

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

EDWIN LEDBETTER

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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[Note: This interview was not completed prior to Mr. Ledbetter's death in 2016.]

Q: Today is 31 August 2012 with Edwin Ledbetter. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Ed and I started out my first post in the foreign service was Frankfurt where Ed was. That was back in 1955 Ed, let's start with when and where you born?

LEDBETTER: Conway, Arkansas, March 9, 1924.

Q: What do you know about how the Ledbetters get to Arkansas?

LEDBETTER: How they got there?

Q: Yeah, what were they, farmers? Did they migrate from elsewhere or what?

LEDBETTER: Well my grandfather Ledbetter came from Tennessee and prior to that I don't know.

Q: What was your father doing?

LEDBETTER: He was a politician and very active in the Arkansas National Guard. He was a captain in the Arkansas National Guard.

Q: Did he go to college or what?

LEDBETTER: No he didn't go to college.

Q: What about your mother? What was her background?

LEDBETTER: Well on my mother's side, my grandparents came over from Sweden and it was a large family and very loving. I have very fond memories of that family, and the other family too.

Q: Do you know what your mother's family was doing? Were they farmers or merchants or what?

LEDBETTER: My grandfather Mulander on my mother's side ran a lumber yard. He was foreman in a lumber yard in Marinette, Wisconsin.

Q: What was the town you grew up in?

LEDBETTER: Conway, Arkansas.

Q: What was Conway, Arkansas like?

LEDBETTER: Well in those days it had about six or seven thousand people. The important aspect of it was it was a college town. Hendricks College which is a fine liberal arts college and then a teacher's college and then a two year women's school. For a small town that made a good bit of their employment and impact. As a consequence by and large the populace was reasonably well educated by the standards of those times.

Q: Yeah, I can imagine so. What was it like being a kid in the town?

LEDBETTER: Well it was sort of a Huck Finn existence. A free wander around. There were hardly any restraints on us. Instead of the Mississippi River we had the Arkansas River and we would fool around down there. It was a lot of fun growing up.

Q: How big was your family?

LEDBETTER: Well there were four children and my parents.

Q: Where did you rank?

LEDBETTER: I was third.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

LEDBETTER: Yes indeed. I read a lot from the minute I was in first grade.

Q: I assume they had a good public library there?

LEDBETTER: Yes. I spent a lot of time there too.

Q: do you recall any of the early books you particularly liked?

LEDBETTER: I remember The English Language it was called. I can't remember the writer. It was more than a dictionary. It had the background and examples. I spent a lot of time reading that in the library. I didn't own it.; it would have been expensive.

Q: With your family, what religion did your family subscribe to?

LEDBETTER: Methodist.

Q: Was this an important part of your family life?

LEDBETTER: Yes it was, particularly my mother.

Q: How about politics?

LEDBETTER: We were all yellow dog Democrats.

Q: The term yellow dog meant that even if a dog ran for a post you would vote for the dog.

LEDBETTER: That was the humorous version. My dad was a state representative in the legislature. I was a page in the legislature.

Q: How did you find that?

LEDBETTER: Well my dad got me the job.

Q: Yeah but was it interesting?

LEDBETTER: Indeed it was. They had just lifted prohibition. It was a state decision. The corruption there, liquor stores and so on. I was just a kid but I was witness to this so I saw a lot of that.

Q: How did you find, you know one hears humorous stories about the Texas legislature. I was wondering what the Arkansas legislature was like?

LEDBETTER: Well one of the other legislators and my dad had some differences. He got mad and challenged my dad to a duel, which would have been a terrible mistake because my dad was a good shot. It never took place.

Q: What sort of mischief did you boys get up to when you were young?

LEDBETTER: Well I have very fond memories of what we did. When we were eight or ten years old my two brothers and I and my cousin would go out to this little farm about a mile out of town, a ramshackle little barn and we would have a corn cob fight, throwing corn cobs and cow patties at each other. It was a lot of fun.

Q: Were there in Conway was there a significant black population?

LEDBETTER: There were some but not very many in Conway. We had one black lady who worked for us. She and my mother were close friends. There was no real problem in those days.

Q: What about grammar school. What particular subjects did you like or didn't like?

LEDBETTER: I liked them all really. I was most impacted by our eighth grade teacher who insisted that you learn the parts of speech and how to diagram. After the Second World War I moved out to California. There you would hear young people making fun of Arkies and so on. Well at UC Berkeley you had to take a test when you came in there. If your grammar and reading skills were not up to snuff you took a bonehead course. Well I passed it and they didn't. So I had a very good Nyaah-nyahh there. Leah Rose Hicks was that teacher who taught me.

Q: Oh yes. Well I remember breaking down sentences. There was way of marking sentences, what modified what and so on. Well how about math?

LEDBETTER: I did very well in math.

Q: What sort of school did you go to, grammar school?

LEDBETTER: The local public school.

Q: How many in a class about?

LEDBETTER: Oh the maximum was 20.

Q: I assume most of your teachers certainly at the elementary level were women weren't they?

LEDBETTER: Yes. One or two men. Also the coach.

Q: About this time in school and in regular life the depression must have hit you pretty hard didn't it?

LEDBETTER: Indeed it did. Even though I was just a boy I was very much aware of that. For one example, my aunt was working for the RRA, the Rural Relief Association. She was a social worker. Her job was to go out and interview these people who literally didn't have enough to eat. I would accompany her and my cousin occasionally just in case we got stuck in the mud. That was all I did but I would witness this. She would interview them to see they got all they needed. She would also carry along a big sack of beans and two or six sides of pork because they were hungry and they needed something right then. I saw the depression firsthand, although it did not seriously affect me and my family.

Q: Of course you mentioned when you were in California they talked about Arkies. I lived in California and am four years younger than you. I remember people used to talk about the Okies and the Arkies because these were people who were caught in the dust bowl and migrated. This is the Grapes of Wrath generation.

Was your town hit by the dust bowl? Were you sort of watching the soil blow away there?

LEDBETTER: Not in Conway. My mother was a nurse and came down with Tuberculosis. Fortunately she was cured but we were driving her from Conway out to Fitzsimons General Hospital near Denver. On the drive out there I remember somewhere in Texas the dust was so thick they had stoppers stuffed in the doors and every place else. Nevertheless it was still in there, and it was in the bathtubs and everything. So I saw it firsthand but not for a long period of time.

Q: That was a real tragedy. Well then you went to high school in Conway too?

LEDBETTER: In Conway, yes.

Q: What was high school like? Was it a fairly big high school or small, or what?

LEDBETTER: This was a town of five or six thousand. It was a small high school. We had very good teachers. Since it was a college town naturally we got teachers from there, and compared with the rest of Arkansas the schools were excellent.

Q: Yes I would imagine so because Arkansas had the reputation as a state of being pretty much like Mississippi, very little money and very little attention paid to education.

LEDBETTER: Yeah, but the town of Conway was an exception with the colleges and so on.

Q Did you find yourself interested in subjects other than English that the teachers sort of opened up a different world for you?

LEDBETTER: I had a hobby of building model airplanes.

Q: Out of balsa wood?

LEDBETTER: Yeah. I had one of the first ones in Conway that actually flew. It was gasoline powered. I got a kick out of that. Of course eventually that helped in getting interested in the Air Force.

Q: I used to build those models. They were always warped. They never quite fit. Well what were you I mean it was very active times obviously in Europe. Were you following world events there?

LEDBETTER: Yes indeed. Not only in newspapers but the local movie house. March of Time would show Hitler's coming in and the depression years. So I got that visually as well as reading.

Q: Were you sort of a child of the movies?

LEDBETTER: Yes. Every Saturday my parents would give me a dime or so and I would go right to the movies.

Q: Oh yes, and of course a lot of the movie shows were double features. I think I saw almost every movie that came out. While you were there, what year did you graduate from high school?

LEDBETTER: The year of Pearl Harbor.

Q: That was 1941. You would have been eligible for the draft weren't you?

LEDBETTER: I was already in the National Guard. They were federalized, so I came in with the uniform of the National Guard. I had told them I was two years older than I was.

Q: So what was your division.

LEDBETTER: Well 153rd Infantry. They are part of the 30th division.

Q: So you went in in 1941. What did you do?

LEDBETTER: Well I was an infantryman and we went on maneuvers over in Tennessee. It was raining and terrible. I decided I didn't want to sleep in the mud anymore so I took a regular army enlistment to get out of the guard and got into the Army Air Corps.

Q: So where did you start your training in the air corps?

LEDBETTER: Well first I was at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. They were just checking out what your interest is and what your capabilities were. I got to Lowery Field in Colorado near Denver where I became an armorer, dealing with the guns. Then I was transferred down to Luke Field and then to _____. It was winter and all we did was these AT-6s would fly down from Luke Field and we would reload the guns and occasionally fix things that had gone wrong with the guns. They wouldn't get down there until about 8:30, so we could sleep late. It was winter and while the rest of the war was going on we had a paid vacation in the winter. I really enjoyed that.

Q: Were you training to be a gunner?

LEDBETTER: Well I always loved making model airplanes and flying them. At first I couldn't because you had to have two years of college, and I didn't have it. Then they lowered the requirements. You had to pass a test in math and navigation and physical fitness. So I took that and passed it and got out to Santa Ana California in the old Army Air Corps. There we had exercises in the cold and so on. Then if you passed those, and I didn't have any problem, you went on to flying school. I first went to Rankin Field up in Tulare, California.

Q: What kind of planes did you fly?

LEDBETTER: The old Stearman biplane.

Q: Are these the yellow perils?

LEDBETTER: We didn't call it that, but the danger was ground looping. Fortunately I never did. We were going to learn, among other things, formation flying. I loved that. No problem. From there we went to Roslyn for advanced flying in our continental planes. There I had another episode. On takeoff we were supposed to go straight down the runway. I got off this way and fortunately I just took off in the wrong direction. I thought I was going to be washed out, but I got back and the instructor was lecturing other people. He said, "Well cadet Ledbetter made a mistake on takeoff by turning the wrong way, but he saved it by not turning it back so we will let him slide." So I didn't get washed out there. Earlier on I would have been washed out. But by this time they were desperate for air crews so they overlooked these things.

Q: You are using the term washed out. For somebody who may not be familiar with the language it means essentially flunked. It was used strictly for pilots.

LEDBETTER: That is right.

Q: What kind of planes did you move up to?

LEDBETTER: After I graduated from flying school, the B-17.

Q: The flying fortress. Where did you take your flying fortress training?

LEDBETTER: Well first down at Coyote, Texas. I was copilot there. After two or three weeks we took our planes and flew up to Dalgard where eventually I became a first pilot, just switched over and also became an instructor. This was sort of the blind leading the blind. I was in Dalgard for ten months. That was the longest period I was in any one place during the war.

Q: Let's see you were in the States from when to when?

LEDBETTER: Well let's see. I was totally in the service for 4 ½ years.

Q: You went overseas in 1944.

LEDBETTER: Yes,

Q: Did you go over to England? Eighth Air Force?

LEDBETTER: Yeah.

Q: By this time you were first pilot?

LEDBETTER: Yeah.

Q: What sort of missions did you find yourself on?

LEDBETTER: Well the policy was when new crews came in you separated and went each with a different crew, and older crew. Then after three or four of those missions you came back as one crew. This is what we did, my crew came out.

Q: What field did you fly from?

LEDBETTER: Grafton Underwood near Kettering. That was the only field I flew from.

Q: What were your early missions?

LEDBETTER: Well the first one was we were scheduled to go into Germany, but something happened and we came back and dropped our bombs on Frankfurt. That was the first and last time I saw any fighters. We saw a couple of ME-109s flew through the formation. After that it was only flak. That was the only time I saw any fighters.

Q: It was some time before we got the P-51 which was able to fly to Berlin and back.

LEDBETTER: That is right.

Q: How many missions did you fly?

LEDBETTER: Three and a half. I was shot down on the fourth one.

Q: Where was that?

LEDBETTER: Coming back from over _____ near Augsburg.

Q: That was fairly far in wasn't it?

LEDBETTER: Yeah. We never made it. We got crippled about 20 minutes out and started back and had to get down on the deck and were shot down in France.

Q: What happened?

LEDBETTER: Well I still remember we were right down on the deck, tree top level or lower. At that level it was beautiful and you could see everything and see the Frenchmen braving and so on. All of a sudden we ran into a battery of 20mm and we were taking rounds long before we saw them. I just pulled back on the wheel as we had been taught to do. I remember seeing a line of trees and that was it. I was blind. I couldn't see the co-pilot hit the release and I dropped down. At altitude we picked up flak in the left engine. I had been trained to turn this way. I waited for the oil pressure to go down. It didn't go down. It just flipped over and it was too late. I was getting windmill. Meantime just when

I needed all the power I could get at 23,000 feet the superchargers didn't work over here. So it was just as if we were flying backwards. Of course I had to point right down and salvo my bombs. Anything from 18,000 feet up the heavy flak would get you. So I had to get right down on the deck. Fortunately for me it was clear as a bell. So the best way when you are in flak was to get down on the deck. That is what we did. The navigator. He is still in my crew. He is still alive. He gave us a heading for back to England. We didn't make it. We ran into this 20mm battery.

Q: So what happened. Were you, how badly were you and your crew hurt?

LEDBETTER: Two were killed. The rest, three of us were still in a German hospital in Rheims, France when elements of Patton's third Army came through and liberated us. The others went to Augsburg, Germany prison camps. That was a terrible winter and they had a really tough time. I wasn't as seriously wounded as some of the others. My one shoulder is still stiff and that is about it. So I came away and was liberated toward the end. About the same time Paris was liberated and I came back to the States by December, '44. So I had I won't say a good war but I had it so much easier than so many people.

Q: So what happened to you when you went back to the States.

LEDBETTER: Well I first went to a hospital outside of London. I could go out and see Hennisty Farm but that is all right. The V-1s were gone but the V-2s were still coming in. You couldn't hear them. I would wander around outside of London. People weren't supposed to talk about where they landed so the Germans wouldn't be able to calculate better. But everybody talked about it. I had some fresh eggs. That was the first time in a long time that we had some of those. From there we were on a hospital plane back to the States and that was the end of my war. I was in Miami Beach. That had been the training place for the non-flying personnel in the air force. By this time most of those were gone. So I was down right on the beach with my own private room and nothing to do except sign in once a day. Then I got leave and went back to Conway. In the meantime the war in Europe had come to an end. I remember a parade in Conway and I was in with several other vets and we were enjoying that. But the war in Japan had not finished. Fortunately by this time this shoulder was very stiff and I had been retired with a physical disability so I didn't get to go to that.

Q: What was your experience in a German hospital?

LEDBETTER: Well, I will say this. They gave us the same treatment they gave their own wounded. You can't ask for more. The German doctor, Sinatz they called him. He spoke reasonably good English. I remember when he heard my name Ledbetter, he said, "Well if you had been Led Better you wouldn't have come back here." Then once he said, "I kill Jews and all of a sudden you could see he was ashamed of saying that. He said, 'No, I am a doctor. I don't kill anyone. I try to take care of them'" He did really because I could have been repatriated, sent up to Germany and got on the _____ to go back to the United States. But he kept saying the nerve had been injured here and I can make a fist but I couldn't do that.

Q: You couldn't move your arm.

LEDBETTER: Yeah and he would give me electric treatments and I knew he was just doing that because he didn't want me to go through all that business of going up to Germany. So as a consequence I got away much sooner than certainly other members of the crew who had gone through that terrible winter. Then Patton's Third Army came through I was in the hospital in this room. While I couldn't move this arm I was ambulatory. I actually gained a little weight while I was a prisoner of war. We had our Red Cross parcels with cigarettes and candy and corned beef hash, and the Germans put out split pea soup. The real meal of the day was the corned beef hash and split pea soup and the chocolates. The cigarettes I didn't smoke but I could trade them. Certainly compared to most prisoners of war, undoubtedly those in Japan, I had a good period of being a POW.

Q: You came back and you were retired from the army. What did you do then?

LEDBETTER: Well since I had been in flying school in California I wanted to go back there. My cousin, Betty Millender Mixey, was living in San Francisco. Her husband was in the Navy and she was working there. So I moved to Berkley not too far from her and could get a good meal from time to time and learn how the relatives were doing. So that got me to Berkley.

Q: So when you say Berkley you mean the college.

LEDBETTER: The University of California at Berkley.

Q: You had the GI bill of course.

LEDBETTER: Yeah. The fraternities were mostly guys in the war so the University had taken over the payments on their mortgage. But there weren't many of us back yet from the war. So this beautiful home a block or so from the campus I had a big room all to myself. So that was great.

Q: Was this a fraternity?

LEDBETTER: No, I didn't join a fraternity.

Q: This was a dorm.

LEDBETTER: Yeah.

Q: What made you want to go to Berkley, I mean were there particular courses or interest in something there?

LEDBETTER: I took courses in economics and history and languages and eventually went on to law school. While at Berkley I passed this big classroom and heard all this laughter. I would go in and there would be a professor teaching Shakespeare. He was great. He would play the parts. He would be Romeo and then in a squeaky voice, Juliet. He had them in laughter. I didn't take the courses but later on that really meant a lot to me because I really followed through particularly on Shakespeare and other literature. But I went on law school. I loved the first year of law school. You learn the new languages and that sort of thing. But the second and third year I went downhill. By the time I graduated I just couldn't wait to get out of there. I was in the lower third of my class at Harvard Law School and went off to Los Angeles. During the war there was a shortage of lawyers, so I got a job with one of the best law firms, Inbride, Duke and Adams Dukie and Hale, one of the most prestigious law firms in Los Angeles. As I said, I didn't care much for law school but I did like to write briefs. I liked the writing. So I would write briefs in the library. They did a lot of trial work. They were so intense and they didn't dare lose. This law firm was the largest west coast representative of Prudential Insurance. Henry Dukie, the head of the firm, had a reputation of having never lost a case. When he knew it was touchy he would just settle out of court since he had all the money. So that is how he got all of that. Nevertheless they were very tense when they would go in. I never wanted to be a trial lawyer. I wrote the briefs and fortunately wrote one or two good ones and got a nice bonus at Christmas. But that was the end of law for me. I got into the foreign service.

Q: Ok how did you run across knowledge of the foreign service?

LEDBETTER: Well I had been interested in languages. I suppose when I was in law school I must have heard about the foreign service. I remember going down to Washington and taking the FSO exam. The first time I flunked it. But you can take it more than once. The second time I boned up on various things I was weak on and I passed it.

Q: This is the old 3 1/2 day exam.

LEDBETTER: Yeah that is right. I passed it. One of the things they were looking for is if you told the truth. Fortunately I did admit areas that I didn't know what was going on, but then on the other hand each one of the examiners sensed that I had strong areas, economics and so on, and he would question me there. So that is how I passed the oral.

Q: How did you find the oral exam?

LEDBETTER: Actually I kind of enjoyed it. I knew better than to lie. If it was something I knew something about, I couldn't stop talking.

Q: Where did you take the oral exam?

LEDBETTER: In Washington.

Q: did you have any feel for what you wanted to do in the foreign service?

LEDBETTER: Not particularly. I just wanted to get overseas and get foreign languages and so on.

Q: Get away from law.

LEDBETTER: Yes. That is right.

Q: Well I am just looking at the time. This might be a good place to stop for this time. We will pick this up, we are doing this in person but the next time we will be calling you by phone in New Mexico. I forgot to ask. When you came back or before were you married?

LEDBETTER: No, I didn't get married until after the war, after I graduated from Berkley.

Q: A little more about the law business. Did you find yourself, I mean were your clients mostly businesses as opposed to individuals.

LEDBETTER: Corporations.

Q: It is kind of hard to identify with them isn't it.

LEDBETTER: I did a little divorce work for the top clients, but often if they were being serious they would hide the materials and I never saw it. While I was at law school at Harvard I got a summer job over in Boston in the library. While I was there Elliot Richardson was running the thing. He was very helpful to me. Since he had been a volunteer or something in WWII on the beaches and had really seen part of D-Day. When he learned that I was in the Air Corps he was good to me and took me out to dinner. I could go on with some others. I got to know him then. He was a fine man and went on to be Attorney General of the United States.

Q: OH yes, he was ambassador to UK at one point.

Ok, Ed I will pick this up next time we will start with your experiences coming in to the foreign services and your first posting and all of that.

LEDBETTER: OK.

List of Posts Served

Visa-Commercial Officer; Frankfurt, Germany	1954-195
Consular officer; Guayaquil, Ecuador	1956-1957

Greek Language Training; FSI	1958
Economic Officer; Athens, Greece	1959-1961
Consular Officer; Nicosia, Cyprus	1961-1963
Political Officer Tegucigalpa, Honduras	1964-1965
USAID Provincial Representative; Soc Trang, Vietnam	1965-1967
Operations Center; State Department, Washington, DC	1967
Detail to office of Economic Opportunity; Pentagon, San Francisco	1967-1970
Detail to International Boundary Water Commission; El Paso, Texas	1971-1972
Special Assistant; Panama City, Panama	1973-1975
State Department	retired in 1976

End of interview