BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Sir Albert Thomas (Archie) LAMB

KBE 1979 (MBE 1953); CMG 1974; DFC 1945.

Born 23 October 1921; married 1944, Christina Betty Wilkinson.
Educated at Swansea Grammar School
Served RAF 1941-46. Died 19 October 2021.

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This is Malcolm McBain interviewing Sir Archie Lamb at his home in Zeals on Wednesday, 21 June 2000

MM Well, Sir Archie, I see from your biographical details that you went to Swansea Grammar School and left there at a comparatively early age to go into the Foreign Office in 1938, just before the war broke out. You then joined the RAF in 1941 and were there until 1946. Can you tell me a little about your early days in the Foreign Office and the level at which you started and something about your RAF service?

AL Yes, certainly Malcolm. I had to leave school because the family were running out of money. My father had been ill and so I was put in for this Civil Service examination and I specified the Foreign Office as where I would like to go if I passed because I had done rather well in modern languages and English in Swansea Grammar School and I was supposed to go on to Jesus College, Oxford; but that wasn't possible: I had to go and earn my living. So I went to the Foreign Office and was a filing clerk, a very junior filing clerk because the Registry of the Foreign Office that existed in those days, which was 1938, was organised in Divisions which served Departments; and the Divisions were divided into Sections under the command of a Section Clerk. I was very junior and I was an Assistant Section Clerk. So all my job consisted of was to take files out of boxes and put them back into boxes.

MM And that continued until the war broke out, you remained in the Foreign Office for the early days of the war and then what happened? You were called up?

AL I volunteered on 3 September, or 4 September as the third was a Sunday, for the Royal Air Force and they told me, 'Yes, we will call you when we want you'. They didn't call me until 1941. Principally, of course, because we had nowhere to train people. They had to set up the Empire Flying Training Schools in Canada and Rhodesia. I went to Rhodesia for my flying training but it took them a time to get organised, while the Germans, very kindly for us, remained at bay fighting Russians until we could get organised.

MM So were you a pilot?

AL I was a pilot. I was trained on single engined aircraft, Tiger Moth and Harvard in Rhodesia. On my way back to England by troopship – SS Oronsay – we were torpedoed, I spent 9 days in a lifeboat in the middle of the South Atlantic. I had plenty of adventures. After returning to the UK I went to a Hurricane Operational Training Unit and finally to a semi-experimental Hurricane squadron which was experimenting with weapons to use in low level attack against the German panzer divisions which nobody had found a way of stopping. We experimented with rockets firing explosive heads and solid shot and with 40mm cannons slung beneath the Hurricane, a heavily armoured Hurricane. We weren't allowed to cross the Channel in it because our experiments were supposed to be secret; until the V1's came and we were let loose on the V1 rocket launching sites. It was a great success and we did very well. Later we converted to Typhoons, rocket Typhoons, which the Germans became terrified of.

MM And you were awarded the ...

AL I got the Distinguished Flying Cross.

MM What was that for?

AL Being a good chap during the war.

MM And what rank did you achieve?

AL Flight Lieutenant.

MM So that was respectable and when you came out of the...

AL I commanded the squadron after we lost two squadron commanders. But older men came back to take over; after all they were 26 or 28. I was only 21. I was time-expired when I was 23. There is one story I must tell you. After I had finished my flying I was posted to an RAF transport station at Membury in Wiltshire as the Adjutant. Being already a well-trained bureaucrat, because I think that is my mentality, an intelligent bureaucrat perhaps I had better

say, I was prepared to deal with a lot of what was called crime in the Air Force at that time. It was petty stuff, the chaps were fed-up, they were doing things that, according to Kings Regulations and Air Force instructions, you weren't supposed to do. Some of them were being put up for court-martial. The courts-martial were organised by Group Headquarters. Dear old Lamb, because he was a well trained chap, when the papers came down for courts-martial from Group I found something wrong with them and sent them back. So during my time as Adjutant we had no courts-martial. The Group Captain commanding Membury thought this was wonderful, so he said to me, 'Why don't you take a permanent commission? Because you can fly, you can certainly fly, there's no doubt about that. You've got a DFC. You can run an RAF station, because I've done nothing here, you've run the place for me, so why don't you stay in? You can keep your Flight Lieutenant rank.' I said, 'No thank you.' This went on for a couple of weeks and on the last day when I finally 'demobbed' and I turned up in my blanco'ed belt and everything and said goodbye to him he said, 'Come on now Archie, sign here, I've got all the forms for you, you've got it made.' I said, 'No thank you, sir, I'm going back to the Foreign Office.'
'Oh God damn you Archie,' he said, 'Go and be a satellite of the State Department,' which I thought very perceptive of a Group Captain in the Royal Air Force in 1946.

MM It was.

AL It was indeed, he was a really good chap. Anyway I came back then to the Foreign Office as a clerical officer and started again.

MM In spite of all...

AL Yes, 8 years later and back at the bottom again.

MM That's typical, really, isn't it in many ways. But of course you'd got a good deal of war experience...

AL Yes, I knew from my few years in the Foreign Office that my way forward would have been through the Consular Service, because that's the way people who came in at the clerical level

went. I knew there was a good career for me through the Consular side.

MM Then you went to the embassy in Rome.

AL Then I was promoted to be Higher Clerical Officer with the princely salary of £400 per year and I went to be Archivist at Rome.

MM I see. So you were still right at the bottom of the Foreign Office hierarchy

AL Oh absolutely at the bottom, yes. But I was confident that there was something for me in the Foreign Office. This is the thing you see, I was confident that I knew there was a way.

MM Well, you'd probably take a look at some of the people ahead of you and realise that...

AL Yes, I can do that, I thought, when I started to read the files. The best story, so you get the feel of what the Diplomatic Service was like then, after I had been in Rome for three months the Head of Chancery said to me 'it's about time you met the Ambassador'. After three months! The Ambassador, of course, never came to Chancery. He worked in his Residence. The Head of Chancery and the Counsellor would trot over as required by the Ambassador, who was sitting in his study. So one day the Head of Chancery said to me, 'We are going to meet the Ambassador.' Over we went and there was the Ambassador, in typical gout mode with his leg up, and he said to me, 'Hello, I've got gout.' I don't think he said anything else and I was ushered out of the presence again. I never saw him again. So that's how ambassadors treated junior people in the 1940s.

MM Do you remember who that was?

AL Noel Charles. Old school, pre-war.

MM What a wonderful way to run a service. After Rome you went to the Consulate-General in Genoa for a short spell.

AL That was for consular training. Which I accepted for what I thought would be part of my way forward. So I did 5 or 6 months there as Vice-Consul. In those days Vice-Consuls were not allowed to sit down. You stood up behind a desk because you were serving the British people. A discipline which I still think is good, actually. I would issue 5 or 6 passports in a morning, not take a fortnight over it.

MM Well, you could use your initiative in who you gave them to as well.

AL It was great fun, drunken seamen, fights in the Consulate between seamen, all sorts of things went on in those days. In those days master mariners still had to bring their ship's papers' in to be stamped under the Shipping Acts. It was great fun, being a Vice-Consul. Lots of stories.

MM After that you went to the embassy in Bucharest and were there for three years. Now Romania in 1950 must have been quite an interesting place.

AL Well, there's some background to that because all diplomats in those days had to be inoculated against Marxism and the best inoculation you could get was to be sent behind the Iron Curtain to see what it really was in practice. We were there, Christina and I, actually for the last three years of Stalin's life when the final reign of terror was on. We left Bucharest on the day Stalin died in 1953. We saw it at first hand. It was horrible. People disappeared. Our embassy doctor; they didn't take him, they took his wife. And held her as a threat to him, so he had to go and report to whoever he was reporting to. I advanced my career a bit because I was able to speak French. The Ambassador could speak French but nobody else could. So being this linguist that I was from Swansea Grammar School I became the Embassy interlocutor with the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was all done in French. But behind them all was a terrible woman called Anna Pauker. Do you remember her? Caius Frantsescu was my principal interlocutor at the Ministry. He was called Caius was because his father was Professor of Classics at Bucharest University so he was a true bourgeois. With him, an interesting thing too, there would be the silent man. You have probably heard of this. Behind the Iron Curtain if you went to see somebody there was another man sitting, who said not a word, but was as much watching poor Caius as he was listening to what I was saying. Anyway, so this went on happily, and as I say, I think it helped my career and it helped my confidence because I knew I could do

this. If I was sent off by myself I could cope with it. And then when we had my final cocktail party I invited Caius and the silent man. As they were going away at the end of the party, at the front door shaking hands, this silent man said to me, in marvellous English, 'Don't forget us, Mr Lamb, will you, we've had some good battles, haven't we?'

MM So even in those days there was a certain camaraderie among people in the diplomatic community, even if you were opponents.

AL Oh yes. It's there. This is what I think you have got to be very careful of, that you get the right people in the right jobs. It's so important. This worked in Bucharest for us. It was remarkable, his English was impeccable, it was interesting too that they both came to the cocktail party. They must have got clearance for that. And there was no microphone around then I think, when he said that, by the front door. Obviously his office was bugged. I'm sure the Embassy was, and our home was, but outside the front door probably not. So that was the next episode.

MM What sort of battles did you have? Can you remember any of them?

AL Yes, we had a particular problem because Bucharest was known as the Paris of the East. It was a title it gave itself before the war. Everyone had had a great time with Prince Michael and Madame Popescu and the Court: everything revolved around the Court. There was a great racecourse there. A lovely golf course. It's where we played golf. We all belonged to the golf club because it was one place that the communists let us have for our recreation. Before the war there was everything for the rich, and Embassy personnel, of course. But we were left with the remnants of quite a large British community, who had been there as trainers, ostlers, horsy people and governesses. Everybody associated with sports, a lot of English people had gone there to play these, sometimes senior, sometimes junior. My principal job was to get 43 of them out of the country. But every case had to be argued with the Romanians.

MM Had they been there during the war.

AL They had all been there during the war, but never recovered after the war. They had all been there all that time. They were getting frail. They had no income. We had looked after them as

best we could and I got them out. The other thing was the usual job of trying to persuade the Romanian government to give answers to some question that His Majesty's Government, in its wisdom, had asked. The normal diplomatic to-ing and fro-ing. That was interesting and covered all sorts of things: getting things out of Customs and anything else that had to be argued with the authorities in Romania, that I would do. There was another organisation called Burobin, which was the Bureau for the services to the diplomatic corps, which existed outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If you wanted anything, if you wanted your boiler repaired in the flats, or anything like that, you had to go to Burobin. I did all the arguing with them too. We left on the day Stalin died but we certainly saw Marxism in full action.

MM Was there evidence that Romania had earlier been part of the Ottoman Empire?

AL Yes, the language. Because Romania was Roman Dacia, and then the Turks over-ran it so there were words that came from Turkish. The word for a man was 'om', with the definite article was at the end of the word, not the beginning. So 'the man' was 'omul'. You had these Turkish words coming in as well. The water cistern in the roof was a 'khazan', which is Turkish, and somewhat Arabic, and things like that. Most of the people look very European.

MM I think the Turks do, really.

AL I don't think the Turks inter-bred very much. All the names like Frantsescu are of Christian origin. And you have the Romanian orthodox church.

MM So that was a good posting for you?

AL For me it was a good posting, yes indeed. I learned a lot there.

MM What rank were you when you left?

AL Acting B4.

MM I mean in diplomatic terms.

AL I was Third Secretary. The title was Vice-Consul and Third Secretary. But in the Foreign Office I was still a B5, i.e. an HCO in new terms. My predecessor had been a B4 and they had lowered the rank for me. They thought, 'Lamb's bright, I suppose we'll get more value out of him.' My predecessor couldn't speak any languages at all, except English. He was a post-war entry and he was already a B4. Here was me, a pre-war true member of the diplomatic service, so they made me acting B4 towards the end. I think there was some sort of shame, I think. I didn't ask for it but it came through one day. And so back to the Foreign Office.

MM I don't suppose there's much to be said about that...

AL Oh, there is. I've been very lucky. I'd had a very good job abroad and a very good job at home. Then I came back and they put me in the training division of Personnel Department. Robin Hooper was then head of department. If you remember the Korean War had been on and no diplomatic service in the world had settled down to what you might call a post-war peacetime. Terrible things had happened around the world. Robin asked me to sit down and work out the language training requirements of the Diplomatic Service, or Foreign Service as it was called then. So I settled down to this and I found out that in working it out and consulting Sir Alexander Hutcheon, who was then Head of the Consular Department, because that was where the expertise had been - in the Consular Service, not the Diplomatic Service, that there was an enormous wastage of young gentlemen in something called the Middle East. Because I didn't go to the Middle East in my RAF career, I came back to the European theatre of operations, I took myself off to the School of Oriental African Studies in the evening to find out what this was all about. And I did, of course, and eventually I got hooked on Arabic, being a linguist and John Henniker, who had taken over Personnel Department said, 'Well you'd better post yourself, Archie, if you want to go to MECAS, post yourself there.' So I did. I went off to MECAS and I came third. I was defeated by two University graduates. Great disgrace.

MM Third, out of how many?

AL About twenty.

MM Not bad going, and pretty fierce competition.

AL And I was 10 years older than them, I was 35. Then I came back to the office and John said, 'We are going to promote you to Branch A.' I went up before the Chief Clerk, who was Roderick Barclay, and an array of Under Secretaries who put me through it. The next day John Henniker said, 'You're an A7 now.' And that is how that happened.

MM That was quick.

AL That was 1957.

MM So you were at MECAS at the time of the Suez...

AL That's right. And all the army officers disappeared. They were held in some camp somewhere, did nothing, wasted some months of their training. A mishandled affair, but we won't go into that. I haven't mentioned to you my adventures with Sir Anthony Eden, have I?

MM No, you haven't. Do mention Anthony Eden.

AL I forgot about that. When I was in this Personnel Department job John Henniker came in to my room one day and said, 'Sir Anthony Eden is back and wants somebody to look after him, you go and do it, Archie. Just go over to Carlton House Terrace and see what he wants, and look after him as a sort of private secretary.' Then Evelyn Shuckbrugh, the private secretary in those days, said to me, 'Keep him quiet. Don't let him do anything, don't let him interfere.' I said, 'A B5, don't let him do things?' He said, 'Well, do your best. Don't let him interfere.' That was almost impossible, of course, how could you stop him from picking up a telephone?

MM This was Eden after Suez?

AL No, it was before. When he came back from America, from one of his operations. I was in London from 1953 to 1955 so it must have been 1954. I can't remember the precise date now. But he had been to the 'States, had one of his operations and then come back.

MM That's right. He had one of those curious illnesses.

AL And I got the tough job. Looking after him for months. That was very interesting too. I said to him one morning, 'You know, it's an awful mess this office, you are leaving papers all over the place.' This is interesting, you see. He said, 'It doesn't matter, it's quite safe in this country. You've been in Bucharest where things are different.' A couple of years later we had two defectors to Russia with secret papers. Other Ministers wanted to keep in with him, you see. They don't play by the rules at all. They kept coming to see him and leave him something which perhaps they shouldn't have done, it was all strewn around this little office in Carlton House Terrace.

MM Was he concentrated on things like that? Was he taking it all in?

AL Oh yes, there was nothing wrong with him from that point of view. It was just that he had to rest for a bit.

MM Out of the public eye.

AL Out of the public eye but he wanted to get back in. But they didn't want him back in until he could really take the load. Eventually I finished that job and he went back to do his job, but that was interesting too. An interesting experience.

MM Well, presumably he went back to being Prime Minister?

AL No, that was later. He went back to the Foreign Office in 1955. I must have been with him in 1954 I think, maybe as late as 1955.

MM I think he took over from Winston in 1955. So you went to MECAS and had a spell there learning Arabic and that was followed by the Political Residency, Bahrain.

AL Yes, indeed, as commercial secretary. There was a commercial counsellor there but there I

began my sort of real subject career in the Foreign Office, because it was there that I had to face up to the sheer politics of oil and money. And that was the life blood of my career after that, except for the inspectorate. That's where I began to study that in Bahrain, nothing especially happened in Bahrain, then I came back to the oil desk in the Foreign Office. Then I went to Kuwait as Head of Chancery. I was only there six months before Sir William Luce, the Political Resident, he was a great man, he took me out of Kuwait and sent me to Abu Dhabi as Political Agent on promotion. I went up to Grade 4 then.

MM Sir William Luce. He was nothing to do with the Admiral?

AL A brother. And father of Sir ..... wrote to the Times recently, and was a Foreign Office Minister, Governor of Gibraltar recently, I can't remember his name. He was the first civilian Governor of Gibraltar for a long time, but he was Bill Luce's son, a politician in the Conservative Party but I can't remember his Christian name. I'm getting old now you know, I can't remember everything. And then I went to Abu Dhabi as Political Agent. It was a fascinating job.

MM Can you tell me something about that?

AL Yes, it was an interesting thing because the British government had this special position in the 'Gulf as you know. I don't need to go into that in detail. But one of the persons that we had to deal with was a rather difficult gentleman known as Sheik Shakhbut bin Sultan of Abu Dhabi, who was locked in the past. And didn't want to do anything to develop his Sheikhdom, which HMG, in its wisdom, saw was necessary because the oil world, in that part of the world, was creating a new world. And it would have been very difficult for Abu Dhabi, which was going to come into oil wealth anyway, to remain backward. We had to persuade Shakhbut to start modernising his Sheikhdom, that was my brief and I tried to persuade him, and Sir William Luce used to come down occasionally to talk to him as well.

MM Sir William Luce was then...

AL He was the Political Resident, he was the Governor of the 'Gulf if you like.

MM Where did he reside?

AL Bahrain.

MM And he had no problems, of course, with Bahrain but Abu Dhabi was difficult?

AL Abu Dhabi was difficult. And Sheik Shakhbut didn't want to change anything. He said to me, 'Why should I have a hospital.' At a time when a prefabricated hospital was lying in the sand slowly being covered over. He wouldn't have it put up. 'My people have lived here for a thousand years in perfect health, why do they need a hospital?' And stuff like that, you know. And then somebody pointed out to him to shame him that the people of Abu Dhabi were using their beaches as a lavatory. This is our Clochemerle story from Abu Dhabi. He commissioned some young poor Lebanese to build public toilets along the shore line, which would be washed by the tide. Sheik Shakhbut saw that people still weren't using them, they were using the beach, so he put the Lebanese in prison. It was a hell of a job to get the poor young man out, to get him paid some money and sent away back home. It was all very small in those days. We had two Christmas parties in the Political Agency to include all the non-Abu Dhabians, the Lebanese, the Syrians and all the others, a 100 people or so...

MM As small as that?

AL In those days, tiny.

MM What was the population of Abu Dhabi?

AL Well, I had two squadrons of Trucial Oman Scouts with me to watch over it, and they used to carry out a census. The whole territory was about the size of Wales. We only counted about 25,000 people altogether. There were not more than 1000 people actually who lived in the sea shore village of Abu Dhabi. But under it was all this wealth, you see. And also the strategic thing of Saudi Arabia and Oman as well. We always had trouble in Buraimi Oasis. The number of times I re-translated the Treaty of Sib, which was central to the Sultanate. That was always there, that problem. It was a very interesting experience because this was really direct

diplomacy. Dealing with one man who had the power of life and death, and the future of Abu Dhabi, and everybody's interests, in his hands.

MM Did everyone know there was this oil wealth underneath...

AL Yes, it was just a question of time. You know it does take time to build up and then perhaps they cap when they drill some wells, and it's not so good so it's back to the drawing board in London or New York, but they came again and they found it off-shore first. A famous place known as Das Island. Which is a BP oilfield, and then the Iraq Petroleum Company, Petroleum Development Trucial States, or whatever name they had, Petroleum Development, Oman, they found it on-shore. So it was going to come. There was no doubt about that.

MM Were other nations involved in this...

AL No, because we didn't let anybody else in. We had allowed an American Consul General into Kuwait. Because they had half the oil company, but otherwise, in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Trucial States and Oman we alone represented everybody. In fact we represented HMG, who was everybody. Under the Treaty you see, under the special position, under the Treaty. And the Political Agents were also magistrates, were judges as well because we had our own courts.

MM Now just a minute, the Treaty, who was the Treaty between?

AL The Treaties of Perpetual Peace between individual Sheiks and HMG. dating back to the middle 1830s. The one with Kuwait was signed in 1899 but goes back to the Treaties of Perpetual Peace. We came in because the pirates, the Persian Gulf pirates, were interfering with the maritime trade to India; we could not permit that sort of thing in the late 18th century so we came in through the Bombay Marine and Royal Navy to clear out the pirates, establish perpetual peace and to allow the trade to India to go on, and that is how we came to put political officers there to control it. It's a marvellous story.

MM It's amazing really, what we were able to get away with.

AL With few people With Shakhbut we watched and made Abu Dhabi work, myself, an assistant Political Agent and two executive officers, that's all.

MM But were you able to call upon frigates or visiting ...

AL Yes, they came on a visit now and again.

MM Just to make sure that they understood...

AL What was keeping the peace were the squadrons of Trucial Oman Scouts, which were British officered, with levees, mostly Dofaris and people from South Oman. The Gulf Arab himself is not a warrior, but the Omanis are, especially from Dofar. And from parts of Pakistan, they are warrior tribes. And so we kept the peace that way. But I had to leap into a helicopter every now and again, provided by the army aircorps, and fly down somewhere to deal with something.

MM And you'd arrive by helicopter, military helicopter...

AL And chat to everybody, drinking coffee, and all would be well again, I'd listen to their complaints. They would all want a chap who would do something. Eventually, this had gone on for some time and in 1967 Sheik Zayed (currently the Ruler of Abu Dhabi, President of the United Arab Emirates) was the man that everybody in Abu Dhabi was looking to, but there was a strong family loyalty in this family. They were called the Al Bu Falah; they are now called the Al Nahayan: they promoted themselves in name terms. Shakhbut's father, Zayed's father, had been assassinated in 1928 and Shakhbut became ruler. The story was that their mother, while they were very poor, got the three boys together to promise they would always support one another. So Shakhbut became ruler at a very young age; he was 28. Zayed was not the next brother, he was the youngest brother but he was the man who, as I described in my despatches, had the wind of heaven always blowing through his bisht (cloak). He was what everybody thinks the Arab of the desert is. Tall, big, good-looking and, as I said, his bisht always seemed to be filled with the wind of heaven. Zayed took over and Shakhbut went off to Bahrain. I called on Shakhbut in Bahrain and we had a nice chat. He said that everything had been done very well

and he wished his brother Zayed every success in what he had to do. I went back and we settled down with Sheik Sayed as the Ruler. He had bigger ideas, but in a way tending to go too far, so now you had the other job now, the first chap wouldn't go far enough, this chap was tending to go too far. But he had some good ideas and as I say the only thing was to slow him down so the first thing I did was to set up an Abu Dhabi Investment Advisory Board, which had two Brits, one Frenchman and one American, to reflect the international financial context and the shareholdings in the oil companies.

MM You are taking us right up to 1968, because you became an inspector in 1968.

AL I was put in the inspectorate at a time when they were reorganising the inspectorate, and I wasn't quite sure what I was for a bit. I had an Under Secretary who was supposed to be watching over the inspectorate but he said he was too busy to do it, he had too much other work to do. So he said, 'I'll leave it to you.' Which he did. Eventually they had another bright idea. 'Archie, you are doing all the work, we'll call you senior inspector.' Thank you very much. It wasn't until much later that they decided to go back to the system that had always worked before, and restored the chief inspector at Under Secretary level. So I was up to grade 3. So I did that for 6 years.

MM That's a very long time.

AL It was a long time. I did complain to the Chief Clerk, but he said, 'Nobody would move you, Archie, because you're a square peg in a square hole.' I was numerate, you see. You must remember there was a great change in the diplomatic service. Before, our predecessors, that lovely man who was my ambassador in Rome was an example, very literate but totally innumerate. He didn't understand at all. There is a great story about Rome. The commercial secretary wasn't allowed to come in through the embassy gates. He had to work downtown.

MM yes, trade.

AL So you have had this change in the service.

MM How did you become numerate? Working in the Gulf, I suppose?

AL I didn't. I became numerate because in school my worst subject was mathematics. My maths master, Grandpa Gwynne as we called him, said to me, 'Lamb, what's wrong with you, that you mop up all these languages and you can't follow the simple logic of mathematics?' It wasn't until I went to the Air Force and studied navigation, that I became numerate. Suddenly everything became clear.

MM You had to get it right there.

AL You had to get it right because all we had was a map stuck in our boot. That's where I became numerate, the Royal Air Force. After that I had no problem at all. That's one reason why I had a good run in the inspectorate, because I could see the balance sheet.

MM I guess that's fairly important from the point of view of...

AL yes, trying to balance everything in because it is a very indeterminate service, the Diplomatic Service.

MM Yes, how do you weigh up the value of one post against another...

AL But that was interesting and the other thing is that one learns all the time, doesn't one. There you had learnt roughly how to run an international organisation. It's also where I started my war against modern management. It was just creeping in then, just creeping in. And it was beginning to show itself.

MM What was the latest review that we had at that stage? Duncan?

AL Was it? There was one where I was told to study the application and use of computers in the Foreign Office. This is 1968. And also to reduce the Diplomatic Service by 12%. I soon found that if you are going to install these enormous main-frame computers, for which there was no room in the Foreign Office, you would have to employ at least another 90 people. And also in

that generation of people at the top of the office, they would never look at a cathode ray screen. They wanted the actual paper, on which Anthony Eden or Palmerston had said, ... whatever it was. So it was pointless. I recommended against it and the top of the office, who didn't know what I was talking about anyway, accepted it.

MM I imagine there would be great inertia...

AL It shows how this change of generation is happening in the world so quickly, it must have affected the service because when I was on the oil desk, the oil companies introduced something known as the expensing of royalties. I won't go into the technicalities but then I had a superintending Under Secretary, because the head of department didn't really come into the oily side, he left the oily thing to me. I went to see this superintending Under Secretary, talked to him about it, because the oil men were coming to see him and have a chat with him. We went over it together and he said, 'Do you understand it?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I don't. I just cannot understand it, I'll have to leave it to you.' Understanding was just beyond him.

MM Well, I suppose it was the whole conception of a business revolving around shifting large quantities of money...

AL And also more and more impact of international wealth and money was impinging on the work of the diplomatic service. Not just to talk to Chanceries any more, those days had gone. The rise of MITI in Japan, for example, enormously powerful, but a totally different approach of diplomacy. Chanceries are still there, but you had to watch all the other things that were going on. The movement of money and things like that. And it was just starting about the 1960s. It was the great leap forward of the oil industry which had been quiet for a time, and then it started. The OPEC thing started it. I was on the oil desk and I benefited from that as well because by a happy juncture I was sitting there when we had all these first OPEC problems.

MM You mean the huge increases in oil prices, a tripling of oil prices overnight.

AL Before that. There were all sorts of bad things going on which had to be brought into British diplomacy and policy making, which had never been there before.

MM What were the practical effects of that? It meant that suddenly Persia became terribly important.

AL That's right. And wealth was flowing out of our country, instead of in.

MM That grabbed their attention.

AL Yes it did, you know it did. It caused inflation, of course.

MM And it lead, in a way, to the downfall of the miners and a huge change in society.

AL And it's going on that way. If the Germans are renouncing nuclear power we are going to be driven back on fossil fuels, and the easiest one to use and transport around the world is oil, and gas of course. One day perhaps the great Qatari gas field will be brought on-stream for Western Europe, but that's in the future. There are so many frontiers to cross with the pipeline.

MM Yes, I guess that's another factor too, isn't it, the pipeline...

AL And water is terribly important. I have studied water ever since my MECAS days and at the board meeting with the Kuwait bank in London on Monday we were talking about water. HMG has stated another initiative under its ethical foreign policy, in which if countries don't abide by a Treaty, which is relative to the problem of international water, and consult one another, HMG will refuse export credits for any project connected therewith. This I don't agree with. I don't agree with that Mr Cook (Foreign Secretary in 2000). I think you are making a big mistake to interfere in that way. I ask if you get one country that is willing to sign up to this Treaty but the other ones are not...

MM But I am not clear in my mind how restricting export credits in relation to water projects is going to have much effect because what are we going to export from this country if we have no manufacturing base?

AL Know how. Enormous know how. Tremendous know how. And materials and supplies. And financing by British based banks. That is what they are doing, if you don't consult one another, I won't play ball with you. But it affects not the governments directly, it affects all the British industry. British industry would like to participate in that particular dam project. The project that HMG, Mr Cook and Mr Hain have chosen for this is a dam in Turkey. From which the water flows to Iraq and Syria, the Tigris and twin rivers.

MM It's just on the Turkish side of the frontier...

AL Just on the Turkish side of the frontier. Now HMG has said that Turkey and Iraq and Syria must consult with one another, under the terms of this Treaty. What, you may ask, is it to do with Britain. I think we are getting into deep water.

MM We are going to find that the work is going somewhere else.

AL Of course. Do you think the French are going to worry about that?

MM Or anyone else, the Americans?

AL The Americans won't. Business is business. There are great political interests, of course, in getting Turkey sweet and getting her into the European Community.

MM Yes, that's right. Do you think, this is a slight tangent really, but do you think that the position of London as a financial centre is at risk?

AL No. According to my Kuwaiti friends, not at all.

MM Because it's too important?

AL There is so much bound up in it. Once you own England, there is not much anyone can do about it. If you only own a little bit of England like you and I own they can always change the planning agreement; if you own the lot nobody can do much about it. It's the same. London has

got so much, and also our overseas investment. We are the second largest overseas investor, Britain. So the whole complex comes together in an international context. And this is what the Foreign Office should be paying attention to, not leaving it entirely to the Treasury.

MM I think the Treasury takes a very, very narrow view.

AL A very narrow view, always have done. Even when inspecting, the Treasury ... and the Treasury were dishonest too, when we were inspecting we sometimes had a Treasury inspector with us and if he was losing the argument on the general issue he would then start on the particular, and if still he was losing he would go back, but he would never argue consistently his case, either in general terms or in the particular.

MM How did that work? I mean, talking about Treasury inspectors, what were they doing?

AL They used to come along to check to make sure that we were abiding by the rules of the game.

MM Allowances, and things like that?

AL Allowances, yes, and if there were any home civil servants or service attaches there, they would have a look at that But they wanted to make sure that we were abiding by the rules of the game. In the end we always agreed, because the formulas had worked it out anyway, but that wasn't important. Everybody thought that was the important part, it wasn't. The important part was getting the ship sailing in the right direction with the right crew. An embassy is like a ship, when it has been on the high seas about three years the compass needs re-swinging, the ambassador may not be realise it but he is slightly off course. He can't help it, he is driving this damn thing along. And then, what sort of crew does he need. That's the important thing. Everybody gets hooked up on this allowances thing, in which there is no real imagination, there is the formula. So, you get 25 pounds, be happy. That was dealt with in two days. The other fortnight was spent trying to shape this embassy, and all the things that go with it.

MM Did the Treasury inspectors participate in that side of things?

AL No. Only the money.

MM That's interesting, your view about the city, because you do have a very important inside look at that.

AL Yes, it came up on Monday. They said, 'For God's sake don't get into the euro. Your country is doing very well, and the only thing that upsets us is that you ask us for visas. You let in all these other people but you make us get visas.'

MM Relatives.

AL Right. That came up, yes it did.

MM But when you say that we are doing very well, what do they mean?

AL Well, they say our economy is doing very well. Everything is coming along well, generally. We have these hiccups, C & A sacking people, but overall when they look at the macro economy, these chaps are not into the micro stuff, and neither should the Treasury be...

MM The big picture.

AL The big picture of Britain is good. Leave well alone. We are doing all right. Yes, the pound is a bit expensive but with it all, we are all right. They are very firm on this, our Kuwaiti friends. It did come up and we had quite a discussion about it.

MM Do you think that is shared by, for example, the Americans?

AL I know one American friend who thinks it is so, yes. He was my colleague in Kuwait. He was very bright and is still very active on that scene in the US. He thinks we are doing well but, being a politician, he also sees we have got to come to some accommodation with the European Union.

MM The Americans are really quite strong on that...

AL They are very strong, because they are also worried too, that our military strength is declining below the level where it should be. We are not doing it properly.

MM I wonder what they mean by that?

AL Well, it's hardware, and all that technology, and now they propose what upsets the Americans, the proposal to privatise our defence research, DERA, the Americans don't like that. They see a decline in our technological effort and ability. And what they are worried about is not the chaps in the front line, it's the technology behind it which we have always maintained, and they say it is slipping.

MM Well, it will slip if we can't export stuff. We can't maintain that industry unless we can export...

AL We've got to export it. Every industry has to export something...

MM If it's priced out of the market by an over-valued pound...

AL Or an ethical foreign policy gets in the way, then obviously we are not going to have the money to put into technology and research, but it does worry the Americans.

MM I'm interested to hear you say that because I've been assured by another former senior member of the diplomatic service that all is well and we don't have to worry about what the American view is, it's only the State Department...

AL Well, he's wrong about that. It is worrying. We have 49% of our army deployed, which is far too high, because of the old one third, one third, one third rule. One third fighting, one third in reserve, one third in training. And now we have 49% of them deployed on the front line. Not fighting, but front line duties. In Africa, or Albania, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and then there is

Northern Ireland, just in case, you can't go on with 49% of the army deployed, something has got to give somewhere. They are getting very upset in the army because it is supposed to be a peace-time army, but the wives aren't seeing their husbands.

MM And they are finding it difficult to recruit.

AL Yes, my fellow British member of the board told me that his son, he was an ex military man himself but a man in the city now, his son has resigned his commission and so have a lot of his friends in the army, because they see no future for bright young people in the army, and these are officers, top families.

MM That is kind of worrying.

AL Anyway, we have digressed from our beloved Foreign Office.

MM Yes, and I think we had only got as far as your time as chief inspector.

AL I went from there to Kuwait as ambassador, because the next oil crisis had come in 1973, just at the time when John Wilton was to move out and I was to move in. In the end I didn't get there until early 1974. John was going on to Jeddah and we had to deal then with the next oil crisis, which was nasty for us. Kuwait had refused to sell us oil. Anyway they changed their minds eventually, and we got over that. I spent the next three years in Kuwait but nothing much happened, really. Just sort of managing this really quite nice relationship. We don't have any real problems with Kuwait. And they don't have any real problems with us except we won't give them visas, except as foreigners, as they call other people.

MM Like the French and the Germans.

AL That's right. So nothing much happened.

MM But surely, about that time there was the buy-back of the BP shares in the...

AL That was later. What I did while I was there, the big thing that I got involved in was to run down the sterling balances. I'm not sure how public that is...

MM Sterling balances in Kuwait?

AL Yes. Kuwait had enormous sterling balances and we gradually ran them down, because they were over weighted. And there were big negotiations. Gordon Richardson, the governor of the Bank of England, himself came out to negotiate with the Kuwait Government.

MM This was in 1974 to 75?

AL 1974 to 1977, somewhere between there. My memory's going, perhaps I've got it written down.

MM Well, I'd have thought that was in the public domain by now.

AL It must be by now. We ran down the sterling balances.

MM How did you do it?

AL By transferring it slowly, then the Bank of England started to transfer it into other currencies, not to upset the markets, of course...

MM But to transfer it from sterling to dollars, for example...

AL But that was all done by the Bank of England, and then the other thing in Kuwait was of course building up all those businesses, trying to get the businessmen to pay attention, which they sometimes paid over-attention, because people would come out, as I told you, to sit there with no capital behind them. Doing business in Kuwait was not easy, and I used to have an open house for businessmen every Wednesday evening, I would give them beer and Christina would find some eats for them, cheer them up a bit.

MM Is it dry?

AL Yes. They could import it if they paid enormous sums, like £50 for a bottle of whisky, if they wanted it they could get it.

MM That is expensive, isn't it?

AL So I would get them on a Wednesday evening, and give them all a drink, and talk to them, or let them talk. I think that was a useful safety valve.

MM What sort of businessmen went out there?

AL All sorts. Everything that this country uses, Kuwait uses too. Everything you could possibly think of, is required by the Kuwait market.

MM How big is that...

AL It's not the amount of people so much, it's the amount of money they are willing to spend. That's the test of a market. They speak of consumption, in economic terms.

MM Among the Kuwaitis...

AL Among the Kuwaitis, yes...

AL And then you have a huge immigrant population...

MM Doing the labouring jobs...

AL Doing the labouring jobs. Indians are managing jobs. Palestinians, the principal financial adviser to the Emir is a Palestinian...

MM Oh really...

AL Khaled Abu Said, yes. Very bright indeed. He is the principal adviser to the Emir, he is getting on now. But you have a good market there and you've got to work at it, but that is the trouble, you need the companies with the capital to keep somebody there, which is can be very wearing on the poor chap who is there, hanging around, waiting...

MM No doubt that is extremely expensive...

AL Very expensive, yes. And, of course, Arabs are not good at keeping agreements or engagements. We always agree a date for our next board meeting. It's changed invariably. We have never once stuck to a board meeting date. They solemnly agree at a board meeting. They agreed on Monday that we would meet next on 21 September. I bet you that it will be altered. And you go along, you are always kept waiting. Their term for punctuality is 'English timekeeping'. Tawqeet inglizi, that's 'punctuality'. They can't do it.

MM I suppose they can get away with it.

AL Well, with so much money and so much demand. But they all have homes in England.

The other thing that happened in Kuwait was the interesting relationship I built up with the Prime Minister, Sheikh Saad. We had an awful lot to discuss with them because we had a military training team there. The Kuwait Liaison Team. Which was teaching them to fly their aeroplanes and to operate their Chieftain tanks. I had a lot to do with Sheikh Saad who was also the Minister for Defence as well. It was interesting because if I went along for some business, we would deal with it and then he would say, 'Wait a minute, can you tell me something about X.' It would be something totally beyond our agenda that day, but he was building up his knowledge of the wicked world in which we live. Then I'd do a little tutorial, on what all this fuss is about, wood in the Amazon basin, on anything like that. I found that very interesting.

MM Where would he have picked up the idea of that, from watching television?

AL No, it was his own idea. I had known him before. When I was Head of Chancery in Kuwait

I got to know them all. I came back as ambassador only 8 years later so they all knew me. One of the senior merchants, at the first cocktail party I went to, in 1973, there was a tap on my shoulder and, 'Hello, Archie, welcome back.' But we did have a nice relationship in Kuwait. We always got on well with one another

MM That's what it's all about.

AL That's what it is all about but, you see, you need ambassadors who are out and about. We have had a couple recently, because I get all the gossip, who haven't been out and about, I don't know him they said, I don't know him.

MM That's a reproof.

AL Yes, that's a reproof.

MM That's fatal.

AL Yes it is.

MM And it does happen, I'm afraid.

AL It's no good sitting in the embassy. You've got to get out and about. In Athens the ambassador, when he was interviewed after the brigadier was killed, the ambassador said you can't really represent, you have to get out and about and talk to people. You can't be guarded all the time. We are always having threats, as you can imagine, in the Middle East. Then when I went to Norway it was from the IRA the threats were coming...

MM In where?

AL In Norway, when I went to Oslo. You remember they killed our man in The Hague, and they were going to do me next. Well, I don't know how true it was, but it came through the security...

MM Charming. So shall we move on to Oslo?

AL If you'd like to. It was fascinating but the only reason I went there was because they were rolling in money. Jim Callaghan had been to stay with us in Kuwait and I was told later on that he went to Norway. And he came back saying it's all right but it's not right, in typical Jim terms. The approach of this man was, and I was told this so I have to accept it is true, “it's all right, but it’s not right; get Archie Lamb from Kuwait and send him there to find out what it’s all about”. And I had the pleasure of writing an overview of policy for both governments. They hadn't appreciated the impact of the oil industry. They had left it to their departments of energy, and neither the Foreign Office in London or Oslo had understood the wider implications of what was happening in the North Sea. So I wrote an overview of policy. Which was what Jim had told me to go and find what it was all about. By then he had become Prime Minister. And somebody called Owen became Foreign Secretary.

MM I bet Jim looked at it.

AL In the end he didn't because I went and did my stuff and I came back and the Department said, 'Well, you'll have to go and see the Foreign Secretary, if you attach so much importance to this.' So I went to see David Owen, made my presentation, he listened to it and he spoilt it by saying, 'Well, I suppose I have to agree with you. You are rather popular in No. 10.' Awful. Dreadful. Which was a totally different attitude to the Norwegian, Friedenlund, Foreign Minister. I went to tell him what I was going to say to HMG, and he said, 'It's the first time I've had my instructions written for me by a foreign ambassador.' I said, 'I'm not a foreign ambassador, sir, I'm the British ambassador.' That was a great success. It went down very well. Anyway, the word came back. It was all accepted. And then we began to pay more attention and began to cut out, slowly, the Minister of State in the Department of Fuel and Power. I sent him a telegram telling him not to come there. He was very arrogant...

MM Hold on, the Ministry of Fuel and Power?

AL Well, the Department of Energy in the UK.

MM Yes, it was the Department of Energy in 1976, I'm sure...

AL Yes. But he used to come across and it was pointless.

MM There was also Donald Maitland...

AL He became PUS later, it was before Donald. But we began to get it onto a more political level and to look at the whole thing. And also, you see, the enormous capacity of Norway. Now we are responsible for the defence of Norway. It really is in the NATO arrangement and we used to have great exercises every year but we aimed to hold the Russians on the frontier for 18 hours. And then there was the absorptive capacity. There are only 4 million Norwegians. There is very little you can do in Norway. And yet all this money was pouring in. What should we do. We must get it out, because Norway had not been very rich, the ordinary people, but the ship owners had done all right. But the generality of people had not been very rich. So they didn't want to give it to NATO, or anybody else. They wanted to clutch it to their bosoms. And we tried outward investments for them, tried to persuade them, as I was saying earlier, all this financing does lock them in.

MM Oh yes, it does. You can't sit on a pile of money, can you?

AL We signed the protocol for the last 600 meters of the North Sea median line, which had been about 13 years in negotiation. Only the hydrographer of the Admiralty really knew what this was all about, because we had signed a convention in Geneva in 1965, under the Law of the Sea, we had signed the convention, but you have to apply it on the Continental Shelf. Britain's Continental Shelf was almost up to the Norwegian coast, so we should have said it's all ours. Because there is the Norwegian Trench, which separates Norway from the Continental Shelf. It's the Continental Shelf itself which extends from the British Isles, not from Norway. I learnt all this when I was on the oil desk. It was useful then and I went back and we did that. It was very interesting, Norway. What with the military implications and the money. The reason I was sent there was to try to bring the oil and money aspects of this new relationship with Norway into the generality of our foreign policy.

MM Didn't the Norwegians decide that they would be very slow to exploit their oil reserves?

AL But they spent the money in advance. This was the other problem with Norway. When the oil industry started they thought the millennium had arrived, and they started giving tax concessions and doing this, that and the other, and generally spending the money before they got it. So when I got there, remember this is nearly 30 years ago now, I think they were 25 billion dollars in debt. Something enormous like that. This was another problem which I seized upon, which my predecessor hadn't noticed, so that was a fascinating job, that was. And then they said, 'Archie, there's a knighthood".

MM And they gave you a KBE?

AL Yes, that's the Diplomatic Service battle honour. If you get it below grade 2, which you shouldn't, you shouldn't get a knighthood until you get to grade 2, but exceptions are made. And then you get a KBE, I don't know what you get now, but it was the diplomatic service battle honour.

MM I see, that's the reason.

AL You see, the chap in Beirut got it, didn't he?

MM Yes, it does occasionally happen...

AL Very occasionally, yes. The man in Beirut got it and I got it, and that's why I'm not KCMG because grade 2 followed on The Queen giving me the KBE. If they'd made me a grade 2 before.... But that's why that was, its one of those funny rules, isn't it.

MM Inexplicable.

AL Yes, inexplicable; try explaining that to a foreigner. So that was the end of my Diplomatic Service career.

MM And, on the whole, an astonishingly successful one.

AL I enjoyed every minute of it.

MM Going back to Swansea Grammar School.

AL Yes. I wrote to the 'Times' recently, did you see it?

MM No, I don't take the 'Times'.

AL I listened to Mr Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, on the 'Today' programme, one morning, and he was re-inventing the Foreign Office. He was saying, in the Foreign Office, under me, schools and universities won't matter. So I got on my computer and got the actual text of what he said, to make sure, being a good diplomat, and I wrote to the 'Times', saying this was nonsense. Because in my own experience and generally it has always been thus, and I set out my own career. I haven't had an answer from Mr Cook. Not a word. Sir Reader Bullard, you know that famous name, he started at the bottom and that was a long time ago, and Knox Helm, the great name who was ambassador in Ankara, started at the bottom. It's nothing new. Once you are in, you belong to the Foreign Office. They were all brought up through the Consular, that was the way, Knox Helm and Reader Bullard were brought up through the Consular. Once you are in the Foreign Office, you can come in as clerical officer, executive level, university level or over-age, the famous over-age, once you're in...

MM It depends upon your ability. I think it's a remarkably meritocratic service, and it bends over backwards to help...

AL And can you get this across outside? No, not a hope. Everybody thinks you stand around drinking cocktails. So I thoroughly enjoyed my career, had a marvellous time.

MM And then it led on to a number of interesting things outside?

AL Yes, they had put me on the board of BNOC, Lord Carrington made that marvellous remark, when I went to say goodbye to him on retirement from Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service, I said, 'Thank you for putting me on the board of BNOC.' He said, 'Archie, we wanted somebody on the board who knew what 'abroad' was.' He was exaggerating but it was a nice remark. And clever. A good Carrington remark, too. He could put you at ease immediately. And then, for some reason or other, they wanted me, because of the Norwegian connection, on British Shipbuilders, only for a very short time. Because they were launching some things in Norway and I went there a couple of times.

MM Oh, they were building rigs?

AL All that mixed up together, the Govan shipyard and all that. So I did that for a couple of years and then Samuel Montagu, because one of the visitors to Kuwait had been the Permanent Under Secretary to the Treasury, the man who was the son of Salvation Army officers. And he came out with the then Chairman of Samuel Montagu on this visit and then I got an approach later from the Chairman of Samuel Montagu saying we would like to employ you ..... But it was a very unhappy experience for me, the culture was totally wrong. It was money grubbing and whatever you say about the Diplomatic Service it is not a money grubbing organisation. And I just couldn't change into the culture, so I stepped down after a bit. They said stay on the advisory committee, under Sir Michael Palliser, who had become chairman, so I said OK. And I stayed on for a bit but in the end I gave that up. I went back to Wiltshire, and I was getting lazier and lazier and I had a lovely garden here to look after. And then 14 years after I had retired, the Kuwaitis popped up. And said we are setting up our bank in London and we want you to come and be a member of our board.

MM Isn't that astounding.

AL I wrote to the Foreign Office, wrote to the Permanent Under Secretary setting it all out for him, and the Bank of England. I haven't had an answer from the PUS. After I left it went to the dogs. I thought it was deplorable that he didn't even answer.

MM That is appalling.

AL After all, the Bank of England, they looked into my background, they were making sure I was abiding by the rules, but after 14 years they said we have got no objection. I said I haven't had an answer from the Foreign Office...

MM I suppose they got side-tracked. I do think they are under huge pressure still.

AL But the PUS should have at least acknowledged my letter. I find it easy to acknowledge letters myself. Well, there you are. What else can I tell you, sir?

MM Well, thank you very much indeed, that was a very nice interview.