

Under Fire ... in Afghanistan, some time ago

Erwin Franzen
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The morning after... this is the tent at Badullah where we were under mortar bombardment; my baptism of fire, sort of...

Reading about the terrible battle in Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley in Hal Moore's book "We Were Soldiers Once... And Young" reminds me of my own comparatively puny experiences of coming under fire in Afghanistan 20-odd years ago. It also reminds me of the horribly realistic first half hour in the movie "Saving Private Ryan." I wonder if having bullets whizzing around your ears is more scary than artillery shells exploding nearby – which is what I experienced. I never faced small arms fire, although a volley of machine gun bullets dug up the ground in front of my feet during the civil war in Lebanon once in June 1985 -- a warning from the Lebanese Forces against my taking pictures.

In Afghanistan, on my first trip after the Soviets invaded, I was with Abdul Rasul Sayyaf in Jaji, Paktia Province in late August 1984, two months after the same Sayyaf welcomed Osama Bin Laden in the same area on his first visit to that country. Bin Laden and his men had their baptism of fire under Soviet aerial bombardment in Jaji that time (according to the excellent book "The Looming Tower" by Lawrence Wright) -- they were scared shitless, and Sayyaf and his seasoned Afghan fighters thought those guys were useless. Three years later Bin Laden would become the big Muslim war hero after a battle with Soviet commando forces in the same area.

I had my own baptism of fire – so to speak – also together with Sayyaf's men, in a forward base they called Badullah, in a small tent pitched behind a rock at the foot of a range of hills overlooking the high plain near the army garrison Sayyaf's men just named "Chownee," which apparently just means cantonment (perhaps Ali Khel, I don't know for sure – a larger army base a little further out was called Narai). Mujahideen were firing 82-mm mortars from positions just above us into Chownee, and an artillery gun, mortar crews and at least one tank fired back towards us from the garrison. Mortar bombs and artillery shells were exploding close by as I was talking -- actually shouting -- to Commander Mohammed Naim in that little tent. The mujahideen seemed unperturbed by the din and the shaking of the ground under us. They knew we were safe. I was a bit queasy but their confidence made me feel better. At one point a mujahed stepped out of the tent for a second after a mortar bomb explosion very close by and came right back, dropping a very hot piece of shrapnel in front of me. I picked it up later and kept it as a souvenir.

Another time, in a camouflaged Dashaka .50 caliber (12.7-mm) heavy machine-gun position a bit closer to Chownee I was with mujahideen who were firing into the army base, trying to hit a building where 7 Soviet advisers were staying, according to Commander Naim (based on info from defectors). I was supposed to fire that gun myself at one point but it jammed. A tank from the base fired a few rounds back at us. The first two fell short but the third one passed just above our heads – so close you could "feel" it – and blew up a tree some 50 meters to the rear.

A year later in August 1985 I climbed over high mountains along the Afghan-Pakistani border with a different group of mujahideen (Yunus Khalis) who were planning to attack the exposed Afghan army garrison of Barikot in the Kunar Valley. They fired a total of 17 rockets from a place on the river the fighters called Narei. The response took longer than I expected, indicating to me that the rockets had probably missed their target. The first mortar round from Barikot exploded in the exact location from where the rockets had been fired. You can hear them whistling if they are going to hit some distance away -- not if they come too close. Of course, there was no one left in that place. The next round came quite a bit closer to where I was -- still whistling. They were taking potshots, but they might get lucky and hit us. Another round changed direction a little bit, again, and I thought my cover behind a mud wall might not be good enough. The fourth and last round took out a chunk of the corner of a mud house about 50-60 meters from me.

In October 1987 I was in the Kunar Valley again, much further south and perhaps about 8 km or so north of the capital Asadabad and the nearby Soviet air base of Chagha Sarai. I was with Commander Ajab Khan on top of Tari Sar hill, watching as mortar bombs fired by mujahideen in the mountains to the east exploded closer and closer to a small army base called Shigal Tarna just across the fast-flowing river below. The commander used a walkie talkie to direct the crews. Finally one, two, three bombs exploded right in the middle of the base. "Allahu Akbar," resounded the cry of the mujahideen. During the whole time a heavy artillery gun inside the base had kept up a slow but steady fire into the mountains and its boom reverberated through the valleys. But now, suddenly, we "felt" something like a swishing sound in the air above us, and seconds later a hillside to the northeast was covered by plumes of smoke. "Bimsiezda," commented one mujahed. It was a Soviet multipile rocket launcher, firing from the Asadabad area. Shortly after the second rocket salvo whizzed by we were on our way down the hill to get back to the Mujahideen caves and dugouts in the Shultan Valley closer to the Pakistani border. Just before we left the position we saw a helicopter landing in Shigal Tarna, possibly coming to pick up wounded soldiers there. There was no more fire from the mujahideen mortar crews after this but soon the "dooshman" or "shuravi" (enemy) were firing into "our" Shultan Valley from three sides with rocket launchers, field guns and heavy mortars: Asadabad to the south, Shigal Tarna to the west and the Asmar garrison upstream to the north. I don't know if this can be called a barrage but the shelling continued for a long time until late into the night. The ground shook many times under our feet and the sound was frightening once or twice when several very heavy shells exploded close to each other not much more than 100 meters away and lit up the valley. But it seems they did not use airburst munitions because I think some of us would have been blown away. Also surprisingly, there was no air activity, and in fact I never once experienced being under aerial bombardment.

The big difference between my experiences and those of most soldiers/fighters in combat or civilians under bombardment is that neither I nor any of the mujahideen close to me was ever wounded or killed. I saw one wounded mujahed being carried by others in the mountains once, and another who had bled to death after triggering a land mine that blew off his legs -- but his body had already been wrapped up in blankets. I didn't see anyone getting hurt in battle. I think if I had I might have been just as scared as Bin Laden's men in their first experience in Jaji. So, yes, I have been under fire -- but it was nothing at all compared to what unfortunately too many other people have experienced. And it continues...

Like most if not all of those people I wish for peace.

Erwin Franzen

Some of my pictures from Afghanistan: www.flickr.com/photos/erwinlux/sets/



Rockets ready to hit Barikot garrison -Kunar Afghanistan August 1985

7



General Patton's grave deeply buried in snow - Luxembourg Dec 2010

My message about peace in answer to a question from a family member of General George S. Patton, Jr., the World War II US Third Army commander who rests among over 5,000 of his troops in my workplace, the Luxembourg American Cemetery:

I think the most worthy goal is to work for peace, which means first of all to help people to believe in peace -- world peace, that is.

Humankind has lived with war throughout the history we know, and because of that most people nowadays don't seem to believe world peace is possible -- unless a heavenly Savior comes down to earth and uses supernatural powers to establish it (by force?). Too many people think it's naive to believe that humankind can build a peaceful world, and any effort in this direction is doomed.

Your grandfather fought in the two world wars and he could surely see how the outcome of the first one led almost directly to the second one, and he also foresaw that the second one could lead to a third one. He needed war in a way – to prove himself as a soldier – but he also needed peace for his family. He did not get a chance to see the peace that has now lasted 60 years over all his battlefields in western Europe. His son, your father, followed in his footsteps in war but he also saw the peace, and he consolidated the gains made by your grandfather in southern Germany after the war by building a friendship with former enemies.

Your generation of the Patton's has really grasped the value and meaning of peace, and I think there is something big there on which you can build real faith in peace -- and inspire others to believe. We cherish freedom, and the saying goes that it is not free. But does war give us freedom? Does war make us secure - even if it is a war our soldiers fight in distant places? Are those places really so distant anymore in this day and age? Can we always rely on the west's overwhelming military superiority to ensure our freedom and safety and prosperity by taking war to other lands and keeping it away from our shores? Is that good, right, just?

Can we label other people as "evil" or as "barbarians" or "rats" (or "terrorists" or "enemy combatants") and then utterly destroy them, and go on to live in peace with ourselves? Hitler and his gang tried that with the Jews, for example... Luckily they were stopped and defeated before it was too late. However, ideas similar to theirs continue to proliferate in different guises and in insidious ways. We have to guard against that by promoting peace. "Not long ago our agency, ABMC, adopted a "new" motto: Time Will Not Dim the Glory of Their Deeds -- which is something Gen. Pershing said after WWI. I think WWII came to dim somewhat the "glory" of those deeds -- because it showed that regardless of their own value the larger cause for which they were done (the war to end all wars) was lost. And other wars since then have dimmed the "glory" of the deeds done in WWII. But is "glory" the true message of our cemetery?

Does glorification help to promote peace, freedom – all the things we cherish most? Many American visitors to our cemetery also like to visit the German cemetery, and some of them find it drab and uninspiring compared to the beauty of ours. It is the final resting place of those who fought on the side that lost the war. But the idea behind the German cemetery is to promote peace. In all the literature of the German war graves commission (Kriegsgräberfürsorge) I find one theme that is emphasized: peace.

I wish our cemetery could also help to inspire people to believe in peace.



Luxembourg American Cemetery -summer 2007

My view of the 2003 US attack on Iraq

Adapted from an email to a friend in April 2003 – a month after the USA attacked Iraq:

... I have several major problems with what I see in the beliefs and attitudes of many conservative and neoconservative Americans today. For one thing: they seem to value the lives of "Americans" (actually, most especially Americans of European or primarily European ancestry, meaning "whites") so highly that the taking of one of them can only be avenged by the deaths of tens or even hundreds of "others."

I have met Americans and read opinions of others who seem to feel, for example, that even the firebombing of Tokyo and the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not sufficient revenge for the attack on Pearl Harbor (that and the Bataan Death March [here the few hundred American dead counted far more than the many thousands of Filipinos who died at the same time] seem to figure much more prominently in Americans' minds than the Rape of Nanking and other Japanese atrocities in China and Korea, and elsewhere).

To many Americans, it seems, the deaths of over 55 million "others" in World War II don't really compare in significance to those of the 400,000-odd American servicemen/women who also died at that time. Perhaps, if they could be brought to seriously think about it, their feelings would be different. I don't know.

I am also worried that the Christian conservatives seem to be turning their America into something akin to a religion. I feel that there are grave dangers in exaggerated nationalism, especially when it is combined with a certain callous and arrogant attitude towards other nations and the will to use an awesome military machine that can kill thousands of people (even if they are labeled "terrorists" or simply called "ragheads") in the blink of an eye without risking any serious retaliation.

You know, there have always been "really evil" people. Can you say that the thousands of Taliban or even Al Qaeda members and camp followers who were wiped out in Afghanistan or the thousands of Iraqi soldiers blown up in the latest conflict -- quite apart from the civilian lives lost or destroyed -- were all really evil? Of course not. So how are they to be accounted for -- as expendable for the sake of the greater

good? What greater good...? Who decides and based on what? This is might, not right!

Saddam Hussein and his gang can surely be called evil -- but he didn't just suddenly come to power in Iraq -- nor is he the only evil one around. But one thing is for sure: whatever military capabilities he ever possessed, they were absolutely nothing compared to the power that just swept him away. The United States has by far the most potent nuclear, chemical and biological warfare capabilities in the world.

Luckily for us (so far), it has a fairly good system of checks and balances that normally restrains it from any misuse of those capabilities on a massive scale. I believe everyone needs to do their best to help that system of checks and balances work as it should -- and that may sometimes mean opposing the government in power or warning of the dangers one sees in certain courses of action.

Today, 4 years later, I have the impression that the system of checks and balances has broken down. This is much more dangerous than any threat from "terrorism."

On how my political views changed twice, and how I spent 3 days in prison -- in Czechoslovakia

From an email to a friend at the University of Illinois:

... Before I came to the US and met the church (= 'Rev.' Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, which I joined in New York in March 1975) I had been politically left-leaning, strongly anti-Vietnam War, and I actually believed the US would start the nuclear war I expected. The church in the US turned me into a pro-American anti-communist.

After joining The News World (a NYC daily founded by Unification Church members) I started reading other newspapers such as The New York Times, which we thought were dominated by liberals and leftists. What I read in those papers challenged both my intellect and my acquired sense of morality because it made me feel increasingly uncomfortable with the church and our paper's position against what was derisively called "secular humanism." Jimmy Carter and his people were always talking about human rights but our church did not seem to agree with this, and we embraced Latin American fascist dictators just because they were anti-communist.

I felt increasingly alienated by a lot of other things as well, but looking back now I find it amazing that I stayed in the church and continued to believe in the Divine Principle and Moon (Sun Myung) for so long. It's good to see that it took you and many others like you much less time to decide to leave.

Most of my time on The News World I was an assistant editor in the international news department, mostly combining and rewriting wire dispatches and reports from our own foreign correspondents (almost all of them church missionaries). I also wrote a number of articles under the pseudonym Aaron Stevenson, which Carol L. of the Opinion/Commentary department had chosen because my first published pieces were commentaries. Our first publisher was actually Dennis O.. Mike W. came a little later. If you worked in circulation you must have known Joachim B. and Nick B..

The only time I used my real name in the paper was when I worked in Washington D.C. with Josette S. in 1979. In New York we were worried about the INS people coming to check whether we employed illegal aliens -- and of course I myself was one and there were quite a few others -- but there was no such concern in D.C. I received many reports from the Pentagon over the years including all the SecDef annual reports to Congress from Donald Rumsfeld's last one under Ford to those by Carter's SecDef Harold Brown and the first ones by Reagan's man Caspar Weinberger. They sent them to me in New York for free.

In Czechoslovakia in March 1982 five soldiers took me off the Vienna-Berlin train at Tabor, south of Prague, where I was thoroughly searched (stripped naked) and then kept under guard (two soldiers with Kalashnikovs right behind my back even when I went to the toilet) for several hours until two men from the Interior Ministry in Prague arrived. Some of the things they found in my luggage had made them suspicious, including some of our anti-Soviet material and one or two of those Pentagon annual reports (a diary they found also contained contact info for a man I had called a few times from New York for information: former Navy Captain Herbert Hetu, who opened the CIA's first Public Affairs office under then-director Stansfield Turner -- I found him again not long ago, here:

www.arlingtoncemetery.net/hehetu.htm).

I was taken at night to a big office building in Ceske Budejovice (Budweis in German) that turned out to be a high-security prison and interrogated (without any violence) for hours throughout the next day. On the third day they decided to send me back to Austria, took me to the border at Ceske Velenice and put me on a special train (I was the only passenger on that train), with two soldiers with Kalashnikovs watching as the train headed into the forest towards Gmünd on the Austrian side (I guess they thought I might jump off before the train crossed the border).

.. And yes, you are right about the Unification Church mindset. Some of my old colleagues on the UC newspapers are still out there fighting the big enemy we fought in the 1970s, only now it is called "terrorism" instead of communism.