



## A Foreign Service Christmas Story

"You mean daddy's going to be away again this Christmas?" shouted both children in unison.

This was really too much, thought Cindy. When he had gone to a conference last Easter it really hadn't seemed to bad since Easter in a Moslem country hadn't meant much except vacation from school, an egg hunt at the Embassy residence, and a short special Sunday service at the Anglican church; but Christmas again!

Feeling even sorrier for herself, Cindy recalled all the Fourth of July holidays that had been wasted when mommy and daddy went to those affairs at the Embassy, and the year before he had been away for both her birthday and Andy's.

But not another Christmas! She remembered last Christmas. How they had gone out to the seemingly lonely Hilton Hotel for dinner instead of having their own gay family feast. Cindy had asked over and over again last year why Grandma and Grandpa couldn't come that year as they had done the year before. It really would have made the holiday seem more like those she had remembered from America, but Grandpa had been sick and the travel of over 4,000 miles would have been impossible. Last year they had had a "mini" Christmas before daddy left, but that really hadn't seemed right. December 25th had been an unending sad day of memories of the usual singing around the tree, the presents and good food. It was so different in this hot country anyway, but that first year they had managed to really make it seem like old times.

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**ART BUCHWALD  
AT JANUARY 9  
AAFSW MEETING  
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## "The Kabul Experience" — A Model for the Future?

December 5, a large group of Foreign Service Officers and dependents filled the East Auditorium to hear first hand how a mental health program got started and worked in Kabul, Afganistan. Sponsored by the Mental Health Committee in cooperation with the Director General and the Office of Medical Services, this program was an historic first as an open approach to mental health problems at post.

Introductory remarks made by Betty Atherton, Chairman of the Mental Health Committee, included a letter from Rosalynn Carter supporting this program and stating, "It is clear that one of the greatest obstacles to more effective prevention efforts is our unwillingness to admit that not only do mental problems exist, but that we must begin to speak openly about them, removing the stigma often associated with them, seeking to deal with them before they become serious.

"I commend the Mental Health Committee for its public presentation of the Kabul Experience.

"I hope this will be but one of many steps to encourage greater awareness of mental health problems. We must acknowledge their existence and dedicate ourselves to finding new ways to prevent them."

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, in commenting on the role of the State Department, said:

"At the opening of the Family Liaison Office almost a year ago, I spoke of the importance I attach to meeting the needs of the entire foreign service family as well as the foreign service employee. A healthy and stable foreign service family is essential to the successful conduct of our responsibilities here in Washington and particularly in overseas posts which can place a strain on family life. Without strong

foreign service families, we won't have a strong foreign service.

"I am greatly encouraged to know that a growing number of posts have developed programs designed to raise the morale and improve the quality of life for Foreign Service families. They have been initiated in places as diverse as Tokyo, Bonn, Singapore, Rome, Kuala Lumpur, Tehran, Vienna and Kabul.

"The Kabul Experience was a successful, innovative, and effective experiment in improving the morale at one of our most challenging posts. Kabul is a difficult and isolated post and many of the problems that face foreign service employees and their families are particularly acute there. There was an abnormally high number of medical evacuations, suicides and a serious teenage drug problem. The people who creatively tackled those problems, with such notable success, are with us here and they will tell you what they did and how.

"At a time of limited resources, it is essential that the many agencies representing the U.S. abroad work together to build the strong sense of community and purpose that can contribute to our efforts overseas. We must find ways to support such programs.

"As you learn about the Kabul Experience and discuss what we can learn from it, I want to underscore that your efforts have the full and enthusiastic support of Mrs. Vance and myself."

In reviewing the Kabul Experience, one main point underscored by each panel member was that such a program can succeed only with the support of the entire community and especially the Ambassador's commitment.

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## “Kabul Experience”, cont’d. from p. 1

Panelists included Ambassador Theodore Eliot, who was Ambassador in Kabul, Dr. Frank Pettinga who as the Kabul Medical Officer, and Dr. Richard Westmaas who was the first mental health expert to be officially resident at any post — in this case, Kabul.

Ambassador Eliot said he had been made aware of some of the problems in Kabul before he went to the post, which is isolated and relatively large, with 600 Americans. He commented that effectiveness of people abroad should be paramount to all agencies. Effectiveness can be jeopardized by lack of mental health facilities.

With this philosophy stated at the highest levels, Dr. Pettinga was able to initiate some changes at post. His first priority was getting a Youth Center established and changing the approach to the teenage drug problem from a punitive one to a medically related problem. Drug problems could be reduced if youths were given a chance to work out their anxieties in other ways and before the anxieties took over.

A grant from the Office of Overseas Schools was the first step in getting and staffing a Teen Center in Kabul. Another program initiated by Med was Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) seminars to improve communication within families. Dr. Pettinga also tried to provide a listening ear, and the gravity of a number of problems led him to evaluate the need for a psychologist. During this time 11 people were medically evacuated for psychological reasons. Supported by all the agencies at post, legal ways were found

through the Medical Division to hire a contract person to come to Kabul. Since no one was evacuated after the arrival of Dr. Westmaas, Dr. Pettinga said the program was shown to be cost effective too. After he had been at post a year, money was found to fund Dr. Westmaas and make his position regional.

In concluding his remarks, Dr. Pettinga stated that the program succeeded in Kabul for a number of specific reasons: the person chosen was well qualified to do what he had to do; it was supported by all elements of the Embassy; assurances were made that the mental health record would not necessarily become a part of a person's official record; and there was an Administrative Officer who knew his way through the red tape.

Dr. Westmaas commented that as he traveled around to other posts after his first year, he found that Kabul had no more problems than any other post. It was just that the Ambassador and Medical Officer recognized the problems, were willing to admit it, and then could initiate action to get something underway to help.

He said his first problem at post was one of establishing confidentiality. He was relieved, he said, when the range of problems turned out to be much the same as those he was used to seeing Grand Rapids, Michigan: depression, anxiety linked with stress, marital problems, and teen problems.

Because he was there to deal with the problems in their original setting, it was found that coming through a crisis on the spot could lead to a greater level of effective-

ness than evacuation. For many, he said, just knowing that he was there was enough to give them confidence to act with lessened anxiety.

Programs initiated at post by Dr. Westmaas included individual and family therapy; working with the American International School through weekly sessions with counselors, staff and students; getting a summer job program started for teens; starting a teen-peer program for counseling new students; and community programs like marriage enrichment and PET. During his next two years Dr. Westmaas became regional Mental Health Officer, consulting with schools in his region, conducting workshops at other posts, and counseling with parents and teachers.

After he left in 1977, his position was continued, and he was replaced by Dr. Elmore Rigamer.

Dr. Herbert Haynes, Assistant Medical Director, Mental Health Services Department of State, commented that Kabul was a case book study in Community Action with the activity beginning at the highest level and having cooperation of all post agencies. It is his hope that his kind of program can be expanded along the lines of the geographic bureaus. It has proven to be cost effective to have early intervention in situations that could become crises if left alone. He stated that half of this year's 500 evacuations would have been unnecessary if a program such as Kabul's had been available "on the spot".

A video tape recording was made of the meeting and will be available on request through regional bureaus.

## Christmas Story, cont'd. from p. 1

Cindy and Andy were proud of their father and that he worked at the Embassy. They liked the excitement of moving and living in foreign countries. But they didn't feel foreign, they felt American; and they couldn't understand why Daddy's work couldn't wait until after the holidays. This year, as last, he had to go to a near-by capital city on temporary duty to help make arrangements for a Vice-Presidential visit just after Christmas. Last year it had been the Secretary of State who had arrived just three days after Christmas. Many extra people had already started arriving to prepare for the visit, and they had to be helped; the press coverage had to be arranged and all sorts of complications made daddy's life miserable while the rest of Cindy's world, it seemed, was preparing for Christmas.

Cindy just didn't think it fair she should lose her daddy again for another holiday, and she felt frustrated by all the negative answers to her and Andy's constant pleadings.

*While this little vignette may seem extreme, it sometimes happens this way. Maybe the story could have even ended here.*

*While it might have been possible to keep this family together at Christmas with more careful foreplanning by those in charge, lets say Cindy's father did leave as scheduled. Cindy's mother had learned last year that her being angry and unhappy had not contributed to her family's ability to cope with this unhappy situation. She was determined to change things this second time around:*

After daddy had been left with sad good-bys at the airport, Cindy's mother unveiled some special plans that had been brewing with the singles and several other Embassy families who had been split up during the holidays; not only due to the Vice-President's visit, but also due to travel home or medical evaluation. With a little help from Cindy's mother, they had decided to make a Christmas together instead of alone. At first Cindy and Andy were pretty dubious about this solution. After all they didn't know a lot of these people and some of the children coming were just babies! Slowly though they realized that their own mother had done a great deal of the planning, and for her sake they wanted to help make it a success.

Cindy was mildly surprised then when the

day turned out to be very special indeed. In many ways it seemed just like the holidays she was always reading about in books set in the 19th century. It was a Christmas with lots of good cheer, of lots of children playing games and opening presents, of older children helping younger children, of women in the kitchen contributing to a feast, and of men talking quietly around the tree. Cindy was surprised there were so many people there she had never seen before.

In the car going home, still basking in the warmth of fellowship, they compared notes. Her mother remarked how well she liked some of the women there who she had not really known before. Andy was most impressed by the Marines who he had only seen before in their impressive uniforms guarding the Embassy. He said they were swell, and they treated him just like a grown-up. Cindy was quiet and reflective. She had to admit that even though it hadn't been one of their own special Christmases, it had been fun and special in the sense of a larger family experience. Maybe that even made it better. She would certainly remember it well and tell daddy all about it when he came home.