

## *Jan's Journal*

October 2001

I had been in to Bulawayo, home to some three-quarters million Zimbabweans on a mission of both business and pleasure. The Agricultural College where I had been assigned by the United States Peace Corps had arranged for me to go to town on the 'cabbage truck' to research Internet service provision for the college. The 'cabbage truck' earned its name quite rightly from making its trek into the town's markets with a load of produce each Thursday. Because of this assignment, I had my first opportunity to explore this beautiful bouquet of an African city.

Upon my return, I was looking forward to digesting some of the information on ISPs I had collected for the college and to putting away some of my day's purchases when a runner appeared at the door of my quarters. An urgent phone call from Harare was awaiting me in the Principal's office and I was to hurry there '*now now*'<sup>1</sup>.

Half walking half jogging, I quickly covered the 2-300 meters separating my temporary *visiting lecturer's* quarters from the administrative complex. When I got to the Principal's office, he was holding the phone in his hand and motioned me in.

It was Peace Corps/Zimbabwe headquarters. They were calling *all* of the Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in Zimbabwe back to Harare. No, they would *not* provide additional information over the phone but it was hoped that we would be able to return to our job sites by early next week. No, no other questions could be answered at this time. Be there tomorrow.

Because another PCV was only two kilometers away who was out of contact with headquarters, they asked me to notify her as well of the message. So after I thanked the Principal and explained my need to go to Harare (as best as I was able), I began making my way over the couple of kilometers between the college and my friend's quarters at the local secondary school for boys. What, I wondered, might be the cause for such an unexpected general summons of the Zimbabwe PCVs back from their assigned stations.

Despite the September 11th attack on the WORLD TRADE CENTER and the Pentagon, and the nearly daily bombardment of Afghanistan by the United States military and initial reports of anthrax outbreaks in the U.S., Zimbabwe

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, '*now now*' has evolved in the country vernacular to indicate a sense of immediacy, whereas the word '*now*' by itself can often mean any time the person might choose to 'get around to it' extending upwards as far as the next week or so.

was considered to be a relatively 'safe' place so far as terrorist threats had been concerned. Likewise, it did not appear to be anything like the Peace Corps' 'country wide consolidation' which had occurred eight or nine months before.

At that time, PCVs were pulled back from rural assignments when the threat of violence across the country threatened their placements. PCVs were either permitted to go home or had been reassigned in slightly more 'urban' settings. That my station was 60 kilometers south-southeast of Bulawayo did not particularly strike me as urban did not seem to matter. In part, none of the *code* words the Peace Corps had instructed us in for something like this had been used in the phone call I received, so consolidation or evacuation even if possible at least did not appear to me at the time to be imminent.

Still, the scenario of consolidation-evacuation had lodged itself in the back of every PCV's mind as the country continued to move steadily towards a pivotal election date sometime still to be announced early next year which would climax months of intense political struggle for control of the country. This tension had recently been heightened as shortages of bread, margarine and cooking oil had begun to occur and could therefore not entirely be ruled out. Nor, for that matter, could it very easily be put out from one's mind.

Having found my friend, Ethel - a bright and amiable 22 year old Taiwanese-American - home from her day of teaching science, I explained the strange and ambiguous message with its demand for our return to Harare on the morrow. Like my reaction only moments before, the distress and uncertainty of such a strange and demanding request showed plainly on her face. The six plus hour journey was not something either of us cared to take on but together, we nevertheless made our plans to comply.

The following morning, Ethel and I were driven to town by one of my Principal's drivers a young man named Mpilo. Mpilo had rode on the back of the open 'flat' truck while I had been permitted to sit 'up front' in the cab with the driver and the chief bookkeeper, herself an older woman. Mpilo and I had had a chance to talk briefly towards the end of the day as we were waiting on the truck to return to our drop-off place at Bulawayo City Hall. Though Mpilo was friendly and outgoing our interaction was limited as his English was somewhat broken and my Ndebele, is fundamentally still under construction.

Although this was a 'special' trip into Bulawayo, necessitated by Ethel's and my journey, the little Izuzu pick-up soon gathered other riders. First one and then another of the people we would pass along the college's dirt road would hop on board as Mpilo would pause briefly just in front of them and wave them on. These college employees and relatives of employees would otherwise have had

to walk the 1 1/2 k to the main road where they would catch a 'combi' ride into town for about \$100 (Zim).

In this way, Mpilo extended this precious resource to as many friends and acquaintances as possible. After all, anyone would do the same as the space in the back was not otherwise in use and to be sure, this little act of kindness reduced the burden of these people's lives in this highly discernable if only briefest of ways. Everyone smiled at Mpilo and it was clear his friends' relief brought him some considerable satisfaction. Finally, we managed to have a full complement on board, and so then we headed on towards Bulawayo in earnest.

Once in town, it became clear that Mpilo had been given further instructions regarding our care that extended beyond simply getting us into town. First, as he lingered on while waiting to ensure we were able to purchase the expensive (\$2760 [Zim]) one way 'blue arrow' bus tickets and then later while waiting to see that our luggage and then we ourselves had been safely deposited on the one stop bus to Harare, it was clear our safety was his primary concern.

Once underway after waving goodbye to our friend and guardian, the slow procession of South African scenery quickly caught our eyes which were still new to the Zimbabwe countryside. Goats, donkeys, huts with grass thatched roofs, pedestrians, broken down vehicles with their stranded passengers and even a few monkeys streamed pass the bus's large windows. Over and over we saw scorched earth where villagers had burned back the tall grass, a protection against over-growth once the rains return (and, one presumes, the animals for which the grass provides refuge and cover).

Once, we even saw a small twister somewhat like one might see back home on a dry and windy day. Only this twister, unlike those in North America, rotated clockwise - a trick of the Earth's rotation called Coriolis that reverses the direction of free moving masses from right to left when going from northern to southern hemispheres. Coriolis affects everything from water going down the drain to meteorological monstrosities like hurricanes and typhoons. It was curious to observe this somewhat familiar picture somehow inverted from that with which we were more accustomed.

Not very far along, about a third of the way from Bulawayo to Gweru, the bus suddenly came upon uniformed men who had barricaded the road. As the bus slowed to a stop off to the side of the road, we were able to see that the men had rifles, automatic rifles. My heart nearly stopped as I realized that not only was the bus stopping for these men, but that these armed intruders fully intended on boarding the bus.

Quite to my relief however, instead of the *Independence War Veterans* I had feared these 'soldiers' to be upon initially seeing the 'Vet' sign on one of the armed men's shirts, the intended sign suddenly fluttered out in the wind revealing the rest of the words: 'Veterinary' it now clearly read.

The men were boarding to ensure that beef and pork possibly infected by the recent outbreak of hoof and mouth disease was not on board and not passing beyond their checkpoint. The rifles, one surmised, were to emphasize their insistence on these points.

Soon we once more found ourselves underway, no worse for the wear or the scare and perhaps a little more likely to respect the seriousness of the hoof and mouth epidemic. After about four more hours, we finally began seeing indications of the capitol city. Signs indicating 'lay by 500 m' and 'petrol 300 m' began to give way to signs like 'no overtaking' and 'school turning 400 m'. Traffic also picked up and soon we found ourselves in Zimbabwe's most populace city.

A third PCV had joined Ethel and I in Gweru and so now the three of us departed the bus in downtown Harare. We walked a block or so in order to catch a taxi that charged a less outlandish fare than the tourist oriented ones congesting around where the bus had finally expelled its passengers. Once we had our taxi, we were only minutes from the hotel to which we were headed not far from Harare International Airport.



Downtown Harare, Zimbabwe

Peace Corps staff met us inside and assisted registration process. Within moments, we were escorted into a small conference room where nearly the entire United States Peace Corps contingent for Zimbabwe had been assembled. Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, young and old alike sat talking, greeting and catching up. Why on earth, we each asked once again, had we been summoned back?

This was the first I had seen all of the Zimbabwe Peace Corps volunteers, trainees and staff assembled in one place and was the first I had seen all twenty-one of my own Zim 13 recruitment class in about a week. Our glad-handing and experience sharing however was cut short when the Peace Corps Country Director (CD) for South Africa, *not* Zimbabwe, surprisingly called us to order.

A Peace Corps veteran of Sierre Leone herself, the CD's solemn demeanor immediately arrested the assemblage of volunteers and staff. Larisa Jaffe, a 63 year old PCV who had arrived in this country only last February, the CD explained, was dead, the victim of a homicide in her home in Mutare.

The apparent motive, we were told, had been money and the act itself premeditated. Two of Larisa's Mutare neighbors apparently thought more of the chance at imagined riches than her friendship. Although PCVs are roundly discouraged from bringing money and valuables into *any* developing country, it is an inescapable part of westerners' travel to this part of the world that their white skin and western apparel - even sans jewelry and cell phones - is taken as a certain sign of measurable wealth. Regardless of the traveler's own perceptions, the plain and undeniable truth of the matter is that by the comparative measure provided by the pervasive reach of poverty in this part of the world, the traveler is wealthy.

*"The point is", the South African CD explained later that evening, "you can buy yourself a ticket and go to 'America' whenever you want. You own more shoes and underwear than those you are wearing and you've eaten at least three times a day for as long back as you care to remember."*

She is right. By any standard of comparison, this makes even the poorest PCV wealthy in the eyes of many. Just the idea of having even a small part of the land of Hollywood Movies, Michael Jordan and Bill Gates is more than most can imagine ever achieving here and clearly more temptation than at least some will be able to disregard.

Later, we met with our own CD, late of Mutare where she was assisting in the recovery and care of Larisa's remains, and began to process the horror to befall one of our own. Later still while processing our grief and shock at still another calamity to befall our little group of Americans since the surrealistic collapse of the WORLD TRADE CENTER and the invincibility of our mighty nation, the facts and implications of Larisa's murder begin to be more fully understood. Our American identities had become targets, targets which suddenly with Larisa's death began for the first time to be visible to the unaided eye of every PCV in southern Africa.

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