

Red Rocks and Green Grapes

As I stopped along the roadside north of Kabul, three young boys emerged from an overgrown vineyard and proudly offered me a handful of fresh grapes. Soon more children emerged. The sight brought back childhood memories of summer days spent roaming through the vast vineyards that joined our ranch in California. However, my smile quickly vanished with alarm. The unmistakable signs of a minefield, rocks painted red, surrounded the field from where these children surfaced. Why would they trespass through the jeopardy of a minefield I wondered? The oldest boy quickly responded, *ma goashma*, "we are hungry." The basic need for food had driven these children directly into harm's way.

Trying to make sense of what I had just witnessed, I continued north into the heart of the Shomali Plain. The exposed road had once been shaded by large mulberry trees and the fertile soil in this valley had provided a generous harvest—it was regarded as the bread basket of Afghanistan. Vast groves of poplar trees and vines embellished the land as far as the eye could see. The ancient village of Istalif, tucked into the western edge of the valley, gives evidence to the valley's glorious past; its name is a corruption of the Greek word for vines, *stafiloi*.

However, after decades of intense conflict, the Shomali Plain now bears the scars of war. What used to be the pride of Soviet armor now lies scattered throughout the valley like overturned tortoises who long ago surrendered to rust and gave up the will to right themselves. Mud brick houses that once housed families and dreams are completely destroyed. Their walls resemble little more than broken shards of glass in a bed of dust and the foundations approximate the appearance of wax candles that have burned to the earth.



Remains of war in the Shomali.

After a fateful bull-riding accident, Jed Harris was introduced to the global mine problem by his surgeon and has since traveled to numerous mine-affected countries exploring the issue. He now works with the Rotary Club to fund mine clearance projects.

With these uncharitable descriptions aside, the land is beginning to heal with the presence of peace in the valley. This year's crop produced 50 percent more than last year's and heaps of rain have helped to alleviate nearly five years of drought. Progress is infectious within the valley. However, one obstacle continues to cripple momentum—landmines.

The Shomali Plain recently served as the

front line of factional fighting and the Soviets left a brutal footprint on the land during their occupation in the 1980s. The troops have withdrawn, but the landmines remain. Up to eight people a day are killed or maimed by a mine accident in Afghanistan. Half of these victims are children and young adults. Of the estimated 10 million landmines that litter the earth in Afghanistan, a large majority of these

lethal devices are planted in the Shomali Plain. To make matters worse, these landmines are often placed where they have the most impact, such as irrigation canals, paths, wells and homes. Life's daily routine is an ominous task with these invisible seeds of destruction awaiting the next footfall.

Continuing north, I met with Dr. Nasir Ahmad of the HALO Trust, an organization that is dedicated to removing landmines in Afghanistan and other conflict zones around the world. The HALO Team in Afghanistan recently received generous help from a Bay Area organization, Roots of Peace, in partnership with Adopt-A-Minefield, which is a program of the United Nations Association of the USA. Both are non-profit organizations dedicated to funding the eradication of landmines across the globe.

We suited up in flak vests and Perspex masks before heading into the surrounding vineyards that are currently being cleared of landmines. Our walk quickly brought us to a small forest of red flags that marked the dangers beneath. Further ahead, we walked through a dry irrigation canal flanked by mud brick walls and those ever-present ominous red rocks. The cleared path between red rocks was no wider than the aisle between seats in the Airbus that had flown us into Kabul. Eventually we entered a vineyard where a dozen deminers were patiently probing the earth in the scorching heat.

I watched as one deminer scanned the earth with a sophisticated metal detector, listening attentively for the distinct wail that would heed warning to the dangers beneath. Occasionally, the thump and bang of various intensities would echo in the distance as the deminers detonated unearthed mines. I peeked over the shoulder of one deminer as he carefully unearthed what turned out to be a spent shell casing. Soon after, he found a small piece of metal fragmentation from an earlier explosion. He placed it in my pocket with a smile. "Souvenir," he said.

Centimeter by centimeter, the deminer continued his dangerous trade. In time he unearthed the edge of an Iranian anti-personnel mine. I quickly learned that in a field of many false alarms, a minor lapse in judgment could be fatal. The individuals who laid these mines left another element of surprise for the deminers. Often mines are laid on their side, seeking the probing tool of a deminer, not the footfall of a person. Many more mines are laid on top of one another or booby-trapped to a second device to discourage their removal.

These inherent risks are outweighed by the reward of giving life back to the land of Afghanistan. The tireless efforts of organizations such as Roots of Peace, Adopt-A-Minefield and the HALO Trust have not only saved countless lives and incomprehensible suffering for many Afghans, they have provided hope to a people that are struggling to get back on their feet. At the day's end, the disfigured metal memento that was given to me earlier poked through my shirt pocket as I removed my flak vest. Studying this grisly piece of metal, I felt confident that this cold steel would eventually succumb to the warm hearts of individuals who wanted to end this legacy of mutilation for future generations. It is only a matter of time before the red rocks are outnumbered by green grapes once again.

**Photos do author.*

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Mine victim.



Hope for the future.



HALO deminer at work.



Afghans walk by a POMZ-2 mine.