves or hide under a desk or behind a cabinet and hope not to be detected.”*



**Evacuation from Sanaa, Yemen**

This is a brief account of my son William’s memories of being evacuated from Yemen during the civil war there in 1994. He was 9 then and is 17 now.

Boom! AtttAttTaaaAAttttt. Those were the noises that I woke up to one May morning in 1994. Yay! Fireworks! I was just 9 years old and I had slept over at a friend’s house. We had just started to eat breakfast when the “fireworks” began, and we were excited. We were still dancing around when my friend’s dad walked in, and said, “those aren’t fireworks, it’s war.” And that was the beginning of the short-lived Yemeni Civil War for me.

My friend began crying, but his older sister and I ran around some more. The circumstances did not worry us because at the time we were still too young to realize the potential danger involved. However, our parents did.

The war, even though not immediately life-threatening, created a lot of tension and difficulties. The

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*We were still dancing  
around when my friend's  
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fact that I had been at a friend's house was a difficulty. Our family was split up, and could not be immediately reunited. Needless to say, I was thrilled, because I would be able to spend a few more nights with my buddy than planned. When my dad finally did pick me up, I could tell by his mood that this thing was actually very serious. We drove home, where most of our necessities were packed up, ready for evacuation.

As we waited for the day of evacuation to arrive, we had to stay in our basement, because our house was located between two hills on which anti-aircraft guns constantly blazed bullets into the sky directly overhead. While we were in our basement, we had no electricity; although the electricity faithfully went out every night in Yemen, not having it at all was yet another annoyance to be dealt with.

There was a lot of scrambling being done in the embassy trying to figure out a way for us to be evacuated. All planes had been grounded at the airport, and so we would have to be evacuated on American military C-130's. People were still nervous, because even though the North Yemen government called for a short ceasefire of their anti-aircraft guns, the Yemenis had already mistakenly shot down one of their own fighters. Thankfully, the evacuation went off

without mishap, even though the C-130's were very old indeed, and were not in any case meant for the transport of civilians. As we all sat in the netting, and lay back exhausted, the poorly-pressured bay area of the plane caused a good majority of travelers to become quite airsick. Still, we were safe and we were going home, and that was all that mattered.

*Bill Stewart  
Washington, D.C.*

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**A Curious Definition of  
Hardship**

It was Dec. 17, 1998, a Thursday morning in Herzliya Pituach, a suburb of Tel Aviv. President Bill Clinton had just departed the country after a historic four-day visit to Israel, Jerusalem, and the Occupied Territories. I was asleep, catching up on rest lost during the long workdays of the presidential visit. The telephone woke me. "Pack your bags," said my colleague. "The post has moved to ordered departure status."

After gathering my dazed wits ("What the heck?! The president was just here!"), I leaped into clothes and raced to the chancery. Yes, we were told, Washington had ordered the post to go to ordered departure status, though Amb. Martin Indyk had protested the order since he doubted its necessity. Among the suggestions which had long been discussed at our post was the idea of an internal evacuation point. In our case, we all felt that it would make more sense for families to be moved temporarily to Beersheva, where they could be held in a wait-and-see mode so as to evaluate the necessity for a full evacuation. This suggestion, so far as I know, has never been seriously considered.

We were still USIA employees then, so, after determining that there was no way to avoid the evacuation, I got on the phone to our area office. If

I had to go to the U.S. just before Christmas, Washington was not the place I wanted to be. I have no family there. It took all day, but I got permission to go to my home leave address instead of Washington, with the understanding that I would have to be on leave since I could not report for work.

After finally getting my orders, I raced home. I had about an hour to pack our bags before we had to leave for the airport. With no idea how long the evacuation would last, whether I would be working in Washington, or whether my son would have to start school in the States, I threw a jumble of items into the suitcases. I mainly remember packing all of my son's Christmas presents. I did not pack any of the things I had thought I would pack in such a situation (like family photo albums, important documents) because I did not think it likely my possessions would be destroyed in my absence, but I did take two big bags for each of us with a variety of clothes.

We caught a charter flight as directed by the embassy, along with many of our colleagues. The charter put us into Kennedy International Airport at 4 a.m. in the morning. At that hour, the inter-terminal buses are not running, but we nevertheless had to go immediately from the terminal where we landed to a different one since our connecting flight was departing at 6 a.m. I still have a vivid memory of trying to push a cart loaded with four big bags uphill in very cold weather while at the same time holding onto my son's hand. When he started to cry, mainly from the cold, but also from tiredness and fear, I had to stop. I unloaded the cart, unlocked each of the bags until I located his overcoat, bundled him up, then started out again. We made the connecting flight, but just barely.

Exhausted, we finally made it to

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***At that point, I rebelled.***

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before Christmas...***

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my mother's house. We were lucky that I had a parent who was willing and able to provide us a temporary haven. I checked in with the office the following day, only to be told that it was likely that the ordered departure status would be lifted before Christmas, and we would then have a day or two to return to post. At that point, I rebelled. No way was I going to return to Tel Aviv just before Christmas, let alone on Christmas Day. In the end, we returned to Tel Aviv on Dec. 29.

Despite the evacuation; despite the fact that Israel is the only post for which I have ever been issued a gas mask, atropine, and instructions on sealing my house in case of a biological or chemical attack; despite the fact that Israel is the prime target of suicide bombers and became even more of a target after the second intifada began in September 1999, Israel was designated a non-hardship post. I was, to put it mildly, surprised to learn that after three years of working in Israel and Gaza I was a "fair share" bidder.

So it happened that after 18 years on the job, serving at six different posts, most of them hardship and one of them a danger-pay post, I finally got evacuated — from a supposedly non-hardship post.

*Julie Gianelloni Connor  
Counselor for Public  
Affairs  
U.S. Embassy  
Santiago, Chile ■*



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