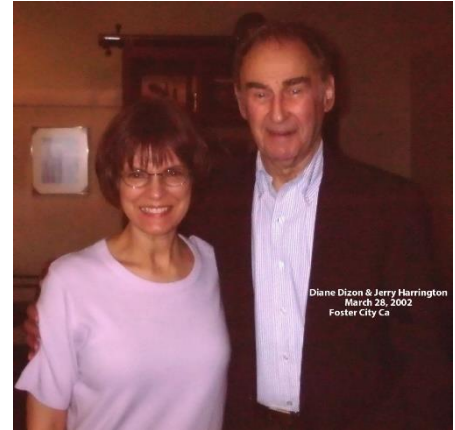


Journey to Afghanistan: A New Chapter in Development 2003: The Call

Following the ouster of the Taliban and the emergence of NGOs, the IRI Research Institute in Stamford, Connecticut, reached out based on a referral from Dr. Doug Novell of USAID. This connection led to an extraordinary opportunity to serve as Chief of Party for Afghanistan, overseeing a comprehensive Technical and Financial Pilot Project for Integrated Development.



The ambitious initiative was presented to both USAID and Ashraf Ghani, who was serving as Minister of Finance for Afghanistan at the time. This high-level engagement demonstrated the project's significance and potential impact on the nation's reconstruction efforts. The project's scope required extensive expertise and cultural sensitivity, necessitating a profound understanding of Afghanistan's complex governmental and social structures.

As a recent retiree, accepting the Chief of Party position required careful consideration. However, years of working with Afghan expatriots in Fremont, California, had created both personal connections and professional insights that made the opportunity compelling for both me and Diane.



Building the project team proved straightforward, drawing on a network of retired Peace Corps Operation Help Volunteers who were eager

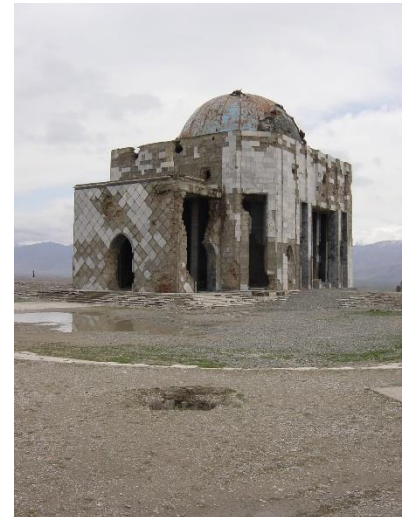
for another tour in Afghanistan after 30 years, as well as Afghan Ex-Pats who wanted to return home to their families and their land. The team's experience and dedication would be crucial to the mission's success.



Within just two weeks of accepting the position, the journey began in earnest. I found myself in Dubai, UAE, 250 miles from Kabul, seated aboard a gifted Arianna jet from India with more broken seats laid out and several dangling useless oxygen masks. Regardless of the plane's condition, our spiral landing into Kabul's historical valley,

passing the embedded mountain homes near the Sher Darwaza, the tomb of Nadir, and the United States Embassy.

The journey began with an unconventional arrival in Afghanistan, marked by a memorable dispute between Afghan passengers and crew over in-flight meal quality. As the aircraft doors opened, passengers rushed toward the exit clutching blanket-filled carry-on luggage—an improvised solution that would become emblematic of the resourcefulness required throughout this mission. Blanket-wrapped bundles tumbled down the stairs to the tarmac below, creating a chaotic yet unforgettable scene that foreshadowed the complex challenges ahead.





At the terminal, Deputy Chief of Party Pordil Mehrpore and his cousin expertly navigated my arrival process, helping to expedite entry through customs. The visa issued by the Afghan Embassy in Washington, D.C. proved invaluable, streamlining what could have been a lengthy bureaucratic ordeal. It was "Now Roz"—the Afghan New Year—and Pordil had strategically

arranged a series of high-level meetings with key government officials, including Ashraf Ghani and various ministers and Generals, setting the stage for critical project discussions.



Despite jet lag, the meeting with Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani proceeded as expected. His questions focused sharply on the project proposal, with primary concerns centered on USAID funding and the potential start date. Ghani also facilitated connections with World

Bank Officers, though he expressed reservations about government stability due to ongoing issues at the Pakistan border.

The afternoon brought a meeting with Sayaf, the Warlord of Paghman and presidential candidate. True to Afghan hospitality traditions, Sayaf and his staff served tea and cookies. With Pordil interpreting, the meeting concluded positively, with Sayaf pledging support for the proposed projects.



Meeting with Warlord Commander Sayyaf
Paghman Afghanistan

Unexpected News

Using a satellite phone, contact with IRI revealed devastating news: the project might not receive funding due to the start of the Iraq War. Instructions came to fly to Dubai and wait, hoping the conflict would be brief. After a week of uncertainty in Dubai, the mission ended with a disappointed return home.

A promising project died as a result of a war—a stark reminder of how geopolitical forces can instantly reshape humanitarian and development efforts, leaving dedicated professionals to witness opportunities slip away despite successful groundwork and local support.



Peace Corps Office Shar-i-Now @Chori-e-Taraboshon
Telephone 21620