

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

**LEWRIGHT BROWNING MUNN**

*Copyright 2013*

**REMINISCING AN “ANCIENT” WORLD  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - 1947-49**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Military duty, WWII  
Port  
Minister J. Rives Childs  
Staff housing  
Water supply  
Legation buildings  
Food sources  
Hotel  
TWA  
Lack of amenities  
Social life  
Recreation  
Morale courier trips  
Females  
Transportation  
ARAMO  
Religious services  
Health  
Temporary duty, Jerusalem  
Consul General Thomas Watson  
Father Patrick Doyle  
Jordanian army  
Major Abdullah el Tel  
Amman, Jordan; accommodations  
Temporary duty, Beirut, Lebanon  
US Delegation, UNESCO Conference  
Transfer; Consulate General, Bremen, Germany

**MEMOIR**

I found the American Foreign Service Journal article about Morocco (SAVE THE LEGATION - May 2013) very interesting. It brought back vivid memories of how we “lived” at the American Legation in Jeddah during the time I served there. NOTE: In those days, Saudi Arabia had three “capitols” - Jeddah was the diplomatic capitol due all the foreign legations located there; Riyadh was the royal capitol because that was the king’s permanent residence; and, Dhahran was the commercial capitol because of ARAMCO Oil Company, the U.S. Air Force Base and Saudi Arabia’s International Airport. It wasn’t until years later that Jeddah became a Consulate General and, as an Embassy, moved to Riyadh.

As the Morocco article noted “antiquity” today’s average American reader would not have believed “life and work” in Saudi Arabia before, in and, probably, several years after “my day”! I have a loose leaf binder of photos I have taken when asked to speak on “life” there.

After 2 years in the South Pacific during WWII, short terms in hospitals in Manila and West Virginia and, eventually “honorable discharge” from the Army I joined and worked at the War Assets Administration “selling” aircraft and parts. It was not interesting. A friend advised the Department of State’s “Foreign Service” was hiring! The “spirit” of adventure” still in me and the feeling it might be interesting to find out what was “involved”! To make a long story short I went for an interview, my prospects and future sounded interesting so I applied for an offered position. Assuming security and other clearances, I waited. Shortly thereafter I was offered a position, signed on, went through orientation and special training and, finally, received my assignment -- Cryptographer (code clerk), Jeddah, Saudi Arabia!

Purchased my “necessities”, packed my bags and trunk, went to New York for my assigned transportation (a freighter of the U.S. Lines) and after a couple stops en route to deliver and/or pick up cargo arrived at destination, late at night & anchored! NOTE: More on this “subject” later!

Waking early, dressed and went on deck. What I could see by naked eye my initial reaction was -- “Oh my God -- I’m back to the world of Lowell Thomas’ Lawrence of Arabia”! Using my sea glasses, looking all along the town’s shoreline, and the town itself another thought -- “what have you gotten yourself into this time?”! There were no docks, no other freighters, a lot of dhows, fishing boats, several launches, and several buildings. On the left of the so-called “city limits” was some kind of plant, in the middle some “OFFICIAL” looking buildings and in the right just outside the “limits” and built on land and over the water was a fairly new looking building. It was now time for breakfast, getting my luggage on deck and wait for someone to come and claim me!

I saw what turned out to be the U.S. Legation’s launch headed to the ship with a lady, two men and the boatman. The lady was a U.S. Secretary (one of three female staff), one male was vice consul and the other male was the chap I was to replace. After introductions and small talk, my baggage was loaded on the launch and off to shore. We landed at what was the customs dock, went through the usual procedures and drove to the

Legation. I was introduced to Minister J. Rives Childs and the rest of the U.S. staff and Saudi Arabian staff (five translators and clerks). After being shown around the Legation I was taken to an apartment I was to share with another male staff member, “space” to unpack and “organized” and “prepared for life in the desert”!

Now to that “life” in Jeddah!

The one main street along the waterfront stretching from the “town limits” in the East to the “Mecca/Medina Gate” in the West was approximately 1 kilometer (0.62 miles). It was the sole hard topped road in Jeddah and continued to Mecca. Every other street or alley was hard packed sand.

With several exceptions most buildings, including three and four floor houses constructed from sand stone blocks, wood, wooden beams and wood flooring. The blocks were “cemented” mostly from “gop” out of a nearby lagoon or actual cement.

Jeddah was originally surrounded by high fortress type walls built in earlier days against tribal wars and attacks but were currently being torn down.

At the East end of the shore road as it turned toward the Mecca Gate was a post World War I salt water condensation plant built by the British and still in use. Off the road and after the Mecca Gate was a large wadi with numerous water wells (source of the water was not known to me). Water was collected daily by a “service man” with donkeys loaded with 55 gallon drums for water. Brought to their destinations, water was hand pumped to large tanks on the roof of buildings (including where we lived). There was no such thing as a “modern” commercial water or piping system throughout the town. Water from the roof tanks was piped throughout our house and living quarters to the kitchen, wash basin, shower and to flush our toilets. Allegedly, true or not, there was underground piping and sewers for waste.

The American Legation consisted of two (2) adjoining floor buildings: Ground: Entrance, Saudi Arabian staff offices, and storerooms; 2nd.: Minister office, U.S. staff offices, unclassified and classified file room, code room; 3rd.: U. S. staff apartment; and, roof and laundry area. A few hundred feet away another four floor building converted to U.S. staff apartments.

Directly across the road from the Legation was the Legation’s maintenance compound consisting of a power plant, garage, workshop and the U.S. maintenance supervisor’s office. Adjacent to that was a walled enclosed building called “the Saudi Widow’s Compound” Its use is self-explanatory!

In an Italian fairly well constructed and modern house outside the “town limits” was the Minister’s residence and walled compound. There also were a garage area, store rooms and servant’s quarters. The house was well constructed, two floors and balcony, open roof area for entertaining. As previously noted the road to the house was packed sand.

Additionally the Legation had one more Italian constructed building in the center of town located on the main road and across from the Saudi Custom's Office and landing pier -- "The American Clinic". Its history is somewhat vague but at the time, the first floor was occupied by a Lebanese medical doctor on contract as a "clinic" for Saudis. A separate entrance to the second floor led to a U.S. staff apartment. It was more modern than the other U.S. staff quarters. Toward the end of my tour I eventually moved there. I shared the unit with the wife (who was a U.S. employee at the Legation) and her husband (who was the General Manager of TWA's contract with Saudi Arabian Airlines). There were two large bedrooms, living/dining room, bath, kitchen, storeroom with an open roof for entertaining. We had a cook (who formerly worked at the French Minister's residence), a houseboy and cleaner. Except for the Minister's residence, no servants were known to sleep or live in any of the U. S. staff apartment buildings.

All apartments were shared by two U.S. staff members. Each unit had two bedrooms, living/dining room, kitchen, bathroom, and secured storage area for food and similar items. Each unit was responsible for its own stocking and ordering food supplies etc. Usually and because of shipping costs, two or more units would combine their orders. Upon receipt of the shipment, everything would be distributed in accordance with what the unit had ordered and paid for. As alcohol products were not permitted for Saudis nor locally available, they had to be ordered too. As I remember, non-perishable food and alcohol was ordered from a Danish food supplier as the closest and fastest supplier. Occasionally, similar orders and shipments were received from a U.S. supplier but delivery took longer. Some food items such as imported bulk cheese, some canned goods, fish, meat -- mostly lamb and occasionally, beef and chicken. Actually the fish and lamb was quite good. Each unit was serviced and paid by the occupants and consisted of a senior houseboy, cook and cleaner. Most spoke English and usually hired through the senior translator at the Legation. No security nor police checks -- all, hopefully, "honest" and "reliable".

The "JEDDAH HOTEL" was located on our road several buildings east of the Legation. To my knowledge no U.S. Legation member nor "official" visitor was required to stay there. For that matter, no known U.S. or European national ever stayed there. From a U.S. standpoint and "standard", it was not appealing, healthy, sanitary, attractive nor livable!

Access to Saudi Arabia was by air, sea or camel! Access between Jeddah, Riyadh, Medina (the Moslem's second most religious city) was by car or camel. To the Moslem world's most religious City of Mecca was solely by road from Jeddah. About five miles north on the Mecca Road was a Saudi police check point used to prevent non-Moslems from proceeding to Mecca.

TWA (Trans World Airlines), under contract with the Saudi Government, maintained, operated and serviced "SAUDI ARABIAN AIRLINES". It operated from/to Jeddah, Medina, Dhahran, Cairo, Beirut and Tehran. Small passenger vessels (during Ramadan) and U.S. and foreign flag freighters brought in cargo as well as pilgrims. As for the U.S. staff, "SAA" was used for the occasional vacation to Cairo on Beirut.

“Public” entertainment and “local” social life was non-existent. Saudi Arabian Government officials and some businessmen were invited to Legation “official” affairs. No Saudi women even attended. There were NO theaters, movie houses, restaurants, department stores, supermarkets nor other amenities usually available to Westerners. We had to rely on ourselves and within our Western “community”!

Social “life” among the Western community consisted of informal and formal (British style) dinner parties; dances to recorded music; card games/contests; “golf” on ARAMCO’s makeshift course (when it was not blown away); trips to a small treeless island near Jeddah; drives into the desert and along the nearby shoreline beaches; Sunday morning “Church of England” style “services” within the British Legation; reading; listening to recorded music; and, etc. Thanks to Minister Childs, arrangements were made with the commanding officer of the U.S. Air Base to be loaned current U.S. movies which were shown on the Minister’s open roof to the U.S. staff and European guests.

As noted above “swimming” came with a “warning” -- the Red Sea had shanks! Because of the shanks, although it eventually failed, a company had been formed and operating to catch sharks for their fins (Oriental market) and export as well as local sale as food. The reason for the Company’s short lived activity was never known to me. However, there were barracuda in the reef areas of Jeddah’s harbor often caught by us on our Friday or Sunday fishing trips. NOTE: The Legation was closed Friday because it was a Moslem “Sunday”, we worked on Saturday and, again, it was closed on Sunday our day off.

Prior to my arrival and because Jeddah was so isolated and as a “morale” factor for the U.S. staff, Minister Childs and the Department arranged a “break” for the U.S. staff. Every two weeks a U.S. Diplomatic Courier from the Regional Courier Service in Cairo would arrive with a pouch, deliver it to a U.S. staff member, take our pouch and, usually, get right back on a plane and return to Cairo. On a pre-agreed schedule between the Jeddah and Cairo Legations the diplomatic courier would skip a trip and one U.S. Staff from Jeddah would make a courier pouch run from Jeddah to Cairo, stay two weeks on annual leave and would then pick up and take a pouch back to Jeddah. This was a physical and morale “break” for the U.S. staff. Flight costs were paid by the Department as an “official business” BUT the staffer used annual leave and was responsible for his/her personal expenses during leave. Unfortunately, after a while, at times it became too expensive for the staff and this “break” was not totally utilized. I made two trips to Cairo. While on the subject of “morale & scenery change” I was able to take annual leave and make two personal short trips to my favorite (at the time) Beirut, Lebanon and one, during Ramadan to Tehran, Iran.

So soon after World War II and, at this time, because of Saudi Arabia’s “end of the world” location, its isolation combined with the total lack of local “normal” amenities for Westerners, a “female” presence was drastically restricted. As a so-called “man’s world”, the resident ladies were the “winners”! At the U.S. Legation we had the Minister’s wife, two U.S. ladies (one in finance and one secretary), later U.S. wife of a vice consul, the Egyptian wife of our “jack of all trades” engineer and the on-contract U.S. wife of the TWA manager at Saudi Arabian Airlines. The British Minister’s wife and several wives

with the British Gellatly Hankey Company, a long-time commercial company, also responsible for the aforementioned water distillation plant. TWA's operation at the Jeddah Airport had a couple wives, two minor children among the U.S. pilots and maintenance personnel. I do not remember whether ARAMCO's "representative" office had any female staff. The Italian Minister had his teenage daughter and a "secretary". I don't remember whether the French and Dutch Legations had any of their national females in their groups. (NOTE: At one time I had a list of all the Westerners in Jeddah but, regrettably, over the ensuing years and many moves it was "lost".)

Local transportation was a minus! The Minister had an "official" four-door sedan -- I believe a Ford -- and driver. The legation had two "retired" U.S. military jeeps. The latter used by the U.S. and Saudi Arabian staff on "official business" and/or the U. S. staff after hours for local personal use. "Public" transportation of any kind, except camels or mules, did not exist. Wealthy Saudis as well as the locally resident Royal Family members had vehicles with and without drivers. NOTE: A frequently reported "incident" involves the "young Royals" visiting or living in Jeddah and personally driving a "royal" car and it ran out of gas would send a servant or other local back to the Palace for another car, return to pick up the Royal who would then abandon the "old" car for possible retrieval by a palace employee. Saudi females, regardless of "position", were not permitted to drive a car -- it required they always had a driver. The U.S. staff's usual mode of transportation within the town's small limits was walking. All the places we might visit were so close -- the "walks" were short. None of the U.S. staff brought in a personal vehicle.

The Persian Gulf's Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, with its ARAMCO oil "operations", U.S. Air Force Base, U.S. Consulate General and internal airport could be called a "city" and was the nation's busiest seaport. On the other hand, Jeddah on the Red Sea "way" between the USA, Europe and the Middle/Far East was the prime seaport. As such it was visited almost daily by U.S. flag freighters (which no longer exist) and foreign flag freighters (who now "get all the business"). Our U.S. staff could go aboard the U.S. vessels and buy items in the ship's "store". Every once in a while a Catholic priest was on board headed East (but not allowed to go ashore) so we Catholics went aboard to attend Mass.

An interesting thing about the port was that Jeddah had NO docks. But it did have three large underwater reefs "protecting" the harbor. All incoming cargo had to be offloaded onto a single sail dhow which would have to zigzag through the reef passages to get to the custom's area docks and warehouses. One auto (mostly Fords) was loaded across the sides of the dhow and, allegedly, securely tied down. When circumventing the two very tight channels in the reefs and turning too sharply and leaning, a loosely tied down vehicle became a "victim of the sea"! NOTE: Some years later the reefs were destroyed and now Jeddah has a dock area.

When assigned to Jeddah we, usually, were in very good health! Not necessarily so after we arrived. The extreme daytime desert heat eventual "natural" health "emergencies" occurred. Although Saudi doctors and dentists were available, Western health, sanitary and qualifications were unknown. The previously mentioned Lebanese M.D. had

departed shortly after my arrival. Later during my tour a British medical doctor -- an ophthalmologist -- became available. Whether on contract with the Saudi Arabian Government, the British Legation or other source I don't know. His primary purpose was to do research into and treat local Saudis afflicted with eye disease -- a common "problem" in Saudi Arabia (as in the case of King Ibn Saud). He took Westerners as "private patients" for minor medical problems. I was extremely fortunate for his availability because, at the time, I came down with "recurrent malaria/dengue fever" (probably picked up during WWII while in the South Pacific). An illness one would not imagine in the desert! A ten or so day "experience" being bedridden. Anyone in the Legation and could travel but had a serious medical problem was immediately flown to the American Hospital in Beirut. While on leave there I had to be treated for acute amoebic dysentery. (NOTE: Again, several years later while on assignment in Bombay, India).

May 14, 1948, Jerusalem, Palestine (later Israel).

On May 11, 1948 the Department advised I was to proceed to the American Consulate General, Jerusalem. As no commercial airlines flew into Jerusalem, on May 11 I flew SAA to Beirut, Lebanon and reported to the Legation for further instructions. . On May 11 aboard the U.S. Air Attaché's plane, along with several other males, flew into the Jerusalem Airport. The ACG's females (whether wives or staff I did not know) loaded on the plane and off they went!

(NOTE: At this time and since the World War I "Mandate" Palestine was "governed" by the British and was to end on May 15, 1948. Any remaining civilian or military were, allegedly, supposed to depart by that date. They were mostly located in the "Old City".

We were then driven to the ACG (American Consulate General) where we were introduced to Consul General Thomas Wasson (who was assassinated a short time later by person or persons unknown -- a whole separate "story"), most of the rest of the U.S. staff (no Jewish non Palestinian nationals were employed at the time). Again driven to a nearby mansion (flying the U.S. flag -- another "story") where we were left to "live" during our assignments.

May 15, 1948: All hell broke out! The Jewish/Arab War had started!

Apparently the British in the "Old City" had "sneaked out" during the night and the British trained Jordanian Army, along with other Arab national military and irregulars had "taken over" the "Old City", sealed it off and manned its walls (facing Jewish Jerusalem) with machine guns, mortars and personnel.

A personal "incident" occurred the day we were driven to our residence. Passing the Terra Sancta College and standing in its entrance was a Franciscan priest talking to some students. I thought I recognized him. The next morning coming out of the house he was standing in the back yard of the school's fencing talking with some of my colleagues. Looking at him, I walked up, excused and introduced myself and said "Father, if I

remember correctly, the last time I saw you, you were saying Mass at the U.S. Air Force Headquarters on Morotai, Moluccas Islands during WWII". He replied "Yes, how do you know?" (NOTE: It happened that I, along with a special detachment from a U.S. Army Signal Company assigned to General McArthur's Chief Signal Officer at Hollandia, New Guinea had been detached to Section 22, U.S. Air Force, Morotai. The detachment was assigned to pick up Japanese code (and similar messages). We had a short but interesting conversation. Unfortunately, it was the one and only time I spoke with him -- no explanation. (NOTE: Several years later when visiting Washington I called to Franciscan Monastery about Father Patrick Coyle. I was advised that he had remained in Jerusalem studying ecclesial law, returned home for a short period, returned to Jerusalem and died). (NOTE: At this point and until I departed there were too many other "stories", "happenings" and "incidents" to add to this letter making it far too long!).

As my "services" were no longer required and a Truce was upcoming I prepared to return to Jeddah.

At this point, a "Robert Ripley" item of interest is worth noting: The central telephone system for all of Jerusalem was located in the "Old City" occupied by the Jordanian Army! The ACG was within the Jewish Section, on the border of "no man's land" and facing the "Old City". The ACG still had telephone contact and service with both sections.

The former senior ACG gardener who resided in the "Old City" was contacted and requested to arrange transportation for me out of the Jewish Section and into the "Old City" for me to proceed to Amman, Jordan. With the Truce in force, I was then driven through the Jewish "lines" to, I think, the "Mount of Olives" where the Truce Center was located at the "Red Cross Center". I had been met by the gardener and two mules -- apparently one was for me to ride and one for baggage. With Mr. Wasson's "fate" in mind, I decided to walk. Entering the "Old City" we went to the Jordanian Army headquarters where I was introduced to the area's military commanding Officer, Major Abdullah el Tel. He had, apparently, been advised by the Acting Consul General of my trip and was carrying a U.S. diplomatic pouch. (NOTE: Major el Tel spoke excellent English as a result like most Jordanian senior officers, had been trained in the British Military Academy. At this point it is pertinent to comment that, several years later I read in a newspaper that a "Col. Abdullah el Tel, Jordanian Army, had been assassinated during a visit to Cairo, Egypt" We had a pleasant conversation when he then arranged for a taxi to drive me to Amman. Baggage loaded, said "goodbye", got in the taxi and off we went! The road from Jerusalem was lined, off and on, with military troops, irregulars and trucks of "supplies" headed for the "Old City". Arriving at the U.S. Legation, Amman and reporting in, I was advised they had been alerted for my arrival. Unfortunately, due to current events, they had no room for me for the night but had made arrangements for "space" for me at a nearby local hotel. Also I was told plane reservations had been made for me the next morning to Cairo. Leaving my baggage and pouch at the Legation, I was driven to the "hotel" located above several stores. The "space" was NOT a room but a canvas army cot in the major hallway -- NO sheets, pillow nor blanket -- no bathroom nor "privacy"! Arab troops and irregulars heavily armed roamed up and down the hall all

night as I was “attempting” to get some sleep. Thank God time, finally, came for the Legation car to pick me up, pick up baggage and pouch and go to the airport. So far -- no lunch, dinner nor breakfast nor, more importantly, the use of a bath room! Checking in at the Lebanese Airline counter I, finally, had the use of a toilet. Loaded on a two engine “puddle jumper” (I think it carried 50 passengers) off we went! Met at the airport in Cairo, I was taken to the Legation, relieved of my pouch, made arrangements for my onward travel after a couple days annual leave and then driven to my favorite hotel in Cairo -- a Swiss operated “haven”! When my leave was over I flew by SAA back to Jeddah.

Usual “routines” again in force but, actually pleased to be back to “normal life”!

November 13, 1948: Legation advised by the Department I was temporarily assigned to the U.S. Delegation at the UNESCO Conference Beirut, Lebanon. Nov. 15 I flew to Beirut aboard SAA, reported to the Legation, received instructions, rented a room, proceeded to the delegation’s offices at the Conference for further instructions and then returned to the Legation where I was to work. An interesting assignment, nothing spectacular and strictly “routine”. One week of daytime work, spending “free” time with Lebanese friends, wonderful French food, a little swimming at the St. George Hotel beach -- although I did not stay there on this trip but at the Hotel Normandy and, after one week, returned by SAA to Jeddah.

My life again back to normal and as Christmas and New Year was looming everyone in the Christian community prepared to celebrate. So started our “holiday” social life -- small gifts to/from friends, get togethers, cocktail parties and dinners -- all the every day social routines for being in an ancient “outpost” of the U.S. Foreign Service. Plus, of course, the continuation of our “official” duties!

HAPPY NEW YEAR 1949!

After almost 19 months of Jeddah and assignments, my “Merry Christmas” and “Happy New Year’s” present arrived -- “direct” transfer orders to the American Consulate General, Bremen, Germany!

The timing turned out perfect for me! Contacting the local representative of the Dutch Rotterdam Lloyd Shipping, the Legation was informed a passenger vessel en route from Indonesia en route for Rotterdam was due to arrive in several days. Aboard were Indonesians coming for and to attend THE major annual Moslem “Holiday” and Hajj. Also aboard were Dutch nationals who were “voluntarily” leaving Indonesia as it was about to get its independence from Holland. A cabin was booked for me.

I was given a few “going away affairs” from friends and Minister Childs. The “M/S SLAMAT” of “RLSC” arrived on January 15, 1949 and started to offload its Indonesian passenger “Pilgrims”.

JANUARY 17, 1949

I said “goodbye” to some friends ashore and again to several who had come out on the Legation launch to “see me off”.

I have to admit the departure was with some regret! My assignment to Jeddah and this part of the world, at the time, was a true experience and without a doubt a most interesting “adventure”!

But now I was, I hoped, heading for a new “adventure”!

\*\*\*

My U.S. Foreign Service “adventures” from 1947-1972 included: STATE: Jeddah, Jerusalem, Beirut, Bremen, Athens, Bombay, Buenos Aires and Beirut. USOM/AID: Benghazi/Tripoli, Taiwan, Seoul, Bangkok, Saigon and Washington. After a total of 33 and 1/2 years Federal and World War II “service”, I retired at 55 years old!

I “loved” almost every minute of my foreign assignments! It was an exciting, educational and a wonderful “adventure”! Even now: at my age, I miss it!

Since retiring my wife and I tried to “settle down” in Florida (my home), North Carolina and Virginia -- just could not seem to make it “final”. Our three wonderful children (two girls & one boy) moved on and gave us four fantastic grandchildren and they gave us three beautiful great grandchildren. My wife died and is in a Columbarium in Arlington National Cemetery (where I will be in time). I have toured Canada and Alaska, three times to France (my wife’s former country), Belgium and Holland; and, have taken four cruises. Now, partially handicapped but still driving, I reside in an apartment by my eldest daughter. Driving is now relegated to local area “trips” and one week at the Jersey shore with the Family. Every few months I do drive to Arlington National Cemetery to “visit” with my wife and nearby younger daughter. I drove one time to visit with my son in Indiana.

One could say, finally, that I am at “home”!

*End of interview*