

Working Around (the World and the Problem)

By Bruce Evans and Peg English



Roger at home in Spokane, enjoying a break.

Like a modern Proteus (mythological Greek god of water, master of changes, shape-shifter capable of assuming many forms), Roger Van Parys is a model of ingenuity, versatility, and adaptability who successfully navigated his way through multiple careers: Air Force officer, insurance industry executive, and creator/manager of construction businesses both in the United States and abroad. He has always sought new experiences and challenges, fresh ways to "stir my creative juices."

"I think outside the box," he says. "I have to be in charge of my own destiny, do my own thing, not report to someone else. I think there is always a way to jigger something and make it work. I can accomplish anything I put my mind to."

After graduating from the University of Washington in 1962, Roger went through OTS, becoming an Air Force officer in 1963. In Vietnam he led a team that flew missions for Combat Information Control, using electronics to gather information about enemy positions along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Once he and his team stunned his commanders by spotting tanks going into the Ahsha Valley, something none had been aware of before.

In 1970 he was reassigned to the Rocket Lab at Edwards Air Force Base, CA, where he earned his MBA, then opted to leave active duty and work for Allstate Insurance in Yakima. After a

stint in their Management Development program, he became a sales manager, then was hired by Marsh and McLennan as an account executive in Spokane.



"One of my projects in Afghanistan... This was at Gardez in southern Afghanistan in the winter."

In 1979, ready for a career change and inspired by the example of a friend in construction, he formed his own company, Vancor, doing light commercial work and building starter homes in the Spokane area until, in 1984, the Air Force called him back to active duty in Germany. There he became an expert in computerized war gaming—"I'm a quick study," he says—and contributed to NATO war planning.

In 1988 he retired from the Air Force but remained in Germany when a friend hooked him up with a defense contractor doing construction work there. He returned to Spokane in 1990 to manage Vancor, but in 1997, motivated by his love of travel and his need to tackle new challenges to his ingenuity and adaptability, he seized an opportunity to become a contractor representing the U.S. government in Turkey. From that point until retirement, he was on the go, managing projects for a number of companies—CH2MHill, Dyncorp, Contrack, ITSI, Perini, Deloitte, BAE—most often in countries lacking abundant resources and readily available materials, like Moldova, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.



"Me on the project in Bashra Iraq. Armored vest and all."

It was those situations, where he often had to adapt "high-tech skills to 7th century conditions," that tested and excited him the most. In Afghanistan, for example, he led the construction, complete with infrastructure such as roads and sewer and water lines, of four \$65 million bases designed to accommodate 6,000 army personnel.

"You have to be a little 'crazy,' he says, "because every day presents a different challenge. Rockets knock you out of your bed. The resources you need for construction don't exist in that community." Or parts for water tanks are delivered to the wrong part of the country, gas pumps arrive set to dispense in liters, not gallons, and voltages are 110 when they should be 220. "You can't just wait for a camel to come over the mountain and drop something off. I had to be clever in coming up with solutions to keep the project moving along." His sense of humor and his optimism helped him meet his deadlines. In such circumstances, he says, "If you step



"Me walking the diplomatic quarter in Riyadh... That was my exercise and entertainment..."

into the shower in the morning and there's water, it's going to be a good day. If the water is hot, it's going to be a **great** day!" A facilitator, not a specialist, Roger was the can-do guy constantly making adjustments as he figured out ways to get things done. He loved being in charge and turning headaches into successes. "Every day I dealt with Turks, Brits, Afghans, Indians, Pakis, U.S. ex-pats, subcontractors, local labor. It was rich in learning about a lot of cultures.

"In Moldova I had the most fun and also had to use the most inventiveness. We were hired to remodel a

large convention center for the Ministry of Defense. They had less than nothing in budget available. No resources available anywhere, so I had to put together work-arounds. Need 100 place settings for the kitchen? Go to the black market and use stealth to obtain them in any way you can. No hammer or crowbars because you can't buy those things in town? Somehow they mysteriously materialize." Ultimately, the Ministry was so pleased with the finished product that resulted from Roger's work-arounds that it awarded him a medal (and a bottle of brandy, to boot!).

In 2015, having traveled in multiple countries and moved 24 times, Roger and his wife Carol (EHS class of '60) finally retired. But their search for new experiences continues. They now live, along with other American and Canadian ex-pats, in Lake Chapala, Mexico (near Guadalajara), a charming fishing village at an elevation of 5,000 feet, a "Goldilocks" location where they need neither a furnace nor an air conditioner and where the health care is both good and affordable. How's his Spanish? "Primo," he says, jokingly. He and Carol have just begun taking Spanish lessons—but surely they'll have no trouble doing work-arounds until they gain facility in the language.



"Carol and I in Canada at Lake Louise"