

HIGH RISK, HIGH GAIN

Can Crisis Corps play a role in countries in conflict?

by Tom Katus

...[We] have been inspired by reading “Three Cups of Tea” and would consider a six-month assignment in Afghanistan. This conflict will not be won on the battlefield, but if we could influence a few individuals on a person-to-person basis, it may be worthwhile. If age is revered in the villages of Afghanistan, we would certainly meet that criteria.

—Art & Ann Young
(Tanganyika I-II 1961-1964)

In the early days of Peace Corps, trainees were ranked from 1 to 4, disqualified to highly qualified. But there was a fifth category: “high risk; high gain.” This was for those potential Peace Corps Volunteers who although they might represent “high risk” due to some demonstrated behavior, they might also be excellent linguists and/or technicians. In those days, Peace Corps took this risk and, for the most part, the “5” PCVs became good to outstanding Volunteers.

It is once again time for the Peace Corps to take some risk to gain credibility in its 21st century role. This can be accomplished by a short term (up to six months) Crisis Corps Vanguard comprised of retired Returned Peace Corps Volunteers like Art and Ann Young. I served with Art, who had a civil engineering degree and worked as a highway engineer in Tanganyika. He returned to the U.S. to obtain his master’s and served as a city engineer for 29 years prior to his retirement. Art is 76 years old. He married Ann in Tanzania where she had served as a nurse. Post-Peace Corps, she was a nurse for 30-plus years and, together with Art, raised four children. She is 69. They have a lifetime of experience—and are ready to serve again.

Throughout much of the spring and summer of 2009, I joined over 14,000 fellow RPCVs from throughout the U.S. in lobbying to increase Peace Corps funding levels. We were successful in the House of Representatives, however, in the Senate we encountered resistance from Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who challenged many of us that Peace Corps is no longer strategically important.

I believe we should accept Sen. Leahy’s challenge and send an “Over-the-Hill Gang” of Peace Corps Response (formerly known as Crisis Corps) Volunteers to carry out community development in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They would “test the waters” for engagement of regular Peace Corps Volunteers to enter relatively safe areas of targeted countries

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of conflict. Many of us have lived good and full lives and would, I believe, be willing to “risk our necks.” While our troops are doing their best, they cannot “kick down doors” one day and try to build schools the next.

A number of RPCVs, especially those who served in Pakistan, have responded positively to the idea. William Tarpai (Dominican Republic 73-74, United Nations Volunteer Somalia 82-83), who was also a career U.N. staff member, advocates strongly for a Peace Corps role in post-conflict countries, while fully acknowledging the risks. He suggested that “a more appropriate term for the

RPCVs should be ‘respected elders,’ as culturally it fits well with both the Afghani and Pakistani [and other countries] cultural perspective.”

Truth be told, there has always been more military service influence in Peace Corps than many would like to admit. President John F. Kennedy was a war hero, and R. Sargent Shriver served in World War II. Our Tanganyika I group trained in the Arecibo, Puerto Rico Peace Corps Outward Bound Camp. The Camp Director was Rev. William Sloan Coffin, Chaplain at Yale University and a civil rights activist with Rev. Martin Luther King. But he was also an intelligence officer in World War II. He tapped his old friend Freddie Fuller, a retired Sergeant Major of British Commandoes, to serve as our “drill sergeant.” My future Peace Corps sidekick, Jerry Parson, was a former paratrooper. (He was photographed swinging on a rope into a cargo net and the photo made the front page of the Cuban press with the caption, “Peace Corps: Preparing for the next invasion of Cuba.”).

As one of approximately one-third of our Tanganyika I group who honorably completed military service prior to Peace Corps, I believe that national service should be a team effort. The Peace Corps community’s “go-it-alone” attitude may be part of the reason Senator Leahy and others see us as strategically unimportant.

Following Art and Ann’s suggestion that I read “Three Cups of Tea,” I had the opportunity to meet its author, Greg Mortenson, very briefly. Since 1993, Mortenson has built 130 girls’ schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. At one stage of his odyssey, he strayed into Waziristan and was captured, held and released



Tom Katus, Art Young at the 35th anniversary of the first Peace Corps training for Tanganyika (1961).

by the Taliban. But he has targeted his schools in a non-Taliban-controlled area of Karakoram Range bordering China and India in Pakistan and the Badakshan area of Afghanistan, which was never under Taliban control.

Twenty-five years ago, I worked in grass roots development in Somalia. Since the unraveling of Somalia as a nation state beginning in 1991, it is probably one of the most dangerous areas in the world. Nevertheless, the former British Somaliland in the northeast coast, now called Somaliland, has continued to function relatively successfully and peacefully. Why not send an RPCV Crisis Corps to Somaliland? If everything goes well for six months, the regular Peace Corps could return. Maybe Friends of Somalia, Tanzania and Kenya could entice Mortenson, who was a missionary kid in Tanzania, to get involved and help donate funds to girls' schools in Somaliland. Inshallah.

Tom Katus (Tanganyika I 61-63) trained more than 2,000 Peace Corps Volunteers for five African countries, Brazil and India. He was born and raised on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation and has worked with tribal Americans for more than 40 years. He worked in grassroots development for 15 years with two foundations, serving in 11 African nations. Prior to Peace Corps, he volunteered as a Combat Engineer in the US Army National Guard. He served in the South Dakota Senate (2007-08) and has been coordinating RPCVs in support of the More Peace Corps legislative efforts.

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