The Seattle Times

Sunday, May 17, 2009 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Ambassador Ryan Crocker, "America's Lawrence of Arabia," returns home to Spokane

By Hal Bernton

Seattle Times staff reporter

WALLA WALLA — In late March, Ambassador Ryan Crocker and his wife, Christine, climbed into a red Mustang and left Washington, D.C., for a four-day drive to Spokane.

For the man former President Bush called "America's Lawrence of Arabia," it was a quiet homecoming to the state he left behind more than 37 years ago to join the Foreign Service.

His diplomatic service took Crocker to posts around the world and, in a tumultuous finish, to Baghdad as the Bush administration's last ambassador to Iraq.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, Crocker — fluent in Arabic and a keen student of history — had been part of a State Department brain trust that warned about the risks of a U.S. occupation.

"The die was cast on that pretty early on," Crocker said. "There wasn't a lot of serious introspection within the administration."

By 2007, the risks were starkly evident in the violence tearing apart Iraqi society as Crocker arrived in Baghdad to help salvage the faltering war effort. There, he worked closely with Gen. David Petraeus to pursue a fresh military and diplomatic strategy.

Days before leaving office, President Bush went to the State Department and paid homage to the thin, white-haired ambassador, awarding him the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

Crocker, 59, could have retired in Washington, D.C., to bask in the bipartisan respect earned from his tenure in Baghdad.

But he was never comfortable in the nation's capital, displaying little patience for the bureaucratic infighting there. Soon after returning from Iraq, he made the move back to Spokane, where he had always maintained his voter registration.

"The decision to live in Washington state, I made that a long, long time ago," Crocker said. "And never wavered."

Crocker also has kept ties to his alma mater, Whitman College in Walla Walla, where he serves on the Board of Overseers. On May 24, he will deliver the commencement speech. He plans to get more involved with the



GREG LEHMAN / WHITMAN COLLEGE Ryan Crocker, Bush's last ambassador to Iraq



GREG LEHMAN / WHITMAN COLLEGE Ryan Crocker addresses a Whitman College history class taught by professor David Schmitz. Crocker hopes to encourage more students to pursue Foreign Service careers.

school and hopes to persuade more students to pursue Foreign Service careers.

Crocker owns 13 acres south of Spokane, where he and his wife plan to build a home. But as yet, the site contains only brush and woods. So when they arrived back in town, the couple searched on Craigslist for a rental. They spotted a familiar three-bedroom house.

The couple soon moved into Crocker's boyhood home.

Boyhood abroad

Crocker was born in 1949 in Spokane, the only child of an Air Force officer, Howard Crocker, and his wife, Carol McClure Crocker. The family left Spokane while Crocker was still in grade school, moving around the world while his father served on bases in Canada, Morocco and Turkey.

In 1967, Crocker enrolled at Whitman, a skinny young man with short hair that stood out among the unruly student locks of that era. The campus was caught up in protest politics as activists organized marches against the Vietnam War and blocked military recruiters from entering a campus building.

Crocker's musical tastes expanded from The Kingston Trio to what became a long affection for acid rock. But he never joined the protest crowd, classmates say.

Crocker did hit the road, hopping freight trains to Mexico during a winter break. After his junior year abroad, he hitchhiked from Europe to India.

After joining the Foreign Service, he kept his taste for adventuresome travel. As part of his final Arabic-language training with the State Department, he spent time shearing sheep with a nomadic desert tribe.

Crocker met his wife, Christine, then a fellow State Department employee, in 1979 while posted to Baghdad, just as Saddam Hussein was consolidating his grip on power there.

During the next three decades, the couple wound up in some of the toughest posts in the world.

They were in Beirut in 1983 when the U.S. Embassy was bombed, killing more than 60 people. The Crockers were inside the embassy and Christine likely would have been killed if it hadn't been for the windows' Mylar sheathing, which protects against a blast. In 1998, when Crocker was ambassador to Syria, he and his wife had to take cover in a safe room as protest mobs ransacked their Damascus residence.

Four months after 9/11, once the Taliban were toppled in Afghanistan, Crocker and his wife reopened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Two years later, Crocker was named ambassador to Pakistan.

"We had no kids," Crocker said. "We had that choice right at the beginning. Either we were going to stay in the service together and go to the hard places, or we were going to have a family. You could not do both."

Lesson of history

The real Lawrence of Arabia was T.E. Lawrence, a British archaeologist-turned-army officer who helped lead an Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1916, during World War I. As the old order collapsed, the British took over Iraq. But by the summer of 1920 they faced a rebellion from Shiite tribesmen.

Lawrence was a harsh critic of the British occupation, writing in the Sunday Times of London that the people of England "had been led ... into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honor ... "



JOHN MOORE / GETTY IMAGES

Ambassador Ryan Crocker visits Ramadi, Iraq, in September 2007, shortly before making a report to Congress.

Ryan Crocker

Age: 59

Birthplace: Spokane

Education: Whitman College, 1971, English major

Career highlights: First posting for the State Department in 1972. Ambassador to Lebanon, 1990-1993; ambassador to Kuwait, 1994-1997; ambassador to Syria, 1998-2001; envoy to Afghanistan, 2002; ambassador to Pakistan, 2004-2007; ambassador to Iraq, 2007-2009.

Honors include: Presidential Distinguished Service Award, 1994; Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2009. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently announced establishment of the Ryan C. Crocker Award for Outstanding Leadership in Expeditionary Diplomacy.

For Crocker, the rebellion served as a stark reminder of the perils of a Western power occupying that nation.

"We don't come by history easily as Americans," Crocker said. "But history is pretty darn important if you are going to play in other people's leagues, on other people's fields. It is certainly very important in Iraq."

History shadowed Crocker after the 9/11 attacks. Bush prepared to invade Iraq, urged on by advisers who believed it was a golden chance to reshape the Middle East.

Crocker felt torn. His early posting in Baghdad gave him an appreciation for the brutality of Saddam's regime. But Crocker was concerned that the administration had done only minimal planning for an American occupation.

Crocker, then working as a deputy assistant secretary in D.C., had his staff draw up a classified State Department memorandum, known as "The Perfect Storm." The classified paper — never publicly released — outlined risks, including a potential explosion of violence once the lid was taken off a long-repressed society.

Those concerns were brushed aside in the run-up to the war as Bush's neoconservative advisers and the Defense Department took the lead in shaping the occupation.

But as the years ground on and the war effort faltered, Bush turned away from those who had once predicted easy victory in Iraq — a shift symbolized by Crocker's appointment as ambassador to Iraq in 2007.

Fresh approach

Petraeus oversaw a new military strategy that included beefing up U.S. troop strength and helping curb the violence in Iraq by creating small, new bases throughout the country. Crocker stepped up diplomatic efforts to heal the political divisions in Iraqi society.

Crocker and Petraeus — both marathon runners — had their differences. But they always ironed them out in private so they could present a united front to Congress, where they took plenty of hits over the new policy.

"You have been made the de facto spokesmen for what many of us believe to be a failed policy" in Iraq, then-Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton said during a September 2007 hearing. "I think that the reports that you provide to us really require the willing suspension of disbelief."

In his early months as ambassador, Crocker had plenty of his own doubts. It took a major military operation just to allow him a brief escape from the Green Zone to visit the suburb of Dora. There, he toured a bombed-out landscape that resembled Berlin in 1945, and heard residents complain bitterly of checkpoints that prevented the wounded from reaching hospitals.

"I went back from that and put my head down on my desk, thinking, 'How did I ever get into this, and how will I ever get out?' " Crocker recalls.

Mindful of the mistakes the British made a century earlier, Crocker says he wanted to avoid imposing a U.S. solution that Iraqis eventually would reject. But the slow pace of talks with Iraqis brought plenty of criticism from Congress.

By the end of 2008, U.S. troops had forged new alliances with Sunni militants that helped reduce the killings. Crocker helped prod the Iraqis to agree on new laws for provincial powers and other bench marks.

He also negotiated two key agreements — one for the withdrawal of U.S. troops by 2011, and another that spelled out the course of future relations between the U.S. and Iraq.

Before retiring, Crocker worked with the Obama administration to help shape the new president's Iraq policy.

President Obama noted Crocker's accomplishments in the opening moments of his first major speech on Iraq, at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

"He is an example of the very best that this nation has to offer, and we owe him a great debt of gratitude," Obama said.

Guarded optimism

On a chilly spring day, Crocker savors the drive through the Palouse hills from his Spokane home to Walla Walla, where he spends the day at Whitman College.

Talking to a history class, Crocker still speaks in the measured words of a veteran diplomat when asked questions about the future of Iraq. He thinks progress is still fragile, but less reversible than a year ago.

Crocker is hesitant in talking about his own future. He says the plan right now is to have no plan. Still, there are goals for the summer.

"There will definitely be a vegetable garden, or an effort at that," Crocker said. "Neither my wife or I have demonstrated any great skill in that regard. But we will give it a shot."

Seattle Times researcher David Turim contributed to this report.

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