

AFGHANISTAN

YAIR – 1970/73

In 1970 my employer, Beecham Pharmaceuticals, appointed me Area Supervisor for 'Non-Arabic Middle East'. They took a big risk in placing trust in a wet-behind-the-ears 24-year-old and for that I am forever grateful. I was sent to live in Tehran, Iran and Afghanistan was part of my patch. During 1970-73 I visited Kabul a dozen times. The journey from Tehran to Kabul was three hours flying time travelling due East, usually on a nearly empty plane of either IranAir or Ariana-Afghan Airlines.

I will never forget the smell of Kabul. The moment the aeroplane doors were opened upon landing you knew where you had landed, it was so unusual. I suppose it derived from pollution, dust and lack of sanitation, yet it was not that unpleasant. It was simply extremely distinctive. During the times that I visited Kabul the country was relatively stable, although by far the poorest place I had ever seen. This was before the Russian invasion.

Time Travel

It was like travelling back in time to an earlier century. There was little motorised transport and hardly any signs of modern civilisation as we know it, like pavements or traffic-lights or street-lighting. Kabul seemed like a foreign planet to me. I was mesmerised by the different-ness of everything. The women all covered in big, billowing blue tents with a grill through which they could see – the open sewers with human excrement floating slowly along – the lonely policeman directing traffic at a major intersection – dust and rubbish-piles everywhere – donkeys pulling carts piled high with firewood. Yet the children, as all over the world, still played and laughed.

Kabul is about 8.000 feet above sea-level. This means that it gets very, very cold in winter and the air is very dry. I once visited in January. The maximum daytime

temperature was minus 20° centigrade (about 0°F) and yet the sun was shining. Walking in the direct rays of the sun was pleasant even without a coat but turn a corner into the shade and the gentle wind would cut through you like a knife.

Another example of time-travel was the British Embassy, a grand building with startling architecture set in spacious, well-watered gardens filled with scented flowers. What was this palatial edifice doing, just yards from such abject squalor? Along the road was the grand Presidential palace with its ring of armed guards. In the street outside Afghans pulled their carts unless they were one of the lucky few who owned a donkey.

If ever on all my travels I was to suffer culture-shock it would have been here in Kabul. Instead of shock I experienced wonderment and fascination. In the course of my work I visited hospital wards and general pharmacies and met the Minister of Health several times. Everyone I encountered was courteous in the extreme. At every opportunity I was offered tea in a small glass. I decided that the Afghan people were a proud nation – it was not for me to judge them in their poverty or to attempt to inflict on them my Western solutions for increasing their material wealth.

Earthquake-Proof Hotel

Finally, they opened a Hilton Hotel – up on a hill overlooking the city, the first modern hotel that would suit visiting politicians and businessmen. I happened to be one of the first guests and indeed struck up friendships with a couple of British engineers who were staying on to check that things were as they were supposed to be after the building was newly commissioned. It was all very pleasant and we readily forgave the faltering mistakes of the newly-trained staff. They were so willing and desperately keen to please.

One early evening I was luxuriating in a hot bath in my room on the ninth floor with a thoroughly decadent gin-and-tonic in hand when the bath-water began to slowly swish up and down the bath. At first I wondered about the strength of the gin. By the time I got my thoughts together it was all over – I had just experienced an earthquake. It was clearly of some magnitude to make the whole building sway like that. An hour later I went downstairs for dinner and met my engineering friends. They were in celebratory mood as the building had survived a significant earthquake, measuring five on the Richter scale. I learned a great deal about how to build earthquake-proof buildings in the next hour or two. Apparently, you set the foundations on sand which acts like water, allowing gentle movement to absorb the shocks. I was growing used to earthquakes in Tehran where we experienced frequent minor tremors each summer. There is a strange effect of disorientation – it takes a few moments to realise what is happening. At ground-level things shake and rattle and jingle. This swaying on the ninth floor was much more disconcerting.

Amateur Radio in Afghanistan

In between meetings with our import agent and major wholesalers and government officials I found time to contact the local radio amateurs. In those days they were formed into the ‘Camel Drivers Radio Club’ and consisted entirely of foreigners, about a dozen in the early 1970’s. They mostly worked for United Nations organisations or PanAmerican Airlines. They held monthly meetings which were

social get-togethers at the homes of the various members. At the time members included Wolfgang, YA1RG, Charlie YA1AB, Ed 1GNT, Ed 1ED, Bruno 1KY, Arne 1AH, John 1JS, Bo 1OS and Guy 1GJM. Of course, Afghanistan is divided into ten call-areas, the capital being the first call-area.

Wolfgang Renner, YA1RG, the CDRC organiser, was a truly remarkable individual. He was living permanently in Kabul and invested a huge amount of his time in trying to introduce legislation in Afghanistan to legitimise amateur radio. In those days there were no legislation or rules that governed ham radio. The Post, Telegraph and Telephone authorities were aware but preferred to let these foreigners just get about their own business, rather than be bothered with making new regulations, standards and so forth. Wolfgang recognised that this was dangerous for the future security of the hobby in Afghanistan and worked very hard to try and have legislation introduced. And he was proved so right to be fearful, as we shall tell.

Meantime, the CDRC was empowered to issue transmitting-licences in Afghanistan. To obtain a licence in those days you met up with Wolfgang, showed him your home licence, registered in his book and picked a call-sign. This was carried out over a cold beer and many anecdotes but he was meticulous in implementing the procedures for recording your new licence and issued a membership card with your call-sign written on it. I wanted a brief call-sign, to be more efficient in the pile-ups, and YA1R was available. This seemed a good choice, being my first initial.

Operating

In June 1970 I operated with my new call-sign YA1R. This was courtesy of YA1RG who kindly let me operate from his shack and on another evening from the shack of YA1HD. This was all on 20 and 15 metres CW. In September 1971 I again operated from YA1RG's shack adding several hundred more CW contacts to the log. These were amongst the first CW pile-ups I had ever handled and it was all a bit of a shock!

These operations were in the local evening hours and taught me just how disorientated one can become when operating from a new location. I had little idea of where to point the beam or what to work. According to the log I worked stations from Europe, Japan, North America, South Africa – all over the globe.

How things have changed over the years. Looking back at my YA1R log-books, some 30 years ago, I see that we exchanged real RST signal-reports. And I have even noted some names and QTH's. One wouldn't dream these days of sending anything other than '5NN TU' in order to be as brief as possible, to allow as many different stations as possible to make a contact!

Another thing I learned from these operations was that to be efficient as a pile-up operator you really need to be familiar with the rig and the keyer. As a guest-operator just visiting for a few hours you feel extremely grateful for any set-up, but the orientation period takes a while so as not to fall over the keyer and make a fool of yourself. Many thanks to YA1RG and YA1HD for lending me their stations on these memorable occasions.

A special pleasure was to work Nigel/G3TXF, my pal back home and who had agreed to be my QSL manager for this operation. I see that we even QSYed to SSB for a chat. A rare event indeed!

Shut-Down

In August 1973 I made yet another business visit to Kabul. During the visit I arranged with a Canadian amateur (sorry, I haven't got a note of his call) to operate at his QTH. He was due to pick me up at the Hilton Hotel at six p.m. on 18th August.

He didn't show up! At first I was patient, then impatient, then a little frustrated, then philosophical. Then I was hungry so I repaired to the hotel restaurant for dinner. Only on the following afternoon did I learn that my intended host was literally on the point of getting into his car to come and pick me up at the hotel when a Land Rover full of soldiers confronted him and demanded forfeiture of his ham radio station.

Unbeknown to us at the time amateur radio was then to remain silent in Afghanistan for the next 25 or so years. At a stroke the military authorities, following a coup d'état, decided that hams posed a security threat and were a nuisance so they had best be silenced. All equipment of the dozen or so (all foreign) registered local radio amateurs was confiscated, all on the same day. My Canadian friend was so disappointed that he had to disappoint me and my one evening of operating the pile-ups. That's a very generous stance but how far is it from reality, in the wider context? One evening of operating was as nought compared to the momentous importance of this event. I was mortified to witness this decimation of ham radio at close-hand with a whole country going silent and I was powerless to do anything about it.

At the time Charles Bennett (VE5LQ, KL7ALX) was YA1AB. He worked for PanAm and took over the Chairmanship of Camel Drivers' Radio Club when Wolfgang Renner left the country. I worked to establish communications with ITU through Ted, F8RU, in Geneva but I never learned whether this helped at all. As it turned out, YA was silent for a quarter of a century so I guess not. Not until after the Taliban were defeated in 2001 was YA again made available on the ham bands. This was when several UNHCR staff, including ON6TT and S50R, became licensed as YA5T.

Memories

I will never forget sitting in the home of the manager of Anglo-Afghan Trade Centre, our registered importer, eating sausage and chips and listening to BBC World News on 21.5MHz. I was playing with his two primary-school kids at the time. It was all almost surreal. Thousands of miles away from home. A strange landscape, climate, people, language but a happy, tiny island of British normalcy.

I will never forget Wolfgang Renner. Not only was his heart in the right place but his head was too. He fully recognised that unless legislation could be introduced to legitimise amateur radio in Afghanistan then it was all at risk. He was proved disastrously right in 1973 when the authorities shut down amateur radio for 25 years.

Now I applaud wholeheartedly the efforts of individuals who work for UNHCR who, in 2002, are providing Afghanistan to the DXers of the world for the first time in a quarter of a century (YA5T). What goes around comes around, as they say. If ever there were a story of patience on the part of DXCC-chasers being rewarded it is this! Whilst chasing those last elusive few countries it seems that some will just never come on the air – but they do, eventually!

The Afghan People

Above all, I remember the Afghan people. In business they drove a hard bargain but always with immaculate politeness and courtesy. Having lived in Iran and learned their language, Modern Farsi, I found it interesting to visit Afghanistan and hear a very similar language being spoken. I was told that it was called Farsi Pahlavi and is closer to the original classical language. There have always been close ties between Afghanistan and Iran, and of course these two countries share a long, common border. They are both populated mostly by Shie Muslims.

The country is almost all arid desert and mountains. Flying overhead on a clear day provides a view of a dramatic moonscape. Kabul is located in a bowl between the mountains and aeroplanes need to approach and leave at steep angles. Taking off from Kabul is quite scary. It feels almost as if you can reach out and touch the surrounding mountains as you climb out of the valley.

I had the impression that the Afghan people are proud and tough with long traditions. Socially, the offering of hot, sweet tea is a normal form of hospitality. For the few tourists there is a wide selection of handicrafts available. I still have several mementoes to remind me of my visits – marble ashtrays and jewellery made of lapis lazuli, a stone with a beautiful, deep blue colour.

Political Turmoil

We all know about the recent troubles in Afghanistan. Seen through the eyes of a ham radio operator it seems such a shame that our hobby is not allowed to contribute more to international understanding. For this is certainly one of the major benefits of our hobby, if only it is given a chance. There is not enough, in my view, sharing of information at the grass-roots level from which we can all gain a better understanding of how other peoples live. This happens best between individuals. When enough individuals are involved then it can have a significant impact. The world then becomes a better place.

Amateur radio has a major contribution to make in a second way: emergency communications. We are so well-equipped to provide the means of communications, sometimes across difficult terrain and when no other means are available. Being a hobby this is usually a free, community service.

Finally, our hobby has so much to offer in helping to develop a skill-base in the community – a wide range of technical and non-technical skills can be developed at no cost to the national budget because this is self-learning. Motivation to learn and increase skills comes naturally to those who simply are given the encouragement and the freedom to develop them.

But the message about these core advantages that amateur radio offers seems not to be heard by the authorities in so many developing-countries. They seem

unable to perceive these advantages as already in place in more developed countries. Instead, they seem to fear for their own security. Perhaps the good of the people is not uppermost.

At worst, as in the case of Afghanistan, the freedom to become a radio amateur is denied to local nationals and there have been many other examples around the world. These include, at different times, several countries that are described in this book like Cyprus, Iran, Ghana.

The hope for the future may lie in the impact of the Internet. Gone are the days when politicians can hope to keep their citizens uninformed about the big world. Gone are the days when individuals are prevented from communicating with people in foreign countries.

But the biggest single impediment may be political instability. A regime that does not have the support of its people or fears loss of same may try to muzzle its citizens until they feel more secure. It may be the case that many politicians prefer to take care of their own interests (security) first and only to start addressing the concerns of the population second. To do so involves control. To keep control they sometimes feel the need to muzzle.

This has certainly been the case in Afghanistan. We all know about the changes in political power in this country in recent decades. Until things can settle down and the population can start to live a secure life then our hobby may remain strangled. And this scenario applies to a number of countries throughout the world.

As individuals we can help improve this situation by supporting our national radio society, who in turn form the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU), who in turn are constantly chipping away at this very problem. It may seem strange to say so, but our annual subscription to the national society does make a real difference in this way. It's no good leaving it to 'someone else' and expecting things to happen. If you bemoan the rarity of Yemen or North Korea on the bands then at least you can pay for membership to your national society as a way of helping the situation. Most good things in this world result from drip-drip action, not from momentous events.

And of course the other thing that we can do is to travel, to meet local nationals, to spread the good word, to encourage and support. In the process we might contribute to a ground-swell of international activity which will do some tiny piece of good. In a very minor way each time a DXpeditioner meets a local person he can contribute to this process. Or he can have a negative impact by being uncaring. I have come across, down the years, several instances where a DXpeditioner has left behind a bad smell. He has, in a way, 'raped' the locals by thoroughly enjoying his pile-up operating and the renown of activating a rare country but at the same time has taken advantage of local hospitality. Any negative impact takes a long time and much effort to counter-act. If you are about to set forth on a DXpedition please, please watch closely for opportunities to influence the situation favourably and please, please make strenuous efforts to avoid damaging the good of our hobby. Each of us is an ambassador and each point of contact with people on the ground is important.