GREENLAND

COUNTRY READER
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GEORGE L. WEST
Consular Officer
Godthab (Nuuk), Greenland (1940-1942)

George L. West was born in Seattle, Washington in 1910. He received a bachelor's degree from Stanford University in 1933. His Foreign Service career included positions in Paris, Godthab, Stockholm, Helsinki, Luxembourg, Frankfurt, and Bonn. This interview was conducted by Charles Stuart Kennedy on February 9, 1990.

Q: That was the idea. You went out. These were all big posts; it's a good place to get some training.

WEST: Well, they weren't big posts, necessarily. A lot of them were small border posts. They didn't want to invest any more money than they had to in you. Also, they brought you back to the school, normally, after about a year.

Since they actually brought both groups... The group that went out in July, new budget year... This was a familiar time to get assigned and be sworn in. We were a total of 23 in this Foreign Service school.

At the time, I was engaged and didn't want an immediate assignment abroad until I'd gotten married.

As a result of that and getting one hundred in the visa examination, I was assigned prematurely to the Visa Division (it was VD then, now it's VO, Visa Office, which is a slight improvement). I was settling down in that when Denmark was occupied.

Q: This was World War II.

West: Yes. We were not in it, but Denmark was occupied. Roosevelt immediately decided we had to do something about Greenland.

It was put partly on a humanitarian basis, that they were entirely dependent on Denmark for their supplies. Mr. Berle was put in charge of this project. The President had pointed out, in one of his fireside radio talks, that Greenland was essentially North American, that the fauna and flora were North American, the natives were North American. At any rate, we were rushed up there. I say, we, an acquaintance of mine, whom I'd also known in college, was sent up there. When they decided to send somebody up, they got a fairly senior officer, who was a bit of an elegant type. He was called in to Berle's office to say what his plans were.

Q: This is Adolf Berle.

WEST: Yes, at the title of Assistant Secretary, I think. I'd gotten to know him while I was in the school, actually. In those days, you came in the school and were entertained at the White House; you called on all the Assistant Secretaries, and all that. It was a smaller service, naturally.

He was called into Berle's office and asked what his plans were for the consulate. He said, well he thought he would...

Q: This was the consulate at Godthab.

WEST: Perhaps I'm jumping too far ahead. [On April 9, 1941] The United States made an agreement with Henrik Kauffmann, who was the Danish Minister in Washington, whereby he did not recognize the authority of the German occupied power in Denmark. And he made this agreement whereby we, among many other things, took over responsibility for supplying the country. There were other factors involved besides relief. That was recognized by the Red Cross sending a man up with us, Mr. Reddy of the Red Cross.

Let me go back. The big item there was the cryolite mines. Cryolite, people are not too familiar with it; I certainly wasn't. It is a mineral; the only commercial deposits in the world are up in Greenland. It was mined by a government company, or quasi-government Danish company, with Danish miners. It was on a fjord.

The two principal North American customers were Penn Salt [?] Company of Philadelphia and the Aluminum Company of Canada. The other was strictly a defense thing. One of the first things in the order was the use of Greenland, if possible, to ferry aircraft to the British, that is going from Newfoundland to Greenland to Iceland.

Q: Airplanes in those days had a much shorter range.

WEST: Otherwise you had to go by ship. Maybe I'm telescoping this a little too much.
We went up on the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard had a lot of experience in Alaskan waters, as they have more recently with the Exxon experience [in Alaska]. We went up on the Coast Guard partly because they were willing and able, and the Army and Navy were arguing who should be in charge.

We were given the house of the sole doctor, Danish doctor, in Greenland. In the preliminary arrangements, Mr. Hugh Cumming, who was on the desk at the time, didn't know whether it was furnished or not.

So I was authorized by the department (I think this is probably a unique experience) to go up to Abercrombie and Fitch and buy certain cots and things of that sort, plus all winter equipment: skis, snow shoes. I got nice cashmere underwear, nice cashmere pajamas for Penfield and myself. And such things as Coleman lamps and cots, chairs. The rest of it we did with packing cases, for the time being. I guess I'm the only one that ever had a free charge at Abercrombie and Fitch.

After we'd been there awhile, we'd had a Sears and Roebuck house shipped up, that is, all the parts, and it was constructed by a Greenland carpenter. We also had put in batteries and a wind charger.

Once, in the dead of winter when there was a hundred-mile gale, the thing broke loose, and I went out to put on the brakes. It was not far from the house. Next to it we had a little building where we had all of our batteries. There was a little space between that little house and our house.

Coming back, I got swept off my feet. This was the first winter just after my boss had left. I broke my leg. I was swept off my feet into the flagpole, a couple hundred yards, and had to crawl back to the lee of the house and get into the house. I had to cut open my boot because it was swelling so much. I got in, got on the sofa, took off my belt, wrapped it around the pillow, and sat there pleading [?] between the light to get some attention. We had no telephones.

Sure enough, the boy from the telegraph office, who came down to deliver some telegrams, saw the light.

There was no doctor in South Greenland at that time, but they took me into this little infirmary. These Greenland nurses pulled the damn thing straight on me and put me in bed with just sandbags around it and pulleys.

I had to move all of my codes down there. We devised a Greenland code for use with all the Army, Navy, Air Force, ourselves, and the Greenland government, based on the Brown Code.

At any rate, one of first things was the cryolite mine. In fact, we put in there first. A quick arrangement was made whereby some of the...

I should explain that this mine was right on the edge of a fjord. In fact, the mine to some extent went under the fjord. It was the sort of thing where it wouldn't take much to knock the edge of it off and to flood that thing, either by air or by sea.

So the Coast Guard supplied some petty officers. They made a blind guard and they had some anti-aircraft weapons and whatnot. It was just a small detachment. Then we proceeded up to Godthab.

At that time, there were two governors of Greenland: one of South Greenland, one of North Greenland. Godthab was the capitol, if you wish, (it had about four hundred people) of South Greenland.

The Governor was close to retirement. Although he had an American wife, he didn't go all out for this. He was rather nervous. He was worried about his retirement when the Germans had won the war. So we sort of induced him to go down to New York.

The cryolite ships that used to ply between Denmark and Greenland were then put on the run to Philadelphia. The Governor of North Greenland became the effective [?] in charge.

We did a number of things, initially. One of the biggest problems was that the Germans and the Norwegian Quislings were landing meteorological parties on the east coast of Greenland; the east coast being largely uninhabited except for a few trappers.

It seems that a lot of your weather for Western Europe originates up on that icecap. It's invaluable, from a military standpoint, to get meteorological reports from there.

So we went around to the Coast Guard, and we'd find these places and destroy them. Once we took a [German?] ship, and (we were not in the war, mind you) they escorted this ship, practically towed it, into Boston harbor. The crew was arrested for entering without visas and interned for the duration of the war. Although as I say, this was still before Pearl Harbor.

One of the big projects was to find some places where we could put in some airfields (and I do mean fields). Greenland is, as you probably know, mostly ice, with a lot of rocks around the edge of the icecap.

One of my jobs was to go with a joint Army-Navy group to explore for possible sites. Well we did find one site, way up at the north. It was designated Blue Wessy [?].

But the best site in the south, which was where we wanted to be primarily, was down on the southwest coast in Tunuliarfik Fjord, which was actually called by the Danes Eric's Fjord.

It's where Eric was supposed to have landed and named it Greenland because there were some willow bushes around there. There are no trees in Greenland, and there's not much else.

There was a glacial moraine there, which, although it had a pretty good pitch, looked as if it was a possible field.

The Army engineer was a man named Gerlenski. He described the surface of it as "gravel." Well, in the long run it proved that, although there was a little gravel on the top, you got down a bit and you had these, I'm not showing any racial bias, but they're referred to as "nigger heads." They're small boulders, which subsequently were known as "Gerlenski gravel."

At any rate, they had an awful time getting equipment ashore. They should have put in a pier as the first thing they did. But we had ships, so many ships there you had to unload them by lighter.

All kinds of ships were sent up with heavy equipment. They were stuck there sometimes for over a month just because of the tempestuous weather. Actually, when December of '41 came along, I was on a banana boat in that harbor, drinking a rum and cola, when we heard the news of Pearl Harbor.

I should go back and mention that we did an awful lot of travel up and down the coast, lining things up. My boss went out in the late fall of '40 to go down to the States before the ice pack came in.

The ice pack comes around from the east to the west and then up the west coast. Godthab, for example, is inaccessible by ships for several months of the year.

So I was left there in charge. Incidentally, the Canadians had also sent a Consul and Vice Consul up there, recognizing their natural interests and the aluminum companies' interest in it.

And so I spent the first winter there. The Canadian Vice Consul was actually a Scotsman, a marine biologist from McGill. We did quite a study of the fisheries; I did the commercial aspects of it. This was the chief support of the island during the war.

There had been a small crab cannery, but the crabs had disappeared, so we converted it to shrimp. It was with a good deal of pride that when I came back to the States I'd go into Safeway and see "Produce of Greenland." They'd had little glass jars.

The big thing was the sale of their cod. It used to be that a lot of the cod was shipped to the Mediterranean countries.

The Portuguese, themselves, did a lot of fishing. In fact, up in North Greenland in Ngelaund [?] I went aboard a Portuguese fishing... They have a big mother ship. It's a hospital that is loaded with sardines going up, and those are used as chum to cast. They had a fleet of about 30 or 40 smaller vessels. The mother ship did all the meteorological work in the shipping.

It was quite an operation. They were still operating during the war. The reason they put in (they normally were not permitted to come in) was just to bury a man and, incidentally, to get some fresh water. They had a priest and all that. I tasted all the ports, the green ports.

So there was a great market for the cod, and particularly though, for the liver oil, not only cod liver, but halibut liver. These drew a terrific premium. They did great with them in the States. A lot of the cod went on to the West Indies, Spanish-speaking countries.
The base eventually became operative. An awful lot of planes were lost flying from Newfoundland because of the storms. We established a meteorological system, with people taking recordings every day. I used to put up a balloon every day. This was a fascinating experience.

Q: You were there until 1942, is that right?

WEST: I came down on a plane in spring of '42, just about two years after I'd first come up -- and left in very Arctic conditions. We had a hard time landing at Goose Bay because of all the snow and then came into a sweltering Washington, D.C., where I stayed for some time.

I was put on loan to the Navy, partly because after two years in Greenland I'd lived in Greenland longer than had any other American, and most recently was most familiar with a lot of the conditions up there.

Then I got an assignment, through Mr. Cumming, to Sweden. Of course I might say that originally they'd been saying, "Well, you'll go up for six months," but I'd spent two years up there. Well, I went to Stockholm.

C. GRAY BREAM
Consular Officer
Godthab (Nuuk), Greenland (1942-1944)

Born in Indiana in 1914, C. Gray Bream graduated from Midland College in 1936 and earned an MA and a PhD from the University of Chicago. Bream joined the Foreign Service in 1941 and served overseas in Nova Scotia, Greenland, Sweden, Pakistan, Amsterdam and Germany. He also worked in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research as well as the Arms Control and Development Agency. Bream was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1995.

Q: Yes, that was the system. In the summer of 1942 you left?

BREAM: The summer of 1942 I got a telegram saying report to Godthab Greenland. Nothing about how to get there, just a signed transfer to Godthab [in southeast] Greenland. I went to Washington to see what could be done and it was then incidentally that I had gotten the yellow fever shots. I had forgotten them when I went to Halifax. A very painful experience, I was sicker than a dog for a day after that. All I got were instructions to go to an airbase in Maine, I went up there by train, and there I was told that I could take a plane up to Goose Bay and Labrador and from there another plane would go up to Greenland and from there I would somehow or another find my way up to Godthab.

Q: Godthab is quite north isn't it? Where is Godthab?

BREAM: Not that far north. It was about a third of the way up the [eastern] coast. Do you want all of this story about Greenland?

Q: Yes, yes I do. I try to get back to that era.

BREAM: Well, there I was, I knew nothing. I hitchhiked a ride from that base in Maine. I'll never forget, I walked into the Operations Office and I had some kind of papers to indicate my assignment and that the military was supposed to look after me I guess. The chap sitting across

from me looked at me for a little while and said "Excuse me." He left the room and he was gone for about 10 minutes and he came back and he said "There's some question about that ring that you're wearing." I had an Indian ring with a Indian swastika on the side of it and he wanted an explanation of why I was wearing a ring with a swastika on it. [laughter] I explained it to his satisfaction. We flew to Gander and from there to South Base and from there I caught a Coast Guard ice breaker that was going up the [southwest] coast and delivered me to Godthab. At the time the war broke out, or rather at the time that Denmark was occupied, I should say...

Q: That would have been in the spring of 1940.

BREAM: Yes. Greenland was cut off, the colony of Greenland was very tightly administered from Denmark. They had two districts. There was North Greenland and there was South Greenland and each one had an official designated as Governor. I should add that all of the supplies for Greenland - sugar, flour, everything came from Denmark and everything produced there, which didn't amount to much besides dried codfish, went back to Denmark. With the war, that was cut off. The supervision of Denmark passed to the Danish ambassador in Washington and they set up a purchasing agency in New York. They brought the Governor of North Greenland down to supervise that operation and then made the Governor of South Greenland the head of the whole operation in Greenland. He was stationed in Godthab.

Our interest in Greenland was of two kinds: one, I don't recall or never really knew all of the details of this, was the idea that we should establish air bases there so that if England fell the remnants of its air force could be evacuated by way of Greenland, New Finland or Iceland to the United States. As it turned out, England didn't fall. As a matter of fact, the bases weren't completed in time to enable it to be of any help. The bases were maintained there and then the idea became that we could ferry planes from the U.S. to England. That was tried without much success. In fact, I knew of two flights that went through there, P- 38s which had no guidance systems, they were being shepherded by a larger plane, a C- 54 I think, they got separated in a storm and a number of the planes were lost, so they gave up on that operation.

Furthermore, in a place called Avigaat [in southeast] Greenland, there was a cryolite mine. Cryolite was a very odd sort of mineral which was found in only a couple of other places in the world. One place, I think, was in Arizona. At the time it was used as a flux in the refining of aluminum, and was also used for the enamel on kitchen pots and oddly enough as an insecticide. But the main use was for refining aluminum. This was critical because we were just developing aluminum production and we needed that cryolite for the flux in the refining of the aluminum. Later they developed a synthetic substitute. During the war, cryolite was critical. There was even concern that the Germans might try to take this over. If not for their own use, at least to cut off [supplies to] the U.S. So we maintained an artillery establishment at Avigaat, manned by about 500 men. We had a base at South Base, in North Base, and another base on the east coast on Greenland at Angmagssalik, which was primarily a weather station. The consulate in Greenland functioned as a liaison between the local administration and the military. That was about all we did.

Q: How did you find the local establishment there?

BREAM: Godthab itself had a population of several hundred, probably 45 or 50 Danes. They had a little hospital there with a Danish doctor and several Danish nurses, a Danish church with a pastor and his wife, a Danish school teacher, and then the Mayor of the town and a manager of the store which handled the supplies of the Greenlanders and so forth. The rest of the population were called Greenlanders. Most of them had some mixture of Scotch and Danish from 300 years before. We didn't call them Eskimos there. They were Greenlanders. At the time I arrived, we had a consul, a vice consul whom I replaced [he had already departed], and then a clerk. There were the three of us there. The consul was replaced a few months later by another man.

Q: How long were you there?

BREAM: I was there for a total of two years. A little over two years, but while I was there, I went on home leave. I got back to Casper, Wyoming, and I had an appendectomy. Then I hitchhiked my way back to Greenland, but I spent three months getting to my post. I think I set a record en route to post. When I got from Washington to the South Base in Greenland, but from there it was another story. This was in the winter time. I got as far as Avigaat which was where the cryolite mine was and I was there for six weeks and finally an ice breaker came through and took me up to a little emergency landing field which had been established 50 miles south of Godthab, and from there I was picked up by a local motor boat which took me to Godthab. I've been three months en route from Washington to Godthab. [laughter] Needless to say, I wasn't really needed.

Q: It doesn't sound like there was much going on. Don't I recall story about a German meteorologist there?

BREAM: We had one flap. A German meteorologist was floating around East Greenland, moving around by dog sled apparently, and we were called upon in connection with the local administration in Greenland to arrange for somebody to go over and look for this character. As I recall, they never found him but it was quite a flap for awhile. We also had another occasion when a flying boat, PBY, a Catalina, I guess they were, was flying down the coast to Greenland in foggy weather and they flew right into the edge of the icecap and stuck there. The plane was undamaged. They were just stuck, propeller's going around and they weren't going anywhere. [laughter] We were called upon again by the local administration to get a dog team to come down from the north and bring these guys off of the icecap. It turned out that before the dog team could get there, they figured out where they were. It was just a few miles from Avigaat and they walked out on their own power. [laughter]

Q: It must have been a little bit difficult to keep up one's spirit and everything else, by sitting out there.

BREAM: I was able to read War and Peace among other things. [laughter] I tried to maintain correspondence with friends in the United States. The turnaround was normally about three months. Because during the winter there was no contact by ship, the PBYs could come in, and did every few weeks, and they would take out our mail from reports to the Department such as they were. It was pretty isolated.

End of Reader