COMING HOME

Edith Bingham

AS A CHILD, SHE LIVED ALL OVER THE WORLD — UNTIL HER FATHER'S DEATH. YEARS LATER, ON A TRIP BACK TO WASHINGTON, SHE FINALLY UNDERSTOOD WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG.

BY MARGARET CHENEY

I was a Foreign Service child. I grew up following my father around the world. My family moved from continent to continent, stopping for three or four years in each post: Malaysia, Holland, Nicaragua, India, Peru. After every two posts, the State Department would recall us to Washington for a spell at home.

That life changed utterly on Sept. 13, 1976. During a heavy rainstorm, a Piper Navajo disappeared in the mountainous jungle outside Manila. The small plane carried two Philippine pilots and six diplomats: one German, two Japanese, and three Americans. They were returning from Naga City, where they had visited an internationally-funded irrigation project. My father, Edward Cheney, the economic counselor at the American embassy in the Philippines, was among them.

I was living near San Francisco, where I had a job as a reporter my first year out of college. It was 5 in the morning when the phone rang. My mother was on the line half a world away. "Dad flew to southern Luzon this morning," she said. "But now his plane is missing. He hasn't come home."

She spoke calmly and slowly, but she was always most composed in times of crisis. She had no answers to my frightened questions. "Just get here as soon as you can," she said. "I need you here. "

At first, waves of grief alternated with glimmers of hope. My father's plane was missing — it might have crashed or been hijacked. He might be dead. But as long as it was missing, he might still be alive — it was just like my father to go off on some risky mission and show up fine a few days later.

I caught the next plane to Manila. A massive ground-and-air search was under way, its command center the comfortable modern residence of U.S. Ambassador William Sullivan. Here my mother and I stayed for the next week and a half. Overhead we could hear helicopters and other military aircraft flying low over the city, one after another, as they headed out to scour the mountains, often returning after a few hours because of fierce winds and heavy rain.

More than 3,000 Philippine soldiers and jungle rangers took part in the hunt, supported by U.S. Air Force and Navy pilots from Clark Air Base and Subic Bay. Every day, thousands of soldiers combed the steep terrain outside Manila, hacking their way through the forests. Every night, I dreamed that my father walked back through the door — sometimes unscathed, sometimes wounded, but always home. Every morning we sat down to breakfast with the Sullivans to read the latest headlines. Then the daily noise of the helicopters would begin again, like the soundtrack from "Apocalypse Now."

For two weeks the story was front-page news in the Manila newspapers. The headlines mirrored my own swings between hope and despair.

• Sept. 15, 1976: BAD WEATHER HAMPERS SEARCH.

• Sept. 17: SOS BEEPS BUOY HOPES FOR SURVIVORS.

• Sept. 18: PRESIDENT MARCOS ORDERS 2,000 MORE TROOPS IN SEARCH FOR MISSING DIPLOMATS.

• Sept. 20: SEARCH TEAMS FIND NO TRACE OF PLANE.

• Sept. 21: DISTRESS BEEPS HEARD ANEW.

One afternoon a search plane iced up over the mountains and almost crashed. The rescuers were clearly at risk themselves. Given the growing unlikelihood of finding anyone in the almost-impenetrable jungle, Amb. Sullivan warned us that they might soon give up the search.

Then, on the 11th day, the crew of a U.S. Air Force helicopter spotted the tip of a wing near the top of Mount Palagyo. Twenty minutes later, a paramedic was lowered through the canopy of trees to the crash site. He found the pieces of a twin-engine plane, its wings sheared off. There were no survivors.

A few days later, my father was flown back to Washington for the last time, to be buried in a military cemetery next to the two Americans who had died with him. He was 49 years old.

Back to Washington

With my father gone, our family was suddenly without a home, a group of displaced Americans with few roots in the United States and no State Department directive this time on where to go next. We vacated our Manila house in three days.

After the funeral at the National Cathedral, my mother took an apartment in Washington so my youngest brother could finish his year at St. Albans School, where he had been a boarder. I eventually settled in the city before moving on again 12 years later.

Then last year, out of the blue, the State Department called me home again. The letter bore the familiar eagle seal — stationery I'd seen so many times on my father's desk — but this time it was in my mailbox in Vermont.

It was an invitation to a ceremony at the State Department. The occasion was the inscription of my father's name on a plaque at the C Street entrance. I learned that on Sept. 10, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell would unveil the names of 10 men and women who had "lost their lives in the line of duty while serving overseas." There would be a color guard and a wreath-laying. The names would join those of 186 colleagues who

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had fallen since the United States first engaged in diplomatic activity.

On Sept. 10, the auditorium in the State Department was packed with people from the Foreign Service, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and others who had come to hear Powell speak. It was Foreign Affairs Day.

"Welcome back to the family," Powell said. As he spoke, I imagined that many of the people in the auditorium had put their own lives in danger overseas and that each of them frequently passed the plaques at the entrance to the State Department. I remembered my father showing them to me when I was nine or 10 years old and how fascinated I'd been by the stories hidden in the lists of names.

The first name, on the west side of the cavernous lobby, is that of the consul general to France who set sail for Paris in 1780 and was never heard from again. Other names follow, along with the place, date, and cause of death: Exposure. Yellow fever. Murdered. Lost at sea. Cholera. Earthquake. Volcanic eruption. Drowned while saving a life. Malaria. Shot by sniper. The most common cause of death: tropical disease.

The pattern changes as the roll call continues onto the second plaque, into the modern era. This one was erected on the east side of the lobby in 1972 "in honor of those Americans who have lost their lives abroad under heroic or other inspirational circumstances while serving the country. " No longer is the cause of death listed, though it can be surmised — especially as the names appear not just singly, but more and more in groups. A long string of names is paired with the simple words VIETNAM 1968. Thirteen names stack up with the embassy bombing in BEIRUT 1983. Four more appear next to SAN SALVADOR 1985. There are more single names, more small groups. And then the most recent victims of embassy terrorism: eight names in a row, KENYA 1998.

This second plaque reflects the dangers of life in the modern Foreign Service. After World War II, disease was no longer considered sufficient reason for inclusion on the plaque, and violence directed against Americans became increasingly common as the cause of death. There are 81 names on the west plaque and 115, including my father's, on the east plaque, for a total of 196.

My mother spoke calmly and slowly, but she was always most composed in times of crisis.

A Life of Public Service

My father was typical of many new Foreign Service officers in 1952. He had grown up in a small town: Saxtons River, Vermont. He had been a soldier briefly in World War II and attended Harvard on the GI Bill. He wanted the adventure of the larger world, but he also wanted the security and benefits the government could give him. He shared the sense of purpose, the postwar idealism, of other young men and women in the State Department and the CIA who set out in the early 1950s to help shape America's destiny overseas.

I grew up with little sense of myself as an American but a sharp awareness of my family as a unit. We moved through the world like numbers on a roulette wheel, wherever the State Department spun us. We adapted. My first word was Chinese, learned from my amah in Penang. My parents always enrolled us in local schools, so I spoke Dutch in first grade and Spanish in seventh, when I sang the Nicaraguan national anthem every morning at assembly. While Americans watched the moon landing on TV in 1969, I sat in a packed classroom in Bombay listening to Neil Armstrong's words over a crackling radio.

Washington was the thread that tied these posts together. It was the Foreign Service's way of making sure we didn't forget where we came from. Three years in Washington, living in a brick rental in Northwest D.C., was enough to remind us: Washington was our hometown. It was our cultural touchstone, the place where we children learned the national character, American slang, the sequence of seasons and national holidays.

If Christmas in Bombay was just another hot day in December, my sister, my brothers, and I could at least remember the Santa displays at Woodies, decorated yards on 32nd Street, the rare snowfall that brought traffic to a stall. Spring in Nicaragua brought the wind and the dust, but we knew it also brought opening day for the Orioles.

Washington was an orderly place, where the streets had names and numbers and we could ride our bikes to school, but the foreign world we lived in was not so safe. By the time I was 11 and living in Nicaragua — a country with a long history of political disorder — I had begun to accept those risks as a part of life.

Our house in Managua had no address. Locals gave directions by the number of blocks from accepted land-

marks: "From la Casa del Obrero, 13 blocks toward the mountain, half a block toward the lake…" Coral snakes and tarantulas ventured into our house, so we learned to check the floor before getting out of bed.

A family trip to the beach, on the other side of the low mountains between Managua and the Pacific Ocean, risked ambush by bandits. Volcanoes — some active, others dead — dotted the landscape. Earthquakes occurred with unnerving frequency, though none was as bad as the disastrous quake that would level the city in 1972.

On the playground of the convent school I attended, classmates whose affluent families opposed the 30-year-old Somoza dynasty told tales of reprisals — ranging from harassment to murder — against their fathers and uncles.

I recently found a 1967 letter my father wrote to his mother in Vermont. It described a bloody riot in downtown Managua. On Sunday, Jan. 29, 1967, a noisy crowd had gathered at a rally for Anastasio Somoza's presidential opponent, Fernando Aguero. Speakers railed against the corrupt and repressive regime and demanded fair elections. A scuffle broke out. An Aguerista shot and killed a lieutenant. Soldiers started shooting into the crowd and bayoneting men and women.

"During the unequal battle with the National Guard," my father wrote, "Aguero and his principal chieftains (along with about 30 wild kids armed with machine guns and things, plus about a thousand campesinos) holed up in the Gran Hotel with about 90 American guests as hostages."

It was my father who finally negotiated the release of the American hostages, partly because in his three years in Managua he had built friendships with Aguero, anti-government newspaper editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, and other opposition members. Telephone lines had been cut, so at 7 a.m. the Agueristas gave permission for one emissary from the American embassy to cross the lines. That was Ted Cheney. He would go back and forth four times.

"There was still some sniper fire," he wrote, "and we found a pretty desperate crew when we got inside. Although I knew Aguero and the other leaders pretty well,

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I wasn't at all sure about the boys with the guns."

At 7 that evening the Aguero group surrendered, with a short-lived promise of amnesty from Somoza. "It took three more visits," my father wrote, "to effect the release of the hostages and to get the hotel warriors home under safe conduct, but by 7 Monday night everybody had been taken care of and I could go to bed — although, as you can imagine, still so keyed-up I couldn't sleep for a while."

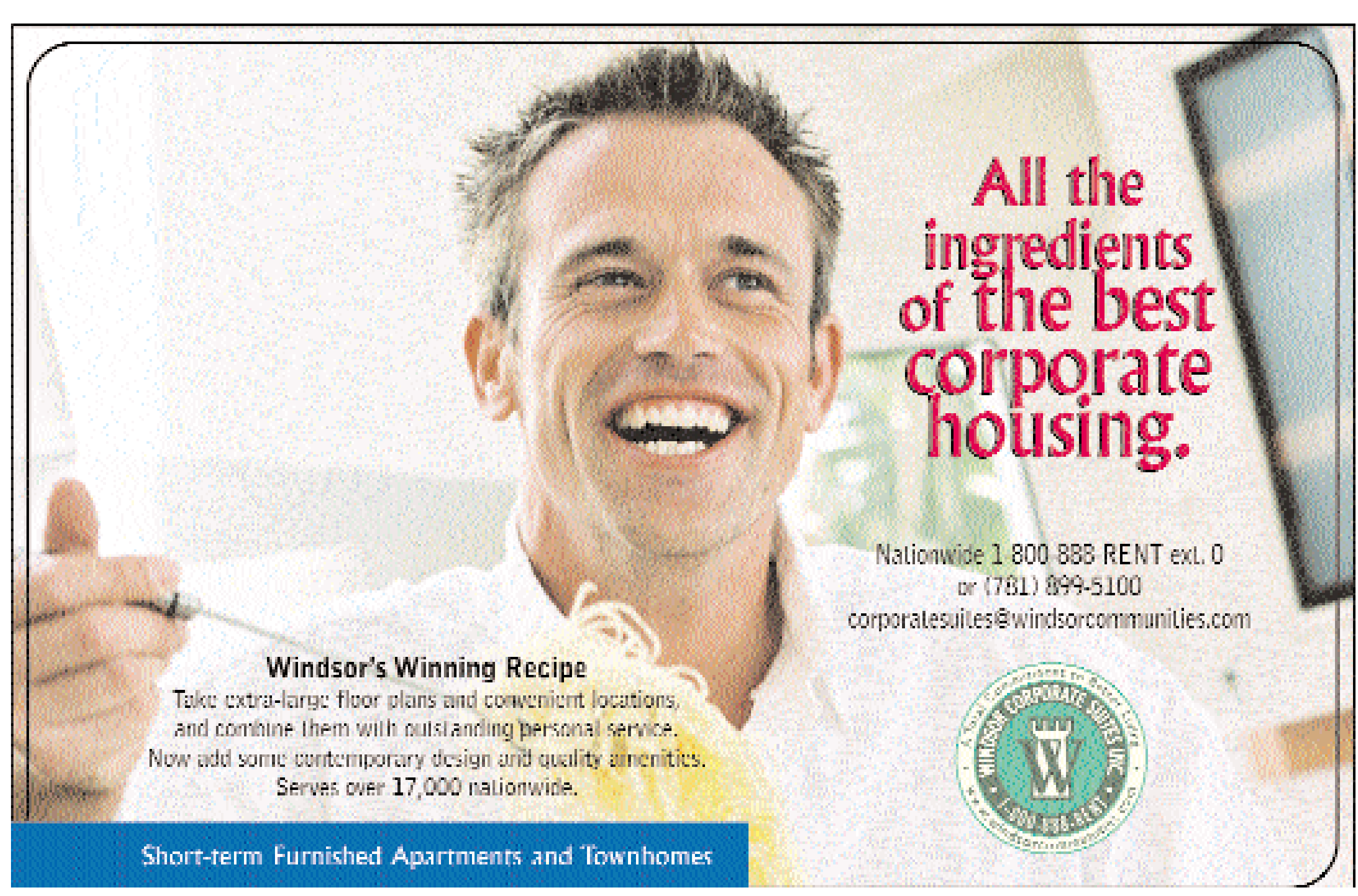
My father concluded his letter in simple words, intended for his mother in rural Vermont. "A massive wave of arrests followed the truce, and many of my friends are in jail ... I am not sure that I am at all fond of my first taste of true Latin violence. The more so because I always thought it would be easy to distinguish the goods from the bads, and I find it isn't so. From my point of view, there is almost an equal mixture of right and wrong on both sides, and I hate to think of people I like on both sides being so bloody-minded about one another."

His children experienced that week somewhat differently. All we knew at first was that Dad wasn't coming home that Sunday night. He appeared on Monday afternoon to shower and shave, then left again. From inside our one-story house a mile away, we could hear the sound of artillery and machine guns and the endless sirens of ambulances rushing the wounded to General Hospital. Later that week, a few of the released American hostages stayed at our house.

My father summed up our reaction, or what he must have hoped it to be: "The children, of course, are much taken up with the drama of the past week ... Not a bad thing to give them some exposure to this at an early age. Sally, too, is getting used to shots, explosions and sirens. It doesn't bother the cats."

Healing the Wounds

For years I felt a lingering resentment toward the State Department. I blamed it for taking my father away from me, for sending him into harm's way. I blamed it more vaguely for its legacy to me, which I came to recognize only as I grew older — the discomfort I feel stay-



ing in one place for too long, the sense of being an outsider in my own country. But on Sept. 10, 2001, I was able to put the blame aside.

Colin Powell was talking about the State Department as his troops — and more than that, as a large family. "I am especially pleased in seeing you all," he said, "in that we are reorienting this a little bit and calling it Foreign Affairs Day to embrace the entire family, everyone who has contributed in some way or another to the greatness of this department."

He went on to remind the bureaucrats that career diplomats were on the front lines: "My operating philosophy is that the embassy is always right and you guys here, especially on the seventh floor, are always wrong. Trust comes from allowing our youngsters, allowing our missions out there to take risks in order to accomplish great purposes."

When Powell turned to the names to be added to the memorial plaque and spoke of the commitment of those 10 men and women who had died overseas in the line of duty, I thought how right it was that my father was being remembered in his workplace, not in some cathedral or hilltop cemetery. I knew that diplomats like him would continue to risk their lives and that my father's death had not gone unappreciated by this, his extended family, even 25 years later. He had been one of those who would pay, as Powell was saying at the podium, "the ultimate sacrifice for his country."

That sacrifice left a wound in my family that may never completely heal. But I took some comfort in seeing his name on my way out of the State Department that morning. There it was, at eye level, in verde marble, where I could touch it: EDWARD R. CHENEY, PHILIPPINES 1976.

I like to think the marble came from his home state of Vermont. ■

One Mission, One Team

I had spent many years in Washington since my father's death in 1976, but I had not been back to the State Department — not until Sept. 10, 2001, when Secretary of State Colin Powell was due to honor my father and nine others who had died in the line of duty while serving overseas. Walking through the C Street doors, I expected to feel out of place among the State Department people who would fill the auditorium that day. I was, after all, only a former dependent — the grown child of a Foreign Service officer whose career was cut short in the mid-1970s. I soon learned how wrong I was.

Once a year, retirees from the Foreign Service and Civil Service return to Main State for a homecoming celebration. This time it was called Foreign Affairs Day, and it took place on Sept. 10, 2001 — on what would turn out to be the last day of normalcy in Washington. The theme was "One Mission, One Team," and the schedule included a keynote address by Secretary Powell, a wreath-laying at the AFSA memorial plaque, and an afternoon of seminars. For me, the main event was the wreath-laying, a ceremony I'd been invited to attend by AFSA President John Naland.

The letter I received from Naland described the plan for Sept. 10: The ceremony would take place in the Dean Acheson Auditorium, with Secretary Powell presiding over the presentation of the colors by the U.S. Armed Forces Color Guard and the laying of a wreath. The event was to honor 10 men and women newly eligible for inscription on the AFSA plaque at the C Street entrance. The recognition, retroactive to 1972, was the result of a change in the criteria for inclusion on the plaque, which have been broadened to include all those who die in the line of duty overseas. My father, Edward R. Cheney, had been on a mission with five emissaries from the U.S., Japan and Germany when his plane went down in the Philippines. USAID's Garnett A. Zimmerly was also on that plane; he, too, was among the 10 to be remembered on Sept. 10.

In his remarks, Secretary Powell used the theme of the State Department as a family, and of Foreign Affairs Day as a homecoming. "We are a team," he said. "We are a family. We are knitted up across the generations." He said he wanted to embrace that entire family — "to show that we care about everyone who has made a contribution to American diplomacy, about everyone who has contributed in some way or another to the greatness of this department." Powell was referring, literally, to the fact that the day included both active and retired employees. More generally, I felt his message embraced real family members as well: the spouse and children of every employee overseas — "on the first line of offense," as Powell said, where they take some of the same risks and represent the United States abroad in their own way. AFSA, through its inclusion of these dependents in its ceremony, made it clear that we continue to be appreciated as part of the extended State Department family.

After Powell and USAID Deputy Administrator Janet Ballantyne unveiled a facsimile of the plaque names and a wreath was placed in front of the easel, there was a moment of silence. The color guard marched out. Secretary Powell walked slowly down the row of family members in the front of the auditorium. I was the last he came to. He paused, took my hand, and said, simply, "Thank you."

— Margaret Cheney