

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

AMBASSADOR GEORGE CRANWELL MONTGOMERY

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This transcript was not edited by Ambassador Montgomery.]

Q: Could you give me a bit about your background, how you grew up and where you came from.

MONTGOMERY: I came from Knoxville, Tennessee. Let me ask, that part, didn't we cover in the first interview?

Q: And that's what I lost, the first tape you see.

MONTGOMERY: Oh, the first tape. I'm sorry. That part I ought to be able to do fairly much like I did it the first time, since the facts are more or less the same.

I grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. Public school through the 8th grade and the Webbs School of Knoxville through secondary school, then went to the University of Virginia, from Virginia was commissioned an ensign in the...

Q: What was your field in Virginia?

MONTGOMERY: I was an English major. I was in the ROTC program and commissioned from Virginia into the Navy where I spent 6 years. I resigned my commission and went to Vanderbilt Law School in 1972 and graduated from there in '75. From Law School came to Washington to work with Senator Howard Baker who had just then become a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Q: I'd like to backtrack a bit. Tell me, you were in Vietnam from '71 to '72, I think, with the Navy. Could you talk a bit because this is a Foreign Affairs interview and I'd like to have what you saw in Vietnam when you were there. What you were doing.

MONTGOMERY: Prior to that I was stationed in a destroyer home ported in Long Beach, California. During my time in that ship we made 2 deployments to the Western Pacific to the Tonkin Gulf. I spent a lot of time off shore in Vietnam.

I went back in 1971 to be an Ambassador to the Vietnamese Navy. Specifically, with respect to the attempt to block the infiltration of arms coming down from the North by sea into some 1200 miles of Vietnamese coastline. I spent a year doing that. We figure that our effectiveness rate in that blockade was about 10%. That is, we stopped about 1 out of every 10 shipments of arms.

Q: Why would it be so difficult? Because I would have thought, granted it's a long coast, but these were coming out of North Vietnam, weren't they? I would have thought one could have drawn a line.

MONTGOMERY: Well the Gulf of Tonkin even during the war was filled with small ships, fishing boats, coastal traffic. Although we had air surveillance assets by the United States Navy. It was still a hard job to pick the ships up and then dedicate an asset, either Vietnamese or United States Navy, to trail the ship to the point where we could identify it as an arms deliverer. And then pick up the point in which it would become logical to engage the rules of engagement under war time conditions. Again, you know, we thought we did a pretty good job but we're never overly sanguine about how much we were really stopping.

Q: How did you find the Vietnamese you were working with?

MONTGOMERY: They varied from very dedicated and well trained, highly professional officers to guys who would take your patrol boats out, two barrels full of fuel on them for their own patrol. And sell the fuel oil to the first fishing fleet they came to and then come back into port and say they completed their mission.

That too was part of our problem. It was keeping assets at sea for the duration that they were suppose to be there. We also had USN patrol crafts, coastguard cutters, and like I say, we had some air surveillance assets. We tried to make it as much as we could a South Vietnamese Navy effort.

Q: Then you started working, had you known Senator Baker before?

MONTGOMERY: Not well, East Tennessee is a pretty small place and the legal community in East Tennessee is fairly small and everybody knows one another. I grew up in the legal community. I knew Senator Baker, I met him.

Q: Your father was a lawyer?

MONTGOMERY: My father was a lawyer, my grandfather was a lawyer, my great-grandfather was a lawyer in East Tennessee.

Q: You started in 1977 with Senator Baker?

MONTGOMERY: '75.

Q: '75.

MONTGOMERY: When I joined the staff in 1975, he had just returned from his first overseas trip as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. It was a trip that was to the Middle East and on the trip he had taken Senator Fulbright's senior staff member for the Middle East subcommittee. A fellow named Sef Telman.

And the first instruction I ever got as a rookie member of Senator Baker's staff, was to get to know Sef Telman and learn everything he knows about the Middle East. Which was my first introduction to the subject and encouragement to get involved in it.

Q: Senator Baker, did he just want to have a Middle East person or did he have a personal sort of a focus on the Middle East?

MONTGOMERY: I think he, like I say it was his first trip to the Middle East, I think he went out with what had become an institutional wisdom on the Middle East, the institutional wisdom in the Congress on the Middle East. The mid-70's was fairly heavily weighted in favor of Israel. And I think the Senator approached it with somewhat of an open mind and came back believing that we were slacking our own interest by putting so much emphasis on the Israeli relationship to the detriment of our relationship with the Arab states in the region.

I think it was intellectually challenging to him, that discovery. So I think that heightened his interest in the region. I think he was truly impressed, as anybody would be, with Sef Telman. And was appreciative of Sef's guidance and help during the trip. And thought this was something he wanted to pay more attention to and it was a good thing to tell a beginning staff member to start thinking about.

Q: Well tell me a bit about Sef Telman. I take it he was an influential person on that staff regarding Middle Eastern things on the Foreign Relations.

MONTGOMERY: I think anybody who had Senator Fulbright as a patron, who worked for Senator Fulbright, was first of all going to be a good person to begin with. I think he brought to what he did the intellectual rigor that Fulbright applied to everything that he did. They were close then, they have remained close. I think it impressed Senator Baker that Senator Fulbright would send Sef willingly on this trip.

Q: Was Sef Telman looking at the Middle East sort of as an entity? Because one of the accusations has often been that the United States for domestic political reasons focuses on

Israel to the detriment of our relations with the Arabs. I was just wondering, at the staff level, how was it going?

MONTGOMERY: I think Sef approached it probably from the interest of the United States. I think he tried, as a member of a then important committee and an important subcommittee, to balance that perspective on the Middle East. He could not have done that if Senator Fulbright did not share those views. At least he could not have done it very long.

I think you'd have to say that Fulbright had laid the foundation for that kind of perspective. Like I say, Fulbright, whether it was Vietnam or what other issues, he was known for his intellectual honesty and rigor with which he approached an issue. Sef reflected that.

Senator Baker came back and reported to the Senate in a report that Sef drafted. That we needed to take a more, quote "even-handed" close quote, approach to the Middle East. And got unsorted hell for a phrase like "even-handed" from the Israeli community, or from the Jewish community.

It was a phrase that rankled in the Jewish community throughout the service, and probably in the Senate, until 1985. Having said that, and also not withstanding the fact, is that first the Minority Leader and the Majority Leader of the Senator was required to play a leading role in the major controversial arm sales, principally to Saudi Arabia, that the Jewish community had opposed.

Q: AWACS.

MONTGOMERY: AWACS, F-15s, so forth. There I think was, came to be with all but the most fervent ideological Israeli supporters, a grudging respect that Howard Baker was going to tell you what he thought. And if he disagreed with you, he could still be your friend. Particularly during the AWACS debate in 1981, that kind of approach won a good deal of Jewish support or at least acquiescence for the sale.

Q: During the time you were with Senator Baker from 1975 until when?

MONTGOMERY: Till he left the Senate in January of 1985.

Q: You started out sort of learning about the Middle East and then what were you doing?

MONTGOMERY: I was generally responsible for foreign policy. Like any beginning legislative assistant, I had a variety of issues for which I was responsible. I guess it became and remained more broadly national security, military issues as well. My principal focus was his activities on the foreign relations committee.

Responsibilities evolved considerably as he became first the Minority Leader and then the Majority Leader. And as he got more deeply involved in his leadership responsibilities, his

activities on the foreign relations committee, or as a member of the foreign relations committee, diminished considerably.

And my job became more on one of advising the Senate leadership, probably on foreign policy. And providing a liaison between Republican leadership and the Executive branch on national security issues. And that was treated a certain extent during the Carter administration, became much more true when Howard Baker was the Majority Leader and President Reagan in the White House.

Q: This is '81 to '83.

MONTGOMERY: '81 to '85.

Q: One of the themes that comes out often during these interviews is that the State Department, particularly the Foreign Service, isn't very good in its relations with Congress. From that perspective, what were your impressions on how the State Department would respond and work with Congress on foreign policy matters.

MONTGOMERY: I would have to say that during the Carter years, with Under Secretaries Vance and Muskie, in the 4 years of the Reagan administration with which I'm most familiar, from that perspective, the State Department did pretty well with the Congress. During the Carter years, we had the F-15 sale, we had the Panama Canal Treaties, and we wound up working very closely with the White House liaison and the Senate liaison, and the senior officers of both institutions. And I think they did a pretty good job. I think in the Reagan administration under Secretary Haig and Secretary Shultz, I think the State Department did a pretty good job in the Reagan administration.

Best example in my own mind was the September '82 Peace Proposal that Secretary Shultz put together. He did what ought to be a textbook, classic job of coming to the Congress and saying, "We have got to get the peace process back on track. These are the ideas I have and what is your reaction to them." And he did such a good job in selling his thoughts and what we in the United States should be doing, in persuading members of Congress to open up and talk about their own thoughts and their own reactions to his proposal, that the proposal that he tabled in September '82, I think, really took the United States government right up to the line of what was possible in the American political system.

And it was really, truly, brilliantly, for lack of a better word, brilliantly done. It was less brilliantly done in its execution and follow-up. But putting it together and working with the Congress to put it together, get the most out of the Congress that he could in putting the presentation on the table; it was awfully well done.

Q: How about just one other thing on this period. The Panama Canal Treaty really stirred up all sorts of things in the body politic of the United States, nationalism and all this. How did you see it? Was there a lot of pressure on Senator Baker on this particular problem?

MONTGOMERY: If he were sitting here answering that question, he would pull up his shirt and show you the scars. There was a great deal of pressure. You could make an argument that that was a significant factor in his not becoming President. I don't think it was, well I don't know, I don't want to make that judgement that it was a significant factor in his not becoming President. It was a significant factor in the hard right wings of the Republican parties general distrust of Howard Baker.

Q: What sort of things were you doing on that. Were you involved in trying to move this?

MONTGOMERY: I was. It was such a major issue that there were a number of us on the staff that were involved. Senator Baker also, during that period, used the Minority Leadership funds available to him to engage 2 consultants. One who was to argue the case for the Treaties and one who was to argue the case against the Treaties.

The two consultants were Bill Rogers, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, and Roger Fontaine who was at that time at the Center for Strategic Area Studies, who argued the case against. Without trying to speak for Roger, I think by the time we got through the debate, he was probably for the Treaties but he maintained his role of presenting the arguments against, and what we needed to do to try to make the Treaties acceptable in the Senate.

I think that process worked well for the Senator. It worked well, especially well, that he replicated it during the aborted debate on Salt II, that ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

But it provided a process, a better mechanism than we in the staff could have provided to the Senator to sense the foreign policy issue, the political issues, what was necessary or what was critical in the Treaty in order to get that 61st vote that was necessary to pass it.

Q: It shows us part of the process of the intellectual exercise of a key Senator on his own of trying to come up, decide what were the issues and all. A part of Baker, it was. This was his was of looking at ...

MONTGOMERY: A hard case.

Q: Were you at all involved, what was the reaction during the long standing hostage crisis with Iran? They had seized our Embassy and kept hostages for more than a year.

MONTGOMERY: We were involved to the extent that the administration, specifically then Deputy Secretary Christopher, would come up once a week to brief the leadership on the situation, the developments that were on-going.

The one thing that we were not involved with was, at least until the very last moment, the hostage rescue attempt. Which had reverberations in my later life in Oman. And some reverberations at the time in that Senator Baker and Senator Biden did a bipartisan

Congressional delegation to the Middle East just before the hostage rescue attempt. Actually went out to the carrier in the Indian Ocean that was involved and discovered later that the Secretary of the Navy had directed the carrier not to disclose anything about the hostage rescue attempt. Miffed a then Minority Leader.

Generally they did a very good job of keeping us apprised on the situation in Iran and the situation with the hostages, the diplomatic efforts that were on-going to attempt to secure their release.

Q: You stayed with Senator Baker until 1985. And then you became Ambassador to Oman from '85 to '89. How did this appointment come about?

MONTGOMERY: As I was, to back up a little bit, from that beginning instruction of the Senator's to get to know Sef Telman and find out everything he knew, I took that to heart and I got to know Sef Telman. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to find out what he knows about the Middle East. It did fire an interest.

His becoming the Minority Leader and then the Majority Leader, afforded me the opportunity to travel extensively on my own at the expense of taxpayers. And I did that mostly in the Middle East, it became my predominant interest. Particularly during the first 4 years of the Reagan administration. I spent a lot of time first in the Arab-Israeli conflict traveling to Egypt, Israel, Jordan. Then as Beirut became more of an issue for the United States--to Beirut. And then as the Iran-Iraq war became more of an issue for us--to Iraq, to Baghdad and also to the Gulf states. As a matter of fact, Graeme Bannerman and I, were the first relatively senior officials, to visit Baghdad in the period after, following our break in relations in 1967.

But in any event, that became an interest. There were some that would have described it as an aberrational obsession but it was something in which I wanted to stay involved. And as I thought about what I wanted to do when Howard Baker left the Senate, I thought I wanted to stay involved in the Middle East. And the best way to do that, the most influential way to do that, would be to become an Ambassador there.

My first interest, frankly, was Jordan. In our discussions with the White House that seemed to be a real possibility. As it turned out, the State Department had gotten too far along the road in the Fall of 1984 to insert a political appointment in that process. The White House said, "We're interested in appointing you somewhere in the region. These are the possibilities, and what would you be most interested in." Among those possibilities was Oman and given the relationship that we had with Oman, I thought that would be the most interesting and challenging possibility.

Q: How did you find, you'd already had obviously contact with the Near Eastern Bureau. But here you came and there aren't as many political appointees in the Near Eastern Bureau as there are in the others. How were you received and briefed and all that?

MONTGOMERY: I don't want to overstate my welcome. I think I was perhaps better received by the bureau because I had been involved. Because they knew that I was generally, and had been generally, supportive of the foreign service during my tenure in the Senate. And because I was not purely a political appointment. I was a non-career appointment but I had been involved in the region, I knew something about it.

I think the foreign service quite rightly, tries to retain as high a percentage of Ambassadorships as they can. I think they were more cooperative with me than they might otherwise have been. Just because of my background. Because they knew me and I was not a preacher as far as they were concerned.

Q: Before you went out there. In the first place, what did you gather were American interests in the area. And what were you going to accomplish, your set of goals, when you went out there.

MONTGOMERY: My principal goal was to implement fully the security agreement with Oman that Reggie Bartholomew had negotiated in 1980. That included not only access to Omani military facilities but the building of considerable military construction on these facilities. Both to provide storage for war reserve material and to improve those facilities so they could accommodate US forces should the situation require the presence of US forces.

We spent about, in the 4 years between the negotiation of the agreement and when I went out there, we'd spent about \$270 million in military construction. The agreement, to the extent that we were actually implementing a major and significant part of it, and that was the pre-positioning of military assets, had not been implemented. The Omanis resisted the full implementation of the agreement for a variety of reasons. So getting that agreement on track and working and functioning to the satisfaction of both countries was my major objective.

Q: This pre-positioning and having supplies and all, at that time, we're talking about '85, our principal concern was Iran at that point and the Gulf area. Was that what we were thinking about? Or was Iraq on an equal level?

MONTGOMERY: You would have to say that we were well into our policy that we were not enthusiastic about the Iraqi government. But that we were far less enthusiastic about the Iranian government. Well we did not necessarily want Iraq to win the war. We certainly did not want Iran to win the war. And therefore we tilted in favor of Iraq. Which gets you into a whole different set of issues and events that are perhaps beyond the scope of this discussion.

But one interesting aspect of it was that when I went to Muscat in 1985, in the Fall of 1985, the Omanis had decided that the Iran-Iraq war was not going to end until there was a more, to use a Sef Telman and Howard Baker's phrase, an even-handed approach to the 2 combatants. They therefore needed to normalize and start improving their relationship with

the Iranian government. A decision that they put forward and supported in the 1985 Fall of the GCC Summit which happened to occur in Muscat.

Q: GCC?

MONTGOMERY: GCC is the Gulf Cooperation Council, organization of the 6 Gulf states. It was formed in about 1981 principally as an economic mechanism that became a security mechanism. So while we were tilting in favor of Iraq, at least visibly, and against Iran, the Omanis were improving their relationship with Iran.

In fact, that Fall, offered to serve as a channel of communication between the United States and Iran. That offer we initially accepted but then perhaps because other things were going on with respect to US dealings with Iran in the Fall of '85, that only a few people knew about. We went back to the Omanis and said, "While we appreciate the offer and think it was a good idea, it would perhaps be best to put that offer on the shelf for the time being."

Q: This has a little to do with the Iran contra affair and the secret contacts between the White House and Iran because of American hostages in Lebanon and all that.

MONTGOMERY: It was during that period. I don't think the decision to put the Omani offer on hold was directly related to it, it was in that context. While I am confident that I did not know all the details, I know a few more details I cannot get into in this environment.

Q: Were we trying at all to dissuade, either when you were there early on or before, dissuade the Omanis from opening up to Iran?

MONTGOMERY: Not at all. We thought generally it was a good idea. We accepted the rationale that there needed to be some credible government in the region that could talk and deal with Iran on a more or less normal basis. It was interesting to me that the Iranians, initially when Husar Fharoukin was the Foreign Minister of Oman, began the exploration of normalizing his relationship with Tehran. The government in Tehran put up objections on the basis of Omani-US relationship but as the Omanis persisted, those objections faded.

To the point that there was such strong perception in Oman, amongst the Omanis, to the extent that we knew what was going on in Tehran, somewhat of a perception that the Iranians actually sort of valued having a relationship with someone who had a strong relationship with the United States. Notwithstanding the fact that it was a strong military/security relationship. And that may appear at some other point in the interview.

The strongest evidence I have to support that contention is that in the Summer/Fall of 1987, I had to go to Sevala to meet Sultan Qaboos. And there is a daily shuttle flight from Muscat to Sevala, for government ministers and others who have dealings with the Sultan during that period that he is in residence in Sevala.

Q: Sultan Qaboos was the Sultan.

MONTGOMERY: Yes, of Oman. And as it happened, on that day he also had a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Ayati. We were placed in the VIP lounge part of the airplane down to Sevala together. And the Foreign Minister greeted me quite cordially and we exchanged pleasantries. And then the Omanis, much to their amusement in the 2 hour flight from Muscat to the South, would ask me a question and get an answer and then turn to the Foreign Minister and say, "Mr. Foreign Minister, what do you think about that?"

They were tactful enough not to put us in a position of direct face-to-face conversation. So for 2 hours we engaged in this 3-part conversation. And Ayati seemed to be amused by it. And again was cordial when we parted. Had there been a true resentment of the Omani relationship with us, I don't think he would have responded that way.

Q: How was Oman run and how did you see it at that time?

MONTGOMERY: Oman is a monarchy. It is a country that until 1970 was ruled by Sultan Qaboos's father, Sultan Saheed. Sultan Saheed had been vigorously resistant to the 20th century. To the effect that in 1970 there were 6 miles of paved road, 1 school, 1 hospital and virtually no diplomatic relations with the outside world. Partially because of that resistance to development, economic and infrastructure development of Oman, in 1970 there was a Yemeni supported and inspired insurrection in the South of Oman that had become dangerous to the existence of the state, threatening to the existence of the state.

The primary motivation for the coup that brought in the son and the royal father was the fear that if the policies of the old man continued, and the situation in the South continued to deteriorate, and the war had begun to move towards Muscat in the North, the state could fall. So when the Sultan came in in 1970, his first responsibility was to end that war. Which he successfully did with significant help from King Hussein of Jordan, the Shah of Iran, as well as the British. Because it remains a factor in their relationship with their neighbors that with very little help from their neighboring Gulf states, he did successfully win that war in 1975.

He began the process of developing the country and by the time I arrived in 1985, they had successfully entered the 21st century. There was an abundance of schools and hospitals, major infrastructure projects, roads all over the country, two major international airports, diplomatic relations with the rest of the world, membership in all the relevant international organizations and an active foreign policy.

I think the hallmark of Sultan Qaboos in his first 15 or 20 years was that not only was he developing a country, bringing about a petroleum financed remarkable economic transformation of a country, he was doing it without most of the dislocation and stress on the fabric of a society that occurs in a rapid economic transformation. And at the same time he was also proving to be very Omani in his independence, an independent approach to his foreign policy in relations with his neighbors and in his relations with the outside world.

The very best example of that, perhaps the 2 best examples of that were first his support of President Sadat and his decision to go to Jerusalem and subsequently to

Q: '77 to '78?

MONTGOMERY: '78 roughly, subsequently to that, to negotiate the Camp David agreement which Sultan Qaboos also supported. He became the only Arab leader with the exception of Sudan, I think, to maintain his close and supportive relationships with President Sadat. In fact the only one with the exception of Sudan, not to break diplomatic relations, threw Egypt in isolation for 10 years or so.

And secondly to negotiate with us a security agreement which became the first written security agreement between the United States and an Arab state. A decision that was vigorously condemned by his brother Arab states. Most vigorously by the Kuwaitis and the Saudis.

Q: Sort of ironic.

MONTGOMERY: Became very ironic. The Omanis were much amused when in 1988 the Kuwaitis asked us to escort their tankers through the Gulf through the Straits of Hormuz. We're not unmindful of the fact that when Kuwait was invaded by Iraq, who also vigorously opposed the security agreement, that the initial response by the United States to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was made possible because we had a billion and a half dollars of war material in Oman that we could move rapidly into Saudi Arabia.

Q: What was this agreement? What did we have in Oman?

MONTGOMERY: What we had was a 2-part agreement essentially. That in a situation developed in the Middle East, and remember that it was negotiated in 1980 in light of or as a result of the fall of the Shah, one of Henry Kissinger's pillars in the Middle East, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Q: We're talking about '79 really.

MONTGOMERY: The agreement was actually negotiated in 1980. And what we got out of that was things. One was--If the situation required it and if the leader of both countries, the President of the United States and the Sultan of Oman, agreed that the situation required it, then United States forces could make use of Omani military facilities and the strategic location of Oman.

The other main thing we got out of that is the pre-positioning of material at Omani facilities for use in such a contingency that required United States forces.

As an adjunct to all that, there was also a great deal of cooperative military training between the United States and Oman; the billeting of the United States navy, which was supporting

an Indian Ocean task force, to use Omani facilities for the logistic support of that task force; to use the Omani military as training opportunities for navy pilots; and for the ships in the task force; and also to use Masirah, as very frequently happened, as a safe haven when it was unsafe to land planes on a carrier for a variety of reasons.

Q: Do we have much of a military presence there to protect and maintain it?

MONTGOMERY: The only extra military presence we have in Oman, because of that agreement, is the small group of air force personnel, a Lieutenant Colonel, a Major and about 12 or 13 enlisted people who are the air force quality control, or the contractors who maintain and reposition the equipment.

Q: A contract operation mainly. The whole idea of keeping the military presence down to almost nil. How did you deal with the Omanis? Did you work through the Foreign Ministry, the Sultan? Every country has its own way of getting things done.

MONTGOMERY: I guess it might be expected my principal contact and principal interlocutor was the Foreign Minister of the State for Foreign Affairs. Developed as well a close relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister of Financial Affairs who had been the Foreign Minister, and in fact had been the Foreign Minister when the 1980 Access Agreement was negotiated.

Because of all the military activities, exercises, the implementation of the pre-positioning of the Access Agreement and so forth, I developed a very strong relationship with the military leadership, both uniformed and political. The uniformed military leadership when I arrived was principally British. While I was there it evolved to become increasingly Omani. To the extent that by the time I left, I think the only British commander left was the Commander of the Navy. And the senior military representative from her Majesty's government, was the former Commander of the Air Force. Only 2 senior officials left but only one of them was in a command position. And within a year the entire military structure was Omani commanded after that.

But you worked, I worked closely with all those people. I had the good fortune to go at the time when I think there was in Oman a desire to improve, strengthen, broaden the relationship. Amongst the Omanis, an unstated, perhaps a desire, albeit it unstated, to balance the relationship with Great Britain. And then a corresponding receptive attitude to strengthening the relationship in the Reagan administration and certainly in the State Department, and in the persons Richard Murphy and Michael Armacost.

Q: Did you go to the Sultan often or did you sort of save this?

MONTGOMERY: I tried to go to the Sultan enough to maintain a sort of continual dialogue and when I had to. But not to wear out my welcome and particularly with the frequency that did not give the Foreign Ministry the impression that I considered the Sultan

the only decision maker in the country. I did not go to him every time I needed an answer for something.

Q: Some governments in that part of the world, you almost have to deal with the ruler or whoever is head of state. But here there was a structure that you could deal with.

MONTGOMERY: A structure that you could deal with, you had good people in terms of the Deputy Prime Minister who was the de facto Prime Minister of the country, and the Foreign Minister and the military leadership. We had a Sultan who was generous with his time and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk. I thought there was a need to not overuse that and also to not create the situation that every time I needed a decision or something I expected to go back to him.

Q: Could you explain what the boundary situation was with Oman and the Yemen. What constituted the Yemen in those days?

MONTGOMERY: I arrived in Oman in 1985. In the context of Oman human relations, that was then 10 years after the end of the Dufar rebellion, which was a South Yemeni and thus a partly supported Soviet insurgency in the southern mountains, the Dufar of Oman. The Dufar region of Oman, Hadhramaut of Yemen, is an area where tribes overlap, state boundaries move back and forth. There was a number of areas as I remember, that were ill or not defined in terms of natural boundaries. Where Oman thought its territory ran to a certain point. And South Yemen, the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen, thought its boundaries ran to another.

So there was still contested areas. As a matter of fact, there were still periodic discovery of weapons, caches in the South, supposedly coming from Yemen. And during one instance while I was there, in late '87, October '87 I believe, there was a significant cross border incursion by South Yemen military that was countered by significant force by the Omanis. It was resolved after a number of days of ground fighting patrols entering Oyadis and encountering opposition patrols and so forth. It was resolved finally by the Omani air force. Essentially locating a major portion of the Yemeni incursion force in an open area and pretty well bombing it to bits.

There was a good deal of confusion at the time. I'm not sure if it's ever been satisfactorily resolved as to whether or not it was a conscious decision on the part of Aden to provoke the encounter. Or whether a local commander perhaps with family on the Omani side of the border or whatever, had personally inspired the incursion. In any event sort of frightened both governments, I think, to the point that mutually decided we've got to solve this thing, and resolve it before something worse happens.

And I think it was then or it may have been even before because I can't remember the sequence of events, but at some point Sultan Qaboos decided that and helped with the mediation of Sheik Zayid's United Arab Emirates. He decided that he needed to end this

contest, that he had other problems to deal with. Typical of Qaboos to put problems to rest so that he could deal with other things. And he started a process of normalization.

Until that point there had only been a Charge level of diplomatic exchange between the two countries. They agreed to exchange Ambassadors, I don't know remember when that occurred, but it occurred while I was there. They started the process of negotiating the boundary. Zai An Farad, the Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs of Oman, was the designated negotiator in the boundary dispute.

And again where the major border incursions fit in the sequence of those events, I don't remember at all. But it was a part of the process. And then it led finally, after I left, it led to a final resolution of the border, an agreed border between the two countries.

Q: Did this have any play as far as what you were doing, the fact that the Omanis knew they had a problem on the border which had not been solved when you were there. You think this made relations a little easier for you or not.

MONTGOMERY: Again I'm not remembering the sequence but that's a good question. I may have mentioned at some point that we had an understanding with the Omanis that on request, assuming there was not a carrier in the area, and on request that we would provide a squadron of F-16s should they feel threatened. At least part of that was as a counter to the Yemeni threat. At some point in that process, again I'm assuming that it came after the major border confrontation, where there was a significant loss of life. In that picture, but at some point they invited General Krist to make an extended visit to Oman.

Q: He was who?

MONTGOMERY: General George Christ was then the Commander of Central Command. And he had been to Oman before but never had been extensively hosted. For this visit, which I think was after that incursion, again I'm not sure, for this visit they not only had him stay for a considerable bit of time but they fussed over him. He had major interviews. I think he met with the Sultan which he had never done before. They took him down to the South and paraded him around the ramparts of the border. It was in a way a situation somewhat reminiscent of Quemoy in the PRC where both sides were standing there looking at each other through binoculars. Or maybe North Korea and South Korea.

Q: The demilitarized zone.

MONTGOMERY: They made sure that the Yemenis saw the Commander of Central Command walking about inspecting the defenses of the South.

Q: Central Command was a command set-up so that in case of emergency within that area, particularly the Persian Gulf. Which resulted eventually in the Desert Storm operation against Iraq. But this was the command that was set-up that he would take over this particular...

MONTGOMERY: It was Central Command that owned the pre-positioned assets that were stored in Oman.

Q: Did we have any feel about what the designs; were we reading, the time you were there, that this was part of the tentacles of the Soviet Union reaching out to grab the South Yemenis. How were you reading that at that time?

MONTGOMERY: I think we were reading that as a, certainly when I arrived in '85, it was the Soviet Union's foothold on the Arabian peninsula. In the period of '87, maybe '88, it was clear that as far as Yemen was concerned, their relationship with the Soviet Union was a declining asset. And that almost certainly was a major element in their consideration that we need to resolve this Pitri situation with Oman because we no longer are going to have the support of our patron in the Soviet Union.

Q: The United States didn't have relations with Aden in those days.

MONTGOMERY: Did not have relations with Aden at all at the time. Like I said, it was a Charge, lower representation in Muscat. We would nod to each other but wouldn't speak.

I was trying to remember. There was also a period in there significantly earlier, where there was a major internal confrontation in Aden. A shoot-out in the politburo. I would say that was late '86, maybe early '87. One of the things that we were doing, Oman was a good place from which to watch Aden, of course. I was trying to figure out what role the Soviets played in that internal Pitri confrontation. We basically decided that the Soviets too were caught by surprise by the situation and had not played a major role in it. Other than to try to placate the different parties and bring the conflict to a close.

One good thing that we did, that's worth observing I think, one good thing that the United States government did was ensure that in Muscat we almost always had somebody who was knowledgeable about Yemen. And who could take advantage of that observation point and the exchange of information with the Omanis to our mutual advantage.

Q: Were there, often a good source are basically refugees, Yemeni refugees coming in and all who were there, that one could talk to?

MONTGOMERY: There were a number of those, a number of prominent Omanis had strong links to Yemen and particularly to South Yemen. A number of members of prominent families of South Yemen who weren't willing to live under the regime and become welcome ex-patriots in Oman that had kept their contacts. And according to some rumors, moved back and forth quite freely. They were good sources of information. Like I said, it was also good that we had somebody in the Embassy that was knowledgeable enough about Yemen that they could evaluate what we were hearing and seeing.

Q: Were we reporting through State channels? I'm assuming that most of this was done through the CIA but how about through State channels. Were we reporting on the Yemen? Were you sort of the designated hitter as far as Yemen was concerned?

MONTGOMERY: I guess I'm reluctant to make a distinction, one from our own internal process. I think we in Muscat and we in Sanaa were probably the 2 designated hitters. I suspect they got a lot more, certainly they got a lot more than we did on in terms of what was going on in the South. But we had, I think we got a good bit. And I think it was a good reference point check for what we were hearing in Sanaa which would be covered by, a lot of that being filtered through North Yemeni perspectives rather than Omani perspectives.

Q: This is the thing, when you get into these things it depends, your information, not only where you are, where you're sitting, but whom you're talking to and where they come from.

MONTGOMERY: I think it was valuable.

Q: Coming to back to this major thing and this is the oil tanker business escort. We're talking about the Iran-Iraq war spill-over. Could you explain the context at the time you were there, what was happening and our involvement.

MONTGOMERY: In 1985 it was then 5 years after the negotiation of the US-Oman access agreement. It was shortly after the first 5 year review of that agreement. In which it was modified not significantly but mostly to codify into the protocols of the agreement, the practice that had developed over the 5 years of implementation. And it was about that time that we started fully to implement the pre-positioning aspects of the agreement. And that took about a year or two.

It really took about 2 years fully to stock all the warehouses and fill them with trucks, weapons and all the material. The period '86 to '87 was generally the bringing to full fruition all the components of the US-Oman access agreement. That included, in addition to the pre-positioning, it included the fairly regular use of Omani airfields at Thamarit and Masirah, the island. Occasionally at sea, which was outside of Muscat. The principle use of a regular basis, was maritime surveillance, the P-3 patrols.

Q: P-3s is a type of airplane.

MONTGOMERY: P-3 is a naval surveillance aircraft, 4-engine Lockheed, turbo-prop--Orion--long time service. Primarily an anti-submarine asset but can be used for surface surveillance. And we would use it, the P-3 squadron itself was based in Diego Garcia, it was staged at Masirah and then fly the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Oman patrols out of Masirah for a period. That aircraft would go back to Diego Garcia and be replaced by another. So there's almost a continual use in that respect of the Omani facility at Masirah.

Q: What were they looking for?

MONTGOMERY: That was mostly anti-Soviet in its inception, looking for Soviet assets, perhaps Soviet submarines in the Indian Ocean. Remember this is post-Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A long time suspicion of Soviet, if not Russian designs on a warm water port in the South. But also the Russian Soviet ability to choke off a squad over to the West, like putting submarines in the Indian Ocean, it never got to that point.

In the mid to late 80's, a transition into using surveillance assets against Iranian activity as opposed to Soviet activity. The Soviet threat declined. I guess it's worth noting that at least when the Oman access agreement was negotiated in 1980, one of the considerations that went into the need for it was the major Soviet use of the Yemeni island, Socotra. It never had a major base but it had facilities and could use the island as a logistics point.

Other major use that we used of Masirah under the access agreement as a regular course, not because of any other special activity, was to logistically resupply the Indian Ocean battle group. Which we had by and large kept in the Indian Ocean during the period of the Iran-Iraq war and of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It was not always there but it was usually there.

And there was a good deal of debate between commanders of Central Command and the commanders of the navy's specific fleet as to the navy's commitment to keep a battle group there. And to have more operational control of that battle group. That's a whole different debate, that's a military debate. Not a diplomatic debate but we did get involved in it. Like I said, that's more tangential to this story.

But in terms of access agreement, in the Omanis, there was more often than not a battle group in the Indian Ocean. When there was one there it was logistically resupplied through Masirah.

Frequently there would be Omani navy military exercises. We would fly and they would strike at Thamarit, Oman would come up and defend, we got Omani pilots and navy pilots working together in different kinds of exercises. We would use the Omani bombing range, active live ordinance bombing range, at Rubcut I think, doesn't sound quite right but it's something like that, down near Thamarit in the desert. We had a good exchange.

The other value to us in the course of our normal relations with Oman, in keeping the group in the Indian Ocean, was whenever an aircraft had a problem that made landing on the carrier somewhat risky, they would send it to Masirah for recovery. Where that had a long runway and they could foam the runaway, and they had nets and so forth. By the time I left Muscat, they had recovered at Masirah something like 60 aircraft. Anywhere from 15 to 30 million dollars a copy. You could pay for a lot of access agreements.

Q: I'm always a little hazy on dates, but there was a crisis in the Persian Gulf because the Iranians and the Iraqis started to go after each others tankers and all of this. That must have impacted on you didn't it.

MONTGOMERY: Yes. I know I'm sort of rambling to that point but I was trying to describe, because I think it is useful to the knowledge of the relationship, to know what in the normal course of events, without anything extraordinary going on, what use and what benefits we acquired from the access agreement with Oman.

Q: But as I talk to you, to me it's a whole revelation the fact that we really had this very advantageous, to both sides, agreement. As you were talking about just using the airfields and all this without much publicity or intrusion into, you might say the culture and the problems that we have in other areas where we had agreements. I mean we didn't a lot of personnel and all this. Just as a very useful and in a way non-intrusive type of arrangement.

MONTGOMERY: I think it's a marvel from any number of aspects and you've described several of the most important. The other was, as you say, with virtually no publicity. Which is not always been to our benefit because without the publicity it's hard to get attention and gratitude in some respects of the folks on the Hill.

On the recovery point at Masirah, let me cite one instance because it's probably the most illustrative of all of them. There was a time, again I don't remember the time frame, I think it was after the Gulf war had heated up quite a bit, we were significantly involved, but we did have a carrier in the Gulf.

The carrier had launched a flight of aircraft, had gotten something like 21, 22 aircraft up in the air. And this was on the day after the Admiral, carrier Admiral, his name was Denny Brooks, a great guy, had made some remark that had been reported on in Oman. I think he made it actually in Oman. To the effect that he was proud that during his tenure as a battle group commander, he had not once had to send an aircraft to Masirah for recovery. That he had been able to recover all of his aircraft during his tenure.

Then the next day he launched something like 20 or 21 aircraft. And right after that launch, one of the cranes on the aircraft carrier deck broke an axle right in the middle of the deck. Their option was to get a tractor and push it over to the side or try to repair it on the deck. A valuable piece of equipment, no one wanted to push it to the side unless you absolutely had to. Of course they had about 20 aircraft up there that had to land in about an hour or so. And there was nothing they could do after they'd refueled them a couple of times but send 20 aircraft, half a billion dollars of aircraft maybe, to Masirah. At which point the commander on the Omani air force, who was then British Air Marshall Bennett, sent a message to the carrier that said: Quote -- To Admiral Denny Brooks - said quote God, Brooks, no hubris -- close quote.

Somewhere, I guess it was mid '87, the Iranians began to attack shipping in the Gulf, it seemed to focus most heavily on Kuwaiti shipping. Of course, they had the longest transit time through the Gulf. And the Kuwaitis tired of that and asked that the ships be reflagged under the American flag so that they would be then protected by the United States.

I can't remember with great detail if we every did process, but it wasn't an automatic answer because we did consult with our Gulf allies on whether or not we should do that. I think we by and large decided that we wanted to be responsive and that we would do that. But in any event we discussed it. I remember discussing it with the Omani Foreign Minister who expressed some reservations about it.

Also at some point Admiral William Crowe who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, came out and we went out into the desert. Talked about it with Sultan Qaboos who was then on his annual progress to the South. Sultan did not express in that meeting strong reservations as I remember, but did voice some concerns about the reflagging proposal.

It really came down to an Omani position that: "We don't think it's a good idea. We don't think it is economically justified on the part of the Kuwaitis. They're not losing enough to make it worthwhile doing this. Because in doing this you risk a great escalation of war, you risk a direct confrontation between Iran and the United States that will pull us all into a war against Iran. We in Oman have been normalizing and improving our relationship with Iran. We think we can live with those people. We don't want to get into a confrontational situation with them."

You know, more arguments along that theme. But it always concluded with, "But if you are determined to do it, if having taken all those things into consideration you still think that you should do it, then of course we will support you." And they did.

Obviously they were not only an Indian Ocean battle group in the area to support "Operation Earnest Will" which is what the escort of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers was called. There was a significant enhancement of our forces in the region. There was a unification of the command of the ships in the Gulf under the Middle East COMIDEast Force which had been there since the '40s I think.

Q: When I was there in the late '50s it was well established.

MONTGOMERY: And the Indian Ocean battle groups as a whole operation was under the operation control of a single commander. Who for most of the period was Admiral Tony Less who was also a hell of a guy. There was continuous significant assets in the area beyond just about ----- Middle East COMID East Force, all those assets had to be supplied through Masirah.

It meant that we were running daily initially C5 flights, a very large cargo transport. We discovered that the C5s were very hard on the runways at Masirah because of the softness of the acreage or something. Anyway unless absolutely necessary, scaled us back to several C141 flights which were the next largest transports. But there were daily flights. Obviously a lot of Masirah recoveries--aircraft flying off carriers and so forth.

A good deal of cooperation, in that the Omani had a naval base right at the head of the Straits of Hormuz at the northern point of Oman from which they can observe virtually the

entire Straits. Visually look across and see the Iranian island of Aba Musa, a little of 19, 20 miles away. They ran naval patrols out of that base. We of course were at that time, operating ships up through the Straits and into the Gulf.

There was significant discussion between ourselves and the Omanis as to the nature under international law of the passage up through the Straits. The Omanis wanted to characterize it as innocent passage, I believe. Which has the connotations of the passage of a warship of a combatant in a conflict. I believe we wanted to characterize it as transit passage. Which is somewhat more neutral but also allowed us to take somewhat more defensive measures than we could under innocent passage. Such as have helicopters in the air and trained gun mounts and so forth.

The Omanis considered the flying of the helicopters particularly provocative and did not like that. We worked out an arrangement where we would do as little of it as we could. And that was primarily the arrangement of Admiral Hal Berntsen with the Omani military.

Q: Did you find that being a former naval officer, although you were a junior naval officer, but at least you understood the language. I mean you were part of the "navy club" in a way. Did you find in this particular thing, that this must have been helpful for you, wasn't it, on both sides?

MONTGOMERY: I think it was. It was enormously pleasurable. Sort of an ego trip. Well, I'll correct your record a little bit, to say by that time I was Captain in the United States Naval Reserve and had stayed active in that respect. I think the navy appreciated it too in a certain respect, it gave us a good common ground over which to talk. Particularly when I had to say either we've got to do something about the helicopters, or the other problem that we frequently ran to, was the Omanis during this period were flying daily scheduled civilian aircraft. Commercial aviation flights up to the Musandam and up to Khasab where there's an airport.

Q: This is in Iran?

MONTGOMERY: Oman. Remember that there is a point of Oman that is separate from continental Oman. That literally sticks right up into the Straits of Hormuz. It is geographically isolated but when the UAE was created, those people who were interesting people, mostly the Shahab and they're different. I mean like so much else of Oman, they too are different, but the Shahab wanted to be Omani. And of course Oman real estate is strategically located. Generally that portion of it that controls the Straits of Hormuz is itself, God knows how much per foot, if they wanted to sell it.

But they were running commercial aircraft, aviation, up there everyday. The ships, the escort ships, because you had several Iranian airfields in the vicinity, most significantly Bander Bass but also down the Straits into the northern gulf of Oman, were flying aircraft. Ships were required to identify aircraft, friend or foe. And there were occasions when they

would challenge, somewhat aggressively, Omani aircraft who were just doing their little milk run to Khasab. That prickled the Omanis quite a bit.

And we worked hard on communications procedures and had to insist that the navy work hard on getting that problem straightened out. There's generally a problem with newly arrived skippers who hadn't seen what happened to Stark and seen what happened when you're not at the keen edge of anticipation. They weren't going to be accused of taking anything for granted. You sort of understand it but after they got sort of worked in to the region, they got a sense of where people were and so forth, they got better.

Q: Just for the record, the Stark was an American destroyer that was hit by an Iraqi aircraft with an excel-set missile and very badly damaged. Then you had the case of, I mean exactly what you're talking about, came up a little later or what is during your time, was the Long Beach?

MONTGOMERY: I was going to get there. It was not Long Beach, in fact I know Long Beach pretty well and I don't think it ever got to the Gulf while I was there. But in any event, you're right. Instances like that where you tell the navy--Look, we've got to work it out, it's a communications problem, we can work it out. But being able to talk to communications, being able to talk to them and say--I know your priorities and so forth but we've got to keep these folks happy. And, I think it helped that I had the navy background.

I took a gratuitous advantage of hospitality in the navy to go out and spend days on the carriers and days on the destroyers, which I most enjoyed. Also it helped when we got them into port. By the time that I left, we had a ship visit a week in Muscat. And that's worth talking about a little bit at some point, maybe now.

Q: Why not.

MONTGOMERY: One of the things we would do of course is to, at first we would send a Naval Attaché who was generally a Marine Major, out to the ship before it came in, and sort of do a briefing for the ward room, the commanding officer. To emphasize on them that they're coming into an Islamic country. You've got troops who've been at sea for quite some time. You need to press on them that this is a privilege that is being guardedly extended and could easily be revoked, and that behavior has got to be superb.

After a while we got to where we would do those arrival briefings when they got into port and discovered that the commanding officer and the senior enlisted leadership on the ships were doing a very good job of impressing on the troops the need to enjoy themselves but to be careful.

The Omanis in turn made available to the troops hotels, would turnover the recreational facilities of a hotel to the ship with all the sports: tennis, swimming, softball, the beaches. They would have hamburger and hot dog cookouts. Of course the hotels could serve alcohol so there would be beer and when the troops were in town in the evening, they could

go to a hotel and get a drink and so forth. It was a tribute to the Navy that we had not one incident when I was there.

Q: That's remarkable.

MONTGOMERY: Like I say, by the time I left in early '89, we were running a ship a week, at least, in Muscat. The Omanis really extended themselves in making facilities available, taking them out of the country up to the mountains. American families, of course, would take them in particularly when they were there over a holiday. We would always have a sign-up sheet for folks to have 5 or 6 sailors for dinner. The ships would let us use the commissary, the dentist, some of the things we didn't have too much available.

One particular incident about that that was instructive to me was that at some point in the Fall of '88, one of the destroyers, tenders, the ships that we sent over to take care of and repair and maintain the escort ships, came in to Muscat. It was a little bit different from the combatants in that 10% of its crew was female, were women.

I debated whether or not to tell the Omanis that this ship was a little bit different than the other Navy ships that we had had in. I finally decided, no, it is a United States naval ship, everybody aboard are United States Navy personnel, I will not make that distinction. And we sort of held our breath till the ship was there 4 or 5 days, over a weekend. Like every other occasion, the sailors sort of disappeared into the woodwork of the town. There were no incidences. Nobody was aware of it. I mean it was a ship.

They went without incident but there was an incident where an Omani, who had gotten somewhat inebriated, sort of cornered one of the female sailors in a hotel lobby. He was being abrasive or aggressive, or whatever. One of our boys came up and tried to sort of pacify the situation. The Omani took a swing at the sailor and he restrained himself, did not react whatever. And before that could blow up, the Omani police arrived and apologized to both of the Navy folks, took the Omani drunk off and resolved the situation. We got an apology the next day from the Omanis. Nothing happened.

Q: What was the Omani reaction to the American flagging on the Kuwaiti ships and our heavy involvement there. They obviously didn't like this to begin with, were they kind of watching it very closely? What was the end result of watching how we did this?

MONTGOMERY: You're going to have to indulge me one small story before I answer that question.

Q: Sure.

MONTGOMERY: Because I think that too is sort of instructive about the Omani attitude. And that is that, perhaps I won't identify him, but shortly after that ship, that particular ship was in Muscat, I had a meeting scheduled with a very senior Omani official. Who was very frequently involved in the relationship, somebody that I saw fairly regularly, had gotten to

know quite well, who called me by my first name, and all that sort of thing. It was a fairly important meeting, I can't remember what the subject was, but I had folks there and he had his staff there. We had a long talk.

At the end of the meeting, with a tone I wasn't used to hearing, he said, "Mr. Ambassador, would you mind dismissing your staff? I have something that I would like to discuss with you." I asked my folks to leave and he asked his folks to leave.

He closed the door and he turned to me with a stern look and said, "You had a ship in this past weekend." I said, "Yes, sir." I thought, uh oh.

He said, "It had women aboard didn't it." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Did you tell us it had women aboard?" I said, "No sir, I did not."

He said, "Well, let me tell you something Mr. Ambassador, you have another ship in here, it has women aboard and I don't know about it and I don't get to meet any of them, I will tear you (some obscenity) one side to the other." And I said, "Okay, sure. I'll make sure you get to meet some of them, next time." And breathed a deep sigh of relief.

But anyway, they did not like it: they thought it was a bad idea; thought it would lead to confrontation which it did between the United States and Iran; thought it was not economically justified by the losses that the Kuwaitis were incurring; thought it would jeopardize their normalization with Iran; maybe lead them into conflict with Iran. But having harbored all those thoughts, said, "We will support you." And they did.

We could not have done that operation as well, as safely, and as thoroughly without the Omanis as we did. We could have done it, it would have been possible. But it would have been damn difficult and a hell lot more dangerous.

But you know, somehow through that, even while making it possible for us to become virtually a combatant against the Iranians in the Gulf -- We were shooting at Iranian ships, we were shooting at Iranians on platforms, we were killing Iranian sailors, and taking them prisoner. And the Omanis were making it possible for us to do all that. Their normalization process in their own relationship with Iran continued to proceed. It's a tribute to them and a tribute to us in a certain extent, in that the degree to which the Omanis supported the operation was never publicized.

Q: This is how you get things done, particularly in that part of the world.

MONTGOMERY: A well kept secret. A year and a half we held our breaths. I guess it helps in some respect that the Omanis do not make it easy for the western press to come in and inquire too much. I think it's more of a hindrance than a help, at least now. I think they've got a good story and ought to be willing to tell it. They're gradually opening up but it's been a slow process. That prevailing mood--that we think it's a bad idea but if you're

determined to do it, we'll support you--carried through even after July 2, 1988. When Vincennes

Q: This is a cruiser, a guided missile cruiser.

MONTGOMERY: A guided missile cruiser in the Straits of Hormuz, between the Omani Gud Island naval base and Iranian commercial or military airfield Oban Dhurbas, shot down an Iranian airbus and killed 200 and some odd Iranians.

Q: A horrible thing. We're talking about a civilian airbus.

MONTGOMERY: A civilian aircraft, regularly scheduled. The Omanis with their observation capability, understood how we might have had difficulty figuring out what kind of aircraft that was. And that may have helped with respect to their not being too upset about it. Other than of course being upset as anybody would be over the loss of innocent life. I think it's worth saying, without saying too much, that the Omanis helped us in our reconstruction of events. To figure out a good deal about what actually happened and how we got confused between what we thought was a military aircraft and a commercial aircraft. It was helpful to us.

Q: The major point being that they did not say--I told you so. Because it was a horrible thing that happened.

MONTGOMERY: You know they had already been vindicated in certain respects in their concern about the reflagging. In that prior to the Vincennes shooting down the aircraft, there had been other instances of confrontation between ourselves and Iran. That aspect had come true, sort of with a vengeance.

There had been occasions where we had taken Iranian prisoners, at least 2 occasions where we had taken Iranian prisoners. And could not figure out how to repatriate them to Iran. Oman became--I don't know if this has ever become public, it may have been, I don't think it's particularly classified--but Oman became the intermediary and allowed us to repatriate the Iranian sailors whom we captured on several occasions.

There was another irony in all this too, that I may have brought up in another context. It greatly bemused the Omanis, that it was the Kuwaitis who came to us and asked us to do this. To undertake this endeavor that required the support, logistical and otherwise, support that we obtained through the Oman access agreement and out access to Omani facilities. When it was the Kuwaitis who were most outraged, 7 or 8 years before, that Oman would sign such an agreement with the United States.

I think it's worth pointing out that still it was the first agreement between the United States and an Arab nation. It was bitterly opposed by the Gulf Arabs and most vehemently by the Kuwaitis. And it was a source of no little amusement to the Omanis, that it was the Kuwaitis who came and asked to take advantage of that agreement.

MONTGOMERY: Several guys across the table were British Army officers, and for that matter, a couple of American lawyers. I think the British were smart, and surely some of the British edited, the Americans are cutting into our turf, sort of edited behavior, but by and large, the senior guys were difficult for us to deal with because for their own credibility in the country, and because they knew the Omanis had had less experience in negotiating agreements of this nature, and implementing arrangements of this nature. They sort of had to be more Omani than the Omanis. They grated on our military who felt they could have gotten a much better deal, perhaps taken much more advantage of the Omanis than they were able to do otherwise. But in the long run, because the Brits were so prickly, because they were so insistent on protecting Omani sovereignty, and because many of them remembered the rescue attempt...the Irani(?) attempt when we intruded on the Omani sovereignty, somewhat better than the Omanis did, I think we came out of it with a better working relationship, we came out of it with a candid working relationship as a result of being able to do that ___ exercise, and do it with relatively few problems, as we had. I might be overstating the case, and might be defending them a bit too much, but I really believe the Pentagon, on that issue, has been wrong.

Q: In other interviews, I found again and again that there seems to be a problem with the military negotiating status of forces, and everything else, agreements where they try so hard to get the very best deal, and sort of use the weight of the United States, it's pretty counter-productive because in the long run it's not how good a legal deal you've got, but one of what's the relationship of the country you're dealing with. And this seems to be a very common problem in every country where we had military arrangements.

MONTGOMERY: I think that is exactly the point. To say it again, I think the reason that the Omani relationship has worked as well as it has, and it has truly been a model because principally the Brits were such sons of bitches when they were supposedly negotiating the agreement, and implementing the agreement. And now that they have stepped aside, we are left with a good working relationship that the Omanis are comfortable with. It has proved beneficial to both countries.

A couple other side issues about this that are worth recording, I think. One is that when they agreed to do it, they said, "Of course, we don't agree that you should do it, but if you're determined to do it, we will support you." The Omanis were generally somewhat amused that the security agreement between the United States and Oman that would make this operation possible had been adamantly opposed by the Kuwaitis some seven or eight years before to the extent that the Kuwaitis had even offered them several billion dollars to try to buy them out.

Q: What was the purpose there? Just to not rock the boat.

MONTGOMERY: The Kuwaitis thought that signing this agreement, the Omanis would be bringing us into the region in a much more intrusive way than they thought was proper and right.

Q: In light of the saving of Kuwait by basically American forces.

MONTGOMERY: Even in '87, much less in 1990. The Omanis enjoyed that bit of irony.

Q: Do you find the Omanis as far as in the Persian Gulf, that they had a different outlook than maybe the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, and Kuwait, and even Saudi. Were they a different breed of cat?

MONTGOMERY: They are a different people. We tend too much, and the newspaper reinforce it, to think that a group of countries like that are all alike, and we do it not just in the Middle East, and Latin America, and everywhere else. And the Omanis are as individualistic and different from the rest as they come. They were isolated from the rest of the peninsula by the Empty Quarter, and by their own mountain range. They were seafarers and traders when the rest were still Bedouin. They had an empire that included East Africa, and some bits of South Asia, which meant the influx of those people, both African and Asian created a much more cosmopolitan...

Q: Zanzibar was actually their capital.

MONTGOMERY: Until the late 19th century. You can still get Swahili in Muscat.

Q: ...the Eastern Africa lingo.

MONTGOMERY: They had a much more cosmopolitan looking at the Indian Ocean and that part of the world rather than inwardly. I think its that heritage that Might have induced us to support Sadat at Camp David. To be able to do the security agreement in 1980, they have a different outlook.

Q: You mentioned last time a fascinating subject, and that is one of our stated policies, one which we believe in, is bringing democracy, we feel this is a good thing to other countries. But here the Arab countries have been singularly either committed or successful in doing this. And here is an absolute monarchy, or pretty close to it at least.

MONTGOMERY: Certainly that's a monarch. About the time of the negotiation of the security agreement, Sultan Qaboos created what was called the State Consultative Council which was a council that I described as somewhat as a nascent parliamentary body. It was appointive, composed of a third government junior ministers essentially, a third the leading businessmen, and a third appointed by the Sheiks and elders of the various tribes. And it had very limited powers. It could review legislation. Sometimes it didn't get around to reviewing legislation before it was published as a royal decree, but over time it gradually assumed the role of a body that would summon ministers, have a debate on the five year

development plan, or the annual budget. It took regularly to reviewing decrees before they were published. And gradually it obtained a bit of a legislative character to it. In the same meeting we went down and sat in the desert with Sultan Qaboos, Admiral, and I. At the end of it, as sort of a footnote as we were chatting about something or another, Qaboos made the remark, "I'm thinking about establishing an upper house to expand the legislative side of the government." I took that as a significant remark, also took it as a remark that was made to me personally as rumination of the ruler and not something that he particularly wanted communicated, so I didn't. But it stuck with me, and then two years ago when he created a State Constituted Council, I was not surprised a little bit. I guess put off by the continuing newspaper reports that he was doing this trying to keep up with the wave of democracy that seemed to be springing up with the power, or the demise of the Cold War. I think this has a vision that includes democratizing Oman that he has followed for some time. And I think the State Constituted Council with its increased responsibilities, and more democratic selection process, not an outright election yet is but one step in what will eventually be...I think his ultimately legacy to Oman, and that will be some sort of parliamentary democracy.

Q: Looking at this, you had been involved in the political process when you worked with Howard Baker, did you find that maybe we were pushing our style of democracy maybe a little harder and were not as responsive to other ways of handling things in other societies, other cultures?

MONTGOMERY: Not so much that we were pushing it because we had only started to think in '89 really what all these transformations were [going to lead to]. But in our judgements of those systems I think we've traditionally underestimated the degree of consensus building that is inherent to an Arab society. And it was particularly betraying the Omani bias, I suppose. I think it was particularly applicable to Oman, which has a tradition of democratically selecting its leadership. And Qaboos was, I think, is very conscious of the need to build consensus, and have a sensing- mechanism that works both ways in terms of what the people want, and what the people think, and how they feel.

Q: Would he travel quite a bit around and hold majlis?

MONTGOMERY: The Omani citizenry has some reason for complaint, but it is not on a variety of issues, that autocratic un-sensing rule is not one of them.

Q: What about succession? Were we sitting there and looking and saying all right, if something happens, was succession going to be...is the tradition to be violent, or orderly, or within the family?

MONTGOMERY: The tradition, in the not too distant past, in dynasties previous, has been that there is not necessarily a linear succession. It frequently has been a lateral succession, and frequently has been violently--perhaps not so often violently--but certainly vigorously decided.

Q: I know that in the United Arab Emirates, at least the Trucial states in those days, most of the leaders usually were knocked off by a nephew or a cousin, or a brother.

MONTGOMERY: I can't remember the last time that happened in Oman. Actually, the empire that included Africa broke up when the Sultan of the late 19th century, in the 1870-1880 period, died and left two sons who could not resolve among themselves who was to succeed him, and the British proposed a compromise that gave one Muscat and Oman, and the other Zanzibar. It ended the empire, and had to entice the one who took Muscat to accept the compromise, and to compensate him for the loss of the more wealthy kingdom which was Zanzibar.

Q: Yes, with the cloves and spices.

MONTGOMERY: Particularly after the Brits persuaded them to give up the slave trade, which was a major income gainer.

Q: You left there in '89, what were your final thoughts about this experience, as being an ambassador, coming from outside? What contribution did you feel you made, and what you got out of it?

MONTGOMERY: One of the most satisfying contributions that I made is coincidental to having been the ambassador. That is establishing a school, which we did on very short notice--decided in April to open a school because the secondary school, the English speaking school in Muscat, decided they would close their secondary school. And between March perhaps, and September, we made the decision to open a school, acquired the land, acquired the buildings, and opened the school with 260 students, and a full faculty. That school is now up to 650 and is flourishing, and has become the English-speaking school in Oman.

Q: You say the English-speaking school, who went to it?

MONTGOMERY: Every ex-patriot in Oman could go. The Omanis prohibited Omanis from attending it. Our student body was essentially 30% American, 30% English, and 40% other, and the other was some 30 nationalities. I mention it because I wanted to make certain it was noted in this. It was not my accomplishment, but the opportunity to participate in it was one of the most satisfactory parts of my service as an ambassador.

I think the other was working for three and a half years to broaden the relationship beyond simply the military relationship; to try to get Washington to view it as a barter relationship, to dispel the Omani perception that we thought of them as somewhat a cheap base, to be there when we needed them. I think the relationship matured a great deal while I was there largely as a result of Kuwaiti reflagging -- that we did it, that we did it well, that we kept our commitment.

Q: When you came back, one last question--I'm afraid I know the answer--but were you able to impart your experiences when you came back to the Department to say farewell, or was it just sort of here's your flag, hand in your pass, and on your way.

MONTGOMERY: Well, I never got my pass, or my passport. I did get the flag. I have kept a very close relationship with the Department, NEA, the sixth floor down to the fourth floor, and that's a part of the continuing interest in the relationship, at the desk officer level, at the country director level, and Dick Murphy, etc.

Q: Do you feel our course with Oman during the Desert Shield operation, and the war against Iraq, the foundations were laid and they came out pretty well as far...

MONTGOMERY: I think so. As recently as last year at some point, Yussaf (Inaudible) remarked to me--there seemed to be a sly grin on his face--that despite all his complaining about the level of consultation, etc., he wanted to tell me that he was finally satisfied.

Q: Well, I guess we might stop here. Thank you very much.

End of interview