

Diary Entry 4

The following diary entries are Ron Hamilton's personal observations, musings and thoughts while commissioned by the World Bank to review governance and monitoring in the Strategic Grain Reserve in Kabul during 2012

If I hadn't served long in Afghanistan, and learned the speech and ways of the Central Asian tribes, I suppose I'd have imagined that I was in a cell with a couple of madmen. But I knew this trick that they have of reviling those they respect most, in banter, of their love of irony and formal imagery, which is strong in Pushtu and even stronger in Persian, the loveliest of all languages.

Flashman at the Charge, p.221, Pan edition, 5th printing, 1979

One meeting down and one to go, today. This morning's meeting rattled my cage as I discovered that there is a paper on the SGR sitting in front of the Council of Ministers. From what I could glean, it has logic, though one big flaw.



The meeting was back in my old stamping ground, the Ministry of Finance. And on the top bloody floor, too! With a man I had some association with in my SOE assignment. I thought he was a bit smooth, then but I also knew he has a good knowledge of local institutions. It was a useful meeting though even though I was told of issues hitherto not known.

The Ministry is in the CBD and near the banks of the Kabul River. Well, that is what the trickle of water and rubbish is called. The streets were comparatively easy to navigate, though I saw one man knocked off his cycle. But not much chance for photos – it is tighter to take them in some areas, now.

“Central Region Security Advisory

120711- 11: 20 hrs - Kabul City, PD 4, Share Naw, the march staged by MoWA ended peacefully.”

The last of a series of warnings not to go to a particular area.

It was a relief to go out to a meeting – the exterior of my “cell” is being painted in water-based paint and my sinuses and eyes have not been happy.

My meeting was on the outskirts of the city although, as we were dropping someone off at another venue, I saw some of the middle-class suburbs. With local shops and small businesses. And the usual proliferation of handfuls of guys repairing streets, gates and such. Plus incomplete houses standing idle.

The adjacent photo’s main interest is that I fortuitously caught a brief glimpse of the old city wall. Almost certainly, it was there when the British (and Harry Flashman) commenced their big retreat in 1842. (Readers of previous diaries will recall that I am fascinated by the Retreat.)



We passed the big mosque referred to in previous trips and headed down a long, straight divided highway to the Afghanistan Land Authority. I met the CEO, a lawyer and very informative. I see him as an operator in the modernising Afghanistan. You can pick them by the quality of the suits – invariably better than mine! Besides its being an interesting and useful meeting, it was the sights that made it for me.



The Old Palace

We passed by the old palace, destroyed several times during the “unpleasantness’s” of the last couple of decades.

It is dust season and my photos are, invariably, through dirty car windows into dust-haze.

The park full of old Russian aircraft seems to have gone – or I have my roads mixed up. But I did see one of the anti-rocket blimps on the ground, being serviced. When I think about it, they must be sod for aircraft flying around the city. Recall how many aircraft collided with the anchor lines of barrage balloons during the war? And, as I have mentioned the skies over Kabul have a fair amount of traffic. We bypassed the soccer stadium where the Taliban executed people during their occupation of this sad and fascinating city.

I saw my first beggars. An elderly woman in a wheelchair, and a younger woman with



One of several book stalls, by the river

We went down to the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. My role was to brief the Minister and gain his approval to my recommendations. We didn't expect it to be clear cut. He recognised the value of my proposals but is cursed with having to deal with a centralised bureaucracy. My second meeting was with Afghanistan's Olympic entry for the cigarette smoking competition. He saw what I needed and, although cynical, agreed to provide advice. After having pressed Assad for meetings with such people, it took a Minister to put his finger on what I needed.



I occasionally reflect on how decisions impact on one's life – even many years later. When I left Coulls Somerville Wilkie's Dunedin office for the Valuation Department, who could guess that one would, one day, be offering advice to Ministers in different parts of the world. Perhaps I should thank Sir Robert Muldoon for preparing me in dealing with difficult people?



The trip itself was through the gap in the steep, house-covered hills to the south of the CBD and to a large campus adjacent to the walled University of Kabul. As always the sights, though increasingly familiar, fascinate. Every foreign city I have visited has fascinated through being allowed to observe the daily routine.

This morning I spotted a young lad wearing a cap with New Zealand's Silver Fern. As far as I could see, he made it to the other side of the road. The Ministry campus was like a park, too. Not all that old, as gardens and paths were being laid out. And many trees had been retained. Not the dusty, spindly ones I am used to seeing lining the roads. These ones looked as though they might actually survive. And, as always, the items the shops I saw en route are displaying are interesting. Galvanised tanks seem very popular, this summer. Coils of old cables too. Perhaps this is where the St Andrews copper pipe ended up?

I don't usually take a camera with me. Such items are held when passing through entrance ways. I mention this to explain why some of my photos are blurred. The next one, in particular. It is not possible to see that the sign refers to the Police as a "Ring of Steel".



I am still not clear who are police and who are soldiers. Some wear the high-peak Russian hats. Others wear the Castro cap. And some wear military helmets. And we passed by one hummer, machine gun at the ready – but the gunner's boots were airing on the front of the "nest". His toes would be the first to disappear if a "bad guy" opened up with his AK 47. I sometimes ponder whether such sights are a reflection of complacency or an indication of a low threat situation.

I leave here no later than 5 30 am on Monday and have booked into a cheap hotel in Dubai, for the day.

And what was the outcome of the trip? Well, we have an initial agreement that the organisation two of us designed is what they are looking for. Our Montana colleague with his wheat experience and me, with the SOE background, may have the solution the government wants. It has been odd to argue against the SOE model but then, we have discovered that the pure SOE model will not succeed in Afghanistan. Too many Ministers and officials want to “run” the businesses. Our proposal for a semi-autonomous agency is not a guaranteed outcome – the centralists will strive to keep control.

Future newsletters may bring news of a successful outcome.

But let me finish with a quote from the old Afghanistan hand, Harry Flashman:

“India and Afghanistan ain’t in the Haymarket, uncle,’ says I, looking humble-offended,”

Flashman at the Charge

To which I should add that it “ain’t Wellington, either!”