

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

HARLAN LEE

*Interviewed by: Jay Anania
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Jay Anania. It is the tenth of November and I'm speaking with Harlan Lee, who's about to start his oral history.

Harlan, why don't you introduce yourself?

LEE: Thank you very much, Jay. My name is Harlan Lee. I'm part of this project because of my career in the Foreign Service and as well as with the State Department Federal Credit Union.

I grew up in Hawaii and went to school in Palo Alto, Northern California. That's Stanford. And I happened to be interning at my congressman's office in Washington, DC in the summer between my junior and senior years at Stanford and one thing—

Q: What years would those have been, Harlan?

LEE: That was 1966, I believe the summer of 1966. And this piece of mail came across my desk while I was in the congressman's office and it was the State Department Foreign Service exam, the application for the written exam. I'd never thought about that before and it looked really interesting, so I said, "Why not?" So, I went ahead, took the written, got a good enough score to be invited to take the oral, and then passed the oral in San Francisco and went on to do all of the other examinations, security, background check, physical, et cetera.

I was invited to join the Foreign Service in September of 1968. Went through the A-100 course at that time. And this, please recall, this was in the middle of the Vietnam War, so the thinking in my Foreign Service class, and I think there were forty of us at the time, was that the guys who drew the short straws would be assigned to Vietnam. Well, when the last day came for the A-100 course and the assignments were made, I was given a totally off the wall assignment, that is, to be vice consul in northeast Thailand in a post called Udorn. And this was, again, in the middle of the Vietnam War, so I knew that I was going to be in Southeast Asia; I knew that I was going to be close to Vietnam. But when the assignment was made I had really no idea what it was all about. It happened to be

then a special purpose post set up in northeast Thailand to deal with the communist insurgency that was going on at the time and to help support the four U.S. Air Force bases and one U.S. Army base that was in the northeast.

At the time, and I think it's still true now, there was no status of forces agreement between the U.S. and Thailand, so that every incident that arose had to be dealt with in person on a face-to-face basis and to be negotiated. So, we were there to help the U.S. military figure out how to deal with any incidents that came up between U.S. servicemen and the local authorities. So, the job at the time was to travel through the fifteen provinces to work with the American military installations and to talk to the local civilian and police and military Thai officials in order to report on the communist insurgency. Very much an untypical, unusual assignment for a first tour officer. I replaced a guy who became a friend, his name was Vic Tomseth, and interestingly enough, toward the end of my Foreign Service career, when I was in protocol, I was the one who swore in Vic Tomseth to be ambassador to Laos. So, things really come around in the Foreign Service. It's a small community and we, I guess, get to know each other pretty well.

So, that was my introduction to the Foreign Service. It was very unusual. I had six months of Thai language training to start with and that was enough to get me on a functional basis to work without interpreters in Thailand. I traveled with a consulate driver and really had to fend for myself regarding Thai language ability. It was an interesting two years. I had military travel orders to travel on any aircraft that was available in northeast Thailand, so we—myself, and my boss, the consul, and then the number two consulate officer—just kept moving. We split the district into three compacted areas and we each took one area to deal with, so we became very familiar with the people who were in our respective districts.

I got to meet lots of interesting personalities. The new U.S. Army commander for the base in Korat, northeast Thailand, was a—just received his first star, was a fellow named John Vessey. And interestingly enough, after he became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he made a tour back to Thailand and I got to see him when I was head of the consulate in northern Thailand. But also—

Q: That would be Chiang Mai?

LEE: In Chiang Mai, that's right. Also, Jack Vessey's son joined the Foreign Service and later took on the same position in Udorn that I had.

Q: (laughs)

LEE: There's all of these interesting coincidences taking place.

Q: So, stepping back, Thai is not necessarily an easy language to master. Six months is not a long time to study it. Had you studied other languages before, or did you just have a strong affinity for language learning?

LEE: Well, I was never a very good language student. I took high school and college French. I took Mandarin Chinese in college, never really got to a high proficiency level. But because I had to use Thai in my job and just to survive there, I got it up to a 3+/3+, which was, you know, perfectly good enough for professional contacts.

Q: And how did the Thai people and the Thai officials you dealt with react to you as an American coming in there?

LEE: Good question. Because I look very much Thai to them and speaking Thai, well enough to get by. We had to drive into military bases all the time. If I was driving the vehicle, they'd never check my ID [identity card]. If I was sitting in the back seat, they would always check my ID. But I think in some ways it helped; in some ways it really confused the Thai officials, that there's this very Thai looking fellow who's representing the United States. I didn't know any different. I just tried to get my job done.

But there was a fair amount of danger in northeast Thailand. We drove very fast on laterite roads and I asked one of our drivers once, "Why are we driving so fast?" And he said, "Well, if the bomb explodes, we want it to explode behind us."

Q: That's a very astute comment he made. And you anticipated a question I was going to have, because given the fact that there was a communist insurgency and Southeast Asia at that time was so turbulent, did you feel that your life was in danger there? I don't believe the State Department offered much in the way of security support back then.

LEE: Well, I didn't know enough to be terribly afraid, but I knew, certainly, all of the American officials in the region took a lot of precautions.

Q: And you said that you typically traveled with a driver and I guess you had a consulate car?

LEE: Yeah. We had two Land Rovers, British Land Rovers at the time, and those were pretty hard on my back. I still have back problems because of that. And while there was a very good system of laterite roads there were very few hard paved roads in the area. So, travel was usually on the ground in Land Rovers. There used to be C-130 and other aircraft flying between each of the military bases so whenever I could I would just hop on one of those to get to the next base and then back home again.

Q: So, there was a U.S. Air Force base in Udorn?

LEE: Yes, there was. And every once in a while, there'd be a loud explosion when the hung ordnance would come back with the aircraft and explode near the runway.

Q: Yeah, so they were—were they—was the U.S. Air Force operating bombing missions from Udorn?

LEE: Both the U.S. Air Force and Air America. Air America running operations in Laos at the time and the U.S. Air Force flying into Vietnam at the time.

Q: So, do you have any particularly memorable consular cases where you were assisting air force personnel? A lot of consular officers have, quote, unquote, “war stories” from visiting jails or what have you.

LEE: Absolutely. Well, it had a lot to do with the military, of course, and there were so many American servicemen who were away from home for the first time who happened to fall in love with a lot of young ladies from Thailand. And so, the American base managers would constantly be asking our help to try to resolve any issues between their guys and the young ladies who mainly happened to work in the bars.

Q: And in that case, when U.S. service members married local Thais, were you required to intervene in any way? I assume that they would be requesting perhaps either fiancée visas or perhaps petitioning for immigrant visas.

LEE: Right. Well, first we did the marriage certificates. And this, of course, was in conjunction with the American base commanders. If they gave their approval, then certainly we'd support—give them support.

We had a very big AID [United States Agency for International Development] program in Thailand at the time to build roads and provide community development assistance. We had a very big USIS [United States Information Services] presence in northeast Thailand. There were, I think, seven or eight branch public affairs officers scattered around the northeast. There were just the three of us in the consulate at the time, so we were—we spent a lot of time simply just communicating and coordinating, as well as with the embassy in Bangkok.

Q: And did you have embassy officials from Bangkok visiting you?

LEE: Constantly. Primarily to talk about the insurgency. There was a counselor at the embassy for counterinsurgency in Bangkok. This is not very usual in most embassies either. And so, there would be quarterly counterinsurgency meetings in the northeast and the regular meetings that we had to go to in Bangkok as well.

Q: You mentioned that the security situation was not the best. Can you remember any particular security incidents? Was the consulate ever attacked or were any of the consular personnel injured?

LEE: Yeah. Fortunately, there was no direct attack on the consulate premises, which was in downtown Udorn. But there were several attacks on the military base at the time. Sapper teams came in at night and tried to get across the perimeter fencing, so we worked

very closely with the Thai local police and the base security to try to figure out how best to develop good intelligence on the bad guys.

Q: And the people who were conducting these attacks, would these have been Thai insurgents?

LEE: Yeah, mainly Thai insurgents who were trained by the Chinese. China at the time was very much a sponsor of the insurgency in Thailand, and so a lot of Thai insurgents would go to China to be trained and then brought back to be reinfilitrated, I guess.

Q: Uh-huh. And what was the consular premises? Was it a building we owned, or did we lease it?

LEE: It was a leased building. Very few American-style buildings in the northeast. It was really a home that was converted into an office and it was a little bit on the perimeter of the city, and we were comfortable enough there. Again, just three FSOs [Foreign Service officers] and local staff.

Q: And did USAID have a presence there as well or did they come from other places?

LEE: At the time the AID program in Thailand was called U-S-O-M, USOM, U.S. Operations Mission, but it was definitely strictly AID officers. And there was, as I said, constant coordination and interaction with them because they would be working with local Thai officials to help sponsor the road building programs.

Q: Did they have a separate premise there in the same city?

LEE: Right. Separate office for USIS. And the other fellows that we worked with had offices on the base itself.

Q: I see. And where did you live yourself?

LEE: In a private home about maybe a quarter mile from the office. We had access to the base commissary, the PX [Post Exchange]. It was not hard living; it was just frequent travel. And because I didn't know any difference, I thought this was the Foreign Service.

Q: (laughs)

LEE: I guess I found out later that it was a very unique assignment.

Q: Indeed. Of course, I imagine a large percentage of your class would have gone to Saigon or other places in—

LEE: I think we had four or five junior FSOs heading to Vietnam at the time. Everybody else got a very traditional assignment in an embassy or consulate elsewhere around the world.

Q: And the other two FSOs there, who was your—was it a consulate or a consulate general?

LEE: No, it was a consulate.

Q: Consulate. So, who was the consul, do you remember?

LEE: My first boss there was a fellow named Al Francis and number two was Lee Bigelow, who I'd gone through Thai language training with, so we knew each other very well.

Q: That's nice.

LEE: When Al Francis departed Tom Barnes came in, and so he was the principal officer for the second year that I was there.

Q: And did they try to inculcate in you some sort of Foreign Service ethos and perhaps give you a little bit more in the way of background about what a, quote, unquote "normal" assignment might have been like?

LEE: They tried. I may be the only one in the Foreign Service who's really read the *Foreign Affairs Manual* (FAM) from cover to cover because I thought that that would be a good way to try to figure out this organization that I'd just joined.

Q: Well, I think there were other people who did things like that, so I don't think you're that much of an outlier; back when you could read the Foreign Service manual in a paper copy. I don't know if you—maybe that would have been one of your duties, too, to receive the transmittal letters with the FAM updates and put them into the books.

LEE: Well, when I got there we had a Foreign Service staff officer who was the administrative officer, but that position was cut. And so, I, being the junior man there, I became the admin officer as well.

Q: Well, that's a good experience. In fact, that was very similar to my own experience. My first tour I was a consular officer, and our admin officer was asked to depart early, and I had my baptism to administrative work for a few months at the end of my assignment. And that happened a week before the inspectors arrived. (laughs)

LEE: Yeah. It seemed that with every post that I had we were on the verge of an inspection or went through an inspection, which was fine because I think that's how you learn things.

Q: Yeah, it's true. The inspectors can be—can play a positive role in highlighting areas where you perhaps need to do a little bit more, maybe educating especially the more junior personnel.

LEE: Well, what happened after the two years in Udorn was that I'd made a fair number of friends and contacts in Bangkok, and so the political counselor at the time recruited me to move to Bangkok for the next two years as an officer in the internal political section. A wonderful man named Larry Pickering. And I learned a lot from Larry. Also, Leonard Unger was ambassador. My first DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] was George Newman followed by Ed Masters, and they were all very good to me. I respected them a lot.

Q: So that must have been a very large and diverse embassy at the time. We had, of course, still the Vietnam War going on. We had military bases in Thailand. You mentioned we had a very large USAID mission working all throughout the country, public affairs, many other things. To what degree did you interact with other elements of the mission as a political officer?

LEE: Well, one portfolio that I inherited was the narcotics portfolio. Opium and heroin were becoming a major issue in the U.S. at the time and before the narcotics section was set up in the embassy, I was the one who was mainly following those issues and put together a relatively new portfolio at the time. So, I interacted a lot with our consulate in Chiang Mai. I interacted a lot with Thai police officers who were also focused on narcotics suppression. And again, what comes around. The Thai captains and majors that I worked with at the time in Bangkok, when I came back later to be principal officer in Chiang Mai, they were the heads of the Thai narcotics bureau and as major generals and lieutenant generals in the Thai police, and so I had readymade contacts from about ten years before, which helped tremendously when I was back in Chiang Mai.

Q: And that was 1982 you arrived back there?

LEE: Correct, '82 to '85.

Q: And so, your period in Bangkok was 1971 to 1973.

LEE: Correct.

Q: And what did you do in your leisure time back then? Did you have any special interests that took up your time?

LEE: Yeah. Getting back to my assignment in Bangkok, shortly after I arrived the Thai government pulled a coup on itself. They abrogated the constitution, declared martial law. It was the same generals at the top of the heap, but they didn't want to deal with the members of parliament anymore, so they pulled a coup. And so my first six months there I spent reporting on coup developments, which is great fun for any political officers.

Another incident which took place at the time, maybe two or three months into my assignment in Bangkok, these two fellows showed up at my office door and identified themselves as U.S. Air Force OSI, Office of Special Investigations. And I didn't know what was going on. I thought I had done something wrong. But they said, No, it's because they were investigating an espionage case and they had arrested a U.S. Air Force master sergeant who was working in the communications office at the U.S. JUSMAG, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group office in Bangkok, and he was about to pass over some documents to his Soviet counterpart at the time when they arrested him. And they had three documents—he had three documents in his possession written by three of us at the embassy. One was written by George Newman, the DCM; another by Bill Eaton, another political officer; and the third was a memorandum of conversation that I had written when I was in Udorn, and it was marked confidential. So, the three of us were invited to go to the trial of Master Sergeant Raymond de Champlain and the nearest American facility—American location was in Guam. So, the three of us flew to Guam, were put up at Andersen Air Force Base, and individually testified in the trial. I was asked whether I had authority to issue a classified document, which I did. I was asked why was it classified, which I explained, and that's all they needed to know. So, Sergeant de Champlain was convicted of espionage. I heard later that his sentence was reduced because there was a flaw on the procedural side by the air force. But you know, here again, I was in my third year in the Foreign Service and I get to testify at this gentleman's trial. I mean, is this usual? I don't think so.

Q: And how were you flown to Guam? Did you fly on military aircraft from Bangkok?

LEE: We flew commercial.

Q: Commercial airline.

LEE: But once we got to Guam, we stayed on the base in the BOQ [Bachelor Officers' Quarters]. I remember the only thing that they had on the TV at the time was the "Dirty Dozen," and the TV reception was terrible. But that's all we— We were not allowed, we were not encouraged to leave our quarters. They wanted to make sure that we didn't disappear on them.

Q: Uh-huh. Well, there's also a lot of snakes in Guam. Maybe they were afraid you might get—

LEE: I don't know, but it's an interesting way to visit Guam.

Q: So, you watched the "Dirty Dozen" on probably Armed Forces Network?

LEE: That's it.

Q: Of course, back then there was only one channel.

LEE: These things get etched in your memories.

Q: Yes. (laughs)

LEE: And again, you know, I retired from the Foreign Service in 1995, so all of that was more than twenty-five years ago. And some things are still stuck in there.

Q: Yeah, it's interesting what you remember. It was a very different world back then. I think anyone reading this who's thirty or younger would probably be amazed at some of the experiences that you might have had. And often the independence that diplomats had to go out and do things then that probably wouldn't necessarily be permitted these days.

So, what about back in Bangkok when you were working on internal political issues, who were some of your Thai contacts? Who were the people that you were reaching out to about the coup and its aftermath?

LEE: Well, because I was working the narcotics portfolio my main focus was with the Thai police. And each of us had some good contacts within the—within parliament. One of the people I nominated for international visitor—for the International Visitors Program [IV] was a young member of parliament from southern Thailand named Chuan Leekpai. And he had just joined, he was very young, but he looked like a real winner. And over the years he continued to grow in stature so that when I was assigned to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand as principal officer, we needed help to keep the American school there open and who was the minister of education? Chuan Leekpai. So, we went to call on him in Bangkok and it was like renewing the acquaintance. Years later, when I was in protocol and we were working the first APEC [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation] summit in Seattle, Washington under President Clinton, I was one of the protocol officers assigned to stick with the delegation, and of course, they gave me Thailand. And went out to the airport and who stepped off the plane as prime minister of Thailand? Chuan Leekpai. So, I escorted him to the hotel that night and as I was leaving his suite, he turned to me and said, “Mr. Lee, do you remember me?” And I thought that was a funny question. I said, “Prime Minister, of course I remember you.” He said, “Well, I sure remember you.” (Anania laughs) And this was an acquaintance that had built over twenty years and started with the IV program. And I’ve always been a, you know, real advocate of the IV program and there it was, something—

Q: Out of the International Visitors Program, right?

LEE: That’s right. In addition to that, one of the groups that I follow very closely are the university professors and the university students. Again, ironically, shortly after I finished that assignment in 19—I can’t even remember the year—

Q: Nineteen seventy-three.

LEE: Nineteen seventy-three, there was another coup in Thailand led by the university professors and university students. And I was no longer there, but a lot of the people that I had very good contacts with were part of the coup group.

Q: And was that a successful coup in terms of taking over the government?

LEE: It was put down very violently and a lot of people lost their lives. But they understood what risks they took.

So, moving on, okay, after Bangkok? I mean, already the State Department had gotten its money's worth from six months of Thai language training—

Q: Indeed.

LEE: —over a four-year period. After that—I had a couple of unusual assignments after that. The first was just a year at the San Francisco Reception Center, which was part of the educational and cultural affairs bureau at the time, as a program officer for the International Visitors Program.

Q: Now, this was—[Bureau of] Educational and Cultural Affairs [ECA] was part of the State Department then?

LEE: That's correct. And they had, I think, five reception centers across the U.S.: New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Honolulu, and Chicago, I think. And our job was to put together the programs for the IV grantees.

Q: And how did you happen to get that assignment?

LEE: I needed something that would take me back to the San Francisco area, and so rather than going to Washington, back to main State, they made it possible for me to be in San Francisco for a year.

Q: Did you have personal reasons to go there?

LEE: Yeah, yeah, that was it. And that was followed by a year of university training to become a Pacific Islands specialist. And it took me back to Hawaii because the University of Hawaii had the best program for that in the United States.

Q: And what had you studied when you were at Stanford for your college degree?

LEE: I did mainly history and political science, mainly Asian history. And one of my professors, the person who really helped inspire me to join the Foreign Service, was a professor of Asian history named Claude Buss, and he was the child of missionaries in China and at one point did work for the State Department there. So, I kept going back to him, I kept taking his classes. And again, what comes around many years later when I

was principal officer in Chiang Mai, he visited Chiang Mai as part of an ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] study group. And so, I hosted a reception in honor of the visiting group, and I had a chance to get together again with him. Again, twenty years later.

Q: Well, so much of the Foreign Service and diplomacy in general is about those personal relationships.

LEE: I think that's one thing that I learned early on and one thing that helped me a lot in my future assignments. My ambassador when I was in Chiang Mai was John Gunther Dean and one of our first meetings, one of our first conversations was him saying to me, you know, "No matter what you do, build relationships." He said, "You don't know what issues you're going to have to deal with tomorrow. It may be totally different. But if you're building relationships you always have someone to talk to. You always have someone to go to when you need help." And that was just so true. And later on, in life, after I'd left the Foreign Service and went into the private sector—same thing applies there, building relationships. And if there's one thing I advise junior officers to do is to focus on that. It's wonderful advice for life.

Q: Uh-huh. So when you were in San Francisco, where were the offices located for the department?

LEE: There was a set of offices in the federal office building in downtown San Francisco right near City Hall. And the head of the office at the time was a political appointee named Bernice Behrens. Her husband was a very well-known journalist who'd written for the *San Francisco Chronicle* for years and years and years. But Bernice was very well connected. She knew everyone. Every once in a while Shirley Temple Black would come and visit her and we'd all get to chat with Shirley Temple.

Q: Well, it's funny because the previous interview I did was with William McKinney, who was a USAID employee for many years and served under her in Africa. So, immediate intersection.

LEE: Liberia? I can't remember.

Q: It wasn't Liberia. I'm not sure what country it was.

So what were some of the programs that you organized for people?

LEE: Well, it was always new because we would find out from the Cultural Affairs Bureau who was coming, and we would try to shape it based on the grantee's interests. So we deal with the universities in the Bay Area, with people in the local community. If they wanted to talk about local development, we would talk to San Francisco officials about meeting with our grantees. We would give them some home hospitality. And there was a very active World Affairs Council in San Francisco at the time with lots and lots of

volunteers who would provide home hospitality for our visitors. Another good lesson that in future opportunities I always tried to work closely with World Affairs Councils wherever I was located.

Q: Uh-huh.

LEE: Citizen diplomacy. I meant, that really paid off.

Q: People to people. Yes.

LEE: Exactly, exactly. But that was just a year and again, making good friends, building good relationships.

Then to Hawaii for a year of university training.

Q: You still had family in Hawaii?

LEE: Yes. And that was wonderful from that standpoint. There was one other Foreign Service officer at the time who had gone through the same training in Hawaii to become a Pacific Islands expert named John Dorrance. You may know John. This was almost ten years before. And the department realized that it would be good to have another person trained and asked me if I would be willing to do that. And I didn't know any different, so I said, "Of course. It sounded good to me." And I learned a lot about the Pacific Islands in that year. You know, you'd think that someone who was born and raised in Hawaii would naturally know about the Pacific Islands. But none of the curriculum that I had growing up dealt with the islands. It all dealt with the continental United States.

Q: Of course, yeah. The insular.

LEE: And it happened to be a lead up to the bicentennial year and it happened to coincide with a real renaissance in Hawaii—the Hawaiians really rediscovering their roots. And so, this was—that was a wonderful time to be there. And I did enough coursework at the time to lay the basis for a master's degree that I picked up on a couple years later.

Q: Now, during all these periods that we've talked to so far, were you single during these assignments?

LEE: Yeah. Now, I had a family along the way and so, it was, again, very challenging, especially in Thailand to have a family in a difficult area. I went through a divorce a year later after being in Hawaii, and so it was important for me to have the support of my family at the time. And you know, it was very reassuring that I wasn't by myself. But it was a very good year in Hawaii, and I got to reacquaint myself with a lot of family and friends that I grew up with and expanded my knowledge of the Pacific Islands to a great extent. Prior to that I had no idea what was going on in Micronesia or anywhere south of

the equator. That was followed by a natural assignment to a position at the American embassy in Fiji.

Q: And was that a linked assignment or did you simply have to bid when you are already in Hawaii?

LEE: I think everybody had that in mind for me.

Q: I see.

LEE: I mean, it was a natural continuation of the training.

Q: It certainly was. So how large was the embassy in Suva at the time?

LEE: Three officers, one secretary, one communicator. The ambassador for Fiji at the time was non-resident, was our ambassador in New Zealand. So, the DCM in Fiji was essentially a chargé, full-time chargé. I was the number two officer and there was a junior officer who was the consular officer. And again, lots of travel. Very large consular district going all the way from French Polynesia in the east all the way west toward the Solomon Islands, just short of Papua New Guinea, and New Hebrides, at a time when there's a lot of independence movements throughout the Pacific. So, a lot of reporting possibilities going on. I did both the political and economic reporting. I was also responsible for the USIS program, which covered the whole region. And I was the liaison with the East-West Center in Hawaii. So, I helped to select grantees and chose representatives from all islands to travel to Hawaii and beyond. I was very much connected to the University of the South Pacific, which is one of the main regional organizations at the time. Still is. And so, I did a lot of USIS type programming, which was very much appreciated because all the islanders wanted to kind of balance off the influence that the Australians and New Zealanders had, and the British and the French, to bring in the U.S. as well.

Q: And how many other embassies were there when you were there from other countries?

LEE: Probably five or six. Not that many. But a lot of non-resident diplomats who would come on visits and that's when we would connect with them.

Q: And did the U.S. work with any of the other countries on programming there?

LEE: Very close, of course, with the British and some of the other islands had embassies at the time. But because this was during the bicentennial period, we had lots and lots of interesting visitors coming through. I would look at the travelers who were heading to Australia and I would ask them if they'd like to pay a stop in Fiji to do some programs for the bicentennial. And that included James Michener, who of course, one of his early books was *Tales of the South Pacific* and he has quite a reputation in Fiji. He apparently wrote at the time that Fiji was very much divided between the indigenous Fijians and the Indians who were brought there as plantation laborers and that the Indians were

second-class citizens in the independent Fiji. So, when he came it was the Easter weekend of 1976. When he came for a three-day visit, I put together a program at the university for him and there were already protests about Michener and his writing and demonstrations at the university that he had written about the racial problems and in his speech, he said, you know, he understands that people are very upset about what he wrote at the time, but can you tell me that there's anything different? Well, that calmed everybody down. He gave a very pedestrian speech about the bicentennial. Most people really weren't that interested in it. But some of the faculty members invited him over for coffee later and so I took him over to a faculty residence. And as soon as we got there, there was a group of students who were also invited and they were all creative writing students, and they said, "Could we meet Mr. Michener?" And he said, "Of course." So, he took the students with him into the kitchen and closed the door and was with them for about fifteen to twenty minutes. And all of the professors were wondering what was going on. But you know, this is the real James Michener, who understood where the future was. I really highly respected him for that. His wife, who was traveling with him at the time, was still very upset about the demonstrations and I think everybody calmed down. The next day was Easter Sunday and they left to return to the United States. But that was a pretty big deal.

Q: That was very enterprising of you, it seems, to snag a big literary name like that. It wasn't exactly like Fiji was on the usual travel routes, I wouldn't think.

LEE: It was fun for me. We had Aaron Shikler, the artist who did John F. Kennedy's portrait for the White House. He came through on a visit during the bicentennial year. We had a number of others as well.

It was also an election year, presidential election year, and we, of course, were all really interested in what was going on so far away in the United States when Jimmy Carter was running against Gerald Ford. I received a call one day when I was at the embassy to go and visit this American guest at the Suva Travelodge Hotel. And that guest happened to be Raymond Burr.

Q: (laughs) The actor you're talking about, I guess.

LEE: The connection was that Raymond Burr owned an island in Fiji and he would come for a visit once a year. Well, he wanted me to come over, really anyone from the embassy, to come over and talk to him at the hotel. And my boss was not around so I was the one who went over. And so I ended up in Raymond Burr's hotel room. He's a big guy, I mean, was, but he pretty much filled up the whole bed that he was sitting on. And he said he was a personal friend of the prime minister and he wanted to be sure that the prime minister was going to be the first Pacific Island leader to pay an official visit to the United States and he was a good friend of Jimmy Carter's and he wanted to be sure we understood that if Carter got elected that Raymond Burr—(chair squeaks/unintelligible) getting a formal invitation to the prime minister of Fiji to visit the United States.

Q: Now, Raymond Burr at the time was a highly successful actor. He had portrayed Perry Mason, I think, prior to that, and later had another series called "Ironside." Did the people of Fiji have any access to TV that would have made him a known person?

LEE: No TV at the time.

Q: No TV. All right, so then—

LEE: He was well-known in Fiji just because he owned an island.

Q: Because he owned an island, okay. So, now, he's made this statement and of course, Jimmy Carter went on to win, so what happened?

LEE: Nothing.

Q: Oh. (laughs)

LEE: We kept waiting for the invitation to come, but nothing happened.

Q: Well, I hope the prime minister wasn't expecting the invitation.

LEE: Yeah. In those same two years that I was in Fiji, of course we had several CODELs [congressional delegations] that came through. There was a CODEL in particular that I remember very well, headed by Mike Mansfield, who was majority leader at the time, Senator Mansfield, and there was only one junior senator who traveled with him and happened to be John Glenn. And the first year they were on a trip around the world really and arrived in Fiji to write their trip report and spent a few days at one of the very nice resorts on the other side of the island. So our embassy staff went out there to assist as needed. I got to meet John Glenn and spend some time with him. And second year, same thing happened. The same delegation came through. They spent another few days at a resort on the other side of the main island to write their trip report. So we made acquaintances once again.

Q: And so, what did the people of Fiji know of John Glenn, first man on the moon and—?

LEE: Nothing at the time.

Q: Nothing. Okay.

LEE: They were paying attention to Mike Mansfield, but Mansfield was not in a mood to do anything because he had a serious dental problem and—

Q: Oh, no.

LEE: —we had to find a dentist for him.

But after my tour in Fiji ended and I spent a year back in Hawaii to finish up my master's degree and to work for the state government as a consultant, then went on to Washington as the Pacific Islands desk officer under a fellow who I really liked working for named Bill Bodde. And this was when the Pacific Islands, again, were adding to the list of independent states. So, we had a small office in Washington, Pacific Islands Affairs Office, where Bill was the director, and I was the desk officer. Well, we were very much involved in the Micronesian status negotiations at the time and with several other negotiations out in the Pacific, so Bill was on the road traveling a lot at a time when the prime minister of the—sorry, the president of the Solomon Islands came for a visit. And it was just a personal visit, it was not an official visit, but the Solomons had become independent six months before and the person who went out to be the U.S. representative for the independence celebrations was a senator named John Glenn. So when President Kenilorea came to Washington he really didn't have a schedule. We said, "What would you like to do?" He said, "I'd like to visit Senator Glenn." So I escorted President Kenilorea to Senator Glenn's office, and Senator Glenn said, "When are you heading over to the White House?" And I said, you know, "That was not requested." He said, "Oh I'll take care of that." So the next morning I was with the Solomons delegation. We were at the Air and Space Museum, watching the movie *To Fly*.

Q: Which was a sensational movie at the time. It was one of the first ones in the giant screen format.

LEE: Right. And a Secret Service agent with the delegation tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Can you come out?" So, I went out and he said, "We just got word that you're expected at the White House in an hour and a half." I told the president and his party that we'd have to leave the film. They wanted to go back to their hotel to freshen up and when they got to the hotel they're rummaging around their suitcases and they came up with this little box and he—the president turned to me and he said, "Here, you carry this. This is our gift." So we went over to the White House, went into the Cabinet Room. Senator Glenn walked in and he said, "You're going to have to be ready." So, we headed with Senator Glenn into President Carter's office and it was President Carter and Brzezinski, the national security advisor, and President Carter was terrific. I mean, he greeted President Kenilorea very warmly. He said it was wonderful to have you here. He said, "We know you have a good friend in Senator Glenn and he's a wonderful representative of ours for the independence celebrations." And after a little bit of chitchat President Carter excused himself, went out the side door to the helicopter that was waiting for him and took off. So as we left the White House President Kenilorea said to me, "We have to tell our people about this." And I'm thinking to myself, we just had a Pacific Island leader who was the first to meet President Carter and it was not the prime minister of Fiji.

Q: (laughs) When you had served in Fiji did you visit the Solomon Islands?

LEE: I did, yeah. But I mean, they're, you know, this high above the ground having met the president of the United States in his office, in the Oval Office of the White House. So

I headed back to the hotel with him, went back to my office, wrote a message to Mary Olmsted, who was the ambassador to Papua New Guinea and the Solomons at the time, and said, "This is what just happened." So, I was the communicator of the good news back to the people of the Solomon Islands.

Q: Well, they must have considered that to be quite an honor. That was a wonderful experience that you had.

LEE: Again, all of this was so much fun because it's not the kind of thing that you'd expect, but I just happened to be in a position to be in the middle of it and to enjoy it. And to be able to see it up close like that. So those two years went quickly by.

Q: Well, I have two connections to your experience there. One, I worked with Peter Bodde, who I believe is the son of Bill Bodde, and unfortunately, Bill Bodde passed away in the last year or so.

LEE: Right, yeah, just about four or five months ago.

Q: Yeah. And then, I was just a college student at the time, at Kenyon College, and we had what they called an extern program. One of our political science professors had worked in the Republican Administration prior to Carter and he led this program into Washington, and we went around and visited quite a few people including, yes, Senator John Glenn because Kenyon College was in Ohio. I suppose that's one of the reasons why he saw us, but he was very gracious with his time.

LEE: Yeah.

Q: All right. So, where were you living when you were working now at the department on the desk?

LEE: About two miles from where I am right now in Northern Virginia.

Q: Northern Virginia?

LEE: Right.

Q: And did you have a family with you at this time?

LEE: Yeah. I had remarried and then we started having kids, and by the time I'd finished my two-year assignment in Pacific Island Affairs and moved on to my next assignment in Washington, twins were on the way. And so, two years later we had three under two, which is a handful, but my wife is a wonderful mother and organizer, so she had everything under control. But the assignment that I moved onto after Pacific Island Affairs was closely connected because I had been dealing very closely as well with the Micronesian status negotiations, which went on for ten years. So I moved to a political

officer job in international organizations, in IOUNP [Office of United Nations Political Affairs] and the office director, someone you probably know, Mel Levitsky. And the office was so big that we had two deputy directors. And my portfolio happened to be Territorial Affairs and I was the secretary to the U.S. delegation to the Trusteeship Council meetings at the time when the only Trust Territory was the U.S. Trust Territory, Micronesia. This was a long time ago, wasn't it? But they also gave me a geographic portfolio, which happened to be Latin America, so for the first time I was dealing with Latin America and it was a wonderful learning experience. I was following all of the political developments through cable traffic and had to deal with the geographic bureau as well.

Q: And again, you were working for the Bureau of International Organizations—

LEE: IOUNP.

Q: And that would be UN Political?

LEE: Yep, UN Political.

Q: And were your offices at the main State Department building?

LEE: That's right.

Q: So, what did you do related to your Latin America portfolio?

LEE: Well, a lot of it was simply trying to put together policy papers and background papers for the UN sessions, for the General Assembly, for any Security Council meetings, for territorial—on territorial issues, Committee of Twenty-Four for the Trusteeship Council sessions. So I got to know the U.S. territory folks pretty well. I got to meet regularly with the U.S. Virgin Islands office in Washington, with the American Samoa office in Washington, with the Guamanian office, which is a good tie-in to my Pacific Island background. And for the annual Trusteeship Council sessions I was the one who put the briefing book together with possible questions and the U.S. responses. And for the three- or four-day sessions that took place each year in New York, I was the delegation secretary, mainly to keep track of all of the administrative requirements that went on at the UN itself.

Q: So— (garbled audio) up there.

LEE: Yeah. We had one interesting episode. The first year that I was at—in New York at the U.S. mission building, there was an announcement that came over the PA [Public Address] system at U.S. UN saying everybody who was up above the fourth floor should remain in place and everybody below the third floor should leave the building.

Q: Huh.

LEE: And we were wondering what was going on, then we heard the sirens and we looked out the front window and there was the New York City bomb squad pulling up. Apparently, the mailroom had detected a letter bomb that was, they found out later, was sent by a Puerto Rican nationalist, and it was a real bomb. They took it away, exploded it in a safe place. But these things seemed to follow me around somehow. I don't know why.

Q: Well, that, again, is very different from the way things would probably be done now. There were many, many attacks against U.S. diplomatic missions overseas during that time period, the seventies on, certainly in Latin America there were quite a few, but we didn't do a whole lot with security, so it's a dramatically different situation now for overseas employees. Having left in 1995, you would have seen some of the start of that perhaps, but the trend accelerated over time.

LEE: It was a lot of fun just being in New York at the UN. These are things that you hear about when you're in school, but to actually be part of a delegation at a session is very special.

Q: I'm sorry, were there any particular actions that were taken that were particularly notable at those sessions?

LEE: The Trusteeship Council sessions were mainly between the U.S., the UK, France, and the USSR. The Soviets were always the enemy in terms of challenging us to prove that we were doing the right thing in Micronesia. The British and French were very supportive of us. But it was a matter of, again, coordinating the responses. And the Micronesian delegations that came to participate all were, like, a third factor in terms of us trying to be supportive of them but defending our role and our policies as being the head of the trusteeship. Again, those negotiations went on for more than ten years and later on, when I was—a different assignment, they finally ended, and we all celebrated the end of the trusteeship. And of course, the UN celebrated it because it no longer had to have a Trusteeship Council.

Q: (laughs)

LEE: And they could use the space for something else.

Q: So it was a rare case when bureaucrats worked themselves out of a job.

LEE: That's right—(Anania laughs/unintelligible) for a long time.

I had a good friend when I was on the Pacific Islands desk. He worked in an office next to me, Charlie Twining. I don't know if you know Charlie. But he was the desk officer for Australia and New Zealand. And his follow-up assignment was in personnel and so while I was in IO, Charlie arranged for me to be assigned to Chiang Mai. And for those who are

in the Thai language community, Chiang Mai was viewed as maybe the most—the plum assignment for Thai language officers. So I thanked Charlie every day. So I went on for a three-year assignment to Chiang Mai following IO. And again—

Q: Would you have been the consul? Or was it a consulate general there?

LEE: I was the last consul before it became a consulate general. I did all the work to make it possible.

Q: Work and none of the glory?

LEE: That's true. But it was truly a very special assignment in the heart of the Golden Triangle to fight the drug wars, to be at a post which had an incredible number of visitors from Washington because they all loved to visit the exotic locations where the shopping was really good.

Q: Did we have any military facilities in Chiang Mai during that period?

LEE: The only military facility at the time there was a U.S. Navy facility that was a seismic monitoring station, which is, I mean, U.S. Navy seismic monitoring in northern Thailand. So I had six non-commissioned officers with me there.

Q: And were they actually doing seismic monitoring?

LEE: Yes.

Q: Okay. Seems a little fishy to me, but okay. (laughs)

LEE: If there was any earthquake or other major explosion anywhere in the world, they had the machinery to take note of it.

Q: Yeah, I suppose we would triangulate and therefore needed to have these stations in not necessarily obvious places.

So this was a period where there was intense counter narcotics activity going on there and the U.S. was, I'm sure, very much a part of that. So what about your security situation there in Chiang Mai during that period?

LEE: We were sharing the same city with all the drug traffickers and there was, as far as we could tell, an informal truce. But in the second year that I was there somebody broke the truce. There was an American school and my daughter, who was the eldest at the time, was attending kindergarten there. It was an American school run by the missionary community. So one night some of my fellow officers and I were attending a social occasion on the other side of town when we saw a large flash in the sky and the sirens started going off. Well, apparently a bomb had been set off in a compound of one of the

Chinese generals who was involved in the drug trade. One of his competitors was trying to put him out of business. And the general happened to live in a compound right next to the American school. So, it blew the school up as well.

Q: Wow.

LEE: Fortunately, it was on a Sunday night and so none of the schoolkids were around. But from then on, we increased security seriously in order to make sure that our families were safe. But you know, we were trying to put all of these people out of business—

Q: Indeed.

LEE: —and (crosstalk/unintelligible) we were living in the same city that they were.

Q: Well, that must have been very frightening. You said there was a Chinese general in the drug trade; was he actual Chinese or was he Chinese—

LEE: Leftover from the Second World War. He was a Kuomintang general.

Q: Uh-huh.

LEE: Who just happened to remain in place and get involved in the drug trade.

Q: Interesting. Do you have any other tales of the counter narcotics effort? Any particular successes or failures?

LEE: Well, of course we had DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] presence there. We had other folks as well who were running overflight operations to try to detect opium fields from the air. We had a Department of Agriculture scientist who was trying to work on crop substitution for opium. We had USIS. We had the military. So all in all we had about twenty-five or twenty-six people representing the U.S. government in place there. And it was really my first opportunity to be in charge of a consulate, to be a supervisor, and it was a wonderful learning opportunity. Again, the Foreign Service benefitted from having a Thai language officer, myself, who was using language skills there.

I also got to meet members of the Thai royal family, which was a benefit later on as well.

Q: So as a supervisor you were supervising people from a variety of different agencies. Did you have any concerns or were there any particular success stories about interagency cooperation and collaboration there?

LEE: We were always hoping for cooperation and collaboration. I tended to be the referee and the usual inter-agency disputes; I was always the neutral party trying to bring people together, which again was real good training, real good test to see whether I could do that or not. And with an ambassador who was terrific at understanding how to deal with that,

John Gunther Dean. I had two really excellent DCMs to report to. When I first got there, it was Stape Roy, Stapleton Roy, and it was great to work for him. He knew so much. He was a real China expert as well. And the second DCM I had there was Chas Freeman, who—

Q: You were really rubbing shoulders with some of the greats of the Foreign Service throughout your career.

LEE: Yeah. And you know, they were very good models for me. Real smart people who really knew how to manage well as well. So those were three challenging years, very enjoyable being in place there.

Q: And how about your family?

LEE: We arrived with three kids, we left with four. One of my sons was born at the local hospital there. The consulate residence was built in the 1930s. It was the home of the prince of Chiang Mai at one time. And the royal property there was on lease from the Thai government. So we had our residence and office in the same compound, so I had a wonderful commute. I could just walk out the backdoor and walk into my office building.

Q: And did you do a lot of entertaining there?

LEE: A lot of entertaining, yes.

One of the things that I realized even before getting there was that people would come up to Chiang Mai as tourists anyway, so what we needed to do was to work very closely with our embassy counterparts to make them feel welcome, to encourage them to come and visit us in our office, which all paid off in the end in terms of the support they gave us on the administrative side whenever we needed help. So we developed very good consulate-embassy relationships at the time, which I'm sure, you know, continued on for many years later.

Q: And what sort of entertaining would you do with your Thai contacts? Would you host them at the residence?

LEE: Well, we had a very nice setup within the consulate compound to host receptions. There was a building in the compound that was perfect for lunches, for cocktail parties. But we also used the local hotels as well. But invariably every month we'd have a congressional delegation, or a staff delegation come to visit and so we became very expert at dealing with CODELs. My local staff knew exactly what to do, how to do it because we had so much practice. And it made my life a lot easier where I didn't have to worry about those details, and I could spend all of my time just helping to guide the visitors around Chiang Mai. I gave lots of briefings on the narcotics situation, off the record briefings, background briefings. Saw a lot of journalists there. One of my first

visitors was Attorney General William French Smith, and he only spent a day in Chiang Mai, but it was a very busy day— (crosstalk/unintelligible)

Q: And was he there for narcotics-related business or—?

LEE: You know, DEA was part of his bailiwick, and so the DEA agents there spent almost a whole month preparing for his visit, which gave the drug traffickers a free ride because it took the pressure off them.

Q: (laughs)

LEE: But the attorney general came. We held a very high-level briefing for him with the local governor and security officials. We gave him lunch, he and Mrs. Smith, and of course, in Thailand a lot of the charm is Thai food. And so, here comes the attorney general, who could not eat anything spicy, so it was a real challenge for our cook. We also needed to make sure we knew exactly where all of the men's rooms were along the route that he was going to follow because he maybe needed to make lots of stops, and so that was the responsibility of the DEA agents, to check out the men's rooms along the route.

Q: (laughs) Make sure there were no security situations in those places, yes.

LEE: But we always left time in the schedule for some sightseeing and shopping because we figured that that would make our visitors go away happy, along with the official duties of getting a briefing and maybe a tour of poppy fields and hill tribe villages. We always left a little bit of time to go to the night market and to go to the elephant village and see the sights.

Q: So what are some of the things that people would have been shopping for?

LEE: A lot of hill tribe handicrafts, a lot of textiles, a lot of silver ornaments, a lot of opium weight sets. But just the idea of going out to this big open market in the evening when it was cool and spending a lot of time shopping and bargaining. I guess the word did get around that visiting Chiang Mai was the thing to do then, so we had—

Q: It was very popular.

LEE: —a lot of visitors. That's right.

Q: In fact, my mother lived in Japan on an army base in 1978 and nine and she managed to get her way to Chiang Mai somehow, I think on a—maybe even on a military, U.S. military plane, she flew space available at least to Thailand and I do remember her going to Chiang Mai and shopping and all that.

LEE: Yep. One of the interesting responsibilities I had, Ambassador Dean came to me one day and said, “The king wants his son-in-law to work on his English and you’re it.” The royal son-in-law was a commoner, but he was married to the youngest princess, was an air force pilot and he had been assigned to the Thai air force in Chiang Mai. So he was resident at the palace in Chiang Mai. And so, over the course of a year and a half I got to know him very well. Came from a very good Thai family, of course. His father was a four-star general in the Thai air force and at the time he was a wing commander who would later become a one-star general. But he—we later connected up many years later when I was in private business and we worked on some projects together.

Q: Again, with your many personal relationships that you built up through your professional exposure.

LEE: Yeah, that was key. I mean, I got to know the governor of the province very well and he would invite me every week to travel with him. He was a Harvard-educated architect and happened to be very close to the royal family, so they wanted him in Chiang Mai where they were always visiting. But Governor Chaiya and I became very close friends and he spoke excellent English, which made my life a lot easier. But he had a very smart attitude about how to do his job, which was to go out once a week, every Wednesday to visit a remote part of his province and to bring services to the local community there. So, he would corral all of his provincial officers, the veterinarians, the social services people, he would get the barbers and hair salon operators to join in the motorcade with him and give free haircuts out in the villages. And I said, “What prompts you to do this?” And he said, “Intelligence.” He said, “This is the best way to find out what’s going on in this part of my district.” And I had an open invitation to travel with him every Wednesday. I probably went with him once a month or so, just because I had so many other things going on. But just having three- or four-hours driving time for a private conversation was just invaluable because I could ask whatever questions I wanted of a very senior local official and it gave me a much better understanding of what was going on as well.

Q: And how do—

LEE: (crosstalk/unintelligible) —relationships.

Q: How did you communicate that to the embassy and back to Washington, the insights you were gaining? Did your post write its own reports or did you feed information to the embassy?

LEE: We had our own reporting schedule. And I probably could have written twice as much, but I had too much going on regarding the interagency coordination and administration of the post that I didn’t want to have to be working twenty-four hours a day. But it was a real privilege to represent the U.S. government in such a special place at a special time.

Q: Indeed.

So, you built up tremendous expertise, obviously, in the East Asia Pacific Bureau [Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs], as it's now called. Was it called that then, EAP?

LEE: EAP, right.

Q: EAP. And then it was time for something completely different.

LEE: Well, what happened is that I had not made my situation very clear to my friends in Washington, so by the time the bidding process had gone through I was not—I did not have much choice in terms of what was left. And one of the things that was left was to be principal officer in northern Nigeria, which was very challenging at the time. But it was a consulate general so in terms of status it was, I guess a step up. But because I had the management experience for a constituent post they felt reasonably comfortable that I could cover the territory in northern Nigeria. I did have time to do the area studies course en route.

I had a wonderful staff in Kaduna, Nigeria, mainly younger officers, mainly first tour officers, so for most of them it was a learning experience as well. But anyone who's worked in a consular position in Nigeria knows how challenging it is to work the visa line because there's so much visa fraud that goes on in Nigeria. I think I was told that over 95 percent of the applicants were fraudulent. And we could track that based on the number of change of status requests that came through afterwards. So, it was—

Q: So, if you gave a visa to someone and then they went to the U.S. and changed status then—

LEE: Almost immediately.

Q: —Immigration and Naturalization Service would send a notice to the post that issued the visa, I believe.

LEE: Right.

Q: So that you could keep track of this.

LEE: So it basically showed that we had made mistakes by issuing that visa to start with, that we had not really perceived the true interests of the applicant.

Q: Uh-huh.

LEE: And we knew that it would take—that the consular officer, we had just one assigned consular officer, that it would be extremely difficult on her, so what everybody did was to share that responsibility. We had our admin officer, our political officer, our

commercial officer, our USIS officer all taking turns on the visa line to help relieve the load on the consular officer. At the same time, I gave everybody reporting responsibilities as well. We divvied up the consular district and everybody had to keep track of developments in a couple of states within their—the district and come up with political and economic reports. So it was largely a two-year training assignment for most of my staff and they all came through tremendously. It really built morale, there was very high *esprit de corps* because everyone felt that they were in the same boat and that they were all learning a lot at the same time.

Q: And what was it like personally for people living in Kaduna at the time? I'm sure it was a hardship post. What was it like to live in the city?

LEE: Well, on our way to post we transited London and as we went on the bus from Heathrow to Gatwick Airport to get our connecting flight, I was sitting behind the bus driver and he had his radio on and I heard something about a coup in Nigeria.

Q: Uh-oh.

LEE: And I turned to my wife and I said, "I don't think we're going to be traveling this afternoon." So we got to Gatwick Airport and there was a line a mile long waiting for news, and of course, they had closed all of the Nigerian airports. And so, I contacted the American embassy in London, and I said, "I'm here. It looks like I'm stranded. What should I do?" So the Africa hand in London at the time was Bob Frasure. I don't know if you know Bob. But we got together, and he arranged for me to get lots of days of per diem for the family. So we stayed at the airport in Gatwick, at the local Hilton there, for a week, waiting for the airports to open. And after seven or eight days we finally were able to travel to Nigeria.

So it was all under martial law, which meant that we had to be especially careful to mind the curfews. The reporting requirements were up because everybody wanted to know what was going on with the coup. But it also meant that the economic situation was very tough because they had established an exchange rate that was nowhere close to reality, and so every time we had to change dollars to the local currency, we as officials were losing out big time, whereas those who were able to exchange dollars on the black market were at least able to be more comfortable. It was very much a hardship, but at the same time, because everybody stuck together and supported each other, there was very high morale at post.

Q: And you mentioned in the CV that you sent that one of your notable subordinates was Harry Thomas.

LEE: Yeah. That was Harry's second assignment. I think his first assignment was somewhere in—

Q: Lima, Peru. He was in my A-100 class, so I know that.

LEE: Yeah. I enjoyed working with Harry and we became very close. In fact, I attended his swearing in for director general.

Q: Yes, he had a very distinguished career, was ambassador—U.S. ambassador to the Philippines and at least one other post. And I will say that you were an effective mentor to him because I know that he was not keen about going to Kaduna in the first place and I subsequently heard from him that he considered that to be a very positive posting and a very good experience that he had, so that's a good mark of your leadership.

LEE: I'm very proud of Harry. We traveled together, we worked very hard, worked well together.

But it was tough because we felt very isolated in northern Nigeria. I received word when I was there that my mother was in very serious medical condition in Hawaii, so I was essentially medevaced to Hawaii to be with her. And it took two days to get from northern Nigeria to Honolulu. And she survived that, but it was quite clear that this was going to be a long-term medical issue, so I said to my wife that we'd have to find a way to get much closer to Hawaii in order to give my father some support. I'm an only child, and so he was trying to do it all himself. Which led to our next assignment, which was a Pearson assignment to work as a special assistant to the mayor of Seattle. That was about as close as we could get, and it was a job that I really set up for myself because I knew people who could help me do that. And the mayor, Charlie Royer, in Seattle, was very internationally minded, and he was one of the first mayors to set up his own office of international affairs. And so, I worked in that job for two years, as a matter of fact, with a chance to travel to Honolulu at least once every three or four months. Again, you know, it was as good fit for me because I had had so much experience in the past working on into visitors and cultural affairs programs and to do some trade reporting as well, so it was a combination of all of that, but I also felt very good as a representative of the State Department in that local community. I could have stayed there for a year, but I knew that my father continued to need help, so we made a decision, a family decision to request a second year, knowing that that would have a lot of impact on my Foreign Service career. But the tradeoff was to be able to help my father with the family situation. So I did so willingly and with no regrets.

Q: Well, certainly not a bad place to be.

LEE: Exactly.

Q: And you—I noted that you had expanded the sister city program quite a bit, so were you receiving and helping to entertain and possibly doing programs for representatives from various cities then?

LEE: Exactly. We had a very active sister city program. I worked very closely with the group that was sister cities with Tashkent and with two African sister cities, arranged for

an ambulance from the city of Seattle to be transported to Cameroon in one case, and for another ambulance to be sent to Mombasa in Kenya. We had lots of international visitors to take care of. But a lot of the work was mainly promoting international affairs within the city and working with the World Affairs Council. We in fact got together with the representatives from Portland, Oregon and from Vancouver, British Columbia, to talk about a northwest coalition to promote cultural affairs and trade exchanges, taking the attractive parts of Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver and creating a coalition to promote this part of the northwest. Something new.

Q: So a very interesting period.

LEE: Yeah, very much so. We actually thought about retiring to Seattle after my Foreign Service career ended. It didn't happen but I did go out for some job interviews at the time.

Q: So you thought maybe you might even stay in that area?

LEE: Who knows? I mean, we could still end up there.

But then it came time to move on and I had some bids out to three very nice posts; to Nairobi, to Cairo, and to Canberra, and we ended up in Cairo. And someone who really wanted me to go there was Frank Wisner, who was ambassador at the time. And my boss for the first year was someone well known in the Foreign Service named Ryan Crocker.

So it was my first assignment to the Middle East, and I was acting principally as like an executive officer of the political section, handling interoffice coordination, handling personnel issues, handling administrative issues, but also being responsible for all of the external reporting that was going on in the political section. This preceded the first Gulf War, which brought us a lot of attention and a lot of activity to the point where in the follow-up to the Gulf War where it looked like we had a really good chance to reach a settlement, a Middle East peace settlement, that Secretary Baker was coming out once a month for about fourteen months to visit. And you well know what a sec state visit entails. So, for a good part of the four years that I was there it was a twenty-four/seven type of assignment.

In Muslim countries Friday is the day of rest, but it was not a day of rest in Washington, so I had to report into the embassy to deal with instructions from Washington. The Egyptians observe Saturday as a workday for the foreign ministry, so I would get calls from the foreign ministry, asking me to come in on Saturday, which was our other weekend day. So, I essentially had a seven-day workweek. No regrets, no complaints, but it meant that it was a very tough schedule around the clock with lots of visits, lots of big issues.

And Ryan Crocker went on from there to be ambassador to Lebanon, so there was a gap when I was the acting political counselor. Stan Escadero, who you may or may not know,

replaced him and—for part of a year, then Stan went on to an ambassadorship so then I became the acting. Bob Maxim eventually became the political counselor for my last year. So, essentially, for about two years out of the four years that I was in Cairo I was the acting political counselor, and it was a wonderful experience. Again, no regrets about that. And got to work with both Frank Wisner and Bob Pelletreau as ambassadors. And Wes Egan—I don't know if you know Wes—was my DCM for the last three years.

But a very high-pressure job but a wonderful place for children to go to school, a wonderful American school. We had some AID officers who were there for seven or eight years because the school was so good.

Q: Yes, Cairo was always a preferred family post for decades until, unfortunately, recent years when there's been violence and the need for evacuations.

LEE: Right. So, we were there in the busy years. And then, I had a chance to bid on what was to be my dream job, and I was actually paneled into that job, which was to come back to Washington to be director of Pacific Island Affairs, something that I was trained for. But this was the election year of 1992, and when the Clinton Administration came in, they started consolidating some of the smaller offices within the department, and so the job disappeared. And so, I was left with looking at whatever was remaining to be my assignment to Washington. And one of the things that was still there was executive director of the protocol bureau, which came with a neat title, assistant chief of protocol. I had really done a lot of protocol work informally through the years, but not ever in such a structured situation as that.

So when I came back to Washington, I was the only Foreign Service officer in the bureau. We had one Foreign Service secretary and I was managing a bureau made up of four different personnel systems: the regular Civil Service, the Civil Service people who worked at Blair House, the president's guest house, the political appointees, and then the Foreign Service side, and had to make all of that mesh. Well, what I found was that it was a tremendous amount of fun because they included me on all of the ceremonial aspects of protocol as well. I would officiate over swearing in ceremonies, both for new ambassadors and for new Foreign Service officers. I got to travel to set up summit conferences outside of Washington, DC; APEC I already mentioned in Seattle, but also Detroit and other cities. I got to escort a lot of incoming visitors in and out of Andrews Air Force Base. I got to do a lot with the Washington diplomatic corps for all of the sessions, the joint sessions of Congress where the president would deliver a "State of the Union Address," all of the diplomatic corps was invited, and we got to shepherd them up to Capitol Hill and back again. So it was a different kind of busy, but it was a tremendous learning experience for me because for the first time, really, I had to manage a budget. In all of my previous assignments there was always someone else there to help do the budgeting, but in this case, I had to manage the budget for about ninety people in four different locations—office locations. And what I really learned from that experience, which helped me in life after the Foreign Service, was what things really cost so that I could take that information and use it in setting up my own business. Also, the very

high-level ceremonial activities, I learned a lot so I could offer that in the private sector as an event manager, having seen how it was all done in the White House, in the secretary of state's office, and in events outside of Washington, DC. So, it was a wonderful learning experience from that standpoint, which helped me in life after the Foreign Service.

As I was finishing up my two-year assignment, I realized I could qualify for retirement at age fifty with a full pension. And with a growing family we were not interested, really, in going overseas again. Everybody, all the kids were very happy in school. And so, we said, Why not? So I was able to voluntarily retire at age fifty with a full pension with the opportunity with enough years left to really start up a new career. I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do, but I was doing it at an early enough age so that it was possible to carve out another career. So I had twenty-eight years with the Foreign Service and then twenty-five years in private business, which concluded just earlier this year.

Now to the credit union because this—

Q: Okay, let me stop recording here and I'm going to start another recording to talk about that.

LEE: Okay.

Q: And ADST might prefer that. So, one moment.

(pause in recording)

Q: So, this is Jay Anania. I'm interviewing Harlan Lee. This is the second portion of our interview and we're going to talk about his experiences working with the State Department Federal Credit Union [SDFCU] starting in 1994.

Over to you, Harlan.

LEE: Okay, Jay. I'm Harlan Lee. When I was back in Washington for the first time in a long time in 1994 or 1993, I decided I wanted to take advantage of an opportunity to run for a board position on the credit union, just to learn more about the credit union. I'd been a member from my early years as a junior officer and I felt like it would be a wonderful opportunity to learn something. So I put my name into the election process and much to my surprise, in the spring of 1994 I was one of two people elected, new people elected to the board. The other was John Condayan, by the way, who was well-known throughout the Foreign Service community.

So, I essentially was starting from ground zero as a member of the credit union board and for my first year on the board I was happy to take on different volunteer assignments because I felt it would be a great way to learn. The president of the credit union at the time was John Adkin and he was a very good mentor, helping me to figure things out. The board met once a month but there are lots of committee activities in between those

meetings, and I recall that I was chairman of the credit union benefits committee in my first year and helped with the scholarship committee and with other committee assignments. In my second year on the board Michelle Truitt became board chairman and she invited me to become board secretary and I was happy to do that. And so I was board secretary for two years, which completed my three-year assignment on the board.

People who know me well know that I really believe in term limits, so I figured that I would give someone else an opportunity to join the board, so I did not run for re-election at the time. But one way that I could keep involved at that level was to join the supervisory committee, which is the board committee that oversees the internal auditors of the credit union. So, I became a member of the supervisory committee for the first year and then my second year on the committee I was the chairman of the committee, which meant that I got to work very closely with the internal auditor, Moe Eldack at the time, and to be responsible to oversee all of the credit union activities to make sure that they were being done in a right and proper way. This was at a time when I had just retired from the State Department and I was trying to establish my own private business, which was a one-man consulting business. And as I grew my business it became tougher and tougher to devote enough time to credit union activities, so regrettably I left the supervisory committee after two years, after a total of five years involvement with the credit union.

Q: So, can you talk a little bit about the issues that the credit union was experiencing in those years? At that point I think it had multiple locations. As I recall, there was one up in the Courthouse area of Northern Virginia.

LEE: Right.

Q: What was going on with the State Department Federal Credit Union?

LEE: Well, this was a period of growth. I think the credit union itself had assets of about five hundred million dollars, which was rather small for an organization like that. And I know that currently it's well over a billion. So this was a period of just finding its footing and growing.

One thing I discovered when I joined the board was that a lot of the credit union officers knew very little about how the State Department worked and knew very little about how embassies and consulates work. And really didn't know very much about how to service their members who were overseas. So one of the—

Q: So who were these board members? I think of the State Department credit union and assume the membership is mostly State Department people, so I guess I would have thought the board was mostly State Department people.

LEE: Oh, no, I'm not talking about the board, which were made up mostly of Foreign Service and Civil Service, but I'm talking about the vice presidents in charge of different credit union activities, the marketing guy, the—

Q: Oh, I see. So, they were the professional staff, yes.

LEE: The professional staff—

Q: The bankers, if you will.

LEE: —of the credit union. Right. Who knew a lot about how to run a credit union but didn't know a lot about their customers or their clients or their members and how they operated. For example, you know, we know that when you're overseas and you're at the mercy of the pouch, it may take a lot longer to get any transaction to take place. This was before people could use the cable system, telegrams to conduct business. So, just—

Q: And—and—before we— (crosstalk)

LEE: (crosstalk/unintelligible) —about how much longer things would take to request a loan or to transfer money from one account to another account. Part of it was my feeling that they needed to be educated. So we actually set up some travel for the credit union staff to go and visit some of the constituent posts in Canada, which are, of course, the closest we could find to actually talk to their members who were overseas. And a lot of this was very useful communication because then they could shape the programs and the benefits back in headquarters to fit the needs of the membership. Because when you look at what takes place in the Washington, DC area, it's literally only half of the Foreign Service membership. And so, I think as a result of that initiative we got much better service, much better customer service out to the people working overseas.

Q: Uh-huh. What kinds of loans was the State Department Federal Credit Union making in those days?

LEE: Very similar to what's offered now. Except that you may recall that there was a serious government shutdown, and in Washington terms, the first time that really had to deal with a long shutdown of government services, which put a lot of State Department personnel in jeopardy in terms of cash flow.

Q: Yes.

LEE: So we arranged some quickie loan programs to make sure that people could go to the credit union to get a travel advance, to get any kind of advance so that this would tide them over to pay their mortgages, to actually, you know, make sure that they're not starving to death while waiting for the government to reopen. And as I recall, the government was shut down for a couple of weeks at the time.

Q: Yeah, that was a considerable shutdown. So that was an important service.

LEE: (crosstalk/unintelligible)—

Q: Yes. He's still with us. I read today that he was decrying supposed electoral fraud for which there is no evidence.

LEE: Well, to me this was a role that the credit union could play for its membership—is to be the place of first resort in order to get help when there are economic crises. And I think it all worked out very well.

Q: And what other activities was the State Department Federal Credit Union doing then? Was it trying to expand in any particular category, auto loans, mortgages, anything like that?

LEE: Yep. Well, in those days credit unions took their limitations very seriously as to who could become a member. You had to actually be an active-duty employee of the State Department in order to join. Now, that has been liberalized significantly in the years since, so that these days, if anyone wants to join a credit union, they can do so without really becoming part of that organization. But in the 1990s everyone believed that the regulations had to be followed very strictly in terms of eligibility for membership in a credit—

Q: And so, what sort of market share do you suppose that SDFCU had in those days with the constituency that you had?

LEE: I wouldn't say it was a battle with the private banking sector, but everybody understood that the credit unions as really a non-profit organization could plow more of its money back into loans and other ways of helping the membership than the private banks could. I still see a lot of unhappiness by the private banks that credit unions still exist. Well, that's too bad. I mean, the credit union act makes it possible for people without a regular bank to find banking services at much lower costs. It's always going to be a better deal getting a loan from a credit union because the costs are much cheaper. A lot of it had to do with marketing, making sure that potential members, that potential customers could find out more about what credit unions had to offer. And the economic community is big enough to accommodate both private banks and credit unions, I feel. We've certainly had accounts in both a credit union and private banks ever since. But there's always a soft spot in my heart for the credit union because I know how helpful it can be in the long run for people who have difficulties meeting the tougher private banks' standards for getting a loan, for getting help when they really need help.

Q: Yeah, I would assume that at least when you were still on the board that it was mostly State Department affiliated individuals and those individuals tend to have security clearances and clean credit records, so I would have thought that making loans to those people would have been a pretty safe business. Am I correct in that?

LEE: Yeah, that's true, but we tried very hard to loosen up some of the standards so that people with some marginal financial records could also qualify. You know, it's kind of a how much risk are you willing to take? And because credit union costs are lower, credit unions can offer to take on more risk, whereas the private banks have to have a much tougher standard of loan guarantees.

Q: So did you feel that you were, in fact, expanding the pool of people who would be that worthy?

LEE: We could only expand it to a limited extent because of the membership eligibility requirements. Now that most of those requirements are lifted, then credit unions get a lot bigger. But there's a lot of camaraderie, I found, among the credit unions in the Washington, DC area. Our credit union got to work with people at Pentagon, with the Navy Federal Credit Union, which is the largest credit union around, with other agency and institutional credit unions and would share a lot of information with each other. So it was a wonderful learning experience. Something, again, I took into my post-retirement days where I really had to understand how to deal with financial spreadsheets and to work competitively in the private sector. So, again, credit union, thank you very much for the opportunity.

Q: Well, it's an excellent service. I personally started credit union membership at the age of about sixteen with another federal agency's credit union and in my professional work I was the head of administration at the Organization of American States [OAS], which also had its own credit union, which fortunately was much more solvent than the OAS itself. (laughs)

LEE: But in a nutshell, Jay, that's my experience with the credit union. It was all to the good.

Q: Okay. Well, I thank you for that. I certainly appreciated being a State credit union member during the early years of my career when there were real advantages to that, especially being able to communicate from overseas when we depended on APO [Army Post Office] or pouch mail to pay off credit cards and other bills, so it was nice to know that the credit union had our backs, it wasn't just an organization trying to eke out greater profits by charging exorbitant fees and, you know, basically mistreating its customers as, unfortunately, is the case with some institutions. So I experienced that good service, thank you.

Okay, let me stop that recording.

LEE: Okay.

End of interview