NEW CALEDONIA

COUNTRY READER
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ROBERT LYLE BROWN
Principal Officer
Noumea (1944-1948)

Robert Lyle Brown entered the Foreign Service in 1944. His career included positions in Morocco, Japan, Taiwan, and Washington, DC. Mr. Brown was interviewed by Charles S. Kennedy in 1990.

Q: *You had a very interesting first assignment, almost unique. You went to Noumea, New Caledonia from 1944-1948. Did you get any training before you went overseas?*

BROWN: We met in the old War Department Building which had become the new State Department which is now the old State Department which is the new Executive Office Building near the White House. We were in a training class on the ground floor of about twenty-five new Foreign Service officers. A fellow by the name of Foster, a former Consul General who had served in South Africa. He had picked up some of the Southern African brogue. We had to learn accounts, visa and passport issuances and all the other Foreign Service functions. We had two or three books to work with, called "Foreign Service Regulations." That was it. We had tests and we had five weeks of training. I had said that I be assigned overseas where the troops were. I didn't care where or what as long as it was near troops. When the assignments were posted, I saw Paris and a lot of places I knew. And then there was Noumea. Nobody knew where Noumea was. I didn't ask the head of the course because he would have told me to go to the library. So I went down the hall where there were a lot of Foreign Service old-timers who talked in a very precise manner. I asked one whether he knew where Noumea was. He looked at me in complete disdain. I told him that I had just been assigned there. He said: "In that case, you should certainly know that it is in New Caledonia." I thanked him profusely, although I still didn't have the vaguest idea where that was. I finally went to the library to find out where I had been assigned. I did get near

the troops and it was an absolutely unique experience because it was a one man post. Eventually, our Embassy in Australia gave up on trying to keep the New Hebrides because I got too far ahead of them on my reporting. It recommended, and the Department agreed, that the New Hebrides be put under my consular jurisdiction. I reported directly to Washington. I had the privilege of signing my own name to the telegrams. I had no one to consult. I had no telephones. I was the pouch clerk, the communications officer who encrypted and decrypted messages, the visa issuing officer--which was a struggle in itself because the requirements at that time required 51 percent Caucasian blood and I was in a melting pot. We had a De Gaullist appointed as governor of the Island. The De Gaullists did not like Americans that much in any event. We had the Army and Navy making certain presumptive moves because they were bigger than everybody else on the Island, in including the government. There were as many as 100 ships sitting out in the port at one time. So I had a lot of seaman-shipping work. I also had to negotiate on behalf of the military on things that had to be done or trying to protect the military while the French were trying to move in.

Q: *Give us an illustration of the problems created by our military.*

BROWN: For example, they wanted to expand their bases, because they needed more room, or they wanted to move some heavy equipment over some roads which were then left in gross disrepair or the military decided to go on a Sunday to shoot some deer and shot some cows also or you had a murder by an American Colonel of a Polynesian native. On that one, I was called at three o'clock in the morning. I was the first person on the scene and kept the French out of it until I found out the facts. Then I had to resolve the matter. It was a potpourri of things. I had US Navy ships coming into the New Caledonian waters without permission after the war was over. I had not been advised and neither had the New Caledonian government. I then had to try to pick up the pieces. The Navy had a big base with a lot of people. I was only twenty-four when I went to Noumea, but I was a lot older when I left.

I had to keep the accounts for all the other US government agencies having offices in Noumea, including the Economic Cooperation Administration and the War Shipping Administration. There were about six different government agencies for whom I had to keep the accounts, pay the bills, write orders, and implement all the telegraphic transfers and other communications.

Q: *How did you deal with the French government in New Caledonia?*

BROWN: It was one of the times that I had the proper insight. I was smart enough to know that I had a lot to learn and didn't have many resources at my command. If I couldn't get people to work with me and help me, I knew that many matters would not proceed as well as they should. We had admirals and generals by the dozens, flying in and out. I had studied French in college, although I never had used it orally, but I could communicate with the French government officials, including the Mayor and his entourage. At times my lack of experience was a handicap, but my sincerity, youth, good faith and the will--never say "No", but rather "I'll try"--worked out very well. People might assume that I was taken advantage of because of the drawbacks. Some could have taken advantage of me, but I found that the relationship with both the US military and with the French, including two governors, Chiefs of Staff, the French military, and the local

government, were excellent. The good working relationship with the military was to pay off subsequently when the bases were closed.

As I look back on it, I now realize how lucky I was and how well it worked out, simply because of attitude.

Q: *Were the French officials fighting with the American military?*

BROWN: They were not fighting the Americans because they too were in a far away place with a war going on, but you can imagine what happened with all of the Navy ships in port coming and going and the aircraft landing and taking off and all the good things--the Army-Navy clubs not to mention the war material. The importation of civilian goods to maintain the Red Cross and the Army personnel was passively agreed to by the French except when they got pushed and things got so gross that they had pull the system up to let them know there was a French government. Our military of course couldn't wait and always had to things immediately. When the war in the Pacific ended and Americans began to leave it become evident that many did not want to see the US withdraw but rather replace France as the political power. The "colonials," as differentiated from the "metropolitan" coming directly from France to manage the country (both politically and economically), wanted us to stay (basically for economic reasons); the indentured laborers from Indonesia and Indochina felt that we (the US) was a friend and that their interests rested far more with us than the French, and the Melanesian natives who considered their interests would be better under the Americans than the French. In short we had earned the respect of a variety of nationals, many of whom wanted us to stay. I remember well sending dispatch to the Department on this subject and concluding that the bottom line for the French was that their heads said "yes" but their hearts said "no." The bottom line was that after all that had transpired we were departing a Pacific island nation where we had gained the respect of a varied number of foreign nationals.

Q: *How did the departure of the Americans take place?*

BROWN: When the war in Europe was over--VE Day--that was a big deal for us in the Pacific, but we still had a war to fight in the Pacific. On the other hand, the war had continued to move through the Solomons to the north and we were becoming a supply and training base and even those services were beginning to move north and our presence was being drawn down--fewer ships, fewer personnel. At the beginning, we were in one of the centers of the action, but as time passed, so did the role of New Caledonia. When VJ Day came in August, 1945, everybody wanted to get home, including me. My commitment to myself was that the day the war was over, I would send a cable of resignation. But there was too much to do. When the American military started to move--it can move into battle and out of it pretty quickly. This was appropriately disconcerting to the French because all of a sudden they were left with roads to empty bases, telegraph lines going to unpopulated areas and docks sitting empty. The whole infrastructure was being pulled up and put on ships. Away it went. It got almost to unruly at times. We had to develop a program to determine who stayed behind so that the property could be disposed of appropriately. We had legal problems because, many of them not having been resolved during the war. That is when the negotiations with the French became intense. I didn't have the resources--the military lawyers--to call upon. The Coast Guard wasn't around to put the seamen

into the brigs or the Army to put its men into stockades. I became the keeper of all these problems.

I bought a Consulate while I was there. I was so conscientious (at that time) that I read everything I could get my hands on, even in French. I used to get the Federal Register in the pouch and reviewed it carefully. It was because of this dedication I saw a statement on the sale of surplus property for tangible property to foreign governments. I wired the Department referring to the appropriate citation in the Federal Register and asked whether I could undertake a negotiation to exchange our surplus property for a Consulate building and residence. We were renting very inadequate quarters down on the dock. The Department gave me carte blanche, so I found a builder who had a building partly constructed who agreed to modify the structure to accommodate a residence and the required office space. I bought it for $25,000 worth of trucks, which probably would never had returned to the US and may well have ended up in the sea and $15,000 worth of telephone poles and wires which were spread throughout the island, which we obviously would never have taken. So I got the Consulate built and the military gave me enough silver and table settings for 100 people and a music room with a piano. I had a dumb waiter to bring the food to the formal dining room. From the Consulate one had a view of the whole city. It was a beautiful Consulate which we got at practically no cost.

Q: *What was the nature of your political reporting towards the end of the war and after the armistice?*

BROWN: I remember that every year I used to get a cable saying that "Performance report on Brown not received. Please telegraph over-all rating and send complete report by next air-pouch." Every year I was so naive that I would send back a cable saying "Brown in charge." Signed "Brown." If I had to do it all over again, I would have written some beautiful prose about myself. That is the only report that was requested of me.

I did a lot of the things --I had many instances of life and death and other difficult experiences-- on that island. I never had time to report them; they solved them. That was enough. There was other work to be done. When I had a window of opportunity, I started to record my observations. I wrote a tome on the anthropological, psychological, cultural and political circumstances that obtained in New Caledonia and what those implied for the future. I got all kinds of accolades on that. When I returned to Washington, some people didn't want to see me because New Caledonia was far away; others asked that I come in to see them. They didn't want to ask me what happened on the island and what I did, but they wanted to discuss that report. It was a lesson to me because obviously the Department was a political animal and the other things were "nuts and bolts" that should be solved in the vineyards. There was no real recognition of what I had done, except I had a Foreign Service Inspector come to New Caledonia and he wrote back a report which said that he had never seen anybody who had to work so hard and who got so little recognition. He recommend a two-grade promotion immediately. That helped my morale because if he hadn't come, I would still be at the same grade and still in New Caledonia: Believe it or not after nearly four years, uninterrupted years, the Department perfunctorily authorized "home leave and return" orders.

Q: *You were there until 1948. How long did we keep that post after that?*

BROWN: The South Pacific Commission started its work while I was stationed in Noumea. That became a focus point for me because I truly believed that we should not have gotten caught in another confrontation or war in the Pacific area without giving greater consideration to the islands there. I had learned that there was so much to know about the Pacific. If you live in a little island and people come in and out and you listen. There was even a Cardinal from the Solomon Islands who came to Noumea and I had to fingerprint him, which made me a little nervous, in order to give him a visa to come to the United States. He suggested to me places where ships could land easiest with the least danger. I wanted to get the South Pacific Commission set up and I thought it would be great if it were headquartered in Noumea, even though I would not have been there. I even made a recommendation that we have a roving consul who would go around to the various to these Pacific islands every two or three years to talk with people, learn about problems and pick up maps of the waters. There was a lot available because island people were, at that time, open people. They are very generous; and I think that is true of most of those residing in the Pacific islands. Nothing happened to this recommendation. When I was in Washington, I put a very long proposal in a "Suggestion Box". I went to various agencies. I went to CIA, to DoD. Everybody said that it was a great idea but no one would pick up the initiative. Eventually, three years later, a panel was convened to consider my "Suggestion Box" proposal.

When the Department decided to issue "Home Leave and Return" orders, I thought that was not proper and asked whether there wasn't an other assignment available. I had married a New Zealand girl while in New Caledonia. In that period one had to resign if one wanted to marry a foreigner--especially when they spoke better English than I did! I sent in my resignation but was given permission to marry. We were married by the Mayor of the City and the Governor's daughter was there and they opened the church for us which had been left by the military. It was a great event. In any case, in response to my inquiry about another assignment, the Department sent me a cable saying that I had been "administratively" assigned to the Department. So we packed our few belongings, which was not that big a deal, and shipped them to San Francisco. When I got to Washington, I was asked what I had done with my effects. When I told them that I sent them to San Francisco, they said that I was not authorized to that. I told them that I had looked up every regulation for the definition of the term "administratively assigned" and I could not find it. They checked and couldn't find it either. Their (personnel) answer: Well, you shipped your stuff without authorization. You have a real problem and we will have to reassign you so that we won't have more trouble. So why don't you go over to the Department of Commerce and take a course for eight weeks. You have been away for a long time and need a refresher." I thought that was a fair conclusion. Everybody in the course got per-diem, except me. I wasn't making that much. I had starting salary of $2,500 per annum and had not been promoted to much more. When I asked why I was not eligible for per diem like all the other State participants, the answer was that I had been "administratively assigned" to the Department and therefore not eligible for per diem. I never did receive the per diem and paid for staying in Washington out of my own pocket, which wasn't very deep. Eventually, we went to Casablanca.

CLAUDE G. ROSS

Principal Officer
Noumea (1949-1952)

Ambassador Claude G. Ross was born in Illinois in 1917. He received a B.A. from the University of Southern California and entered the Foreign Service in 1940. Subsequently, he served in Mexico, Ecuador, Greece, New Caledonia, Lebanon, Egypt, Guinea, the Central African Republic, Haiti, and Tanzania. Ambassador Ross was interviewed by Ambassador Horace G. Torbert in 1989.

Q: Yes, that's where I've heard the name. You went to Nouméa next?

ROSS: Yes. Nothing ever happened easily, you know. In the fall of '48, I got home-leave orders. It wasn't convenient for the post that I leave immediately, so I left in February of '49. In those days, you were able to travel by ship. By that time we had a second son, who had been born in Athens. We traveled on one of the Four Aces, not the Constitution or the Independence. Four days out, we put into Genoa. A friend of mine who had served with me in Athens, who had since been transferred to Germany, happened to be in Genoa when a cable came in from Athens to the Consulate General for me. When we docked at Genoa, he was on the dock side there, waving this cable. He came aboard, and this was a telegram transferring me to Nouméa.

Here I am, four days out of Athens, had left a household full of furniture there, with Gerry Drew in it house-sitting for me.

Q: When were you supposed to go?

ROSS: It didn't say. It just said I was transferred as principal officer, and I was to go. I knew where Nouméa was, I knew a little bit about it. I think Andrea may have known where it was. I'm surprised the Department didn't hear the commotion that went up. (Laughs)

Anyway, I was of two minds. We spent the rest of the voyage home, fretting about this completely unexpected move. I didn't know what the implications were. I didn't think it represented any dissatisfaction with my work, because I had just been promoted to class 4 at that point. But I didn't know what it was all about, and it certainly wasn't anything that I had figured in my calculations. It was very inconvenient for obvious reasons.

I went home and took counsel from a number of people, including Rob McClintock, about whether I should try to contest this or not. In the end, I decided not to. When it was obvious that I was going to go, the Department suddenly decided that I ought to have a little training in commercial work, so they sent me to a short course at the Department of Commerce with about 20 other people, which consisted of about six weeks here in Washington in training, then two weeks at a field office, in San Francisco in my case because I was going to California for home leave. So I went through all of that.

Then I went to California, had my leave, and then proceeded on at that stage alone to Nouméa, to settle in. One reason I went alone is that I wasn't at all sure what housing was going to be like. I got out there in August of '49, but in the fall of '48, there had been a hurricane that had taken the

roof off of the third floor of the Consulate. We had a combined office and residence, office on the lower floor, residence quarters on the top two floors. Well, the third floor was not usable because it didn't have a roof. This had happened ten months before, but still no roof. Just a kind of jury-rigged affair.

Q: No roof and no appropriation for a roof.

ROSS: That's right. So I went out alone. I was met by the non-career vice consul who was holding the fort there, an officer by the name of William Snidow. I had a few days overlap with him, and then he took off. Though I was "principal" officer, I was at that point the only officer, with an American clerk, who was an old master sergeant who had been out in the Pacific during World War II and had mustered out there, having married the daughter of one of the local merchants. Then I had an Australian clerk-secretary, and that was the staff.

My first order of business, apart from official duty, was to find a place to live. There wasn't much going. Eventually I did get a place owned by the nickel company. It was not very attractive, a cement block, but at least it was substantial. Since there were hurricanes, that was one of the things I was interested in. So I got this, and my family came out and joined me about a month later.

My work in Nouméa really fell into three parts. One was doing consular work in Nouméa itself. One was reporting on other territories in the district, because this district was the largest consular district in the world, most of it water, obviously. But it had about 14 island territories, some of them British, some of them French, and New Hebrides, a British and French condominium.

Q: Was there a significant American population?

ROSS: The office was in Nouméa simply because Nouméa was the headquarters of the South Pacific Commission, which had been established by an agreement amongst six countries having dependent territories in the Pacific, in 1947. They set up the secretariat general headquarters in Nouméa, in what was known as the Pentagon, which was Admiral [William F.] Halsey's headquarters just outside of Nouméa in a place called Anse Vata. So that's why the office was there. We had had, until 1948, three consular posts in the South Pacific, but Congress, in one of its economy waves, decided they were only going to have one. Then where would it be? The consulate in Nouméa had been established just before the war. The one in Suva had been established a considerable time earlier, but in this century, I think. The one in Tahiti had been there since about 1830. Suva was where we had most of our commercial interests, and that had the best communications in the area. Tahiti was where most of the Americans were. I must say they ranged from beachcombers to the black-sheep sons of wealthy American families, a whole spectrum.

My immediate concern in New Caledonia, as far as the consular work was concerned, consisted of commercial reporting. New Caledonia was highly mineralized and had nickel mines and chromium mines. The nickel mines in New Caledonia in the old days, at the close of the last century, had been the leading nickel producers in the world. Then I think Canada took over.

Q: Were some of these mines French-owned?

ROSS: They were all French-owned.

Q: We were interested in the output.

ROSS: We were interested in the output. I reported on that. I reported on labor conditions. The population of New Caledonia in those days was about 60,000. It wasn't very large. Half of it was indigenous, Melanesians, not Polynesian. They were kinky haired, black, monolithic types. A quarter of the population was French. In addition to French officials from Metropolitan France, there were French merchant families that had been in New Caledonia for several generations, and then there were the descendants of the old French fonçats, either common criminals or political prisoners who were sent there after the commune in Paris in 1870. So you never asked anybody about his antecedents, because so many of them were descended from these people and were very sensitive about it.

Q: They weren't proud of it.

ROSS: Some of them were, some of them weren't. You didn't know whose ancestors were the criminals and whose were the political prisoners. Then the other quarter of the population was Tonkinese and Javanese who had come there before the Second World War as indentured labor to work in the mines. Their terms had expired during the war, but obviously there was no way of repatriating them. So they were still there in substantial numbers. It was a very, very interesting kind of society to report on.

Q: What was your transportation? Did you have your own airplane?

ROSS: Obviously, as far as the bulk of my consular work was concerned, citizenship and visa work and all that, it had to do mostly with people in outlying territories. There had been, until just before I got there, a French airline that had flown out of Southeast Asia and into Nouméa and Tahiti, but that went out of business. So there was no air connection with Tahiti. There was with Fiji. When I came in, Pan American was operating, and Quantas, the Australian airline, was operating. So when I went to Fiji, I normally took Quantas because they flew into Suva. They had old Sunderland flying boats, these double-decked things that flew at about 75 miles an hour, and with a head-wind, you practically stood still in the air. They never flew above about 2,000 or 3,000 feet, which was under cloud cover, not terribly comfortable. Pan American flew into the other side of Fiji, into Nadi International Airport. Nouméa was on the Nadi, Honolulu, L.A. or San Francisco run. So to go to Fiji and to New Hebrides, I went by air.

I only got to Tahiti twice in two years that I was in Nouméa. The first time I heard that there was an airline that was inaugurating service between Honolulu and Bora-Bora, which was an adjacent island to Tahiti. So I got authorization from the Department to fly from Nouméa to Honolulu, where I took this inaugural flight all the way back down on the other edge of the triangle down to Bora-Bora. There I took an island steamer overnight to Papeete.

I had expected to spend a week or ten days until this inaugural flight made its second swing, and I would go back to Honolulu. But as it turned out, there again as I arrived in Tahiti, I was met by a man waving a cable. He was our lessee, who rented the old consular premises. What was the cable? It was a message telling me I was about to be inspected in Nouméa! By the time I made this trip, I had a second officer, a career vice consul there. I expected therefore to be able to stay in Tahiti until this plane came back. Now I didn't know whether I could afford to wait that long.

So I asked immediately about a steamer schedule, and found that within four days' time, there was one coming through, one of the Messageries Maritimes ships out of Marseille, coming through the canal and stopping in Tahiti, then stopping in Nouméa, then Sydney.

So I had to do, in four days, what I would have taken a week or ten days to do, and I got practically no sleep the entire time, because the Americans were all over the place. I even had to crawl into a thatch hut on hands and knees to see one man who was in an advanced stage of elephantiasis, with swollen limbs, an American citizen who had been out there for years.

Anyway, I did my work and grabbed this ship, and went back. To give you an idea of the size of the district, it took eight days full sailing to get back to Nouméa--no stops. Nine days on the calendar, because you cross the Date Line, of course. Eight days full sailing.

I got back and cranked up for inspection. E. Tomlin Bailey was my inspector. Did you ever know Tom Bailey?

Q: I met him.

ROSS: He was the inspector. It was his first time out inspecting. He inspected us and, happily, we came through very well. His inspection was very useful, because I had a couple of problems he was able to help me with.

I might say that consular work, dealing with these outlying areas, was very difficult. Most of the Americans with whom I had to do the passport and citizenship work were in Tahiti, where mail took a long time to arrive. There was cable traffic, but a lot of documentation you couldn't get that way. We had all kinds of complicated cases, because the so-called Asiatic Bar zone still existed. Certain people born in that zone were not eligible to become American citizens, and therefore couldn't qualify as immigrants. I've forgotten all the details myself, except that it was an immense complication.

Proving paternity was another complication in a place like Tahiti.

Q: No birth records?

ROSS: People didn't bother to get married, and then they would want to bring their children to the States. How were you going to prove that a case was legitimate? So there were a fair number of cases, and a lot of them were really very complicated. We had a lot of interesting and difficult consular problems.

The other thing that I was concerned with was the South Pacific Commission, because I was an advisor the whole time I was there to the U.S. delegations that came down semi-annually for South Pacific Commission sessions. Then I was appointed a member of the working committee, which did things between sessions.

Q: Was this to settle territorial disputes?

ROSS: No, this was a precursor of Point Four by a year or so, because the commission had been established by these six countries, the U.S., the U.K., France, New Zealand, Australia, and The Netherlands, to provide economic and social development and health facilities to their territorial possessions, their non-self-governing territories in the area.

Q: And presumably to coordinate?

ROSS: And to coordinate the efforts, that's right. Have joint programs, coordinate efforts. There were these semi-annual sessions to go over the program. A lot of it, I was at the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh sessions while I was in Nouméa. At the first couple of sessions, there was a lot of housekeeping involved and getting the staff. Like every other international organization, there were national quotas regulating staff for the secretariat and the various functional programs.

Q: Were they actually conducting some sort of economic assistance programs?

ROSS: Yes.

Q: The commission itself?

ROSS: Yes, technical assistance. We had a Secretary General, then a man in charge of health programs, a man in charge of economic development, a man in charge of social development and educational things, with staff all headquartered in the commission headquarters, making trips to the field as the occasion warranted. So I did a lot with the Commission.

When it came time for me to leave, the Department, in a moment of aberration, forgetting that I had been out almost 12 years, was going to assign me to Hanoi as principal officer. Then they suddenly realized I had to come back to Washington. So they called me back. By that time, on the basis of these two years, the Department regarded me as a colonial expert. (Laughs)

Q: We were just getting you back to the Department. You mentioned being colonial officer, but you mentioned you had something you wanted to add on the Nouméa experience.

ROSS: Yes. There are a couple of things that I think are of some interest. When I got a second officer at the end of my first year in Nouméa, he had no housing. I finally got from the French colonial government a lease on a property that we, in our generosity, had given to the colonial government when we evacuated New Caledonia at the end of World War II. We put the second officer and his wife in it, but then it was a question of furnishing it. On one of these working sessions of the commission when I had to go to Sydney, Australia, my wife went with me, and I got authority from the Department to buy furniture. So in the two weeks that I was there on the

working commission, she was over there scouring the furniture establishments in Sydney for furniture, which we bought and charged to the American consulate general in Sydney. They had received authority to do this. They eventually shipped all the stuff back to us, so that our second officer had furniture.

I also had gotten two American secretaries by that time, and they lived on the second floor of the consulate. By that time we had a decent roof put on, but we demolished the third floor.

I discovered at some point that I apparently was sent to Nouméa, among other things, because I spoke French, but I also discovered that I was about the fourth officer that had been tapped for this, including several fairly senior Class 3 types. It was a matter of what the Germans call sohadenfreude, the delight in somebody else's troubles, when I later learned that these people never got promoted again.

Q: So that proved that there's still that discipline.

ROSS: Right. Anyway, I thought it was worth noting.

Q: Yes.

LEWIS M. WHITE
Vice Consul, Principal Officer
Noumea (1955-1957)

Lewis M. White was born in August 1921 in Virginia. After serving in the US Army from 1943-1946 he finished his bachelor's degree at Georgetown University. His career included positions in Colombia, New Caledonia, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Morocco. Mr. White was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in June 2001.

Q: In '54, where did you go?

WHITE: In '54, they said they were sending me to New Caledonia as vice consul; now that's about as far as I could go away from home. As I have said, I didn't really care as long as they didn't send us to a communist country. My wife would have been very nervous in a communist country, with her father being with the Pentagon. They could have nabbed her, and she didn't like communists because they'd had a terrible time with the communists and Nazis back in Czechoslovakia. I disliked them as much as she did, but I would have gone to a communist country if the Department had wanted me to go before I was married. And if they still wanted me to go I would have had to arrange for my wife to wait for me in the U.S.

I told them I'd go anyplace, and I thought it would be very nice in New Caledonia. Dan Montenegro, the consul, wrote me a nice letter. He said we had to cover the South Pacific, all the

islands there that were British or French possessions. He said we had to travel a lot through the area and I thought it would be very exciting.

Q: You better explain where New Caledonia is for somebody who might not be geographically aware.

WHITE: I would say it'd be about 1200 miles east of Brisbane in Australia. It's an island about 200 miles long, 40 miles wide. About half the population was French and half Melanesian. It had a lot of French culture there. Excellent French restaurants. We got along well with the French.

Q: Was New Caledonia part of the French commonwealth?

WHITE: Yes, it was a French overseas territory. They had a *conseil general,* a local legislative body with mixed French and Melanesian membership. The main decisions were made in Paris and the government was mainly in the hands of a French governor and a French staff. At present they have more autonomy than they had then and in about ten years there is an agreement to have a referendum on independence.

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At the time neither I or my predecessors predicted that the islands that were in our jurisdiction, like the Solomon Islands, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the New Hebrides Tonga, Fiji, and French Oceania (including Tahiti would become independent countries. Now the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, the Gilbert Islands, the Ellice Islands, Tonga, and Fiji are all independent. But New Caledonia and French Oceania remain dependencies of France.

Q: Was New Caledonia having problems between the Melanesians, and who else was on there?

WHITE: Well, there were the people of French descent, the *colons*, the one's that had been there for years. Some of them came, they claimed, as guards when the island was used as a penal colony. I don't recall much agitation for independence then or any conflict between the local French and the Melanesians. Now there is an independence movement by the Melanesians and there has been some agitation.

Q: Were there Tonkinese there at the time?

WHITE: We had some of them, too. They were workers in the mines, different places. You know Bloody Mary back in Mitchener's book *Tales of the South Pacific*. I loved the book and it was made into one of my favorite musicals. It dramatized the South Pacific for me.

Q: The play by Rogers and Hart.

WHITE: I had an Indonesian in the consulate as one of my main assistants; he was very effective, very good.

Q: What was the setup? Was there a consul general?

WHITE: No, we didn't have anybody above us. There was just a consul and a vice consul. The Indonesian desk officer had the responsibility for the Pacific Islands. The Office of Dependent Area Affairs in the Department was followed developments closely and sent delegates to meetings of the South Pacific Commission.

Q: So you were the consul?

WHITE: I was the vice consul, at first, for the first year, but when Montenegro left, they made me the principal officer. Two inspectors came out when I was the sole officer there after Montenegro departed. They gave me a very good report and it was no doubt on their recommendation that I was named principal officer. After a few months Sam Wise was transferred from Palermo as vice consul. He came with his wife, Mary, and a baby daughter. We found a house for them to rent near the consulate. My wife and I had put so much work into the bungalow that we did not want to move. Housing was very hard to find in Noumea and I recommended to the inspectors that we should build housing for the staff if we stayed in Noumea instead of moving to Fiji. The employees of the South Pacific Commission had very nice homes that were owned by the Commission and I thought we should at least have something equivalent to what they had..

Q: What were the responsibilities?

WHITE: We traveled. We had the South Pacific Commission there; we were a sort of liaison with the South Pacific Commission; we attended their sessions, we kept an eye on them.

And then we had to travel to places like Fiji and Tahiti and give consular services and report on what was going on there. I visited the New Hebrides and reported on the situation there. I went to Fiji and Tahiti, reporting on those places and doing consular work. I visited the Solomon Islands. People come in, they want passports, they want visas. One thing or another. The Department wanted us to travel even more than we did travel. But the wives didn't like for us to be gone all the time.

Q: What were your main tasks? Were you basically reporting on what was happening?

WHITE: We reported on what was happening, but there was not really a whole lot happening. But I know in one case we had some Melanesian up in the New Hebrides - Espiritu Santo - he'd gone up into the high hills there hunting boars and found a skeleton and a crashed plane from World War II. There was a little bracelet that said Howie Falten.

So the French made a little coffin and sent all the remains down to us. We kept them in our storeroom and got in touch with the Pentagon and finally sent them to the U.S. I know the family were very glad to get them, but it wasn't Howie Falten, Howie Falten got out. The person flying with him was the one who was killed. That's a case where we were able to get somebody's remains back. After the plane crashed in World War II there were search expeditions but they never found the plane.

Q: Did you run into feeling, particularly from the islands, of nostalgia for World War II, when we were pumping a lot of aid and troops and money and everything else in those areas?

WHITE: I would think there would be a certain amount of that. Some Americans just stayed on there. When I went to Espiritu Santo, they said they had "million dollar point" where the Americans had shoved a great deal of equipment into the ocean rather than transport it back to the States. One of the locals there offered to take me scuba diving to see it all, but I just took his word for it that it was there. I asked the British district officer in Espiritu Santo if I could see the air field we used during World War II. He took me to see it and it was still in fairly good shape. I took photos. The British and French were very helpful on all of my trips.

We had a little bungalow in Noumea. It was built by a Navy captain during World War II for his own residence. He got court marshaled for it because he wasn't authorized to do it. So we inherited it as a place for the vice consul. It required a lot of work for my wife and me to make it habitable.

The New Caledonians anticipated that if the Japanese moved beyond Guadalcanal, New Caledonia would be next. One day they looked out and the harbor was full of American Naval vessels, and they knew they were saved. So they have a very good feeling toward the United States in New Caledonia. And the other islands I went to, too.

Q: Did you find that the French were at this time pretty touchy about Americans?

WHITE: They were, especially in 1956, when they had the war with Egypt over the Suez Canal. We had not trouble with the French we knew in New Caledonia. But there were some French who came down from Vietnam and seemed particularly hostile because they thought we had not done enough to aid them there.

Q: Suez crisis.

WHITE: We didn't support them in that war. We actually got together with the Russians and we called for a cease-fire. I had to travel through the Pacific and call on the different people, the governor of the Fiji Islands and the governor of Tahiti. The governor of Fiji, whom I had met in New Caledonia, invited me to a dinner. Some of the British expressed disappointment that we had not supported them in the Suez operation.

The governor of Tahiti invited me to a reception, with the dancing girls and native music. But he didn't seem to object one way or the other. I felt myself that we were probably right in doing what we did, because as soon as the French and Israelis and the British launched their attack on Egypt, the Russians thought, "Well, that gives us a free hand to launch an attack on Hungary, " so they moved into Hungary and put down the revolt against the government and communism there..

Q: It was not an easy time. Did you report essentially back to Paris, or straight to Washington, or how did it work?

WHITE: I usually reported to Washington. But in case somebody would request aid in the Solomon Islands, I would contact London because they had an AID office there that had responsibility for British possessions like the Solomon Islands..

Q: Were the Solomon Islands under the Australians at the time?

WHITE: No. The Solomon Islands were under the British. New Guinea was under the Australians. We didn't have any islands that belonged to Australia or New Zealand in our district, although we did visit them.

We had Tonga with the British, and Tonga is independent now. And Fiji is independent. We didn't have Western Samoa (it is independent now), because they were under New Zealand. And French Oceania is still a territory. But Tuvalu and Kiribati are independent. And Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides, is also independent. So it is a different situation now.

Actually there's been some excitement recently in the Fiji Islands. Indians are about 47% of the population, and they had an Indian prime minister. There was a revolt by the Fijians, because they don't want the Indians to take over the Fiji Islands. The Indians had been brought in years ago by the British to work on the sugar plantations.

I always reported on the situation. At that time, the Indians were getting to be the majority; a lot of them have left since then. But that's the sort of thing we would report on - the relationship between the Fijians and the Indians. The Indians couldn't own land. The Fijians owned the land; Indians would have to lease it. I met the Indian Commissioner in Fiji, a charming man, and he invited me to dinner.

I recommended that we move the consulate from New Caledonia to the Fiji Islands, because we owned land in the Fiji Islands and we didn't have any direct plane connection between the United States and New Caledonia as we had when the consulate was established. Mail would have to go by way of Australia and wait for a plane to New Caledonia. Quantas, the Australian airline, flew to New Caledonia every two weeks. The Fiji Islands were centrally located in our consular district and it was served by Pan American Airways. After I left, the consulate was moved to Fiji.

Q: How did you get around?

WHITE: We'd go to Australia and there get a plane for the Fiji Islands. And then we'd take Teal, the New Zealand airline, and go to Western Samoa, the Cook Islands and then Tahiti. I visited the New Hebrides by boat, taking my wife with me. I also visited Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands by boat because I did it on the way home. No one else had been there from our consulate. Lady Gutch, the governor's wife, whom we had met in New Caledonia, invited us for lunch and put her car at our disposal to visit Henderson Field, that we had used during the war. The Governor was absent at the time. Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, was a new town established at the end of World War II. The center of town was really just a circle of Chinese stores.

Q: At that time, it was a little early, I take it there weren't men who had served there coming back to look over the place? Veterans - Guadalcanal.

WHITE: We were invited by another family for dinner in Honiara. Everyone seemed to have a very high opinion of the Americans and how we cleaned the Japanese out of Guadalcanal. I didn't hear of any veterans returning at that time. It probably was a little early for anyone to want to come back to where they no doubt had a very bad memory.

Q: When you would go to one of these islands, like the Cook Islands, would you let them know beforehand that you were coming?

WHITE: I wouldn't do it in the Cook Islands because that was a New Zealand colony, but I would in the case of Fiji. And in Tahiti. I would notify people I was coming. They would broadcast the news on the radio for the people in outlying islands to come for consular services.

Q: What sorts of things would you be doing?

WHITE: Well, there was visa work; you give visas, you give passports, notarials. And we'd report on whatever conversations we had. We'd usually call on the top officials if we could get an appointment and I always did get one..

There was an Office of Dependent Areas in the Department; they were interested in more participation by the local people in the government, and insurgencies of any sort. There really weren't, that we knew of. The Melanesians have become much more active in New Caledonia since I left.

Q: How much social life while you were in New Caledonia? What would you and your wife do?

WHITE: Quite a bit. The French invited us; we didn't have a very good place for entertaining, but we would entertain in a restaurant that would cater things for us. On the Fourth of July we would have receptions at a local club there. We did have small dinners in our bungalow.

We knew the French very well. The French can be prickly on occasion, but my wife speaks fluent French, and I did all right. We've always been rather fond of the French we know.

Q: You were there until what, '57?

WHITE: Yes, that was '55,'56,'57 we came back. And that was kind of unusual, too, because my wife - I didn't realize it at the time - what a fear of flying she had. Now she always reads these books on fear of flying, and she's gotten more or less used to it.

But we had a chance of going back by boat. So I took the chance of going back by boat, and it just took 12 passengers; that's the way I got to the Solomon Islands. At first they didn't want to take us on the boat because we had a 2-year-old child, my wife was eight months pregnant, and the ship had no doctor. They had to go to Australia and load up, they had to go to New Guinea

and load up; it was a Norwegian tramp steamer. It took us about seven weeks to get back to the States.

I thought that the Department would not like me taking so long to return and that I would have to rush to Washington. I hurried back to report to duty, and I think that was about May or June, and they said, "We don't have a thing in the world for you to do until you start at Harvard in September." I would have come back in a more leisurely way if I'd known that.

SAMUEL G. WISE
Vice Consul
Noumea (1956-1957)

Samuel G. Wise, Jr. was born in Illinois on May 11, 1928. He received his BA from the University of Virginia in 1951 and his MIA from Columbia University in 1953. He served in the US Marine Corps from 1946 to 1948. His career has included positions in Italy, Russia, and Czechoslovakia. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1995.

Q: Then you went off to New Caledonia. Before you went to New Caledonia, outside of the fact that you were an ex-Marine, so some of these names rang bells for anybody who followed World War II. But did you know anything about New Caledonia at all?

WISE: Not a great deal, no. I was in China, just sort of passing through the Pacific on the way there. I did spend some time in the Marine Corps in [ ] as well. But just the general, superficial, historical knowledge of its importance during the War.

Q: Can you describe where New Caledonia is?

WISE: Well, as I recall without looking at the map again, it's about 1,500 miles to the east of Brisbane, Australia. It's not in the middle of the Pacific, but it's probably the first major island as you're going from Australia to the United States. Then you run into Fiji and Pago Pago and Tahiti. It was quite a ways. It was funny how our ship arrived. We took a ship from Ticino to Sydney, Australia and then had to take another ship out to New Caledonia. So, it was about six weeks before we got there. They were so happy to get somebody...

Q: What was the situation? First, what were the dates you were in New Caledonia?

WISE: Well, it was the summer of '56 til, I guess, the fall of '57.

Q: What was the situation when you were there?

WISE: It's a French colony, a territory. It was run by a Governor General. It's population was primarily Melanesians and was being threatened to some extent in population terms by an influx of Indo-Chinese that had come down there, particularly after the war. The main industry was

nickel. At that time, Cuba was leading nickel producer and New Caledonia was second, so the economy depended a great deal on the nickel market. It was run as a French colony. I had the feeling that, down the road, there were going to be problems with the native population and the colonial status. But at that time, it was a very subtle situation. I guess the reason we maintained a Consulate their, the United States, was because it was the only one in the whole South Pacific at that time. It was important as an economic entity and also, it was the headquarters of the South Pacific Commission, which was the Commission that fought off all the major countries in the area, and tried to cooperate in economic and commercial ways.

Q: Did the area of the Consulate General extend to other Pacific islands?

WISE: It did. Incidentally, the Consulate had a perfect symmetry: two Vice Consuls, two American secretaries (one I think to keep company for the other) and two local employees.

Q: And a Consul?

WISE: No, that was it. There was a Consul previously, but the Department had trouble getting people out there. So I was Vice Consul during the period that I was there.

Q: Who was the other Vice Consul?

WISE: Jack White first, and then another fellow named Bob Shackleton. I don't know whether they're still in the Service or not. The work in the Consulate extended throughout the South Pacific, which made it such a wonderful job in a way. Basically, one Vice Consul was traveling almost all the time - one or the other. I was the Junior Vice Consul, but I did Consular work in Fiji. We used the old Pan Am office as our base. And Tahiti - we used to have a Consulate in Tahiti. It went way back to 1789 or something like that. One of the jobs I had, an unpleasant job, was to put the Consulate building up for sale. I dutifully did so, but almost suffered as a consequence. The place where I was staying was this hotel where this group of what they call "bourees," these thatched huts that they had done up rather well. And one night, mine caught on fire. I got out alright, but I heard all the people saying, "This is the wrath of Queen [Pumare] against the Americans for selling the Consulate, which was given to the Americans." And we were trying to sell it. Well, I got out all right, but I was there about two weeks. They had flying boat connections... They didn't have an airport in those days. You flew around in these big flying boats. So, I went there, and to the Samoas, so it was a wonderful introduction to that area at an age where you can appreciate it.

Q: What was the work?

WISE: It was basically consular work. One of the cases I had in Tahiti was where an American doctor had come over and gotten himself into a terrible accident. Communications were such that he need a lot of help and I tried to do it. It was a mixed Consular pack of things. Some protection, some deaths...

Q: Did you have protection welfare cases of American beach combers or were they around?

WISE: Yes, but not in any great numbers. There was a whole set of film makers out there. I remember, in particular, one American outfit - they were willing to help with French and this and that. So, you got involved in what was going on.

Q: How did you find the French government of New Caledonia? Had De Gaulle taken over by this time?

WISE: Yes.

Q: I was wondering whether they were putting the freeze on the Americans.

WISE: The French were always a little distant, I think, towards the Americans in those days in New Caledonia and in Tahiti. Distant but proper - they didn't go out of their way to make anything difficult. The local people were all very warm, very friendly toward Americans. The place was just sort of given to good things in life. They did a lot of dancing and that sort of thing. It was sort of a crazy place. You couldn't get your orientation easily. There were all sorts of rumors about what was happening and what was going on.

Q: I take it there was not much interest from the Department of State and what you all were doing.

WISE: Not really. I mean, FBO asked me to go out there and put the property up for sale, but other than that, you dutifully, diligently file your dispatch report. Maybe somebody read it, maybe somebody didn't. It's like now: when there's trouble in an area, they're interested.

Q: You left there in 1957. What happened?

WISE: My two years were completed and the Department kept its word in terms of the second assignment, the general Consular work, because there was some reporting and that sort of thing. From there I was sent to language training and area studies in Oberammergau, Germany. I had pointed out to some inspectors that had come to Palermo that my real hope was to be assigned to the Soviet Union. I'd gone through Colombia and I had this degree. They said, "Mr. Wise, that's very good training, but you'll never get to Moscow unless you get there at the Department's expense. He said to apply for this Oberammergau thing, so I did. I took a test in the language, and I didn't do very well at all. But, as I recall, I got assigned to Oberammergau while I was in New Caledonia, then came back to the Department en route to Oberammergau and took the language test, and did terrible at it. I thought they weren't going to send me, but the system had committed to it and so I was sent. I found that, with some effort on my part, I got up to speed with the others pretty quickly. The program is organized by the Army for its officers to learn Russian and the Soviet area. It was two years in the United States: one at Monterey, one at either Harvard or Colombia, and then two years at Oberammergau. It's called the "FAST Program." The State Department people just went to Oberammergau for one year and then on to our assignment. I did my year there and then was assigned back to the Department, to INR.

LESTER EDMOND
U.S. Representative to the South Pacific Commission
Noumea (1977-1979)

Lester E. Edmond attended the City College of New York and Harvard University. Edmond was in the US Army during WWII and worked in the State Department before entering the Foreign Service as a Rotation Officer and International Economist. His posts in the Foreign Service include Japan, Finland, Washington, DC, National War College, France, and the Philippines. Edmond was interviewed by Raymond Ewing in 2001.

EDMOND: In May 1976, I was surprised to discover that President Ford had appointed me to be the United States Representative to the South Pacific Commission. I doubt that more than a handful of people in Washington had ever heard of the organization. The United States had been a member since its founding in 1947 and the US Representative's position was often given to a private citizen, the chief perquisite of the appointment being a Presidential commission that one could display on ones wall and a trip to an annual meeting held in one of the South Pacific islands. The alternate US representative normally was an officer in the US Department of Interior who was responsible for supervising the US dependent territories in the Pacific, such as Guam and American Samoa and who served as the contact point for the Commission's secretariat. I suspect the decision to move the representation to the State Department resulted from the increased concern about the political situation in the South Pacific due to reports that the Soviet Union was displaying an increased interest in the South Pacific region. Soviet naval vessels had begun for the first time to sail in Pacific waters and Soviet fisheries vessels had begun to operate in the region. Many of these reports were probably overblown, but suddenly this part of the globe to which we had displayed practically no attention was being viewed as a possible arena of cold war competition.

The South Pacific Commission, the name of which has since been changed to the South Pacific Community, is the oldest and largest regional organization in the Pacific. It was established in 1947 under an agreement signed by Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States as a mechanism to promote economic and social development in the Pacific Island territories under their administration. As the various territories attained independence, they joined in their own right. The SPC Secretariat is located in Noumea New Caledonia and that also was the location of the first SPC annual meeting that I attended.

My attendance at the meeting and the background of the new US representative was noted in the area. It was favorably commented upon as an indication that the United States was beginning to play greater attention to the problems of the small island states. It was also regarded somewhat cynically, if accurately, as being the result of the apparent increased Soviet interest. Taking advantage of my attendance at the meeting, I paid calls on the Prime Ministers of Fiji and Samoa. I recall that the banner headline in the weekly Samoan newspaper noted my arrival as being part of our cold war struggle.

I did develop a very modest program, I don't recall whether I was tasked with the assignment or developed it on my own initiative, that would display increased United States interest in the area.

It was very limited in scope. It principally called for a greater number of officially sponsored visitors to the region primarily as part of USIA programs, and most significantly the establishment of a new resident Embassy to be located in Suva, the capital of Fiji which would also be accredited to Samoa. Prior to that change, our Ambassador in New Zealand had been accredited to the two island countries which meant that the only real contact between American officials and those of the countries took place during the brief annual visits of the US Ambassador. There also was practically no reporting about Pacific Island developments since we had no observers on the scene.

I recall an interesting conversation with the Prime Minister of Samoa when I informed him that we were planning to establish an additional Embassy that would be located in Suva and that also would be accredited to the capital Apia. I noted that as a result there would be much greater contact between our two governments since members of the Embassy would be able to spend much more time in Apia due to its proximity to Suva. I thought that this evidence of the United States placing greater interest in the region would please him. I was mistaken. He informed me that while he welcomed the greater US interest, he wished to retain the present diplomatic representation arrangement where the accredited ambassador would reside in Wellington, if we were not able to put a permanent representative in Apia itself.

I learned that there were long standing tensions between Samoa and Fiji. The Samoans believed that Fiji, by far the largest country in the region, was frequently overbearing and insufficiently cooperative on questions of mutual interest. Although it was left unsaid, I sensed that the fact that Fiji's ethnic make up primarily was Melanesian and that Samoa's was Polynesian did not help.

End of reader