

A Bird's-Eye View of DRI

During a gap between language and tradecraft training for my first assignment, I had a bridge assignment with the Diplomatic Readiness Task Force. My assignment was to draft a survey of junior officers, but I also spent time discussing my motivations and experiences in joining the Foreign Service with the very people responsible for my, and many others', employment with the State Department. Based on those conversations, I constructed the following brief narrative of the year-and-a-half-long process that brought me into the Foreign Service. While my experiences are by no means unique nor necessarily typical, I hope they will be of interest to others in the State Department community.

You can't make someone else's choices. You shouldn't let someone else make yours.

First, as I learned in A-100, always lead with a biographic introduction. My parents immigrated to the United States from the Netherlands about two years before I was born. I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa., earned a B.S. and M.S. in chemical engineering and worked for a few years with Fluor Daniel's biotech/pharmaceutical division in San Francisco before deciding that engineering wasn't what I wanted to do for the next 40 years of my life. Throughout my years in university, I had harbored an interest in economics, international relations and current events and decided that the best place to combine those interests with my desire to engage in public service was the State Department. Not knowing whether the Foreign Service needed Dutch-speaking engineers but figuring I had nothing to lose, I signed up for the exam on the department's Web site.

I took the written exam in September 2001 in San Francisco, a couple of weeks after the attacks of 9/11. Although the events of that day didn't factor into my decision to take the exam, they did strengthen my intention to find a job that I wanted rather than a job that merely paid well.

Three months after the written exam, I received a letter telling me that I had passed and that my oral assessment was scheduled for April 2002. Provided with the list of characteristics against which candidates are judged, I proceeded to develop a list of work, school, and personal experiences that illustrated times at which I had utilized those traits. I also spent an entire Sunday cooped up in my apartment trying to compile a list of jobs held, schools attended, addresses lived at, friends known, etc. over the previous 10 years of my life for my security clearance paperwork.

What proved most useful, though, was a prep session offered in San Francisco by Steve Browning, a Diplomat-in-

Residence based in Southern California. DIRs (not DRI — mind the acronyms!) are FSOs who spend a tour at universities around the country to educate people about, and recruit candidates for, the Foreign Service, and to demystify the examination process.

Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.

However these three activities factored into my oral assessment experience, I passed. I was given a conditional offer of employment and placed on something called the "Register," pending security and health clearances and selection.

I began my conditionally-employed waiting period with high spirits even though I had heard that candidates could reside on the Register for over a year before being offered a job. I still had a job at Fluor, my doctor used to work for the Navy so he knew exactly what I needed for my medical clearance, and I obtained my security clearance in about four months. I could wait a little longer.

In fact, I only had to wait about two additional months to hear that I would receive an offer for the March 2003 A-100 class (the 112th). And here I learned another thing about DRI. While I was worrying about the meaning of life and what my career aspirations should be, I hadn't thought much about the pay cut I would experience upon joining the government. But thanks to DRI, I didn't have to forgo too much money. Some of my A-100 colleagues who came from law practices didn't see it that way, but, to me, it meant a lot to know that the department was trying to match the private sector in pay while continuing to outdo it in benefits.

And thus I ended up in an A-100 class of 92 people in Washington, D.C. Our class started with an expedited swearing-in, followed by a day in which we took turns interviewing and then introducing the person sitting next to us. It was then that I learned the wealth of backgrounds and experiences that the Foreign Service was attracting: teachers, fishermen, fashion designers, journalists, lawyers, recent college graduates — and yes, engineers — speaking languages as diverse as Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian — and yes, Dutch.

Be careful what you choose. You may get it.

After the class introductions on the first day, we received our bid list. Given 10 days to pick our top 25 choices out of a list of 92 posts, we set about trying to figure out if we could handle two years in Bujumbura, Mexico City or Lilongwe. What was really surprising was that one person's paradise was another's least-favorite place on earth. Our A-100 instruc-

tors told us that our bid list was the envy of all the previous A-100 classes, but it seems like most everyone ends up happy with their destination, even if it was 25th on their list.

While daydreaming about life at our favorite post, we were taught public speaking, cultural awareness, “managing up,” working with FSNs, composure under fire, cable drafting, how to get to your first post, what each officer does in an embassy, how the department is organized, how policies are made in Washington, and how to fill out an EER. There were sessions about language probation, hardship equity, entry-level requirements, tenure, security and promotion exams, and an offsite session. When I took my language exams, my high school Spanish earned a 0+ but my Dutch got me off language probation.

A-100 in its entirety was a great experience. But two moments will always remain as distinct memories. The first is Flag Day: all of us sitting in the FSI gym, backed by family and friends, with 92 flags perched on a desk in front of us. One by one, each flag was picked up, the name of the post read out, and the winner of the assignment announced. I ended up with San Jose, #4 on my bid list, which meant eight months at FSI learning Spanish and taking consular and political-economic trade-craft training. Being paid to learn a language is, so far, the best way to make a living I’ve found. But any time at FSI will always pale in comparison to the days of A-100 when everything was new, nothing was certain, and all we had was our desire to live a life of purpose, wherever the department needed us.

Then there was the second highlight: our official swearing-in ceremony at which Secretary Powell welcomed us and our families into the State Department community. Here was the man who made a lot of us think about taking the exam, the man who made us proud to say we worked for him, and he made a point of taking time to swear us into the Service and to welcome our families along for the adventure. It was kind of like the ad campaign, “This man wants to talk you about a very important job,” as he did, in fact, tell us how important our job and our families are, to us, to the department and to our country.

My A-100 classmates and I have all spread to the far reaches of the earth to begin our own lives as representatives of the United States government. The motivating factors that brought us to our current jobs may not be what keep us in the Foreign Service, but we all came looking for something unique that we felt the State Department offers — a chance to represent America to the world.

— *Bryan Olthof*

Bryan Olthof was a member of the 112th A-100 class. He is now on his first tour in San Jose.

this summer, will have absorbed over 100 new positions and people. New domestic-based programs, such as the HIV/AIDS and Middle East Partnership initiatives, are also staffed with DRI positions.

Creating a “Training Complement”

Therein lies a coming challenge. DRI, by hiring exactly 1,158 new colleagues above attrition over three years, was intended to create a “training complement,” representing over 12 percent of our total work force (a level that remains the target in coming years). This corresponds to the “training float” that each of the U.S. armed forces uses to manage and develop their people. We would then deploy a significant part of our work force to new training activities specifically designed to enhance our institutional readiness.

Some of this would be language training to expand our “bench depth,” such as expanding our cadres of qualified Urdu and Chinese speakers. More colleagues would also be trained in the leadership and management curriculum, across their careers, starting well before they assumed management positions. In addition, others among us would enhance their skills to help ready the department for the complex contingencies likely to become more common in the 21st century, such as conducting diplomatic operations in unconventional environments, working with international coalitions on the ground, interacting with military forces and NGOs providing transitional assistance, responding to multidimensional crises, and establishing posts in zones of former conflict.

Looking Ahead to FY 2005

With so many positions going now to Iraq and Afghanistan, the training complement envisioned under DRI is almost 200 colleagues smaller than foreseen. For that reason, the State Department has requested a FY 2005 budget that includes 183 additional positions above attrition. This proposed additional hiring would provide the personnel resources for these critical but unforeseen priorities while continuing to build our training and readiness capacities to the levels intended under DRI. This funding request is important if the department is to avoid sliding back to the overstretched, under-trained, unready state that DRI was intended to remedy. Indeed, the single most important lesson from the DRI experience is that the continuous recruitment and hiring of sufficient new colleagues for our future work force