

Lynn of the Khyber Rifles

By LYNN GRIGSBY

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Touring Afghan refugee camps may not be everyone's idea of "getting away," but this Sooner was looking for adventure, not a holiday junket.

Twelve miles west of Peshawar, Pakistan, lies a legendary, scenic pass leading up to the Afghan border. The Khyber Pass. Gateway to Persia, Turkey and the rich plains of India. Here, more than 2,500 years ago, invasions were launched by a succession of conquerors — Greeks, Tartars, Mongols, Afghans, possibly even Alexander the Great.

As I looked across the border into war-torn Afghanistan, I felt surrounded by the rich history and romance of the rugged mountains and plains. I found myself caught up in visions of the bloody massacres that had taken place centuries before. Suddenly my thoughts were jolted by an explosion, off in the distance but close enough for me to see the smoke rising over the mountain peaks. This was my closest brush with the reality of war.

Because the pass is considered a war zone, Pakistani authorities are reluctant to admit foreigners and rarely grant special permission. I visited the Khyber on the last of my 10 days in central Asia as a member of an official 13-member congressional staff delegation. My assignment was to represent U.S. Congressman Dave McCurdy, D-Okla., and the United States of America. We were ambassadors on a fact-finding mission. Our destination: Pakistan. Our primary goal: to learn first hand about the U.S. aid distributed to Afghanistan resistance fighters by way of Pakistan. While pursuing this goal, I experienced the most incredible adventure of my lifetime, interacting with and briefly becoming a part of the Asian lifestyle about which I had relatively little knowledge.

In addition to the delegation, our party included 15 Afghan Medivac (medical evacuation) patients who had received free treatment in the United States and now were returning to

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Pakistan. We also were carrying a large amount of humanitarian aid items — sleeping bags, food, clothing and medical supplies for distribution to the refugees.

En route to Pakistan, we spent 44 hours in the air, making only two stops, one at Rhein Mein AFB, Germany, and the other at Deharain, Saudi Arabia, where we faced a temperature of 115 degrees Fahrenheit. We flew over the Persian Gulf. Riding in the cockpit, I saw the Gulf of Oman, the border of Iran and the city of Karachi. Considering the conflict that exists in this region and the degree of upheaval below gave me a feeling of depression. At the same time, I felt excitement at actually being able to see the area that had been the topic of news since the beginning of the Iran/Iraq war in 1979.

We finally arrived in Islamabad, Pakistan. We were greeted by General Raza, a high-ranking military official of the Pakistan army, and a host of other Pakistani officials who held a reception in our honor, providing us with a traditional dinner.

The food consisted of spicy chicken prepared with lots of curry, rice mixed with almonds and raisins, yogurt, vegetables, spinach and naan (a native bread). We had a choice of Coke, 7-Up or Fanta orange drink, all in old-fashioned glass bottles, or water. Not knowing what might be swimming in the water, I decided I'd rather risk the calories in the soda pop. However, I forgot that most dishes do contain water and could be harmful to those of us not immune to such drastic dietary change. Whatever was in the water found its way inside of me with dire results three days later.

We spent the next day in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan since 1959. This city of 2.5 million inhabitants is an oasis. The focal point of the city is the administrative zone containing the parliamentary buildings, the president's home, foreign embassies and other public buildings. Islamabad is populated mainly by civil servants and diplomats who have created a modern city while preserving the traditional values of the Pakistani people.

For the remainder of our stay, we were based in Peshawar. This historic city, the center of the frontier tribal area, proved to be the cultural highlight of our journey. To reach Peshawar, we drove along Grand Trunk Road, a single-lane dirt road with traffic worse than Washington, D.C.'s rush hour on the Beltway. It was a free-for-all — no traffic laws, no speed limits, no center lane — only horns honking loudly as cars, trucks and busloads of people attempted to pass each other. I saw my life pass before my eyes several times. People afoot and donkeys carrying bundles of wheat and straw to various markets were common sights. There were numerous billboards, both in English and Arabic languages, advertising

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An Afghan boy, left, teaches Sooner Lynn Grigsby to say "assalam-alaikum," or "God be with you," at the Munda Pul refugee camp outside of Peshawar, Pakistan.



Lynn Grigsby

This sign on the Pakistan side of the border with Afghanistan makes it clear to foreign visitors that travel toward the war zone is by official permits only.

Coca Cola and different brands of cigarettes.

As we entered Peshawar, we passed through the "Old City," where craftsmen were busy weaving carpets and welding metal. The air was dusty, and there was a distinct odor, a musty smell that reminded me of an open sewer. It was warm and humid, in the high 90s or low 100s.

Within a 500-foot radius, I saw almost every form of transportation known to man. There were cars, trucks, buses with people hanging out of the windows and piled on the roof, motorcycles, bicycles, donkeys, mule-drawn carts, wagons, tractors, three-

wheel taxicabs that kept tipping over, people on foot and even airplanes flying overhead — all traveling at a very fast pace.

One of the best ways to experience the true culture of the Asian people is to spend time in the bazaars. Here merchants invited us in — not only to bargain for copper, lapis jewelry, rugs and other metal works, but also to drink tea and hear stories about their people and native lands. I learned quickly that this hospitality was an important tradition in the Islamic people's lifestyle. We politely accepted their invitations.

The markets were overcrowded,

with many shops hidden in dark corners. Flies swarmed around open pails of milk and over raw meat that hung from the tops of market shops. Men were engaged in various activities ranging from shoe shining, needlecrafts and basket weaving, to cooking corn, bread and shish kabob. Coke and Fanta stands were everywhere. For three or four rupees, roughly 25 cents, one could purchase something cold to drink. Every now and then, a bicyclist flashed by, honking his horn noisily to move us out of his way.

We saw mostly men dressed in loose-fitting cotton shirts and baggy trousers. Many of the older men wore colorful hats or turbans identifying their province or region of the country. The women walked about very quietly, trying not to attract attention. They were concealed by the traditional shalwar kameez, long shirts with baggy pants and veils which covered their faces. We were not to take notice of the women; the tradition of "purdah," allowing women to be seen only by their husbands and immediate family members, is still prevalent in the Islamic culture. Out of respect for the Asian customs, I too wore a veil, long shirts and baggy pants during my visit.

There were many children. They knew we were foreigners, and they loved to pose for pictures. Capturing their wonderful facial expressions was easy.

The people seemed to be happy in spite of the poverty. Knowing no other lifestyle, they seemed quite content with what little they had.

Most of our group stayed at the Pearl Continental Hotel. However, several of us decided to experience the full impact of our adventure, so we bunked at the International Medical Corps facility (IMC), known as Nasir Bagh. IMC receives funding from the United States to teach Afghan refugees very simple medical procedures. Once taught, they return to Afghanistan to administer aid. Compared to the adobe-mud homes in Peshawar and the Nasir Bagh refugee camp across the road, the IMC was more modern.

Afghan armed guards surrounded the converted home which housed the IMC. Each time we entered the area, our driver pulled up to the iron gate, honked the horn and waited for guards to grant us permission to proceed. Sev-

eral roosters and peacocks scurried noisily around the yard.

The brick/frame home was surrounded by trees. We entered through the back door. In the first room students were operating on live goats that had been injured. The room beyond was sleeping quarters for four or five IMC volunteers. The next room was the kitchen where Afghan cooks prepared meals. With the exception of such staples as peanut butter, most food was served Afghan-style. Beyond the kitchen was the dining room and still more sleeping quarters. Medication and food preparation created a distinctive odor that always permeated the house.

We survived for five days with little electricity, no hot water and few of the modern luxuries common to the Western world. But choosing to stay at IMC was the right decision.

One evening at IMC, a party was given in our honor, complete with a full-course Afghan dinner and live music which lasted into the wee hours. The Afghan band had been on the top of the charts in their homeland before the 1978 Soviet invasion. I looked up at the stars and the wide-open sky. Multi-colored lights were strung on the trees and bushes. The air was still; the evening seemed peaceful, much like a night one might experience in the West. Although I did not know the language, the eloquent voices of the singers told me all about their lives. For five hours straight, they sang patriotic folk songs reflecting their Afghan heritage.

For me, the greatest emotional impact of our trip came when we ventured into the Afghan refugee camps around Peshawar. Pictures I had once seen in *National Geographic* now were brought to life. There are more than 250 refugee camps and more than three million registered refugees in Pakistan — the largest refugee population in the world.

As we entered Munda Pul refugee camp, crowds of Afghans swarmed around our bus. Their faces were so expressive; some mirrored excitement and happiness, some loss and sadness. I wrapped my veil tightly around my head and climbed out of the bus.

The camp was arranged in small communities within one large community. Most families lived together as

they had in small villages in Afghanistan. Their homes were built of adobe mud. Because of the temperature, many rooms were roofless.

As we walked up the dirt road, we noticed Afghans busily engaged in various forms of industry — farming fruits and vegetables, brick-making, weaving baskets and rugs and many selling Cokes. Occasionally we saw open butcher stands displaying raw meat. As we moved long, we came to an area where many children were lined up holding pails of milk. Their faces brightened as we approached. They crowded around us and motioned for us to take their pictures. As I snapped several shots, one small boy asked if I were a journalist. He did not know very much English but enough to

boy who had taught me “welcome.” I waved goodbye. I wanted to say something more but didn’t have the words. I remembered I had some cinnamon gum in my purse and gave him my last two pieces. He didn’t respond, but his sparkling eyes said enough.

We proceeded to the refugee camp at Nasir Bagh. When we arrived, officials took us to an area where orphaned children, widows and disabled men were assembled. The day before they had received a shipment of sacrificial lamb from the Saudi Arabians, who had just finished observing the annual religious pilgrimage, Hajj. Ironically, this was Nasir Bagh’s second batch of lamb; originally intended for another camp, the meat had had to be rerouted because of the bomb-



Lynn Grigsby

Today antiaircraft guns protect the legendary Khyber Pass, used by conquerors for thousands of years as the gateway to Persia, Turkey, and the plains of India.

teach me how to say “assalam-alaikum,” or “God be with you.” I was thrilled.

My attention turned to a little boy standing alone. He couldn’t have been more than two or three years old. He wore no clothes. As I took his picture, he began to cry. His peers laughed. I caught another glimpse of a little girl about six years old who was decked out in make-up, fingernail polish and flashy jewelry. She looked almost like a gypsy, quite pretty in fact.

I was so engrossed in my surroundings that I almost failed to realize it was time to board the bus again. As I looked out my window, I saw the small

ings. Women and children, one by one, were carrying the lamb over their shoulders.

Suddenly some F-5 fighter planes swarmed above us. My heart pounded, but the officials assured us that it was only a bombing exercise.

Several of us traveled to Dara, which was like stepping into an American western town in the 1800s. Built in the center of the tribal area, this small town is comprised mostly of gun factories and stores. Here in the black market gun capital of the world, one can purchase anything from a Chinese or Russian AK-47 Kalashnikov to an Israeli uzi. As I got out of the car I

heard a loud shot. The Pakistan intelligence official explained that someone was only testing a gun.

I ventured into one of the gun shops and asked a guide if I could fire a gun. He motioned to the gunsmith, who seemed reluctant to let me shoot because I was a woman and forbidden by Islamic custom to fire a weapon. I finally cajoled him into letting me fire only once. I was thinking about shooting a small pistol. To my astonishment, he handed me a Kalashnikov, cocked the trigger and aimed the gun at a 45-degree angle into the air.


"Shoot only once," he cautioned.

I had no time to think. Before I knew it, my fingers slipped, and I pulled the trigger. My ears rang, and I was thrown back a little. I laughed to myself. I wondered if I were now qualified to be a "Mujahad," an Afghan guerilla.

In the course of 10 days, I learned a lot about the Islamic country, its people and their culture. Soon it was time to say farewell to Peshawar and head back down Grand Trunk Road toward Islamabad. Off to the west, the

sun was setting. The Pakistani and Afghan people were still milling about the streets, and horns were honking.

I thought about my experiences and how I first became involved. As a volunteer back in Washington, I had edited monthly newsletters for the Jamiat-E-Islami Afghan resistance party. But it was one thing to read about the Afghans in Pakistan; it was another actually to see these stories come to life.

I was thankful for this opportunity; I felt proud to have been an ambassador representing Congressman McCurdy, the people of Oklahoma and the people of America. At the same time, I was happy to be heading home to share my experiences. The memories are still vivid, and as I retell them, they will remain with me forever — even the little things: the small boy who taught me "assalamalaikum," the sounds and smells of the bazaars, or the sign in English which greets the tribes who guard the Khyber region, "Welcome to Khyber Rifles." 

LETTERS

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it is in completely intact condition.

Another donation, no less exciting than the above, came to us from a cultivated gentleman in Oklahoma City, Mr. Lynn Kirts. During his world travels, Mr. Kirts had acquired some eight Greek and Roman vases. With the support of the OU Associates Fund and the University of Oklahoma Foundation, Inc., we were able to purchase the single most impressive item, an Attic Red-Figured Column Crater dating to ca. 450 B.C. Mr. Kirts presented his remaining seven vases to the University museum as gifts.

Another surprise occurred this past summer, when I received a letter from a lawyer in Washington, D.C., Mr. Frank L. Dennis (OU '28). While Mr. and Mrs. Dennis were serving in the U.S. foreign service in 1954, they happened to pick up two fragments of white inscribed marble in a field near Ostia Antica, the ancient harbor of Rome. Having read the article in *Sooner Magazine*, Mr. Dennis wrote me out of the blue, offering to donate his two fragments, which he had kept for over 30 years. Once they arrived, it was apparent that both were parts of a tombstone, the larger piece measuring about 1 foot by 1 foot, dating from the high point of the Roman Empire, about the reign of Hadrian.

The fourth gift came from Prof. Emeritus and Mrs. H. Lloyd Stow, long known for their benefactions to and concern for this University museum. Not content with donations in previous years, Mr. and Mrs. Stow recently presented a remarkable assortment of over 30 artifacts. Prof. Stow was the founder and first curator of the ancient archaeology collection here, and his wife Hester, with her own Ph.D. in classical archaeology, was equally responsible for the work done in the early days of the museum. It would be difficult to assess accurately all the good done for the collection by the Stows, nor can we adequately thank our other donors for their generosity.

A. J. Heisserer

Curator
Ancient Art and Archaeology
Oklahoma Museum of
Natural History
University of Oklahoma



Peter Friedman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — When former *Sooner Magazine* assistant Lynn Grigsby won a Cortez A. M. Ewing Congressional internship for the summer of 1985, she packed her tape recorder and camera and produced "A Capital Summer" for the fall/winter issue. We never expected to lose her for good, but upon graduation the following spring, she returned to Wash-

ington, D.C., as assistant press secretary to her Ewing mentor, U.S. Congressman Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma. Her fact-finding tour of Afghan refugee camps, recounted here, may be just the beginning of Lynn's world travels. In March 1989 a Rotary International Fellowship will provide the Bartlesville native with a year's study in Australia.