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

AMBASSADOR THOMAS HART ARMBRUSTER

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
Initial Interview Date: November 28, 2018

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Wednesday, November 28, 2018. We are having our first session with Ambassador Thomas Armbruster. Ambassador, where were you born and raised?

ARMBRUSTER: I was born in El Paso, Texas, at Fort Bliss and raised in Maryland mostly. I'm an Oriole fan, so I would stick with Maryland, although we have lived in many other places.

Q: So your family moved around. Were you military?

ARMBRUSTER: My dad was military when I was born but he got out and ended up in college publications. He edited Johns Hopkins magazine in Baltimore.

Q: So let's just go back a little bit. Where were your parents from originally?

ARMBRUSTER: They were from Chicago and met at Beloit College. My mom's mother died in the great influenza outbreak in the '30s when she was just a very young girl, so she was raised by other relatives. My dad grew up in Chicago. His dad worked for the city and was a WWI vet.

Q: Was your father in the military before he married?

ARMBRUSTER: No, he married, then served at Fort Bliss. He was interested in becoming a Russian linguist, but decided to get into college publications.

Q: Then where in Maryland?

ARMBRUSTER: We were in Towson, Maryland, Baltimore County, and then Severna Park near Annapolis.

Q: What was Severna Park like when you were growing up?

ARMBRUSTER: Severna Park is on the Chesapeake Bay. One of the early interests I had was in the environment thanks to an eighth-grade teacher. She offered us the chance to not just write papers but to go out and do things. She encouraged us to pick an assignment and find a way to get out on the water. So, I spent the day with a Chesapeake Bay oysterman and interviewed him. I later worked on a charter fishing boat called the "Breezin' Through." I got to hear the captain's stories about the Chesapeake when there were just acres and acres of fish. So, from that I developed an environmental awareness. That was a thread throughout my Foreign Service career.

Q: Before we leave childhood, how about your brothers and sisters?

ARMBRUSTER: My brother, Chris has stayed in Maryland. He sells records, old time 33s, and has a family in Whitehall. I didn't have any other brothers and sisters. But I did have a distant cousin and that is how I ended up in the Foreign Service. Gil Callaway was going off to Moscow as the Press Secretary. My mom said, "You have a distant relative, who you never met, go help him pack up and move." So I did. They invited me to live with them as a nanny for a year in Moscow. I was 17 and that opened my eyes to what embassy life was like. I also worked at the Anglo-American School as a gym teacher. I played broomball and went to the Marine House. Thanks to Gil Callaway and his family I am sitting here talking to you.

Q: Before we follow you as a 17-year-old into Moscow, what was school like for you growing up. I forgot to ask you what year you were born to give a little more context to the era that all this was happening.

ARMBRUSTER: I was born in 1958. I played baseball. I broke my leg when I was 13 in three places, and that kind of put a serious pause in my baseball career, but I had made it to the All Stars with the Baltimore County Orioles and played third base and wore number 5 like Brooks Robinson. My hero. So, great childhood in the Towson area. We grew up on our bikes and just had to be home at 6 for supper. I went to public school and had good teachers and a good experience.

Q: Any other extra-curricular activities like Boy Scouts or clubs or so on?

ARMBRUSTER: I did Boy Scouts. Later on, I did Model UN in college but they did not offer that in high school.

Q: And languages. Did you grow up speaking any foreign languages or were you taking any in high school.

ARMBRUSTER: I did. I started with Spanish in high school.

Q: Now while you were in high school or as a child did you do any traveling either in the U.S. or overseas that sort of began to get you interested in life outside your town?

ARMBRUSTER: I think the thing that really grabbed me was reading the Odyssey in 7th grade. At first, it seemed really dense and impossible to understand. Our teacher would walk us through it so that very classical language became real. Following this epic adventure, ten years in the Trojan War in the Iliad for Odysseus and then ten years trying to get home in the Odyssey was really a pivotal piece of literature for me in terms of how exciting the world can be and what an adventure it can be to travel.

Q: OK, so let's go ahead and follow you there. You went to help a cousin pack and I can't imagine what you think your next step would be to Moscow. They had kids you were actually looking after.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, three kids. Catherine, Matthew and Abigail. They were very young, ranging from one to Catherine who was maybe five or six, and Matthew was just a little bit younger. Catherine went to the Anglo-American school. Susan Callaway allowed me to work there as a gym teacher part time as well which was really nice, but my main job was to look after them, take them outside. Gil was press secretary and was very busy. They were great kids. We enjoyed getting outside in Moscow in the snow and playing. As the gym teacher as long as we had a hockey puck and a ball, we could always figure out something to do no matter how cold it was.

Q: Now what about learning Russian? Did you begin to learn Russian or how was that as an experience?

ARMBRUSTER: I only had a few words before going. I started studying and I learned the word "Okno" for window. That was the first word in the book. It was very basic. There was a Russian maid that came to their house. She helped me with Russian and I noticed after a little while I could sound out the letters… oh, that is a restaurant. Or, xleb, they have bread there! I could make out the Cyrillic, so by the time I left after eight months I had some very basic Russian.

Q: So, you could make out the words. You knew the Alphabet.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes. And, "strasvicha, pozhalysta," some of the pleasantries. I knew that when kids came around to the school and called us "doorok" they were calling us stupid. But I didn't have any formal training while I was with the Callaway family.

Q: OK, otherwise with small children, did you have a chance to go and see any of the larger city, you know with small kids it is not always easy to move around.

ARMBRUSTER: You are right. I had Sundays off and I knew the very first day I would either have to wait for people to show me everything, or I could go out and get lost. I chose the get lost route. The first day I went down to the "rynok" or market and that was really colorful. Fruits and veggies, nuts and meats, everything. Then I would just buy a bus ticket or a subway ticket and go. The Russians were very nice. If I said I was lost and trying to get to Universitet metro, for example, they would often take me all the way there. I went to St. Petersburg, then called Leningrad. There were a couple of American Embassy dachas. We went there. I explored to the extent I could. My future college, Western Maryland College came to visit Russia and I asked for permission to accompany them in January and the Soviets said NO. They were going to go to Central Asia and for whatever reason the Soviets denied my travel.

Q: So, with this background you go back home, you are 18 and college I imagine is on your mind. How did the Moscow experience shape what you wanted out of college?

ARMBRUSTER: I went to Western Maryland College. I took courses in Russian from a tutor and majored in Political Science. I also went to Penn State University for a semester because they had a foreign service program, and I did an internship in Annapolis. So, I knew the direction I wanted to go was in the political field and I wanted to take the foreign service exam.

Q: Of course, because now you had the exposure. You knew basically what it was about.

ARMBRUSTER: Exactly, and I never would have considered the State Department before that experience.

Q: Would you take a second and describe the internship in Annapolis. Was it in the State Legislature?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, it was with a state legislator. He was a Democrat and my project was to work on a rails to trails pathway. We were able to get that done and it felt really good. He gave me a lot of credit for it. I got to see Steny Hoyer in action. He was the Speaker of the House. He was very impressive. Of course, now he is a national Democratic leader. I would see him occasionally throughout the years and that was fun.

Q: You previously mentioned the activities that you had with boating and fishing and so on. This now would have been the late '70s, I guess. There was already some environmental movement by then with pollution in the bay and so on. What were you thinking?

ARMBRUSTER: The save the bay movement was getting started. We would see precipitous drops in some of the fish populations. So, for example, when I was fishing

with Captain Harry, we were limited to one rockfish per outing. And we often didn't get that. Then, over the years I saw the rockfish rebound and realized that environmental efforts can pay off. With attention, states can really improve the water quality and the habitat and the fish can come back. I saw that really dramatically much later in Bikini which suffered the atomic tests. Bikini came back in quite a big way, with sharks returning to coral reefs. So, nature can come back if we allow it.

Q: You were majoring in political science but were you continuing any interest in environmental activities?

ARMBRUSTER: I did not do well in biology, I can tell you that! They didn't offer an environmental course. I took History and Chinese and Drama. I swam on the swim team for a season, but in terms of environment there really wasn't anything in college that I could sink my teeth into.

Q: It is interesting that you mention drama. There have been other people in the interview who have done drama or public speaking and look back on that experience as a really helpful tool that would continue to make a difference for them in their career.

ARMBRUSTER: I can imagine, especially for public diplomacy officers. That would make a terrific background. After college I was in journalism for six years. The ability to write quickly is useful. We do a lot of reporting in the foreign service so I was able to tell a story in a cable better because of my journalism experience.

Q: OK, so let's go back. As you are approaching the end of your four years in college, did you do any other travel or a year abroad while you were in college.

ARMBRUSTER: I did not. I got out of college. I married Kathy Chandler Armbruster, and for our honeymoon we booked a Yugoslavian freighter and went from Baltimore to Savannah to Casablanca. I think it was my way of telling Kathy, "OK we are going to travel a lot in life!" That was my reintroduction to travel. It was a great trip; we had a lot of fun.

Q: Even though it was a freighter. It was not designed as a tourist trip.

ARMBRUSTER: Not at all. Very limited berths. We happened to be neighbors with Brian Miller who went on to be New York Times restaurant critic. We met the crew and I learned the dynamics of Yugoslavia and the ethnic groups. I learned about the tensions between the Croats and Serbs and how some worked in the kitchens or below decks and others were Captains and officers. There was an ethnic hierarchy. I thought, wow, how can this little country have this much divisiveness. But of course, that played out a few years later.

Q: You married in what year?

ARMBRUSTER: 1980.

Q: So, Tito is still living. He is not approaching death. Even back then in the microcosm of a freighter you could see it.

ARMBRUSTER: You really could.

Q: All right you take your honeymoon. What are you two thinking then about the future. Are you thinking about further education or work or?

ARMBRUSTER: Actually, I realize now neither one of us had a job at the time. We were quite confident we would get them. So we came back from Morocco and my dad was editing the Perspectives magazine at the East-West Center in Hawaii. Kathy and I moved in with mom and dad. Kathy got her masters in library science and I worked at the University of Hawaii as a communicator with research ships at sea, and then started a journalism career working for Hawaii Public Radio. Then I worked for NPR in Washington and then Maryland Public Television and then back to Hawaii with the CBS affiliate KGMB-TV.

Q: So, you spent a fair amount of time in Hawaii but didn't actually move back to Maryland.

ARMBRUSTER: We did. We were three or four years in Hawaii and then two years in Maryland and then back to Hawaii.

Q: So, during that period in Hawaii you were working in radio journalism and maybe some video journalism, TV and some print as well.

ARMBRUSTER: Radio and TV. I was a general assignment reporter. But that is where I got back into environmental reporting. There are a lot of great environmental stories in Hawaii. I did a story on Loihi, an undersea volcano. I went with one of the University of Hawaii submarine crews filming that volcanic outflow and the marine life around it. They joked that in 10,000 years there would be hotels and beaches around Loihi. I talked to the entomologists about biodiversity and evolutionary scientists about island bird life at the University of Hawaii. And astronomy, given Hawaii's telescopes on the Big Island. I produced a regular radio spot on space with one of the University's planetary astronomers. Hawaii was a great place to get back into environmental issues. Then at Maryland Public TV I worked on Farm Day. Environment is also a big issue for farmers. I covered politics and crime and everything else as a general beat reporter, but I did have a specialty in environmental stories. Someone said I had the best job in journalism in Hawaii and I can't disagree.

Q: Wow. But nevertheless, in the back of your mind you are still recalling the whole foreign service possibility.

ARMBRUSTER: Absolutely! Not only in the back of my mind. I kept taking the test, and I kept passing but for whatever reason I wasn't getting an offer. Finally in Hawaii I did

get a call. In fact, I was on the Big Island doing a story on the telescope. I was paged over the airport intercom to call home. I thought oh this has got to be important. I called Kathy and she said the State Department had been trying to reach me. I called and was offered a slot in A-100.

Q: Now what year was that?

ARMBRUSTER: That would have been 1988.

Q: And in '88 they were offering positions in a specific cone. What did they offer you?

ARMBRUSTER: Well she said I am offering you a position in the management cone, is that OK? I thought well that sounds executive! I don't know that I ever concentrated very carefully on management, consular, political, but I knew I wanted to get in the foreign service so I jumped at it.

Q: OK, 1988 and your wife is OK with this and you talked about it and she realizes you are going to be moving around a little bit.

ARMBRUSTER: There was one point I was sitting at my desk in the KGMB newsroom and thinking this is a big gamble, but then I set that thought aside. Kathy had known for a long time that this was something I wanted. She has been very successful as a librarian in libraries all over the world. But she wondered, does all this disparate experience really add up to anything? We went back to New York years later and within a week she had a job offer from a really prestigious school. I think international experience is valuable in any profession. It was a good gamble for us.

Q: Now along the way in the first six years of your marriage still no kids.

ARMBRUSTER: No, Bryan came along after two years, and Kalia three years later, so we had two kids going into the foreign service.

Q: OK, but too young to really have an opinion yet. But you took all of that into consideration. When was your a-100?

ARMBRUSTER: A-100 was in June of 1988.

Q: Describe your class as well as you can remember.

ARMBRUSTER: We were about 30-some A-100 classmates. Our median age was 30. Some people had advanced degrees but not a lot. We had some prior military and we had one former Marine. In fact, he gave us a great tour of Gettysburg which was really memorable and he was selected as the outstanding classmate. The gender balance was not 50-50, predominantly male. We had at least one person with Asian ethnicity and a black man, but not terribly diverse otherwise.

Q: And the experience of A-100 sometimes people stay in touch for years later. Did that work for you.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, although I was voted the classmate least likely to be seen in Washington. I only did one tour in Washington. So, I didn't make it to the reunions but I did keep in touch with classmates via email. That has grown to be a powerful thing for people to have a terrific network and grapevine. So, people know going to a post the reputation of everybody. It is a very positive development.

Q: So, as you were going through the A-100 you kept the list of the possible places for your first tour. Were you thinking about anything in particular or were you just ready to go wherever they sent you? How did that work you?

ARMBRUSTER: I wanted Sarajevo, that was number one. Number two was Helsinki. That is what we got. We still have the picture of our son waving the flag and all four of us being very happy about it. I know Kathy was very pleased with that assignment. Finland turned out to be a great starting post.

Q: And that was your consular tour?

ARMBRUSTER: It would have been but they needed somebody to be deputy of the Soviet Support Office. This was an operation involving a classified and an unclassified warehouse supplying Leningrad and Moscow with everything they needed, from pencils to armored vehicles. We would buy those things, ship them, and act as a warehouse for forwarding effects, anything they needed. My boss was Stuart Spoede, Director of the Soviet Support Office.

Q: Now, do you recall why we did the support from Finland rather than simply bringing things in directly to Moscow or St. Petersburg and shipping it directly from there?

ARMBRUSTER: It was partly logistics and partly the Soviets were always difficult. You never knew if you were going to clear something, so it was better for us to have supplies on hand. Everything they needed from expendables to copying machines. Whatever it was we would be able to send down at a moment's notice.

Q: Did you get training in Finnish?

ARMBRUSTER: I did not. Kathy did. She took advantage of that so she was our spokesperson when we went out in the world, and would buy us goodies.

Q: So, since you had somebody in your family to handle the day to day speaking and I imagine all the Finns you worked with spoke English.

ARMBRUSTER: They did. I did learn to count. *Uxi, koksi, kolmi*... We still have Finnish friends. I took some Finnish while I was there and learned enough Finnish to get around. It is a very difficult language. I can say the black cat is on the table. Musta kissa on

podella. More importantly we learned the Finnish culture. We have a sauna at home now in Ithaca, New York. I really enjoyed working with the Finns. They were professional. And they certainly know the Russians better than anybody. Once you make friends with a Finn, you are friends for life.

Q: Did you have opportunities to travel around Finland? All of the images that I have are that it is perpetually white and snowy.

ARMBRUSTER: It is that way in the wintertime. We went to Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle in the summer and took a kayak. We kayaked all day and into the night but it was still light quite late. I also kayaked from Helsinki to Tallinn with a group of Finns in mid-summer. The Soviet border guard almost fell over when he saw my diplomatic passport.

I did some reporting in the Baltics because at that time things were roiling. At one point in Riga I was surrounded by the crowd. There were pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet people in the demonstration. Once they learned I was an American the whole crowd turned to me and I realized that America was just a beacon of hope for a lot of those people. That was the most important moment in terms of understanding the hope the U.S. represents. They weren't interested in talking to me as an individual but they knew that as an American I could report back about this demonstration. It was important to them. In fact, one person took me aside later and gave me photographs that I sent back to the Office of Intelligence and Research showing the protests and violence. They appreciated that. I also did some environmental reporting on the aftermath of Chernobyl and the reindeer. The reindeer intake of cesium and other radionuclides from lichen was a concern.

Q: I didn't realize it got as far as Finland.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes. So that was interesting.

Q: So now what years were you in Finland for this tour?

ARMBRUSTER: 1988-1990.

Q: Right on the edge of the end of everything. Sure, by then the wall had come down and you were only two years away from the collapse of the Soviet Union. That is quite something. Were you getting the impression from people that it was on the way?

ARMBRUSTER: I don't think so. We were in Cuba when the wall came down and it was a shock. As good as the Finns are at knowing what is going on with the Russians, or the Soviets, I don't think even they looked at it as a possibility. We just knew that Gorbachev was shaking things up and that things were changing. But I don't think anybody had an inkling that the Soviet Union, which had just seemed to be this unbreakable block, would actually crumble.

Q: OK, so you have learned the basics of management and procurement. What are you thinking about now in terms of your next assignment?

ARMBRUSTER: I was always drawn to the adventure. Where would be the most adventurous place I could go. So Chiang Mai looked very interesting. The DCM said, "No, that is probably not the right family post for you." Stu Spoede, after I had been assigned, said I should go to Ukraine because they need help opening Kiev as a new mission and they were recruiting me. But I had been assigned to Havana and that seemed like a good consular tour to me. I would be the NIV chief and do American citizen services. That suited me pretty well.

Q: Before you went to Havana did you get Spanish training?

ARMBRUSTER: I did. Six months of Spanish and I got the 3+3. I think FSI does a great job with languages.

Q: I agree. I went from zero to 3+ for Costa Rica and I couldn't believe it. How in five months? It was astonishing that they could get that out of me. OK so now you have two kids and they are getting to be school age. Was there a school in Havana?

ARMBRUSTER: Right, there was an international school. Bryan and Kalia went to the international school for the first year. We were looking for something a little more rigorous for Bryan, so he spent fifth grade in the Spanish Embassy school and all instruction was in Spanish. He did well. He was writing his papers in Spanish. Kalia's teachers were good.

And the kids were really different in terms of how they reacted to moving. For Bryan it was always a big adventure. As soon as he was out of the embassy car door from the airport he was knocking on doors looking for friends. For Kalia it was a rougher adjustment. I once said I am sorry if your childhood was rough moving all the time. She said, "No I cried every time we moved because I loved every place we lived." They both got a lot out of the foreign service lifestyle and they both enjoyed traveling. We always made a point of getting back to where they were whenever we were overseas, even Tajikistan. We would figure out how to meet somewhere. We always had a plan. Once we met, we started working on the next plan. We are a close family and the foreign service fosters that.

Q: OK, obviously Havana is a very different place from Finland. This is now a period as the Soviet Union collapses and Cuba is more left on its own. With subsidies.

ARMBRUSTER: This is known as a special period in a time of peace. Which really meant it was a very stringent time in terms of the economy. A lot of shortages. The Cubans lost a million dollars a day from the Soviets. Fidel was very much still in control. We saw him a couple of times. We saw him at the Pan American games and he did the wave. When the wave came around the second time all the guys around him did it too because they didn't the first time. But a lot of the Cubans were looking to get out. I was NIV chief and we interviewed hundreds of Cubans every day. For many we said No. Fidel figured out he could allow anybody to seek a visa and very few people would

qualify anyway, so why not let the United States be the bad guy. Rather than say you can't travel, let the Americans say you can't travel. But they did still have the relief valve of people just getting on a raft and going. I had people at my window saying look if you deny me, I am going to jump in a raft and if I die it is on you. I would say no it is on you.

Q: Were there good bets at all. I mean were there any people in some kinds of professions that you felt you could grant visas to?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes absolutely. And we tried to listen to each applicant and give them a chance to express their intentions. I don't think there was a preconceived notion that we were going to say no before they came. I think it was more the economy was very difficult because of the loss of Soviet subsidies. We knew people were struggling so it was kind of doing the math and figuring out where their family and professional ties were and figuring out whether they were going to come back. And of course, some did, and the older people just wanted to see their grandkids that maybe left with the Marielitos or left in the 60s. They would come back. It always felt good to say yes.

Q: Were there also third country nationals? Did you get much of that?

ARMBRUSTER: Very few. I think we would occasionally get an applicant from Africa. The special cases were Seventh Day Adventists who wouldn't serve in the military or in the government, so along with doing non-immigrant visas we also pre-screened people for refugee status. Some people would be persecuted for religious reasons we would pre-screen them and a circuit rider would come from the INS and interview them and many of those folks did settle in the United States as refugees.

Q: Roughly how many refugees would you say, now this was a two-year tour.

ARMBRUSTER: Yeah. I would say probably in the hundreds. Maybe a couple of hundred, something like that. I wouldn't say in the thousands by any means.

Q: And they were principally religious or were they enemies of the regime or something like that.

ARMBRUSTER: Principally religious, or at least the ones that we knew had a really good shot of going were religious. We did process some political dissidents and the political section would take an interest, but many of the dissidents chose to stay. Of course, we did immigrant visas as well so there were some family reunification visas. We also visited Americans in prison.

Q: Beyond the job were you able to travel much around Cuba and what were your impressions?

ARMBRUSTER: We were really lucky. Subsequently the Cubans limited American diplomats to just 15 square miles around Havana without a dipnote authorizing travel. When we were there the only place that was off limits was Guantanamo. We traveled

anywhere we could get to on half a tank of gas. So, we went up into the hills. We went to the coast. We would bike places. I went scuba diving in Cuba. It is a beautiful country. We went to a waterfall called Soroa which is just a magical place. There was an orchid farm right next door. So, it is a lovely country and unspoiled and not commercialized. There were no fast food restaurants. So, yeah, we were able to travel very freely luckily. Of course we were followed and one follow team even drove into a sugar cane field with us when we got lost.

Q: And were people open or how did you find them?

ARMBRUSTER: People were really suspicious of us. If we were just traveling to a beach and people would ask where are you from. I would say, "Guess." They would guess Hungary and all of these Eastern European places. I would say, "No Mucha mas cerca!" No much closer! Finally, they would get it. For example, we invited the teachers from the school to our house for a holiday dinner. They were very nervous because they knew they would have to go back and report on the meeting. Contact with Americans other than casual contact was not forbidden necessarily, but was something that put them at risk and they were very leery of it. Now we had one friend named Hiram. He was the equestrian trainer. He taught their Olympic riding team. So as foreigners we were able to go and take rides at Luna Park in Havana, our son actually competed in horseback riding thanks to Hiram. But he was the only person who felt comfortable enough to invite us over and to come to our house because he knew he was known as apolitical. He was a sportsman. He had traveled internationally. So, I think he felt secure enough to let down his guard and just become friends. Even he said you don't seem like the Americans I see on the movies; you don't smoke; you don't drink. You don't swear. So, it was good probably to show the flag wherever we could.

Q: Absolutely. Now what about the experience in the Interests Section? How was that?

ARMBRUSTER: I saw one Swiss diplomat. Officially we were under the Swiss flag. But they wouldn't allow us to take our home leaves in Geneva! The Interests Section functioned very much like an embassy. It had all of the same offices. The principal officer, Alan Flannigan, did not really have access to Fidel. Even though he was chief of mission he wasn't an ambassador and did not hold that rank. So, I think that must have limited what he could do to a certain extent. Every now and then the Cubans were very intent on showing us that our relationship is not what it should be. For example, I traveled out of town once and was in a hotel. I came back to my room and the sink was filled with blood, probably sheep's blood or who knows what. That was their way of saying you are not really welcome here and we don't like what you are doing. So that was the atmosphere. You felt pretty much followed all the time. They knew where you went. I was familiar with that from the Soviet days.

Q: Sure. Did you have to interact with the Cuban government for any of the visas?

ARMBRUSTER: Not much really. No. I did ask the principal officer if I could do some environmental reporting so I was able to meet with their environment minister and we

talked about water quality in the harbor and agriculture and their coastal resources. I was able to do a cable out of that. So that was a nice little opening that I hadn't really expected. But, my own interaction with government officials was very minor.

Q: During this time was your wife able to find employment?

ARMBRUSTER: Kathy did work in the consular section. That was good. She was very good at finding opportunities and I have to say the spouses, or eligible family members who come to post, or all talented and many want to contribute. We've had spouses who were photographers, writers, nurses… I wish they could all be hired, especially at the small, hardship posts that are so understaffed.

But back to Havana, I think we had one family regret at the time and that was the man that raised her, her "father," had passed away. Just given that it was so hard to get back to Miami on a moment's notice Kathy didn't make it back for that funeral. I think that is one of those realities of the foreign service that sometimes you are just not able to be back with family when you are needed. Of course, we remember that.

Q: Was it simply the fact that commercial flights were not regular.

ARMBRUSTER: Yeah, I think the flights were something like once a week. There was a lot of paperwork. The feeling was the family should go ahead and make their plans. The only thing we could really do is complicate things with plans that we weren't even sure we would realize because we weren't sure we could get all the permissions we needed.

Q: And the other thing while you were there did you, were you able to travel anywhere else in the Caribbean and nearby? I realize almost certainly flights had to go back through Miami unless you are going to Venezuela I suppose.

ARMBRUSTER: No, it was always just back to Miami. No, I didn't do any regional travel at all.

Q: Having worked in Jamaica but many years earlier I recall just how difficult it was to go for Jamaica to just about any other place in the Caribbean because there were very few direct flight and you nearly always had to go back through Miami.

ARMBRUSTER: Yeah, exactly.

Q: So here you are now approaching the end of your junior officer status. Do you get tenure while you are in Cuba?

ARMBRUSTER: In Helsinki, actually. I mean it wasn't such a big milestone that I took notice whether it was Finland or Cuba but it came along at whatever the normal time was.

Q: So, what are you thinking about for your next tour?

ARMBRUSTER: The next tour I really wanted to go to the Oceans, Environment and Science bureau and the job I was interested in was Arctic Affairs Officer. So, I was able to get that assignment out of Havana.

Q: It is just interesting that you go from Arctic to Tropical back to Arctic.

ARMBRUSTER: You have picked up the pattern. Cold to hot stays pretty consistent.

Q: Sort of extremes of temperature. Obviously the Arctic has lots of issues going on, certainly environmental issues and issues of ownership and extractive drilling and all sorts of things that the public isn't aware of. So, at that time I guess it was now '93, what were the major issues going on for you in the Arctic?

ARMBRUSTER: Our major focus was on the creation of the Arctic Council. That was a nascent body that has since grown into a ministerial level gathering. As you said, they take on a lot of very substantive things. They have a working group on birds. They have something on persistent organic pollutants in the Arctic marine environment. Indigenous knowledge. They really take all of the Arctic countries and glean the expertise they can whether it is from scientists, politicians, or indigenous people so that there can be some concerted effort to advance the lives of people there and that very important habitat. It was exciting to be in at the ground floor of the creation of the Arctic Council and I think it has become one of those bodies that works very well.

We also work on Antarctic issues. Of course, the Antarctic has the Antarctic Treaty and all countries can do scientific work there. I think that is a model that would work in outer space and elsewhere, but there are fascinating issues and I have tried to stay current on polar issues. Now with global warming there are sea routes that didn't exist before and there is a lot of geopolitical rivalry with China and Russia staking their claims. As you said huge resources, both extractive and animal resources and now the potential for tourism. So, to have an international body that can try to improve the way we develop in the arctic is a good thing.

Q: And over that time were you working on any specific project that was yours?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, I worked on some of the risks to the Arctic, and so I went to Norway for an Arctic Council meeting and talked about the industries and sources of pollution that threatened the Arctic. That wasn't a very popular briefing as far as the Russians were concerned because the top ten risks we identified emanated from Russia. And then the other project I had was something called RADEX, a simulation of a nuclear release in the Arctic. There is a nuclear plant in Bilibino, Russia. We called this "Arcticland" so we wouldn't say that it was in Russia. But the Russians participated. At this point we had pretty good relations with the Russians. So we simulated a plume of radioactivity throughout the Arctic. Each country would say at this level of radiation we are going to distribute iodine. At this level we are going to evacuate people... It was a chance to see what the triggers were for each country and how we could coordinate in the event of a nuclear disaster. That took place in Anchorage and we all took a trip up to the

Arctic Circle in a C-130. It was a good chance for the Russian scientists and the Norwegian and Swedish and Icelandic and everybody to compare notes and coordinate policy. I thought it was a good early example of what could be done. The Russians aren't as cooperative today as they were then. That was an encouraging time.

Q: To what extent did NGOs play a role in the Arctic?

ARMBRUSTER: At that point they were just beginning to have a role. They certainly observed meetings and other countries would as well. China was not formally in the Arctic Council but were also formally observing and participating because they saw it as an important international body. I don't think it would be fair to say they were shaping policy at that point. I think now they are more powerful and the international Arctic organizations help to shape policy in the region.

Q: Was whaling an issue for you with the Arctic?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes. There are rights for some indigenous groups to take a certain number of whales. That did come up. It was not very controversial because the take was fairly limited. We did not get into the Norwegian Minkie Whale issue because there was the International Whaling Commission, and a separate part of the OES that took on whaling as a global issue, rather than just an arctic one.

Q: I see. Yes, obviously because they are often migratory so they are not necessarily always in the Arctic. What about fishing?

ARMBRUSTER: Fishing again the State Department has some real fishing experts who have been negotiating for years. There is something called the "donut hole." International treaties cover a large part of the ocean but then there is this hole that is not covered and that is where the fishing boats go. And of course, the fish transit and there is a big impact that we had hoped to avoid with these various treaties. So fishing is a big issue for the Arctic. I am sure it was near the top of the agenda in their latest meeting.

Q: OK, being in the department for the first time what were the other impressions or new learning you had. This is sort of the first time you are in the mother ship so to speak.

ARMBRUSTER: That is true and at that point I got the feeling that environmental issues were being taken very seriously. They had created a career track; an environmental science, technology and health track for people interested in these fields. My follow-on assignment was George Washington's Elliott School for International Science Policy. I thought that was going to be the direction I was going to go in my career. There was real resistance to having any kind of environmental relief for the Russians. I wrote a paper on expanding U.S. environmental assistance to Russia, that would go beyond our nuclear deals because of the public diplomacy payback we would get. You know, you go to a Russian town and do something good for their environment and put the American seal on it, it is going to be good for us. The same as if you do schools or roads or hospitals. But the reaction in the department was definitely no.

Q: But otherwise did you find it helpful to be in Washington for let's say planning your next assignment lobbying or finding a mentor who was going to give you a little bit of guidance about career planning, that sort of a thing?

ARMBRUSTER: I have always known I am sort of a field guy. So, I knew that I didn't want to spend much time in Washington. I enjoyed working at the National Science Foundation. I enjoyed every time I could get out of the building. I don't think being in the department was as formative for me as maybe for some other people but I certainly worked with great people. Ray Arnaudo who was head of the Arctic Affairs unit. Tucker Scully who was in charge of oceans and was a real expert on the Antarctic treaty. What I really learned from them was negotiations and just how to run a meeting with other countries. Occasionally I would be able to sit in the U.S. chair at an Arctic Council meeting. Usually It was Ray or Tucker or somebody else but to watch them at work was really enlightening for me.

Q: There is negotiating at the table. There is also the kind of side bars the informal activities. Did you do much of that? Did you find you were able to accomplish things outside of the negotiating room?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, and because the U.S. would field such a big delegation a lot of times the negotiations that were the most intense were on our side of the table. For instance, the military was very cautious about what the U.S. was going to do and commit to in the Arctic, and they had real hard lines. So, we had to be careful about how far we could go and to what extent the U.S. could be involved in something. Yes, very much so. That interagency dynamic was something I was just beginning to learn, finding out that other agencies have real equities and you have to take them into account, because if you don't, your treaty, your agreement is not going to hold up.

Q: You will find that in Washington there is no support for it and it kind of fizzles. The other thing is by now in the mid-90s you are beginning to get E-mail.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes, we did start with E-mail. We also had I don't even know what we called it but we had some sort of website we were populating with these Arctic papers. So that was something I was getting involved with and found it kind of interesting and exciting, that we could all of a sudden have something that the public could go and look at and learn from. So yeah, we were just beginning to see how powerful those Wang machines could be.

Q: But not yet enough of an E-mail connection that while you are in the negotiations all these different agencies are reporting back separately to their own chains and you by following day you are getting deluged by what are you doing out there?

ARMBRUSTER: No, it was really a paper driven process. Absolutely.

Q: OK so it was a two-year tour in OES. What are you thinking, because now you have

got your kids in school in the U.S.? What are you thinking about your next assignment?

ARMBRUSTER: Well in keeping on the science and environmental technology track I went to George Washington University State Department program for one year looking at international science and technology policy. I took a class from one of the experts on the moon landing for example, Dr. Logsdon. I had a professor working on complexity. So, it was a chance to broaden my own education. I didn't have any master's degree work at that point. I was going to be going out to Moscow after that as nuclear affairs officer. So, I was able to talk to some academics about nuclear policy. Of course, Chernobyl had happened and I was dead set against nuclear stuff, but I was starting to hear from some professors that there is some real promise in nuclear technology. It was a good introduction to those issues.

Q: So, you knew you were going to be doing work in the nuclear field, was it only civilian use or was it also being schooled a bit in nuclear weaponry?

ARMBRUSTER: The work that I was doing was a little bit of both. In Moscow the big agreement was what they called the HEU-LEU agreement. Highly enriched uranium to low enriched uranium. And it was a deal where the U.S. was buying the HEU from the Russians, blending it down into low enriched uranium and burning it in civilian nuclear power plants so it really was a swords to ploughshares arrangement. The Russians made a lot of money on it. Unfortunately, it was not the kind of an opportunity where the average Russian saw much of a result. So again, we lost that opportunity to build a school so the average Russian could say oh the Americans built that school. Or my kid was born in the American hospital. I think we missed the Marshall Plan opportunity with the Russians. But the nuclear deal was important. We worked with the ministry of atomic energy on that. There was a program called nuclear cities going to formerly closed cities like Sarov, previously called Arzamas-16 and trying to develop civilian professions and careers for those nuclear scientists so they didn't sell their service to Iran or North Korea. There were programs to upgrade fences, cameras, and accounting of nuclear materials. You know it was really a full court press often led by the Department of Energy, but State had a coordinating role. I would often be control officer for Senator Domenici who had a real interest in these issues or for the visiting DOE official, often Rose Gottemoeller who became undersecretary for arms control. So, it was a pretty hopeful time for cooperation. The Russians still resented the fact that we won the Cold War if you want to put it that way. One ministry of atomic energy official said to me, 'You destroyed us." When I visited Arzamas-16 with Senator Domenici the ballrooms there and the grand pianos and everything was dilapidated and I realized we did destroy the way of life for that elite Soviet nuclear scientist or policy maker when the Cold War ended.

Q: Before we quite go too deep into that you are moving the family in what year to Moscow?

ARMBRUSTER: That would have been 1997.

Q: So, the year in GW was '96-'97 in the summer. But what about Russian language

training?

ARMBRUSTER: You are right. I did have a year of language and that is correct.

Q: So, it was '94-'95 in GW and '95 to '96 in Russian training.

ARMBRUSTER: Let's see, '93-'95 in OES, '95-'96 in GW, '96-'97 in Russian training at FSI, and then '97-2000 in Moscow.

Q: So how was Russian training for you?

ARMBRUSTER: I liked it a lot. I am one of those learners that likes all sorts of media. I like to watch the movies; I like to look at the newspaper. I like dialog. I like it to come at me with a fire hose. I think I got either a 3 or a 3+ in Russian from that. I later got a 4/4 the second time to Russia, but I just find the native speaking Russian teachers at FSI to be excellent. They really knew how to make you work to understand the grammar and put it into operation. I learned more about English grammar than I ever did before with the instrumental case and accusative and subjunctive and all that stuff. I enjoyed it a lot. I mean to be paid to learn languages is really a privilege.

Q: Yeah, no question. And are the kids and your wife beginning to look forward to going to Moscow? How was that?

ARMBRUSTER: Kalia was probably a little bit too young to resist, but our son was right at that high school age where resistance was absolutely what he wanted to do. For the first week or something he was I am miserable. 'I hate this. I want to go back.' Then he started to realize I could ride the metro. I could probably go into a bar with my friends. I can travel to Belgium with the soccer team and play soccer for my school. It didn't take him long at all to realize this is the best gig any high school kid could ever have. He even got scuba certified in the Red Sea on vacation. Kalia got involved in theater. And she is now really into improv in San Francisco. It was a formative tour. Kathy worked at the Anglo-American school where I had worked years before, thought at a different location in town. For us as a family in a lot of ways Moscow was one of our best posts. We were all there together. Everybody was engaged in things and we liked it quite a lot. For me, the cross country skiing was terrific in the woods near our house. The Russian Olympic cross country team trained there.

Q: And it was still the tail end of the Yeltsin era and you still had reasonably good relations at that moment. All right so was there anything else from the experience at GW. You had mentioned complexity and certainly is at that time was a very timely thing to get considering and of course the nuclear things. Were there other topics that also were emphasized?

ARMBRUSTER: I mentioned working with John Logsdon who was involved in the space program. I was working on a paper on NASA. I got to know one of the NASA officials. They offered to fly me down to Cape Canaveral to see a launch at night of the

space shuttle which I did. So that was really a memorable occasion and just a wonderful opportunity. I think that was pretty special.

Q: Were you expecting to do a bit of work on Space in Moscow?

ARMBRUSTER: I think it was seen as a possibility. Actually, initially I was to be the environment officer. Then they said no, you are going to be the nuclear officer. At first I resisted, thinking I don't want to do nuclear stuff! I want to focus on tigers and polar bears. Then I realized nuclear is one of the biggest environmental issues out there. I was really glad I took that on because these were issues that the ambassador cared about that were important to the US. It involved a lot of money and the relationship between the U.S. and Russia.

Space is a really rich area of cooperation. That is one thing that has survived throughout all these years. All of our astronauts get to space thanks to a Russian spacecraft. Other than meeting with the NASA people in the embassy I think it was later in Vladivostok where we hosted an astronaut for a public diplomacy event that I got to see a cosmonaut and an astronaut interact together again. Astronauts and cosmonauts are bigger than rock stars, everybody loves them, and Kathy still remembers, and talks about, dancing with the cosmonaut at our Consulate event.

When I lived in Moscow with the Callaways, Gil invited me to Star City. They were celebrating the successful U.S.-Russian Apollo Soyuz mission and Deke Slayton and his crew were there. I got to go. Gil said "Here put this camera on, you will be a journalist." I heard Deke Slayton give a speech in Russian which sounded very Texan. "Strasvycha, Y'all." He was terrific. Then I got to go to Spaso House with the astronauts and cosmonauts. There was champagne and caviar everywhere. I have never seen so much caviar in my life. So, the U.S. Russian space cooperation is still kind of a bright spot.

Q: OK, you arrived there, this time I imagine for a three-year tour.

ARMBRUSTER: Yes.

Q: OK, what is with all of the problems with the embassy construction and the new embassy's construction what was the embassy like when you arrived in '97?

ARMBRUSTER: Jim Collins was the ambassador. As always it is a very high tempo embassy. I think morale for the most part was pretty good, but I think morale is always better among people who speak the language better. That is true for spouses as well. The single biggest determinant of morale and effectiveness is language ability. But as far as the construction and the move I didn't find that to be disruptive. We still did our work; we could walk to the foreign ministry and have meetings there. Always lots of high-level visitors. I was control officer for President Clinton. I think the embassy thrived on that kind of thing. The countdown meetings. It was an embassy where people worked hard and probably didn't get a lot of recognition. Like the ambassador once said, "You people don't get a lot of thanks for all that you do but, thank you, it is important work." I think

people found an intrinsic reward in being in Moscow at that time and working on the issues we worked on.

Q: Now who were your principal interlocutors on the Russian side?

ARMBRUSTER: For us it was the ministry of atomic energy. Minister Adamov. A pretty taciturn guy. He could be difficult. We would have the Secretary of Energy come out often for high level talks. There was also the Gore-Chernomyrdin process at that point so there were a lot of multi-lateral initiatives going on in different areas. The exciting thing about the relationship then as opposed to the Cold War was during the Cold War it was all about the security relationship. But as things thawed, we could talk about civilian travel issues, tourism issues, education issues, cultural issues, environmental issues. The whole spectrum was on the table for the Gore-Chernomyrdin meetings. That was very productive. I worked on a treaty between the U.S. and Russia on emergency response. That was right before the tour actually, and that was signed by Al Gore. That was so that if, for example, there was an accident like the Exxon Valdez spill again, we would be able to take advantage of a Russian oil skimmer if it happened to be in the area. Which is exactly what happened. The Russians offered one, and the U.S. said no we don't have the liability agreement with you. So, they sent me to Moscow to negotiate that.

Q: That is really interesting. Ok that is one of the best examples of behind the scenes work that has very powerful application and most people don't even know about it. OK, the other aspect of course is all of the nuclear things. What were your goals or what goals were you given during your tour there for the nuclear field?

ARMBRUSTER: I was meeting with the Russians every day, reporting on what the Russians would allow and wouldn't allow in terms of cooperation. I worked a lot with the inter-agency community on getting the intelligence and the reporting we needed to sort of figure out just how far we could push the Russians. So, for example, the nuclear cities initiative, that ended up not being feasible. The funds for that were basically turned off basically because the Russians said no, we are not going to give you access to those scientists or those cities the way you want. I think what we were seeing was a slow retreat by the Russians from full cooperation with the United States on nuclear issues. But had we really pursued it we could have had more work on a program called plutonium disposition for example. What do we do with these tons of plutonium that both countries have to dispose of? Can we work together and put our scientists together to figure out ways to safely dispose of it? Also, we were working on some of the advanced nuclear reactors. Could our scientists cooperate in those areas? So those are still things that we could theoretically do together. But it just seemed like the Russian motto was "we are not going to just roll over and take your money." We had a lot of ideas and we had a lot of programs that were ready to go. The Russians just couldn't bear the thought of working that closely with us, I think, that soon after the Cold War.

Q: That was sort of on the Russian side. Did the Russians have any interest in anything we were doing, the U.S. in domestic civilian nuclear energy?

ARMBRUSTER: I think they were interested in the advanced reactors.

Q: Take a second to explain what an advanced reactor would be.

ARMBRUSTER: Next generation fusion reactors that would produce enormous amounts of power. The Russians were also working on sort of the opposite end of the spectrum, Graphite reactors and safer reactors that used lower levels of uranium or plutonium or whatever the fuel was. Such that even if a plane crashed into the plant there would not be a catastrophic release of radioactivity. So, there were some pretty promising avenues. If we were going to develop nuclear technology the Americans and the Russians were two of the key players in the world along with the French and the Japanese. Really the Russians were pretty advanced. I wasn't involved in the START agreement or the military side because we did have military folks dealing directly with their military installations and doing the same thing that the Department of Energy was doing on the civilian side. I toured a bunch of nuclear reactors and got to see the glowing rods inside. It was a little scary.

Q: You are responsible for Russia, for Moscow but did you also or were you called upon to do any work in any of the atomic energy issues in the near abroad let's say?

ARMBRUSTER: No, I did follow the events when Ukraine gave up their nuclear weapons. That was very interesting. Then Lithuania had a big nuclear plant that is still operating. That is one of the themes of Russian nuclear plants and the U.S. as well. Rather than decommission a lot of these plants as they have gotten older, thinking they would be replaced by new ones; they have just extended and extended the life of these plants. That was another area our nuclear Regulatory Commission was working on with the Russians. I was control officer for the NRC director who came over to St. Petersburg and to Moscow. She was working with the Russians on that. How can you safely extend the life of a nuclear plant? So, there were a lot of issues. I was there for three years. The third year I actually went from the EST section to the political section as Baltic Affairs officer. So, I was working on trade issues and as you said broad issues across the board, not just nuclear.

Q: In your work with your issues on the Baltics you focused principally on trade you say?

ARMBRUSTER: It was trade and Russian Baltic relations. The Russian diaspora in the Baltics and how that affected politics. There were some minor U.S. initiatives for regional development, something called the Northeast Europe Initiative, but it never had much money. And so, it was really more sort of your normal diplomacy of meeting with the Baltic diplomats comparing notes on how they saw Russia's development. But it was clear that the Baltics were taking a different path than Russia.

Q: OK, there was only one nuclear reactor, but were they interested themselves in getting a nuclear reactor as an alternative source.

ARMBRUSTER: No, I don't think so. When I think of the Baltic countries I think of

them as being sort of more progressive on the leading edge on environment. Looking at clean technologies and being much more at home and natural partners with the other Nordic countries. In fact, each of those countries sort of adopted a Baltic country. I think Norway and Latvia and Finland and Estonia and so on. But I was impressed with Baltic leaders. They were young and idealistic and some American, some people with Baltic heritage who had become Americans had come back and taken leadership roles. As a region it is a success story.

Q: This was the very early days of the idea of expanding NATO. Did that play when you were there?

ARMBRUSTER: It did and it was controversial, and of course the Russians had a knee jerk reaction to it, that it was threatening to them. Some people second guessed whether it rolled out the correct way but the whole idea of international relations is each country is allowed to make their own choices about their friends and allies, so I am glad they are in NATO. They are good partners. They have had to put up with a lot of Russian shenanigans. I think the Russians will continue to be troublesome in those areas. The thing about borders is when you see a vibrant busy border crossing you know things are healthy and going right. But at that point even then trade between Russia and some of the Baltic countries was really limited, and you'd go to these border crossings and you know almost nothing was happening there. They should have been vibrant crossing points and mixings of people and commerce and culture.

Q: Was that a mutual choice or did you get the impression that the Baltics were really trying to reorient everything west.

ARMBRUSTER: I think that was more driven by the Russians. I think they wanted to punish the Baltics for leaning towards the west. You are right. I think that some in the Baltics would be just as happy to turn their backs on Russia and not look back, but I think now there is a more pragmatic view that if they could get along with Russia and trade with Russia it is a win for both sides.

Q: Now for you with a solid three years in Moscow where are you in terms of grade and you are now about ten years in.

ARMBRUSTER: I was an 02 then. I would go cross country skiing with the Embassy Moscow consul general and at some point she says, "You ought to think about being consul general in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, they are looking for somebody. Would you be interested?" I thought OK that sounds interesting. As they say going from cold to hot, that would fit the pattern. So that was the next tour. It will definitely be a change of gears.

Q: OK, so now Nuevo Laredo you are going to become the consul general there. Any refresher for Spanish?

ARMBRUSTER: I think I got a very brief refresher but it wasn't on the order of months at all. Come to think of it maybe I didn't get a refresher.

Q: But as you are preparing to go to there you must have gone through the department and gotten all of the kind of basic instructions about what you are going to do in terms of running that consulate. What were people telling you at that time?

ARMBRUSTER: It was the number three visa post in the world so it was very busy. Narco trafficking was beginning to be an issue. Of course, illegal border crossings were an issue. So, I knew it was definitely ground zero for importing cocaine into the United States across the Rio Grande. There are three international bridges, all very busy. But there was also real commerce and industry with Maquiladoras on the Mexican side, you know U.S. owned factories, and a feeling that Laredo and Nuevo Laredo were one big city separated by a river. At that point the good outweighed the bad in a lot of ways. The main diplomatic channel was the Border Liaison Mechanism chaired by me and the consul general from Laredo, the Mexican consul general. Then we would have the mayors' offices, the police, the border patrol, about 20 different players would get together and meet every six months or so and work together. Mexico City would give us our marching orders and we would go once a year back to Mexico City, all the consuls and consuls general from all around Mexico.

Q: Now take a moment and describe the size and the staff in this consulate.

ARMBRUSTER: Yeah, very heavy on the consular side. I had a good deputy, Joe DeMaria. I did not have a political officer. It was really dedicated to doing visas and American citizen services. We had three prisons with Americans that we would visit. We did some commercial and cultural events, but for the most part we were trying to keep up with the visas. We were until we figured out that one of our staff was selling visas on the side. So, we brought diplomatic security in, they put in hidden cameras and for weeks they built their case so they could prosecute this American, which they did. He ended up spending five years in jail. We closed the consulate. We were then issuing zero visas for a while. We fired the entire guard staff. I got a death threat. It was pretty tense. Meanwhile, we still had a lot of Americans caught up in the narco-violence. I had one case in particular of a young American girl who was kidnapped by narcos along with her friend, who actually was in the narcotics business. They were both tortured. He was buried alive. She was raped and tortured as well. I got information on where they were buried and I told the Mexicans you guys are going to get them back for us. They brought the army out, lit the searchlights, cordoned off the streets and exhumed those two Americans and we got them back to their families. That was emblematic of the beginning of a very violent period on the border.

My first week, maybe even my first day on the job I was interviewed by one of the Nuevo Laredo reporters, and he asked. "What is your priority?" I said narco-violence is really a threat to the economy of both countries and we need to do what we can to reduce the narco-trade. The next day in the paper they had the interview and it said "what is your first priority?" I said, according to the edited version, "it was to increase tourism and trade between our two countries." The reporter knew that if he printed the original answer it would have been very dangerous for me.

Q: So, in your consulate there you are the consul general and you have a deputy but you also had a consular section.

ARMBRUSTER: My deputy was pretty much acting as the head of the consular section. He is the one who saw the discrepancy. At that time, we were doing some visa adjudications outside of the consulate. We would have excursions to other towns. When he was looking at the data, he said more people were coming for interviews than had been scheduled. And then picked up a pattern of approvals enough to signal to him there was something going on. By the end of the trial we knew the visa adjudicator had taken something like $30,000 in payments to grant people visas illegally. Of course, the Department ended doing any of these visa outreach excursions, and they also had only American Foreign Service Officers adjudicate. Many of our adjudicators were civil service officers from the border area and that practice was ended.

Q: What were your numbers per year of applicants let's say?

ARMBRUSTER: It would be hard for me to give you a number except we were right up there with the busiest posts in the world. Hundreds of thousands of interviews.

Q: And these were mostly visitor visas or a fair amount of immigrant as well.

ARMBRUSTER: Then people would send their kids across to Laredo to go to school and you know there is just a lot of back and forth, jut normal travel. The refusal rate wasn't terribly high. I don't know what it was, but you know we have workers, businessmen, students, we had just everybody. Certainly family, but a lot of people would just cross to go shopping and then go back. Until 9/11 it was very easy. . five minutes to cross the border. "Are you an American citizen?" "Yes." "Have a nice day."

Q: You arrived in Nuevo Laredo in what year?

ARMBRUSTER: We arrived in 2000.

Q: OK so you had a solid year of work before 9/11. How did 9/11 change things for you?

ARMBRUSTER: Everything. President Bush and President Fox were very close to an immigration agreement before 9/11 happened. That was going to reform the system and make it easier for many Mexicans to travel to the U.S., work seasonally and go back home, because most people want to do that. They want to work and then go back and see their families. That whole effort was ended. The border crossings that had been so easy, really you just present yourself at the border and state your citizenship and off you go, became a nightmare. It just became hours and hours. Sometimes I would ride my bike across the border because I didn't want to spend a few hours in the car. We got a little apartment on the Laredo side so my wife could work at the library in Laredo and my daughter could go to school, because it was just untenable to get up at 4:00 to get to school at 8:00. They did that for a while. Then finally they would get through the

checkpoint and they would go to Denny's or someplace and have breakfast, and it was a mad house. I remember asking the Mexican consul general "When is this ever going to get back to normal?" He said, "This is the new normal."

Q: All right so to go back in addition to all of the consular work you also had commercial work. Did NAFTA or the NAFTA councils that were created were you involved with those or how did you interact with NAFTA things?

ARMBRUSTER: On a retail basis let's say, I would go to the Caterpillar plant on the Mexican side. There they had a program called pay for work; pay for knowledge. So, the people advanced in the Caterpillar plant based on the training they took, if they decided to learn English, they could move up quicker. If they decided to take another advanced course they would move up. Which was different from the U.S. system which was based on seniority. So, it was interesting to see how Mexican-American companies were a good thing. It just seemed very promising. We worked on transportation issues, coordinating bridge closures for example. For a while we were the warehouse for goods going to Mexico City for American diplomats and their families. That later moved to Matamoros. But we had a big role in that shipping the first year. As far as NAFTA, we were just seeing a very busy, productive border, but we also knew that the drug smuggling and illegal crossing was a fact of life and a real feature of life on the border.

Q: Now one of the perennial issues in NAFTA even after it was approved was the issue of trucking, Mexican trucking going into the U.S., safety issues and environmental issues. Did you end up having to work on that?

ARMBRUSTER: No, the embassy would have worked on that, but I certainly saw the sense in allowing Mexican drivers to be able to take their truck all the way to their destination and back and I think some of the rumblings about the drivers being unsafe struck me as racist frankly. Globalization is the free movement of capital, goods and it should also include labor, so talent goes where it is needed. NAFTA was trying to address that. We have the movement of goods and capital, but the movement of labor is still a sticking point.

Q: Sure, I mean look at BREXIT. OK, did you actually enjoy this job?

ARMBRUSTER: What a great question. I felt more like a sheriff than a diplomat. I told you the story about the young girl who was killed. That was certainly a low point, seeing a mom crushed. But I felt like I was doing my job. I saw her every time she came to the consulate to meet with Mexican officials and I felt like that was a service that I was happy to provide, trying to work for her and other families that were affected by the drug violence. So, in terms of being a diplomat and providing a service and doing something that made a difference to people in their lives, yeah, I think a tour on the border fulfilled that requirement. It was satisfying and rewarding. When you help out an American in

prison, that feels good.

Q: So as consul general there is Nuevo Laredo the city but you have a consular district that extends beyond. Were there issues related to that?

ARMBRUSTER: The Laughlin Air Force Base is in Del Rio, right across from Ciudad Acuña, so sometimes we had cross border issues. Our Consular Agent assisted in a traffic accident on the Mexican side for example involving our airmen. We also had a Consular Agent in Piedras Negras and we visited Americans in three prisons in our Consular District.

I took part in something called the Cabalgata, where hundreds of horsemen ride along the border. I got thrown by my horse who was named Comanche. I should have taken Buttercup. My wife said she had never seen anybody so black and blue in her life from that fall. We would travel a bit and I drove with my deputy to Mexico City. It was safe enough to do that then, and that was the most beautiful ride I have ever taken along the TransAmerica highway, maybe you have driven that.

Q: Well in Costa Rica.

ARMBRUSTER: Mexico is just a gorgeous place. The food is great. I enjoyed Mexico. I enjoyed speaking the language and I enjoyed my colleagues so it was a good tour. I did look at it fondly, but I will never forget the cases of violence and threats.

Q: Culturally they say that the northern area say 100 miles to the U.S. border is distinct from the rest of Mexico in a variety of ways. Did you get that feeling as well?

ARMBRUSTER: When you travel around Mexico a little bit you really get a feel for indigenous areas and areas especially along the border where it really is a Tex-Mex environment, and then Mexico City with its great cultural heritage and the pyramids, there's a lot of history. It is a marvelously diverse country. So when you think of Mexico and the coastline and the mountains it has an awful lot to offer.

Q: Any indigenous issues while you were there?

ARMBRUSTER: The black American soldiers, many Civil War veterans, moved to Mexico and married into indigenous families. That is interesting history, the buffalo soldiers. We invited "Lonesome Dove" author Larry McMurtry to speak on the 100th anniversary of the consulate and he said "alas I don't do public events anymore." I remember working "alas" into all of my cables for the next few weeks. It is a colorful area with the Texas Rangers and the Comanche who ruled that region for decades. You can almost feel it. You look at the scenery and you can just imagine an Indian on

horseback. It is a striking place.

Q: Now I imagine with this level of responsibility you are now an 0-1.

ARMBRUSTER: I was promoted to 0-1 in Nuevo Laredo.

Q: And you are a bit far away from substantive work in the area you like the most which was environmental and things related to environmental.

ARMBRUSTER: Right. They did away with the EST as a career track so they offered me to choose one. I chose political because economic issues really weren't my thing and I found I liked running a small mission. So, the leadership issues and team building, learning how to create an esprit de corps, that was appealing, so then I went to the Naval War College.

Q: Before you go to the Naval War College just one more sort of general question. In this period where you are the consul general and head of a reasonable sized consulate how did you learn leadership issues? Did you get training or what would you say were the ways you took on new skills of leadership as you were running this place.

ARMBRUSTER: I did take the training that FSI offered on leadership. I took negotiations training, but I think probably I learned the most from my staff and my deputy Joe DeMaria. At one point he corrected me. We had taken a poll on some question, I don't remember what, and I didn't like the results of the poll. I had my own opinion of what we should do. Joe said, "Well what is the point of having a poll if you are not going to follow it?" I thought you are right; OK I will take one for the team. If we are going to open it up to everybody, then you have got to live with the results. So, I think I have always tried to be open and create an atmosphere where people could come to me and talk in a safe, no consequences setting. I don't know if I always lived up to it but I always felt communications have been pretty good in the missions I have been in. I tried to foster that by listening to colleagues, especially local staff. I don't think I could ever say enough about the local staff we work with. One of the guys in Russia was actually a survivor of Chernobyl and he had a lifetime pass on the metro because of his going to the scene. We just work with terrific people all over the world. More often than not the local staff will tell you what they think because they are going to be there after we leave and they have seen it all. If we are willing to learn from them we can grow.

Q: OK, great. So, we will pick up next time then with your tour of the Naval College.

ARMBRUSTER: Okay.

Q: OK, so it is November 10, 2018 and we are resuming our interview with Ambassador

Tom Armbruster. Where did we leave off?

ARMBRUSTER: Well we were on the border of Mexico and just before leaving Nuevo Laredo I went to Afghanistan for a month to fill in for a political officer so he could go home for Christmas leave.

Q: Remind me what year was this?

ARMBRUSTER: This was 2002. At that time actually we had pretty good access around Afghanistan. From Kabul we could travel in unprotected vehicles. I remember visiting an Imam and asking about his political perspective on the war. He said the U.S. reminded him of an Afghan fable of a "destroying mouse" where you had a mouse in your house and your neighbor comes over with a sledge hammer to be helpful and just bashes the walls and destroys the house finding the little mouse. He felt that was how our reaction had been. It was an overreaction to the Taliban. It was interesting. I went back several times later from Tajikistan. The month in Afghanistan and then on to the Naval War College for a year where I did a paper there called U.S. Russian Nuclear Cooperation: Actionable Intelligence. They selected me to do a paper on anything I wanted. I thought that would be a good subject and I enjoyed that quite a bit. Then I went from the Naval War college to DCM Dushanbe in Tajikistan.

Q: Was the paper classified?

ARMBRUSTER: It was not. No. I think it is still in their library in fact as a research paper.

Q: Well just as an aid briefly could you summarize your findings?

ARMBRUSTER: Sure. I concluded that the investment in closer cooperation with the Russians in nuclear cooperation was in our national security interest. Unfortunately, I think the Russians themselves were just not in any mood to cooperate, so we both lost an

opportunity, because when we were buying their highly enriched uranium and blending it down to low enriched and burning it in our nuclear plants, I think that was good for both sides. It is a shame.

Q: A number of those issues between us and Russia, a real pity. OK

ARMBRUSTER: Then I was DCM for Ambassador Dick Hoagland in Tajikistan. We were very much focused on regional integration so that the Tajiks and Afghans and Uzbeks and Kyrgyz could get along and play together better. The U.S. was building a bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. So, I worked on that project by getting permissions, even trying to speed up the delivery of cement sometimes when they were diverted for other projects from other donors, like Iran. I put together a counter narcotics group from Tajikistan and we flew to Kabul for the first ever intelligence sharing. That was successful and continues today. We were very happy about that.

On a separate trip I took Tajiks to Kabul and Kunduz for business development. Of course, that had become more problematic as the security situation in Afghanistan has just never really resolved itself. Those were some of the highlights.

We loved hiking in Tajikistan. It was just a beautiful area. Pretty remote. I remember flying home for home leave and we went from Dushanbe to Osh to Bishkek to Baku to London and home. So, it was like 30 hours of travel. But we saw the kids. They came to see us and visited. So, it was a good tour.

Q: Aside from working on the regional aspects, is there anything to say about the relationship between Tajikistan and Afghanistan in terms of the ethnic, because Afghanistan has Tajiks, Tajikistan has other tribes from Afghanistan. And you hear about that in the media periodically but never with regional clarity.

ARMBRUSTER: One of the real warriors against the Soviets was a man named Masoud who was called the Lion of Panjir. He was instrumental in that war and the Tajiks had a

very big stake. Masoud was killed on 9/11 by operatives posing as journalists. You can still see his picture on billboards in the region. Tajikistan was coming out of its own civil war so we were working on stabilization and conflict mitigation with different nationalities, ethnicities and tribes. Many of the Central Asian frontiers are artificial. You go to Uzbekistan and there are Tajiks. Central Asia is a melting pot of many ethnicities. They have got a lot of resources and it is a shame when you go to these borders and it is dead quiet. They should be busy active places of cultural and commercial exchange. The security situation was still not perfect at the time but it was a lot better to the point where families were allowed to come. We had a car bombing. There were security concerns but on the whole Tajikistan was moving in a positive direction.

Q: How would you looking at Tajikistan today, would you still say that it is moving in a positive direction?

ARMBRUSTER: All of Central Asia is underperforming. In terms of regional integration and global integration. We had Defense Secretary Rumsfeld visit and talk to President Rahmanov about establishing a U.S. military base there. He asked me if I thought it was feasible. I thought of it from the Tajik point of view and said, "yeah, it would bring them income and stability and a way to play against the Russians." But Rahmanov said no. He told Rumsfeld, "we are not really an independent country yet." That is an overarching theme. So many Soviet states have such a Russian influence and presence that their foreign policy is not really independent. That is still the case.

Q: Still part of a near abroad. All right. Looking back from a career point of view were there particular talents or skills that were required while you were there that were useful for you as you moved along?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes. Ambassador Hoagland was pretty much focused on the policy. That meant that I was working on the management and consular issues. Hoagland was a Public Diplomacy officer and he was very expert in it. But it gave me a chance to lead in all these different areas. We were building a new embassy so that required a real push

working with the Office of Buildings Overseas and Diplomatic Security. I had been consul general in Nuevo Laredo so that was good but Dushanbe was a real full scope embassy whereas Nuevo Laredo was primarily there for visas and American citizens. We also had visitors. We had Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. We had Rumsfeld… I really liked serving as control officer because we could advance issues that had been stuck. So, putting the team in place and having the right people be site officers and making sure we are making the most of every visit is good leadership experience as well.

Q: As you are proceeding are you thinking about taking your Russian language skill and remaining in the post-Soviet space or what is your thinking at this point in terms of your career.

ARMBRUSTER: That is funny. It sort of came down to two posts after Dushanbe. Either Barcelona or Vladivostok, Russia. I thought Barcelona is going to be OK, but I can do some interesting things in Vladivostok. I had my 4-4 in Russian and I wanted to use my Russian skills. It is such an interesting part of the world where there are still tigers in the wild, the North Korean border and the Russian Arctic. I did the math in my head and thought I would really like to go to Vladivostok. I am glad I did.

Q: What year did you arrive in Vladivostok?

ARMBRUSTER: That would have been 2007 until 2010.

Q: OK, so change of administration. Also, and changing relations with Russia. Take a moment to describe what Vladivostok is like as a place.

ARMBRUSTER: It is a port city. We had a lot of great naval ship visits. Culturally it is fantastic. We would bring over jazz artists. We didn't bring Alice Cooper, but Alice Cooper came and did a public diplomacy event with us. We had our 100 best musician and artist contacts over and he was just the most gracious and terrific host you could imagine.

It is one of the largest consular districts in the world, going from the area across from Alaska all the way down to the North Korean border and then Sakhalin where we had interests as well. There was an American pastor imprisoned unfairly and I ended up going to Sakhalin to his parole hearings. One of the guards said I cannot imagine a Russian diplomat doing this for a Russian citizen. I testified on his behalf, to his good character, and he was released the next day. It was really good.

It is a rich area. Rich in oil, rich in forests, rich in seafood. Certainly, in the diversity of the people there, but it is also very sparsely populated. There are some pretty wild areas. The Amur leopard is there. In fact, Ambassador Beyrle came from Moscow. He got off the plane. He was pretty grouchy because of that ten or twelve hour flight. We took him straight to the Amur Leopard Reserve and after that he just loved the trip. It is a fascinating part of the world and I have to say we had some of the best locally engaged staff you could imagine. They worked out an arrangement to host the Long Island Youth Orchestra and house them with Russian host families. They did a concert tour of the region. So, for me diplomatically it was really engaging and interesting. I still think of it as one of my favorite posts, probably because of the people.

Q: Were you engaged with the Japanese or the Chinese in regional issues?

ARMBRUSTER: The Japanese certainly. We would compare notes on the political situation. There wasn't the sort of development assistance coordination you might see elsewhere. But certainly I worked with the Japanese. The Chinese consul general invited me to China to a trade fair, and I rode with him in the car to Northern China. We went to another tiger reserve there. That was quite interesting! I liked my Japanese colleague quite a bit and enjoyed sharing perspectives on economic development.

I also met the North Korean Consul General. Once a year at Christmas they would seat us together and I think we got up to "Will you pass the salt please?" in terms of our conversation. We never got very far but there was a North Korean restaurant in

Vladivostok. Until they did their nuclear test, we did go there. They had pretty good food, very good desserts. But then once the test happened, we just thought that was it.

But you know that small diplomatic presence in Vladivostok is so far removed from Moscow you don't really have that heavy political atmosphere. When relations are bad in Moscow, it is hard to do business. In Vladivostok we were a little bit removed. Even the Russians feel a distance from Moscow and are a little bit freer to do what they want. Caterpillar was very big out there. They sold a lot of equipment. Freightliner, the trucking company, also very successful in the Russian Far East. It was nice to see some American business ventures moving forward.

Q: Was there any sister city activity with Vladivostok?

ARMBRUSTER: Yes. In fact, flights between Anchorage and Vladivostok were just starting up while I was there, so we sponsored through the consulate a writing contest. We flew the winner, a Russian student, to Anchorage, the sister city. She experienced Alaska for a week and then came back and wrote about it. It was nice to promote those flights. They have been on again, off again. I don't know whether they are on again right now. It is close enough that there really should be much deeper links. But you are right, there are some sister city links. San Francisco also has ties to the Russian far east.

Q: And your family, were they all with you in Vladivostok?

ARMBRUSTER: No. by then both our kids were in college, so Kathy did some English teaching in Vladivostok. Our kids did visit. Of course, we would meet them and make a point of getting to wherever we needed to for holidays, but it was just the two of us at that point and our Russian cat Vika. Our dog, Chessie, joined us in Cuba, and traveled to the U.S., Russia, and Mexico. She was a great Foreign Service dog who knew to be nice to GSO whenever they came into the house unannounced.

Q: Because of the size of the consular district were there other regional issues within

your consular district that kept you busy?

ARMBRUSTER: We did try to keep a close watch and did reporting on the North Korean laborers who came across. Every week there was a train. They would work in the timber fields, the seafood industry, and we visited some places where North Koreans worked, but they were always very reluctant to speak to us. We did political reporting. In fact, one of our classified reports on illegal logging made it into WikiLeaks. We would also report on what Chinese businesses were doing, Chinese tourism, and that kind of thing, as well as American.

Q: Did your consular district go all the way up to the Arctic? Were there any Arctic issues you had to deal with?

ARMBRUSTER: It did go up to the Arctic. Chukotka: Their motto is: "The land of real people." It is a stunning place. We were there when it was minus 40 and you could go to open-air markets where they have vats and vats of caviar and fish. It was fascinating. But the links between U.S. and Russian communities was not very deep. Indigenous people do travel back and forth, depending on how warm the relations are. But it didn't take up much of our diplomatic energy. We went to the regions once a quarter to see what was going on and look at the investments.

A lot of Vladivostok was devoted to the military. For example, the Blue Ridge flagship of our Pacific Fleet came to visit and the admiral invited me to go back with him onboard to Japan and give a lecture to the sailors about the Foreign Service and the State Department and what a consulate is. That was a real highlight. The sailors were just great diplomats. They come and play volleyball and basketball and are out on the streets in their uniforms. They just do a great job representing America.

Q: What about environmental issues?

ARMBRUSTER: There definitely were environmental issues. In fact, we even heard

rumors of long-ago radioactive release that had contaminated the area and actually caused the deaths of some people way back during the depths of the Cold War when that type of thing was absolutely secret. I guess it still is. But we would hear things like that from the locals. You couldn't really swim in the local area and Exxon was working on Sakhalin, so they were always trying to make sure they had good relations with the locals and did things right so they didn't go afoul of the environmental regulations. Of course, deforestation is an issue and environment in general, because it is such a rich area, was always on our minds.

Q: So, from here were there any career lessons for whatever you were going next?

ARMBRUSTER: I think I learned the depth and the strength of the locally engaged staff. They were often the movers and shakers, especially on the musical guests that would come. We also had a visit from coach Tom Newell, a former NBA coach, who conducted basketball clinics throughout the Russian Far East. He was a tremendous hit. He would not only do the X's and O's of basketball but he would give whatever message you needed, "stay in school, stay off drugs," just a real great guy. He was again one of those ambassadors of the United States that was great to have. The locally engaged staff knew just where to take him and how to best use him and present him to the Russian audience. I can't say enough about the Russian LES in Vladivostok.

Q: That is fantastic. How were you deciding then I mean this is six years or so in the former Soviet Union between Tajikistan and Vladivostok? Where are you thinking of next?

ARMBRUSTER: I always look at the overseas opportunities first but after a couple of remote posts, Central Asia and Vladivostok, it was probably time to go home. I tended to look for opportunities outside of the Department, like the Naval War College. I took a Diplomat in Residence job at the City College of New York.

Colin Powell's alma mater. He came and spoke and I was able to escort him around and be his companion for a day. I taught a couple of classes, "Understanding Russia" and "The Practice of Diplomacy." Then I recruited in New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Jersey. At that time, we had priority internships, paid internships, for a select number of minority students. They choose six really talented people. I know at least one has entered the Foreign Service. It was really great to recruit especially second-generation Americans who were very bright, very talented, and looking to change the world. I enjoyed recruiting and seeing their eyes light up as they think 'this is something I can do!' The only difficulty for the second-generation Americans was the diplomatic security background check took longer for them because they not only had to check their U.S. contacts, but also their contacts from their country of origin. Sometimes that would take so long, they would drop out of the process. I wish they could come up with a system where it is 100 days for everybody; it doesn't matter where you are from. Because these are definitely people who want to serve and have something to contribute.

Q: And often they spoke other languages.

ARMBRUSTER: They did. We had one student from University of Pennsylvania who spoke Albanian, did an internship in Albania, and is now serving as an FSO.

Q: What were the surprises for you, I mean coming back to the U.S. after all this time and interacting with the students, especially after you had gone to school and done some academic work. What were the surprises and the takeaways from this time you are interacting with students?

ARMBRUSTER: The biggest shock for me, and it was a really pleasant one, is they really got it. They understood that it was expeditionary diplomacy now. That you were going to Afghanistan and Iraq and working in the Provisional Reconstruction Teams and supporting the military. Earlier on there was such a stereotype about the foreign service that we are cookie pushers and it is all cocktail parties and that kind of thing. These kids have done their research about the real work of embassies that they knew it was prison

visits and working on the visa lines. I don't think they had the illusions that earlier generations did about the diplomatic life. For them it wasn't necessarily glamorous. It was service. I just found them to be very talented and ready to go and contribute.

This would have been 2010 to 2012. So, two years in New York then I was nominated by President Obama to be ambassador to the Marshall Islands. That confirmation process went well. The Marshallese during Agrément, where they have to decide whether they want this American to come, said 'we have two questions for him. One, does he fish? And two, does he drink Budweiser?' So, I sent them a picture of me fishing and drinking Bud.

So about four years in the Marshall Islands. A very unique place. I had a chance to come full circle to the environmental issues again because that was where the U.S. conducted 67 nuclear tests. There is quite a nuclear legacy that the U.S. is still working on. We addressed that in a lot of different ways. The Department of Energy had programs to monitor radiation and to see what they could do to mitigate the effects of radioactivity in the soil, which is very responsible. They also started giving scholarships to Marshallese students interested in nuclear issues. We had undersecretary for arms control Rose Gottemoeller come out and speak on the 60th anniversary the Bravo nuclear test, really the worst nuclear test, the one that contaminated the Marshallese downwind. She gave an excellent speech. We are always going to be working on that legacy in the Marshall Islands.

We still have very deep security issues there now with the Ronald Reagan Space and Missile Defense base on Kwajalein. That is where missiles launched from Vandenberg Air Base in California land out to the Marshall Islands, in the Kwajalein lagoon. The intercontinental missiles are tracked and tested, so the base is a big part of our national security and defense architecture.

Kwajalein was also the scene of very big WWII battles and there were medals of honor accorded to servicemen, some of whom dove on grenades to save their buddies. So, a lot

of history in the Marshall Islands.

Q: Now what is the population?

ARMBRUSTER: The population is under 70,000. So, it is very small in terms of population but it is ¾ of a million square miles of ocean too. It is a very rich fishing area. We have a Compact of Free Association with the Marshallese. They can live, work, and travel in the U.S. and about 35,000 Marshallese live in the U.S., many in Arkansas.

Q: That is interesting.

ARMBRUSTER: About $100 million in assistance for education infrastructure and health that goes to the Marshall Islands every year. So, we have got a real special relationship with them and I was thinking with sea level rise and climate change we have a real obligation to the Marshallese. One of the big environmental victories for me was nominating Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner a local poet, to be the civil society speaker at the United Nations climate summit in 2014. She was selected out of hundreds of applicants and she gave a just knockout poem that brought the UN delegates to their feet in the General Assembly. The first standing ovation since Nelson Mandela addressed the general assembly. That was a big win.

The other thing was having the Prinz Eugen, a German ship, that was anchored in the Marshall Islands and that was sunk there taken care of. It was still full of oil and I petitioned the Pentagon to have the oil removed. It took a couple of years but they did it. That was good, saving coral reefs and potentially the beach around the base at Kwajalein and protecting the community of Ebeye, where Kwajalein's workers live.

There were two droughts while I was there, and I declared disasters and sought assistance. USAID came through with about $10 million for food, reverse osmosis machines, and bottled water. The U.S. is a responsible partner and a good partner out there, but the Marshallese are going to face some severe problems with climate change

because with just a little sea level rise those atolls are under water. We did see that a couple of times where there were inundations. It is pretty precarious for the Marshallese.

Q: They are all aware of it. Is there anything that can be done relatively easily?

ARMBRUSTER: No. I guess the one easy thing for the Marshallese is they have the right to work and study in the United States. So many Marshallese do live in the United States. In fact, there is a big population in Springdale Arkansas, many work at the Tyson chicken plant but they are also teachers, policemen, and in government. They are real contributing members of the community. They do have that right to leave the Marshall Islands but if they leave, we lose this culture. It is a great sailing culture, navigating culture. These were people who could navigate by the wind and just the movement of the waves. They are expert seafarers. They still have their own language, their own songs. The culture is very rich and I think to lose that is to lose something of world heritage.

Q: They may not have a choice.

ARMBRUSTER: Especially given that the U.S. has pulled out of the climate accords. That does not bode well. Actually, the Marshallese foreign minister Tony deBrum made a really great contribution during the Paris summit to get what they called the "high ambition coalition" together. These were the countries that committed to trying to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. That was Tony deBrum working all night getting these coalitions together.

He told a great story in the UN. He said in Marshallese folklore there was a whale near a beach, and bothering the birds and making all kinds of weird noises. So, the birds decided to all get one drop of water in their beaks and the oceans dried up. And oh, the whale said I give up, I give up! The birds spit the water back and the ocean refilled. The moral is you take care of your drop and I take care of my drop and she takes care of her drop and we can save the world. I think the Marshallese understand that we have all got to work together to address climate change. They are out front with poetry, with their president,

and their diplomacy trying to make the case that this affects everybody and if the Marshall Islands goes under, we all lose.

Q: I imagine their principal source of income other than U.S. assistance is tourism?

ARMBRUSTER: No, it is really fish. Fishing is very big. Majuro is one of the top tuna transshipment ports in the world. So if you have a can of tuna there is a pretty good chance it transited the Marshall Islands. They do have great sport fishing. I went marlin fishing with them and the scuba diving is fantastic. We would see sharks and rays and turtles. Nothing against Hawaii, but it was better than Hawaii. So, tourism might have a chance. The Marshall Islands are four hours west of Honolulu. It is the next stop on the island hopper that goes on to Japan. There may be some scope for tourism in the future. But it is pretty remote and the infrastructure is small, but we have seen Palau just become this incredible dive destination. So, I would think the Marshall Islands has the capability. We did have some great visitors, including Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, and perhaps the greatest sea survivor in history, Jose Salvador Alvarenga who spent 14 months adrift at sea and finally washed up on the Ebon Atoll.

Credit: Raycrew©Hiro

The U.S. military is the number two employer. That missile defense base is a real full-time army garrison with scientists, soldiers, and Marshallese staff. Hopefully the U.S.-Marshallese relationship will stay strong to provide further employment opportunities.

Q: As you then prepare to come back to the U.S. are there ideas that you have for sort of post state department life?

ARMBRUSTER: I was kind of hoping for one more tour and didn't get the promotion. Midway through the Marshall Islands I was offered to go to St. Petersburg. Their consul

general had dropped out and they needed somebody but Kathy was working on a school library she was building from scratch. So we had personal reasons that I didn't curtail to go to St. Pete. Career-wise that would have been a good move, but we didn't do it and went back to Texas instead for a couple of years. In San Antonio I was flying little airplanes. That is a hobby of mine. Then I started working for the Office of the Inspector General and I've now led inspections of the South and Central Asia Bureau, Embassy Copenhagen, Embassy Bogota and now Embassy N'djamena, Chad and Nouakchott, Mauritania. That is another great way to contribute. I really like Inspector General Steve Linnick's motto and driving vision: "Promoting Positive Change." We do that. We do a lot of off line counseling in the OIG. We also write a "Spotlight on Success" where we find things being done really well that could be replicated elsewhere. In Bogota it was a color coded security map down to the local level. So, if you were traveling to the north, for example, you would see areas that were safe and in the green, and dangerous and in the red, with information about previous security incidents. In Chad, we are looking at a U.S. funded elephant monitoring system to combat poaching as our spotlight.

We also come up with recommendations on where embassies can improve. I speak sometimes on climate change and just had a good session with Cornell University students and do some writing. You saw the article on Practicing Environmental Diplomacy in the Foreign Service Journal. So I definitely try to stay in engaged. I think I will always be recruiting in a way for the State Department. I think I joined it for the adventure but I learned that service is its own reward. That is why I stayed in.

Q: OK, you were an ambassador and then you continued to look at the service from the critical eye of the office of inspector General. How do you see it changing and are there recommendations you would make in general for how the State Department should function?

ARMBRUSTER: I have always wished that we could have a large cadre of people come into the State Department even for just a year or two to become familiar with what we do. When they talk about "Right Sizing" for most embassies that is like double the mission,

because we do good work. When you have an economics officer or a commercial officer, they are going to bring in businesses and create revenue for the United States. So, embassies are good investments. I do believe in universality; we should be everywhere. We have interests everywhere in the world. So, we are doing that right. I think that public diplomacy is a powerful tool and the U.S. military leadership has often said they need diplomats on the ground too. One to mitigate conflict, but two, when there is conflict to help with the aftermath and development. So, I think we are underfunded. We have to continue to fight the good fight to promote the work to the public. I think students are very well informed but the average American probably doesn't have a great idea of what we do. What we accomplish throughout the world is something we should be proud of and something we should promote.

As for changes as a career ambassador it would be good if we had a cap on political ambassadors. The American Foreign Service Association does a good job of lobbying and pushing back when those political appointee numbers get too high. There are good political ambassadors as well and sometimes they become spokespeople for the State Department. We just have to maintain the primacy of the State Department in foreign affairs. Make sure our voice is usually the deciding one in national security considerations, because we do have the experience, we speak the languages, often we have the depth to come up with good solutions to international problems. Those problems aren't going away.

Q: And with regard to training for State Department officers, is there a new direction you would recommend or different ways to train them.

ARMBRUSTER: Colin Powell said that coming into their careers foreign service officers are better prepared in terms of education and experience than military officers. He said by the time they get to the end of their careers the military officers have had more training and more leadership opportunities and are better equipped than we are because we spend so much time just getting the hands-on experience and less time training. So probably a dedicated training regimen where after every tour you have concentrated language or

cultural training or whatever it is, commercial training before your next assignment. The Foreign Service Institute does a great job. I think the language teachers are terrific. I took negotiations training here. That helped me negotiate better and was a real pivotal course.

We need to continue to invest in that. Foreign service officers shouldn't discount their time at FSI or in training or being seconded to another agency or to an American business or corporation. These opportunities are great as well as the War colleges. So, the opportunities are there, but we have to recognize they are worth investing in in terms of the time and taking FSOs away from embassies. I am a big believer in training.

Q: Then the only other aspect is how the State Department acts inter-agency. I don't know how much you saw of that but obviously it is also a major issue for the department and our lessons learned kind of from Iraq and Afghanistan often go back to this question of how well all the government thing worked.

ARMBRUSTER: The whole of government approach. I think that has become part of the ethos overseas. I do think the country team model works, and when people look at that and experience that hopefully they can bring that back to Washington and apply it. Every embassy is different. The military says if you have seen one embassy, you have seen one embassy. It is very personality dependent but I have always found overseas, maybe because of the proximity and working closely with your colleagues, playing sports with them, it always seems to be collegial. Whether it is a big place like Moscow or a small mission like Havana, the agencies recognize that they are all there pulling in the same direction. You really never feel any kind of partisanship. It is all really very pragmatic, professional diplomacy that goes on overseas. I think that model works well.

Q: Retirees, is there a moral role for them or is there a greater value that they could provide from your experience. Or is it simply better that when you retire you retire and you leave opportunities for those coming behind?

ARMBRUSTER: Yeah, there is kind of both sides to that. It is good to experience things

outside of government. I volunteer on the board of Strategies for International Development, an NGO devoted to alleviating poverty. I traveled to India as a business consultant, but I still like being involved and I like being a resource for the OIG as long as they need me. I guess it is retiree dependent. Some want to go off and become farmers or do something completely different. But it is an honor to have a chance to serve and promote American values, help out American citizens when they are in trouble. It is a great career that I would recommend to anybody.

Q: I think that is a great place to end. Thank you.

End of interview

[Note: For further reading, click HERE for Ambassador Armbruster's article on *Practicing Environmental Diplomacy*.]