Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN B. RATLIFF III

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 24th of September 1997. This is an interview with John B. Ratliff III. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. John and I have known each other from way back. John, could you tell me when and where you were born and a bit about your family?

RATLIFF: I was born in Louisiana in 1935. My parents were both school teachers, my

mother in music and music education and my father was a math and science teacher. We moved around a bit.

Q: In Louisiana?

RATLIFF: Well, throughout the south. When I was born in Louisiana, I was only born in Louisiana because my mother wanted to be near her mother, who was there at the time. My family was living in Mississippi at the time.

Q: Where in Mississippi?

RATLIFF: I'm not quite sure, in McComb, I believe, or it may have been the Mississippi delta because there were two or three places they lived at in connection with their school teaching. When I was six, my brother caught polio, so we moved to Georgia so my brother could be at Warm Springs Foundation. My dad got a job at a military school in Georgia so that we could be near him. He got that job through his college roommate who happened to be teaching at this military school. Then, when I was 14, my dad took a job with a college in Louisiana to be close to my grandmother who was aging, and so we moved to Louisiana at that time after having lived in Georgia for about seven years.

Q: Where did you live in Louisiana?

RATLIFF: A place called Hammond, about 60 miles north of New Orleans at the crossroads of interstates 55 and 12.

Q: You went to school in Hammond?

RATLIFF: I went to high school at the demonstration school at the college where my dad was teaching and then went to college there for one year as a music major.

Q: What college was this?

RATLIFF: At the time it was called Southeastern Louisiana College. Now I believe it is called Southeastern Louisiana University.

Q: Why music?

RATLIFF: Well, it seems I had a talent for it. It sort of ran in the family. My mother had been a public school music teacher and a piano teacher. I enjoyed singing and enjoyed playing in the band and got a scholarship to college for playing in the band.

Q: What did you play?

RATLIFF: I played trumpet in the band. That gave me scholarship tuition for a grand total of $18 per semester. Since the total tuition per semester was only $25, I only had to pay the remaining $7.

Q: You went one year, then where did you go?

RATLIFF: Then I went in the Army.

Q: From when to when?

RATLIFF: From 1954 to 1957.

Q: What branch did you serve in and where did you serve?

RATLIFF: I was with the Army Security Agency, and after basic training I ended up at what was known at the time as the Army Language School studying Korean.

Q: At the Presidio of Monterey? I think we talked about this a long time ago. We're alumni. I took Russian in 1951 in the Air Force.

RATLIFF: That's right. You were four years ahead of me. I was there in '55 for Korean.

Q: Did you feel your music ability helped with your language ability? Had you shown language aptitude?

RATLIFF: Not particularly. I took Spanish in high school against my wishes and my will. My father who never had an opportunity to study language insisted that I study Spanish. In high school we had a teacher who was the history teacher, spent two weeks in Mexico and didn't speak a word of Spanish. It was the sort of experience that many Americans had in going through the school system at that time. When I got into Korean, I found it extremely difficult. To my best recollection, I had never seen an Asian face until that time. It was basically the first time I had been out of the South. In the early weeks, I was having considerable difficulty. Out of 45 people in my class, I was the only person from the South.

Q: Could you describe the Army Language School method as you saw it at that time and how it worked with you?

RATLIFF: I am in much better shape to describe it now in a somewhat more objective and knowledgeable fashion.

Q: This became your profession, but at that time how did it work?

RATLIFF: At that time the emphasis was on speaking. Of course this was a new thing for me. There was a lot of dialogues, if not dialogues, then conversations, representative conversations. Also there were records that could be used to listen to the language. There was a lot of emphasis on memorization and a lot of tests. We had a test every two weeks; they would test us on the materials that we had covered over those two weeks.

Q: How did the other students relate to Korean?

RATLIFF: I think everybody was motivated and interested in mastering the language, even though it had not been the first language choice for most of us. We thought that we would naturally go to Korea and were fascinated and somewhat apprehensive. This was after the Korean War. Everybody knew a certain amount about Korea. Here we found the 20 or 30 Koreans that were teaching us as representatives of that language and culture. Most of us were quite fascinated and motivated to learn as much as we could and were looking forward to assignment to Korea.

If I may, I would like to go back to an earlier question, regarding leaving college to join the Army. There were two reasons I left college to join the Army. One, while I was a good singer, I was not a great singer, and I didn't see a professional career as a singer. Without a professional career as a singer, by majoring in music, the prospects were for a career as a high school chorus director or band director in Louisiana or someplace in the South. I thought there must be more out there. Two, I was unlucky in love. I was nineteen and in love with a 16-year-old. She was still in high school and wasn't ready to settle down to one guy, apparently, at least not me. That seemed to be another good reason to make a kind of a change in my life and go to greener pastures so to speak.

Q: How did you find life in Monterey in those days? Did you live in the barracks? What platoon were you in?

RATLIFF: Yes. I don't remember.

Q: I was in the 6th platoon.

RATLIFF: I remember that it was one of those WWI wooden barracks. It was on what might have been called Soldiers Field in those days (and still is), directly below the chapel and the officer's club. That's all changed now.

Q: How did the language training play out? You were saying that you were having a great deal of difficulty when you started. What was it, a year's training?

RATLIFF: Yes, I think it was 47 weeks. You were asking what the experience was like earlier. I think anybody who has been through language training of that length has its kind of peaks and valleys with more valleys than peaks. All of us were warned about this, but we experienced it anyway, so it seemed like a very long 10-11 months. You began to see the end in sight and you began to figure out that maybe you could learn this crazy language. The time went by and finally it was time to leave.
Q: You left about the end of '55, was it?

RATLIFF: '55.

Q: So where did you go?

RATLIFF: I went to Seattle, Fort Lewis, Washington, to ship out to Japan to the 500th ASA headquarters in Tokyo.

Q: So much time has passed now and this is obviously an unclassified interview. You and I and many others have talked extensively about what was once a very classified type of thing known only to us and our opponents but not to the general population.

RATLIFF: Why don't we keep it that way?

Q: But anyway, what type of work were you doing there?

RATLIFF: I was working with the Korean language. Wherever I was, that is what I was doing essentially. Even after this many years I am not at liberty to go beyond that.

Q: Did you stay in Japan?

RATLIFF: As it turned out I stayed in Japan. A number of my classmates went to Korea. To my delight, when we arrived in Tokyo, they administered a test to all of us in Korean, and those persons who scored the highest on the test stayed in Japan, so I was fortunate to be one of those who stayed in Japan. So, I was happy that I had applied myself in learning the language, even though it was difficult for me. At the time I was shedding a few crocodile tears about missing the opportunity to go to Korea, but I enjoyed myself in Japan and it set my future career because I had an opportunity to begin studying Japanese.

Q: I would say that as enlisted men in Japan in those days was not a hardship. Going to Korea was still pretty much of a basket case.

RATLIFF: That's right, and I went on leave in '57 just to see if the streets were really paved with gold. I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything, but the war damage was still there, and it was a very different experience for me. Subsequently, I have been back to Korea many times.

Q: Well, now because Japan became a major focus of your career, can you describe from your perspective how you saw Japan in '56-'57.

RATLIFF: Well I'm not sure I am sophisticated about it now, I certainly wasn't then. It was a very pleasant place to live. At that point in '56 - only 11 years after the war had ended, the people appeared to be prosperous and very friendly toward Americans. Life was very easy, and it was just a great place to be.

Q: Your military career sort of ran its course in '57.

RATLIFF: Yes, but I should mention one thing because it was such a great experience. I was fortunate enough after six months in Tokyo to be transferred to Kyoto and spent a year there with the beauty of the shrines and temples in that area. There was only a very

kind of loose control over my work schedule and whereabouts by the Army so I was rather free to wander in and out and do my work and enjoy the country. In fact, I rented a room with a Japanese family for the last six months I was there and had an opportunity to interact with them.

Q: Did you find that there, as I did somewhat earlier when I was in Japan, that some of our colleagues in the military really basically never left the base. They were very uncomfortable, and others just went out and had a lot of fun.

RATLIFF: I found it disappointing and frustrating. I had one friend from my wife's hometown, I'd say an acquaintance rather than a friend. He happened to be married and that was his excuse because he didn't want to be tempted. He said to go out into the community, but in a year and a half in Japan, he left the base twice. I felt this was very unfortunate.

Q: In a way there was sort of this real division between those that were really afraid to go out into a foreign culture and of course, Japan was foreign in those days.

RATLIFF: I was very pleased to have been seen on my base as the resident Japanese expert. When one of my colleagues was an army truck and hit a pedestrian, and he wanted to visit the hospital to express his concern and apologies, he asked me to go with him to the hospital to interpret with the family and with the old man whose leg was broke as a result of this unfortunate accident. I don't fool myself that I had that penetrating look into Japanese society, but I certainly had more than a lot of GI's did.

Q: So in '57 your term ran out. What were you thinking about doing at this point because here you had one year of music and one year of Korean.

RATLIFF: Well, when I was studying Korean, there was a young second lieutenant in my class who had come through the ROTC program. He was a Georgetown University graduate, and he talked about the very good language department that Georgetown had. As time went on, I learned that Japanese would be not so difficult to learn if you already knew Korean. So somewhere early on, I think even before I arrived in Japan, I thought "well there is a plan, maybe I'll apply to Georgetown, and go there and major in Japanese". Later when I fell in love with Japan, going to Georgetown U. seemed like an even better plan. It meant that it would provide a vehicle for returning to Japan.

Q: You had the GI bill at that time didn't you?

RATLIFF: That's correct.

Q: Which meant that the government would pay a significant amount of your tuition for the time you were in the military which for three years gave you about three years of education.

RATLIFF: Well four.

Q: So what happened?

RATLIFF: Well, I was accepted into Georgetown to the amazement of many of my colleagues. Being a Louisiana boy who hadn't traveled much, I was thought to be not that well educated. I came to Washington to study at Georgetown.

Q: Was there any apprehension on the part of your family at home that you were going to a Jesuit college?

RATLIFF: No, to the contrary, the apprehension was when I went to Japan, they thought I would bring home a Japanese bride. That apprehension was much stronger than going to a Jesuit college.

Q: You were at Georgetown from when to when?

RATLIFF: From 1957-1962 because I went on for graduate work after I got my B.S. in Japanese.
Q: You were majoring in Japanese.

RATLIFF: Actually I think it was called B.S. in languages (Japanese).

Q: When you got a degree at that time in a language, what did that mean?

RATLIFF: Well, I frankly didn't know when I enrolled. Many years later, I told my four children that I strongly advised against majoring in a foreign language for the purpose of getting a good job, because one needs a skill besides just a language.

Q: So, were you getting while you were majoring in the language the equivalent of area studies, literature, that sort of thing?

RATLIFF: Some, yes. If I could be described as having a minor, it would be in linguistics rather than area studies, so I was required to take the history of Japan and courses of that sort. In fact, the head of the Japanese department had a Ph.D. in history so it was very strong.

Q: Well now you are saying linguistics. Georgetown, I don't know what the state of its linguistics department was at that time. Could you talk about the state of linguistics in the '50s?

RATLIFF: It had a fairly widespread reputation in those days for linguistics as well as language. There was a fellow there by the name of Leon Dostert. I'm not sure about his background, but I believe he may have been involved in interpreting at Nuremberg and at some point was put in charge of the school of languages and linguistics and I understand was working on an early version of machine translation. I later learned that the effort was government-funded, and it must have been one of the earlier machine translation projects.

I had professors for various courses who were professors of linguistics rather than of language. The university was strong then and I believe it is strong now, not only in theoretical linguistics, but also in applied linguistics. Just to revisit the difference between the two, theoretical is essentially the theory of language and how it works. Applied linguistics is the various studies of how to take that knowledge and put it into practice, most commonly in language teaching or in language testing and things of that sort. I was not at all interested in theoretical linguistics, but I became interested in applied linguistics.

Q: Did your time or intensive study at the Army language school - did you find that the method used there was similar enough that you could see as you got into this that there was a carryover to how Georgetown was doing this?

RATLIFF: Yes, actually at the time they were quite similar. To a great extent you didn't have the military context at Georgetown but in a way you did because we were using the spoken Japanese text that had been written during WWII as part of the series of military textbooks. Consequently, it had quite a bit of military content.

Q: Take me to your 155mm guns, please. That type of thing.

RATLIFF: Yes, and survival phrases such as *Is there any drinking water nearby*? That type of thing. The word for "drinking water" used in the textbook was not used by the Japanese at the time.

Q: Was there any liaison carried on with the Foreign Service Institute (the training arm of the U.S. Department of State) and its language teaching while you were at Georgetown? Were you familiar with it?

RATLIFF: No. I became increasingly familiar with the entity of the Foreign Service Institute [FSI] but only the language school portion. I knew that the Foreign Service Institute taught language to diplomats. The head of the Japanese department at Georgetown had substituted for a very well-known Japanese linguist by the name of Dr. Eleanor Harz Jorden (married at the time to William Jorden, who went on to become Ambassador to Panama) for a period of months when she was out on maternity leave. My Georgetown professor brought information back to me and my fellow students about how language training at the Foreign Service Institute worked and to some extent how the testing system worked as well.

Q: Did you see that the Foreign Service Institute and Georgetown were really running on separate divergent tracks?

RATLIFF: Well, not really. It was just that, as I know even better now, there were so many advantages the Foreign Service Institute had in teaching languages in that you had students who were assigned to the task typically full-time without the distraction of other work or in the case of Georgetown, other courses. I went to Georgetown with the

expectation that I would have an intensive course in Japanese. I recognized that I would have other courses. The best that I could get in terms of an intensive course in Japanese at Georgetown was something like six hours a week compared to the typical 30 hours of FSI, or at the Army Language School where I studied Korean. You can imagine how slow the progress felt to me and to others in a university course. It was a good program, but there were still very few language hours compared to what FSI did.

Q: As you were going through this, you went to graduate school. What were you aiming at there, a Masters degree?

RATLIFF: Initially I was aiming at a Masters, although frankly I expected to remain for a Ph.D. My professor recommended me for a National Defense Education Act (NDEA) scholarship. My grades in undergraduate had not been that good because by that time I had married, had two children, and was working full-time while trying to finish up a B.S. in Japanese. At that point it was kind of like getting through rather than trying to make honors. To my surprise, I was given an NDEA fellowship, which prohibited me from working, so I became a true full time student in graduate school. By the time I left Georgetown, I was already into my second renewal of that fellowship, and there was every reason to expect that I could have remained there to the Ph.D. level.

Q: What happened?

RATLIFF: We were studying, and this to me is where it gets interesting and points out how much we owe to sheer coincidence, in graduate school we had a course in Japanese syntax. Eleanor Jorden who at the time was the chair of the Asian language department at FSI, had written her Ph.D. dissertation on Japanese syntax and we were using her dissertation as our textbook. We had a lot of questions because we found it rather difficult to understand, so we asked the professor who was also head of the department, some of those questions. He said that he couldn't answer all of those questions and that it would be better to have the author answer them. When he contacted her for answers, she said that it had been a long time and it would be better to have the students put the questions in writing. She suggested that we then schedule a lunch at which she would answer our questions.

The Professor (Dr. John Young, who went to head Asian language departments at the University of Maryland in Tokyo, University of Hawaii, and at Seton Hall University) arranged this lunch that was held in the Hot Shoppes at Key Bridge, the site of the current Key Bridge Marriott. At that time, it was one of a number of Hot Shoppes in the Washington area. I think they are all gone now. Anyway, in the course of the luncheon, Eleanor Jorden happened to mention that the assistant director position of the Foreign Service Institute Japanese language school in Tokyo was vacant, and that FSI was looking for someone for that position. It was difficult for me to finish my lunch because I wanted to run over to FSI right away and apply for the job because this was my language, this was my country and away we go. Immediately after lunch I was brought over to FSI by Eleanor Jorden, accompanied by John Young. FSI at the time was located in Arlington Towers (now the River Place Apartment complex) and was introduced to Howard

Sollenberger who was the dean of the school of language studies and Jim Firth who was associate dean. I was interviewed with my professor, John Young, in the room at the same time, a fairly unusual interview. Since Professor Young had substituted for Eleanor Jorden and at FSI, he had a fair amount of credibility with FSI, and could vouch for my Japanese and scholarship, etc. I went home with a very large stack of papers including a background check, personal history that sort of thing. I submitted those papers within three days because I was quite anxious, and then began to wait for security clearance and a job offer with the understanding that FSI wanted me for that position, but it's not a firm offer until you go through the usual procedures and are formally accepted.

Q: You already had a top secret clearance prior to that, so that made it easier.

RATLIFF: Yes, I had top secret clearances subsequent to the Army for the work that I had done in the Washington area to support me and my family while going to school. It was only after the delay went on and on and I started to wonder if I was ever going to get to work. At that, I happened to mention to them that a background investigation on me had already been done by other agencies. They checked that out and a couple of days later I got the clearance. Now we've only got 23 years to go.

Q: I take it this application was approved then.

RATLIFF: Yes it was.

Q: This meant you went out to Tokyo.

RATLIFF: Eventually. As it turned out, my wife was expecting a baby by then so we weren't able to go as quickly as I and FSI would have liked. We wanted to remain in the U.S. until the baby was born and for another six weeks after that. That was in September of '62. We didn't leave for Japan until mid April of '63. My career at FSI started off initially in sort of a training capacity. They had a category at the time called junior linguist which was more in principle than in practice. We had a professor of linguistics at the time sort of emulating a university structure. Junior linguists came in and were tutored to a degree on the reality of language teaching by this professor of linguistics and were given certain assignments to carry out. I say in principle rather than in practice because the needs of the service and the workload put that on the back burner very quickly. I happened to arrive at the time when the Vietnamese language program went from six students to 60.

Q: Were you thrown right in?

RATLIFF: Yes, in the interim between 1957 and 1962, I had also acquired the Vietnamese language proficiency through work with the government. Suddenly FSI was so interested in my Vietnamese that I began to despair that I would ever get out of there and actually go to Japan, which was my main and initial reason for going with FSI.

Q: Just to fill this out, what was the background of your wife before you met her? How

did she feel about this?

RATLIFF: She was from my mother's hometown in Louisiana. Her mother and my mother had been friends before we were born. She had been to Chicago once and to North Carolina once, but she was essentially a hometown girl who had never been anywhere. Her mother owned a women's clothing store in a small town in Louisiana 16 miles from my hometown. I met her when she was 14 at my first cousin's 14th birthday party. She is the one I went into the Army because of-
Q: The cousin?

RATLIFF: No. My wife. She is the one I was unlucky in love with, but we got back together after I returned from my military service, and ended up getting married a year later.

Q: Can you give a little feel about the atmosphere at FSI with this sudden burst about Vietnam?

RATLIFF: Well it was very interesting. There were, of course, people who were very excited about it and committed to doing everything possible to respond to this very important need. The first 60 students, as I recall, were all Air Force medical personnel, but there were others at FSI including some who had been earlier involved in language training in that part of the world who felt unenthusiastic about it, shall we say.

One of the reasons I was pressed into service working in the Vietnamese training program was that others on the staff who had handled the five or six students that came in once a year didn't want the challenge and the headaches that came with what was initially 60 students and what later grew to as many as 400-500.

Q: How did you find this initial baptism into Vietnamese training? Being a tonal language and all, how well did this seem to work out with Air Force medical personnel?

RATLIFF: I'm glad you asked that question. First of all, let me say that their arrival came fairly soon before I left for Japan, so I didn't actually have that much involvement in their training to draw many conclusions, but I do remember one particular story which I tell a lot. This story was related to me by Dr. Jorden, who was my supervisor. At that time there was an ongoing discussion about whether we should be teaching northern dialect or southern dialect of Vietnamese. One side of the argument stemmed from the fact that the people in the government all down from the north, therefore this is the prestige dialect and we should teach northern. The others said yes but the people down at the rice roots level speak southern, so we should train our diplomats and others to speak southern. One Air Force colonel got into that debate and was very much swayed by the dialect of the government officials in Vietnam, and he argued for teaching the Air Force medical personnel in northern dialect. FSI over ruled him, but he didn't give up easily. On one occasion he called Dr. Jorden who was chair of the Asian language department and also taking a lead position on the expansion of Vietnamese training. He called her and said, “I have just heard a report that there are only 45 words in medical terminology that differ

between northern and southern dialect." She said, "That depends." He said, "What do you mean, it depends?" It depends on whether you consider bedpan to be one word or two. The debate stopped about then and they were all taught southern dialect. It was an exciting time; you felt you were working very hard on something that was very important. Everybody that was involved with it felt very committed to it. The training was expanding so quickly that we were forming classes using FSI employees as guinea pigs for teacher training. We were putting new teachers into the classroom after one hour of training; we were that desperate.

Q: Where were you getting your cadre to teach?

RATLIFF: From the Washington area. We were doing everything they could, and searched in other parts of the U.S., I understand. I wasn't in on the actual recruitment process.

Q: These were all Vietnamese.

RATLIFF: All Vietnamese.

Q: The real question was do you hire southern Vietnamese or northern Vietnamese.
RATLIFF: There was no question. They were all southern. That policy issue was settled at the beginning.

Q: It makes great sense.

RATLIFF: Now we have a different take on that.

Q: Things change. That was then; this is now. I suppose we are teaching northern Vietnamese now. Well, let's move to Japan. You were in Japan for 11 years?

RATLIFF: No, I served first a tour of four years '63 to January '67. I served that as Assistant Director of the FSI Japanese School in Tokyo. Then the consulate general in Yokohama closed down except for one consular officer, and the school moved out of rented quarters in Tokyo near the Olympic Village to the consulate general building in Yokohama.

Q: Let's talk about this '63-'67 period. What was your job?

RATLIFF: My title was assistant director of the school. That meant running things in the absence of the director who in fact left for Washington immediately after my arrival on a long delayed home leave. My job was very similar to the director's in terms of the evaluation of students, the training of teachers, the determining of the curriculum of the program. As it turned out, I was also developing new training materials and coincidentally in another capacity of regional language supervisor, overseeing the part time programs at the consulates, and part time and intensive programs through the U.S. Embassy in Seoul.

Q: About how many students at any one time?

RATLIFF: About 30.

Q: How was this split? Were they all State Department?

RATLIFF: No. There was a large State Department contingent in those days and there were some military though they had a tendency to be civilians in the military, and of course, the United States Information Agency [USIA] was very large. At that, there were cultural centers all over Japan. USIA officers represented as much as 40% of the enrollment.

Q: From your perspective, what were the major challenges in teaching Japanese to these students?

RATLIFF: First of all, I experienced the same challenge that I did at Georgetown, that is no really good Japanese materials had been developed since those WWII days, so the materials we were using were not that relevant to the needs of foreign service personnel. As a makeshift intermediate text, we were using a Japanese social studies textbook used in grammar school, which was quite lacking in terms of a textbook to train diplomats in the use of Japanese. It was natural; it was there, but it wasn't suitable. There was nothing whatsoever in terms of text materials that addressed political, economic or cultural. Well, cultural, yes by the nature of the social studies and the like, but nothing written for adult Americans and certainly not for adult American diplomats. Dr. Eleanor Jorden had written a couple of texts since the war. Those were in use for the beginning students, but for the advanced students the material situation was pretty sad. There were a lot of raw materials. I don't want to paint it bleaker than it was. We had the advantage of television and a lot of tapes from radio. We were very active with things like radio news and commentaries. We used a lot of what people like to call now, authentic materials to train people. We were certainly taking advantage of the environment in which the students were fortunate enough to study.
Q: I would have thought this was not a time of strict budgets, this was the sort of thing that the FSI could have just gone either to Georgetown or somewhere in Japan, some university and contracted for text materials to be produced.

RATLIFF: If you look back over the period say in the ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s, various government agencies did exactly that, went to universities and sometimes private contractors and asked that materials be written for government requirements. Much of that money was wasted because the people outside of the government found it very difficult to understand the true requirements of the Foreign Service and the requirements of the Foreign Service officers particularly in terms of training against what we called at the time the FSI proficiency scale and also the subjects that are needed for diplomacy and diplomatic assignments.

Q: I would have thought that over time the scale that we train people in, the tests, I'm not

talking about just Japanese but in general, that a fairly solid template could have been developed for all languages. Here, diplomats need to know this and that.

RATLIFF: I think that's right, but for the most part, FSI took on that task itself, and if you look even today at the list of textbooks used, you will see two kinds: those developed at FSI or those bought off the shelf. You won't see any texts to my knowledge, that were developed on contract or by request by FSI to a university.

Q: Is this something that could have been done or are there really two different mindsets.

RATLIFF: Today it could be done; in those days it was very difficult. Today there is more sophistication out there in universities about this kind of training and these objectives. For example, the commercial language school that I founded after my retirement could develop appropriate training materials easily, and in fact we have produced a fairly large number on contract.
Q: What about as you were working with the students, how well were they coming out at that time?

RATLIFF: Many were coming out very well. I was very impressed with a whole string of Foreign Service officers that came out of the training There was a problem which crept up from time to time in which personnel officers in making selections considered the ongoing assignment first and linguistic aptitude second, so occasionally somebody ended up in Japanese language training who had no business there through either improper screening but more commonly because someone felt that this was a good officer and those officer qualities were more important on whether he could get a 3 or a 3+.

Q: We are talking about the language rating, which goes from zero to five. Tell me, what was your impression then, and as time has developed, about the language aptitude test that is given. Could you talk a little about the language aptitude test and your impression of its validity?

RATLIFF: As you know, there was a test that was developed by John Caroll at Harvard called the Modern Language Aptitude Test. It is a rather old test at this point; it probably goes back to some time in the '50s. I believe it was FSI that developed a new scoring system for that test, with a maximum possible score of 80. FSI was able to make certain rough estimates about aptitude scores necessary to predict success depending on the difficulty of the language. Primarily we are dealing with four different levels of difficulty of languages within the Foreign Service. They have gone down to three now. What we used to call the "world languages," a term that is now considered chauvinistic, included languages like Spanish, French, German. These are the easiest for the native speakers of English to learn. A typical study program for world languages is six months of intensive study to attain a level three, which is described as professional proficiency Then there are so-called hard languages like Thai and Russian and Turkish. A course in a hard language is typically 44 weeks to attain that same score, the three level in both speaking and reading. Then the third category – the "super-hard" languages consists of four: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Arabic. Normally for those languages we figure a minimum of 18

up to 22 months to achieve that same level three competence. That's kind of how it sorts out.

Q: Most of the people being trained, had they taken the language aptitude test?

RATLIFF: Most had and now we get back to the validity of the test. Typically FSI felt that a person needed a minimum score of 60 in order to go into a language like Japanese, ideally at least 65. Sixty to sixty-five was kind of like no man's land. Anecdotally, I saw people who scored 58 and below who had quite a bit of difficulty with the language. There were exceptions - that is important to note. There were exceptions that were based primarily on motivation and hard work. I think that everybody has concluded now that modern language aptitude tests should be one measure or one indication but it should no longer be the basis on which someone is assigned or not assigned to a particular language.

Q: Typically your student who came to the Japanese language school already had language prior to coming there, is that right?

RATLIFF: I think for the most part, but not always. I think there were cases where people were hitting a foreign language for the first time, certainly a hard language like that. My impression was that not everyone had already demonstrated the ability to learn a foreign language.

Q: Had they had any Japanese at the Foreign Service Institute before being sent out?

RATLIFF: Yes and no. At that time there was a full two year program going on in Tokyo and subsequently in Yokohama when the school moved there. Persons were assigned without any particular system that we could perceive, either being assigned six to twelve months in Washington and then on to the advanced school, or assigned for a full two years to the school in Tokyo or Yokohama. Certainly it was based to a degree on the level of the officer and the rank of the officer. First-tour officers didn't get two years of training and consequently always got their training in Washington. There was a very good system which was observed occasionally which worked superbly. That was to give an officer six months of Japanese, in some cases twelve and then ship them off to Japan for a junior office assignment in the Embassy or a consulate. Then on to another tour in a second country, and then bring them back for advanced Japanese language training. I have always advocated you needed to train X number of officers at the beginning level in order to have some field of officers to choose from for advanced Japanese training or any of the other super hard languages. In other words, you have to put more people in the pipeline initially than you expect to need in the future, to account for individual preferences, language aptitude, and resignations.

Q: What was your impression of how it worked out by having the FSI language school in Japan, because I think some of the other countries like the French or the British tended send their officers to a university in Japan, or something like that. What was your impression of putting the people there but in sort of an American teaching environment?

RATLIFF: I think there are two issues here. One is what are the advantages of having the training take place in Japan versus taking place in the U.S., and there were distinct advantages to being in Japan and walking out and being able to speak to the Japanese and to interact. In those days, and to this day, I'm happy to note that students were required to live within the Japanese community. They were barred from embassy housing; consequently, they were coping with day to day life in Japan, learning in some cases reluctantly, how to get things done. That's one aspect.

As far as going into say a Japanese university or in the case of the British, working with a tutor or possibly combining private instruction with some university classes and the like, those of us at FSI in those days felt strongly that system represented what was done in the Foreign Service before the war, and that we learned a lot about language training since then. The structured program with kind of guidance and discipline that FSI provides was a distinct advantage to sending someone off on his own to learn a language. People like Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson before the war learned Japanese from people like Naganuma (who went on to found one of the largest Japanese language schools in Japan) in those kind of relatively unstructured conditions. Some learned it well, and some didn't learn it so well, and sometimes we didn't know whether the student had mastered the language until it was too late to do anything about it.

Some students can learn the language in a very unstructured program. But if you want to be sure that the majority of the people to the necessary proficiency, then the kind of structured program found in an FSI school is the best procedure.

Q: Did you have problems in fending off the embassy from trying to raid your students from time to time?

RATLIFF: Very rarely. I was very pleased and very impressed with that. I remember we did duty at the embassy when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The entire time I was in Japan which subsequently turned out to be nine years, that is the only time I remember people in the school, Foreign Service officers, being asked to serve any kind of capacity. There was an early period when I arrived when the school was still in Tokyo when students were required to be duty officers. That rather conveniently went by the boards when the school moved to Yokohama because it became unworkable after that.

The Embassy provided support, and occasional meetings. They would send somebody down to talk to students and invite people up, but it was pretty strictly hands off, and I was pleased with the support from the officers at the embassy, starting with Ambassador Reischauer, who was a noted Japanese scholar and was the ambassador when I arrived there. By the way, at the reception for newcomers at the Ambassador's Residence, I introduced myself to Ambassador Reischauer. Upon hearing my Louisiana accent, he asked me, "Are you going to teach them Japanese with a southern accent?"

Q: Was there any debate going on about what type of Japanese to teach?

RATLIFF: Well, the debate had come and gone. The type of Japanese to teach was Tokyo dialect, and we were in the Tokyo area. Now it subsequently arose at a time when there was discussion about moving the school, but that was in the '70s. The decision was basically taken that we wanted to teach people standard dialect or Tokyo dialect.

Q: You were there until '67 in this capacity. Where did you go then?

RATLIFF: Well, in mid-'66, one morning when I was shaving, I got a call from two officials at FSI in Washington, Dr. James Frith, dean of the School of Language Studies, and Dr. Eleanor Jorden, still chair of Asian languages but also in charge of the Vietnam Training Center. They told me on the phone that morning with shaving cream on my face that they wanted me to go to Saigon to recruit Vietnamese language teachers. They had exhausted all supplies in the U.S. and they needed 22 more Vietnamese language teachers. They knew I had worked with the Vietnamese program for a few months and that I had studied Vietnamese "in my last life," as we say in Asia. Of course I agreed to go. I went on two trips. I am pleased to say that I was successful in recruiting 22 Vietnamese teachers to be sent to Washington, where they filled a very important need and I think did a good job. At the conclusion of my first trip to Vietnam - I was there twice for three weeks - I wrote a letter to Dr. Frith and said I enjoyed seeing Southeast Asia. I had made a weekend trip to Bangkok. I said I would be interested and willing in volunteering for service in Vietnam, that I felt that I could make a contribution there and it would be maybe a natural next step in my career. At the time I knew there was a position in Bangkok, the regional language training supervisor for FSI which happened to be filled. So, I fully expected to be assigned to Vietnam in a new position there for FSI. At that time, you had a lot of Vietnamese language training going on for AID and State and you have people all over the provinces and the like. To my surprise, I got a letter back a week or two later saying that my interest in a Vietnam assignment fit in very well with FSI thinking and plans. FSI transferred the FSI representative in Bangkok back to Washington to run the Vietnamese language training program, and sent me out on a direct transfer to Bangkok with the special responsibilities for Vietnam in January of '67. That is how that all developed. It would not have developed, I suppose if I had not been asked to recruit those 22 Vietnamese teachers. I have never regretted it of course.

Q: One question before we move to Bangkok. Was there a problem in teaching Japanese in the respect that the majority of your teachers would be women and the majority of your students would be men? A problem between male Japanese and female Japanese as far as the language goes?

RATLIFF: At the Washington level that was a bit of a problem. I should mention that I was also involved in the Japanese language program at FSI before going to Tokyo. We just couldn't find any male instructors in Washington. I'm happy to say when I got to Tokyo I found a lot of male instructors. There was a system worked out which is probably still used to a degree today which university graduates who were not language majors, they were often political science or economics majors were brought in to teach on a part time basis and were trained. We probably had as many male teachers as female teachers, so that the issue of how one speaks wasn't a real problem.

Q: You were in Bangkok from when to when?

RATLIFF: From January of '67 to June of '69.

Q: What were your challenges?
RATLIFF: Well, the first challenge was learning a bit of Thai. I found myself in Thailand which was a delightful place at that time. While I had a regional traveling job in which I covered all of the countries of Southeast Asia, I was resident in Bangkok, Thailand. My wife and I enrolled in the AUA, American University Association, at the Binational center for an intensive course in Thai. I say enrolled, since I was the regional language training supervisor, I beat the bushes and turned up seven government students, that is, six government employees plus my wife from various government agencies who needed intensive training. A woman from USIA and three people from AID, a sergeant from JUSMAAG [Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group], the military assistance group, so we had kind of an interagency intensive Thai class. We went for six weeks; some people stayed on for nine. I felt that I needed to get that out of the way in order to make living in Bangkok enjoyable and tolerable. That worked well. After that I'd say the greatest challenge aside from, Vietnam, which was its own challenge, was living out of a suitcase three weeks out of four and not being home very much. The first round of trips, it was all very exciting. I'd go to Rangoon. I'd never been to Rangoon and that was great. I actually went up to Mandalay. Each country I visited for the first time was very exciting. By the third visit, I was beginning to get a little tired of the constant travel. I will say on the professional side, after a time it began to get frustrating to see the same old problems all the time in the language program. One of my primary responsibilities was proficiency testing of government personnel. This enabled employees to get proficiency on their records without having to wait until they next were assigned to Washington. Aside from that, I was supervising post language programs, and that, I can assure you, seemed like a thankless task and that any improvements that are made don't stay improvements very long.

Q: What's the problem with post language training programs?

RATLIFF: It is a part-time language training program, and people have their regular work to do as well. Consequently the progress that is made tends to be rather minimal compared to intensive training. There has been over the years a pattern built up, which has been to me a great frustration which you may have a slightly different take on, in many posts it was assumed that the Foreign Service officers that graduated from the FSI program, they had an investment to protect and that those FSOs should get tutorial instruction, and then the secretaries and spouses could get group instruction which would give them the basics of the language in order to get around the city. What happened often was that an inordinate amount of the money was spent on tutorial instruction for FSOs, which had a tendency to be if not unstructured certainly unsupervised.

Q: I agree.

RATLIFF: So I was a hard charger in trying to represent the FSI party line and therefore I was not always popular when I went in to see the post language officer and subsequently the DCM or the Administrative Counselor and said I think you've got too many FSOs having tutorial instruction. At the very least you should pair them up. Of course I wasn't popular with the FSOs either.

Q: What about working on the Vietnam training. This is a period of intense buildup. It also covered the Tet period, the Communist offensive. What were your experiences there and what were the problems?

RATLIFF: Again in spades, people were busy; people were trying to do their jobs. Often in the case of people with AID particularly where there had been no time to give them any Vietnamese language training there were many of them working without much language training, and the conditions outside of Saigon made it very difficult to run any language training. Yet we tried. I worked at the region or the corps headquarters level. I didn't get into the individual provinces where there were even more challenges. We were trying to set up and maintain Vietnamese language training in places like Da Nang and Can Tho and Bien Hoa, and Nha Trang. Quite frankly, a good portion of my job involved proficiency testing. I tested lots of people. There was incentive pay for language proficiency at the time, and there was a great interest in being tested for proficiency pay, so I did hundreds of tests. There was also the occasional junior officer who had Vietnamese training in Washington but not to the three level and who had continued working. People like Desaix Anderson, who later went on to be Deputy Chief of Mission in Japan, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs, and others who were in Vietnam at the time. I tested with the help of a trained native speaker who had been on the FSI staff before, I tested a whole range of people over that two and a half year period.

Q: Was there a problem because of the relatively short tours that people served in Vietnam, or did you find that the people speaking Vietnamese tended to stay much longer?

RATLIFF: I honestly don't know. I didn't get much of an impression, particularly since I was only there two and a half years, I couldn't form that much of an impression. You had a feeling that everybody was transient to some degree, passing through, people thrown in, a lot of reluctant volunteers.

Q: This was a time when if you wanted to stay in the Foreign Service, you bloody well went to Vietnam if you were asked to.

RATLIFF: That's right. I remember hearing about a couple of A-100 students, brand new FSOs, who were in their basic training at FSI. This was in 1965 I recall vividly. These two FSOs were walking out of the classroom during basic officer training and one of them said to the other, “I went into the Foreign Service to avoid going to Vietnam. Now I'm going to go whether I like it or not.”

Q: You left Bangkok in '69. Whither?

RATLIFF: Back to Japan. I was very much motivated and reassured throughout my Bangkok, Southeast Asia Tour by the promise from FSI that upon the completion of the Southeast Asia tour, I was going back to Japan as the director of that school. I was able to keep my eye on that objective. Even when things got frustrating or I felt a little low, I knew I had that to look forward to.

Q: So you went back there in '69. You were there from '69 to when?

RATLIFF: Until '74.

Q: As director and a different time period, did you find there was a difference?

RATLIFF: Two differences; the two were inter-related. I found that I was no longer the same age as the students. When I arrived in 1964 as Assistant Director, I was one of the guys. First of all, I was not in the position of ultimate authority, and I was the same age, in some cases younger, as many of the students, so I made very good friends. When I came back, I was a few years older; I was the director, and as they say, the buck stops here. I found it a very different existence. It had its own rewards, but it was very different.

Q: Were there any changes in the procedures, problems in this period?

RATLIFF: I thought I'd have a little bit of a honeymoon period once I arrived. I'd had my time in Vietnam and the like. But we had a Foreign Service inspection as soon as I arrived, within I'd say three or four months. The complaints that had been festering over the years about the materials kind of came to a head during the inspector's visit. The complaint was focused on the relative lack of advanced materials. We had tried to write a text when I was there the first time but we had rushed it into production very quickly. It wasn't very suitable and became quickly outdated. It was based on real events at a point in time in Japanese politics and economics and the like. I was pretty much instructed as a result of the inspection to embark on the development of an advanced spoken text that would focus on the needs of the Foreign Service. I spent a good part of the first two years in Japan working on that text while directing the school.

Q: Did you find particularly '72-'74, did you feel the political change in that Japan was not the big game or even Vietnam, but China was. The People's Republic of China was opening up and where before we had people on the periphery in Chinese training was important and Vietnamese training was important, but...

RATLIFF: Speaking frankly, I did not see that at that time. I saw it later when I got back to Washington in subsequent assignments that I had gave me a broader world view. I will say that in both of my tours in Japan, there was a lot of time and attention devoted to the issue of Vietnam because of the rather strong opposition from certain Japanese circles against the perceived support or involvement of Japan in the U.S. effort in Vietnam. We were the targets particularly after we moved into the American consulate building in Yokohama, even though there was no real diplomatic presence there, the building was the

target of many demonstrations as well as some Molotov cocktails and a little present of six sticks of dynamite once which were defused before they went off.

Q: Did you notice any change as Japan got more prosperous or more critical of Vietnam, sort of the relationship of the Japanese language officers and the Japanese. Were things...

RATLIFF: Yes, there was a single point where things seemed to change dramatically. It was I believe in July or August of '71 where something took place that the Japanese called Doroshoku, Dollar Shock. This was when the value of the yen was no longer tied artificially to the dollar at a rate of 360 yen to the dollar. Suddenly overnight, the buying power of the American in Japan, or at least the American government employee, was cut in half. The good old days were gone before we realized those were the good old days. It also influenced at least for the short term, the amount of access Americans had to Japanese society because the impact on buying power was so great that there was an initial retreat to the compound if you will. People were going to the officer's club instead of going out to restaurants or bars or the like. It was a very trying time. Of course, since that time it has gotten a lot worse; but people have adjusted to it.

Q: Did you find during the time you were there that there was some effort made on the part of the students to go out and do things in Japan?

RATLIFF: There was. I was going to say earlier about that time it was actually '71, with the dollar shock and with the drop in the enrollment, there began to be questions about whether this was an affordable operation. Secondly it was at that time that negotiations began to sell the consulate. The free housing for the school itself was about to disappear. We could understand why the Embassy and the Department of State wanted to sell it. They were paying a dollar a year for it. It was on a 100 year lease at a dollar a year. They were able to negotiate with the foreign ministry to sell the rights to that land, and it was sold to develop a hotel. At that time we talked about moving the school to another part of Japan. We had extensive debates in the Embassy but also back at FSI when I came on home leave in '71 about maybe we should take this opportunity to put the school more directly into the Japanese community and more isolated from the Embassy and any American bases. Someone at FSI said something that has always stayed with me. He said that the American Foreign Service officer who wants to go home to his wife and children and have a martini at home in the evening will do it as much in Sapporo as he will in Tokyo. I think that was basically true. I think we concluded that as long as the school was in Japan that the presence of the Embassy or bases and the like needn't necessarily be such a handicap or such an interference, that people with any kind of initiative will immerse themselves in Japanese society. The students who want to do so continue to do that to this day.

Q: In '74 you came back.

RATLIFF: Yes, reluctantly. I had started out at FSI in the “Junior Linguist” program, in which it was envisioned that junior linguists would get two years experience overseas and then came back and another junior linguist went overseas. I managed to stretch it out to

11 years straight.

Q: You were still considered a junior linguist?

RATLIFF: No, I was fortunate to have been promoted three times while overseas. I had been taken into the Foreign Service as a Foreign Service reserve officer and came back to Washington as an FSR-3, which I guess in current grade level would be an FSR-1.

Q: It is equivalent to a colonel in the military. So they brought you back for what?

RATLIFF: Well they weren't quite sure. Those of us at FSI were out overseas running field schools with a lot of autonomy and independent authority and not much oversight from Washington. You might be under the nominal supervision of the Administrative Counselor or the Deputy Chief of Mission, but you really answered to an office eight thousand miles away. I got a letter from FSI saying there are a lot of changes at FSI and out of change comes opportunity. I got assigned to be the supervising linguist for Japanese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, and also two separate assignments as special assistant to the dean for interagency groups. In a way it was kind of a patch together job, and a job much of which I could have done and did do in 1962. But that happens in a lot of Foreign Service jobs where you may have a lot more responsibility overseas than you do right after you return. So, that's where I was. I spent a not terribly happy two years in that position. The interagency part certainly was challenging. The first year I actually had the Vietnamese and Cambodian language training blown out from under me. This was 1975. I thought well, here will come my relief and something else will come along. The supervisor for Germanic languages transferred to USIA at that time, and I ended up the linguist for German which was also a very interesting and rewarding experience but I was looking for greater challenges.

Q: Who was running the FSI at that time?

RATLIFF: Dr. James Frith was still dean for Language Studies and Howard Sollenberger, dean of the language school at the time I was hired in 1962 had gone on to be the director of the Institute. I worked for Dr. Frith as has special assistant for interagency relations.

Q: '74-'76 about?

RATLIFF: That's right.

Q: Then what?

RATLIFF: Then the assistant dean for overseas programs retired on a medical disability and I was promoted to assistant dean for overseas programs.

Q: That was from when to when?

RATLIFF: That was from '76 to 1980. That position is the oversight position for all of the overseas field schools and all of the post language programs. It was at that time; things have changed somewhat since. That was the position; it had quite a bit of responsibility and some prestige with the title of assistant dean and an opportunity for some travel.

Q: How were budgets at this time. Was there a constant battle going on with Congress on language training?

RATLIFF: Certainly there were problems with budgets, which I assume continue to this day - I know that they do. We were down in the trenches to some degree. The school of language studies is part of FSI so FSI gets its allotment as I understand and then like any office, programmatic decisions are made. The school of language studies has always earned quite a bit of money from the training of other agency personnel.

Q: Would you explain how this works.

RATLIFF: It may have changed some now, but basically FSI has always charged a tuition on pretty much a non-profit basis. They would charge a tuition for enrollment of one student within a group training environment. It is a weekly tuition rate. I am not sure whether that included area studies or if that was charged separately. These days I think that is charged separately. Technically speaking, all students who enroll at FSI must pay that tuition. As you could well imagine, for State employees, that's more kind of a paper transaction rather than actual money changing hands because FSI is part of the State Department. The school of language studies always enjoyed fairly significant revenue. I think it got about 40% of its revenue from other agencies that paid in for the language training. My point is that there may have been enough money earned by the school of language studies so that the budget part might not play that big a role, but the reality is that when FSI gets its allocation for the entire institute then the director must determine how that money is distributed in some equitable fashion.

Q: This is tape two side one with John Ratliff.

RATLIFF: Let me interject here that the real funding problem, well there were two. Of course for me in the position of assistant dean for overseas programs, I was primarily concerned with funding for overseas programs at that time, and so I felt it was my responsibility to do everything I could so field schools were funded at a level where they could operate to do the job. I was the Washington advocate for those programs. I'm proud to say I was quite successful in protecting their budgets so that they could meet their basic objectives. The post language programs, I talked about them being a thankless proposition when I was in Southeast Asia, and they were still thankless. There was never enough money from Congress to adequately fund the post language programs. They were basically unsupervised programs. There was no such thing as enough money to fund those programs properly.

Q: What about teaching of the so-called world languages. Was there any thought of having overseas language schools? We used to have it for French, I'm speaking of

French, Spanish, German.

RATLIFF: Those days were gone. In '67 with balance of payments problems and the initiative to reduce overseas expenses, referred to as the BALPA exercise, every overseas position was examined with a very critical eye. FSI lost a number of overseas positions at that time including some independent regional language supervisors. Of course some schools like the French school and some small schools like the one for Portuguese down in Brazil had long gone by then, so one would have been swimming against the tide to advocate the establishment of schools for the easier languages abroad at that time.

Q: We paid tuition for our students who went to Garmisch to the Russian school.

RATLIFF: Yes. we had an average of one or two students a year State officers who went to Garmisch. The prestige of having gone to Garmisch was worth more than the training - keeping in mind it took place in a German speaking area with Russian expatriates. I visited that school while I was assistant dean. It does a good job but not under the same conditions as our schools did.

Q: What was your feeling about the fact that we are sitting today in the new Foreign Service Institute which is on a beautiful campus, has been especially built and all of that, but at this time you were teaching languages in a tall office building which had inadequate elevators, inadequate toilet facilities, difficult to heat. It was not a very comfortable place.

RATLIFF: No it wasn't, but we had never known a comfortable place and those were just the cards we were dealt. I don't think we as employees at FSI thought that much about it. The classroom space was adequate; the elevators were just something you had to live with. I think it made a greater impression on the students who passed through than on the staff. Keep in mind that FSI was in Rosslyn, that the 12 story high rise for more than 20 years old, though new when FSI began occupying it.

Q: It was a way of life.

RATLIFF: It was a great improvement over the Arlington Towers.

Q: I studied in an underground garage. I took Serbian there and then I took Italian later and French. At least we had windows.

RATLIFF: That is a great improvement, yes. However, what you have now is superb. I guess initially people complained abut the long walks necessary to get from building to building.

Q: Were there any significant developments during the '76-'80 period or should we move on?

RATLIFF: I think the most significant development was the recognition of the People's

Republic of China, and the impact that had on our school in Taiwan. We had a school at that time in Taichung, in the central part of the island. It was separated by some hours from Taipei by train and from the Embassy. It was a pretty successful school and a well-known entity within the community as well. To some degree it facilitated greater access on the part of the students to the community. Everybody knew the FSI school. I tried it out. In visiting there, in visiting every field school, I would ask a taxi driver to take me to the Embassy or State Department language school without giving an address and see if the taxi driver knew it. In Taichung they always knew where the school was.

When we were informed, when the announcement was made that the people there heard that there had been recognition of the People's Republic of China, there, of course, was a big flurry of activity. What does this mean to our operation in Taiwan, etc. I guess the announcement came on Friday. I was over at the China desk in the State Department building the next day on a Saturday morning. The office was fully staffed; I was worried about our people in Taiwan. Not surprisingly, the desk officers more immediate problems to deal with than the language school students in Taiwan. I spent the day there, and of course, nobody knew what was going on at that time.

Q: It was during the Carter Administration.

RATLIFF: Yes, we were in a lot of meetings with a lot of discussions about what to do with the school. We subsequently moved the school to Taipei. That was a fairly significant operation. We had to find new quarters for the school and have it adjust to this new relationship within the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).

Q: What was the rationale for moving it from Taichung to Taipei?

RATLIFF: I think it had to do with two things. One, it was felt that there would be no real support in Taichung for the school in terms of logistic support, and two, there would be no diplomatic protection. I think in hindsight those concerns were probably misplaced, but at the time, the decision was made to consolidate everything within AIT.

Q: AIT being the American Institute in Taiwan which was an unofficial office for American interests. Was there any thought of taking the whole outfit over to China?

RATLIFF: Lots of discussions that went on and probably continue to this day, but certainly went on until my retirement in 1985. I personally revisited that issue on a number of occasions to test the water, talk to people on the desk and elsewhere to see if it was feasible to move the school to the mainland. Aside from housing and other kinds of problems, it always broke down by the refusal of the Chinese Government to permit diplomatic passports for diplomats in student status. I don't know what the situation is at this moment because I'm out of it. As the assistant dean for overseas programs, the Taiwan-China issue occupied a lot of my time. In an earlier stage I was involved in the latter stages of the move of the Arabic school from Beirut to Tunis, which actually took place in '76. I had to help work with that new situation.

Q: Was there concern about moving from Beirut to Tunis? I mean there is Arabic and then there is Arabic.

RATLIFF: Certainly there was great concern about that, and quite frankly I believe the decision was made from the standpoint of politics and safety.

Q: Safety is an overwhelming concern, or turned out to be during that period. It was impossible to have it in Beirut.

RATLIFF: We looked at every Arab country and kind of went down a list and said, "Well, this is possible." We concentrated first and foremost on the Levant because that is the dialect on which the modern standard Arabic is based. I know a lot more about that today than I did then. We looked at Jordan and we looked at Egypt, even though the Egyptian dialect is a bit off. We were told that the visibility that might come from having an FSI school was not desirable at that particular point in time for political reasons. Ambassador Herman Eilts in Egypt argued very strongly for the students to go to Cairo but not to have an FSI school. As a result of his recommendations, three students were actually assigned to the American University in Cairo. At the same time, the school itself was moving from Beirut to Tunis. Excuse me, I said three. I think it might have been four FSI students studying at the American University at Cairo. The experience was not so good so as to have anybody want to repeat it for subsequent students, again because the University there was not prepared for or knowledgeable about the language requirements of American diplomats.

Q: So how did the school in Tunis shake down?

RATLIFF: We brought two or three teachers from Beirut with us, and things started to sort themselves out. There was a constant challenge to expose the students to Arabic dialects outside of North Africa. We tried to solve that problem through one or two field trips a year for the students to places like Jordan and Egypt. I guess that's what they are doing to this day.

Q: Well then in 1980, whither?

RATLIFF: In 1980 I was promoted to associate dean for Washington Training. Essentially there was reorganization within the dean's office, and I became responsible for Washington training, and the person who had been responsible for Washington training became responsible for overseas. There were some other minor adjustments, but essentially I was put in charge of the larger, more important program and promoted to the title of associate dean as well.

Q: You did this until '85?
RATLIFF: No, until about '83 or '84 when the then associate dean retired and I became responsible then for both the Washington programs and the overseas programs as the associate dean.

I should mention that, in 1980, with the retirement of the professional language training dean Jim Firth, a decision was made to assign a Foreign Service officer to the position of dean. I worked first for FSO Pierre Shostal (who was later consul general in both Hamburg and Frankfurt), as the first FSO dean for language training and then for FSO Jack Mendelssohn. When Jack retired in early 1985, I served as acting dean for the school for about six months from about February to August. Just at the point of my own retirement, Ambassador Ray Ewing was appointed as the new dean.

Q: I'd just like to say that I have interviewed Pierre, Jack, and Ray.

RATLIFF: Well they are certainly key players in this whole thing.

Q: During this time of the Washington training area particularly, what were, this also coincided with the beginning of the Reagan years. Did that make any difference or did life go on with the change in administrations?

RATLIFF: Well, we were no longer sending language teachers to the White House once we started in the Reagan years, but before that both President Carter and his wife were keenly interested in Spanish, so we had a Spanish teacher there for the entire Carter Administration. I don't recall anything about the Reagan years in terms of politics or budget or the like that was of any particular significance to those of us who were in the school of language studies.

Q: Were there any developments in the area of new texts or things like this. I mean you have your whole, linguistics had sort of come of age by this time. Did you find much input from other places?

RATLIFF: Yes there were a lot, I can claim very little credit for it personally, but in the period from about 1978 until I retired in '85, there was a lot going on at FSI in the school of language studies, well, throughout the institute. First, there was a real honest attempt and effort to integrate language and area studies. That still goes on to some degree today as well. The idea of trying to take the content of area studies and feed it back into the language, you have heard people talk about that, was certainly successful in the world languages, more problematic in the hard languages. It is very difficult in the first few months of training to talk about anything very substantive, but there were ways to try to make that somewhat useful. There were also changes in response to periodic and I would say chronic complaints from the field that I would categorize in two observations:

"A three-level proficiency isn't what it used to be." Senior officers in Embassies were seeing graduates from FSI come out who were supposed to be professionally qualified in a language, and they didn't feel that they always were or that any score they were assigned necessarily correlated with what they were able to do on the job. In order to address part of that issue, we devised the FSI proficiency test to make it more responsive - to be more reflective of what foreign service officers do. There was a lot of effort mainly through the office of research and development in the school of language studies to interview foreign service officers, to get a better feel for how FSOs used the language,

to try to move away from so-called global proficiency tests that aren't necessarily tied to the work the Foreign Service does and into something that is more reflective of what the Foreign Service does – that the test measures what people do.

We also made a judgment about how Foreign Service officers use the language overseas. We recognized that sometimes they have the opportunity or requirement for preparation prior to using the language for a particular project. If they are going to give a speech or they are going to go and listen to something at the parliament or they are going to do a briefing or even if they are going to attend the Ambassador's staff meeting, there are preparations that they can make so they are not completely unprepared for what is to come. If they have got to read the paper, then maybe the first task may be to do a scanning so that you can get the good parts. If you are going to do a briefing for employees in the language, then you have a little time to prepare. Skills of this sort that had been determined through interviews with Foreign Service officers were injected into the proficiency test and are still in there today.

Q: Did you find that with all the studies that were going on... At one point, I became terribly familiar with all of this because my wife got a masters in linguistics at American University teaching English as a foreign language. I got all the Chomskys and all of the other theory and all of this. There was a lot of intensity on this and there still is today because we are getting more foreigners in and skills. Was there feedback from the university community...

RATLIFF: There was. Through the '70s and the '80s and to the present day particularly working through the R&D people in the school of language studies there has been a real examination of some of the advances in language learning and language learning theory taking place within the university.

There was experimentation with things like community language learning, the silent language, all sorts of different theories that had developed on how language is learned. Some were tried and rejected and with others, the part that seemed to work at FSI were made part of the program. One of the major efforts that took place and is still taking place is to try to take advantage of what we know about language learning, and that includes the recognition that dialogues and drills aren't necessarily the best way to learn a language. You should learn language for example in the natural context in which it occurs regardless of the fact that natural context may not be a beginning dialogue. Instead of trying to master everything, you just let it flow across you and pick up certain things that may be relevant to you at that time. We began to look again at the role motivation plays. If people have more of a role in the learning process, maybe they can absorb this better and put it to use better.

Q: I know the FSI method, I took a little training course not on that, but on adults, you can't lecture to adults. You have to get adults more involved, they are not children. Anyway, during your time there, there was a serious interface with the academic world.

RATLIFF: Yes, we brought in people who were well-known in particular fields of

language learning theory to address the staff. There is one other thing I should mention, and that is something called bridges which was developed in those late ‘70s and early ‘80s. That is a whole series of exercises that would take the student out of the textbook, out of the classroom in a sense, to work on specific activities that simulated what a person might do in a foreign service assignment to talk about this. They still call these bridges and they still do it at FSI, and that was a real breakthrough in terms of creating a bridge between the classroom and use of the language overseas. Interestingly enough, you still have some resistance from students who are traditional in their approach who think that what is in that textbook is what they should learn, and they feel that the use of the language in a simulated context is time away from learning those verbs.

Q: Maybe we ought to stop at this point.

RATLIFF: Great. Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you!

End of interview