Photos courtesy of U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan

(L-to-R) U.S. Rear Admiral Mike LeFever, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Ryan Crocker ’71 and USAID Disaster Assistance Response leader Bill Berger held a press conference in Pakistan on Oct. 20, 2005, detailing the U.S. relief effort following the earthquake that killed more than 70,000 people earlier that month.

Q & A

with Ryan Crocker ’71
U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Over the past two months, Ambassador Ryan Crocker ’71 has traveled back and forth from Islamabad, Pakistan, to Washington, D.C., for briefings and confirmation hearings, preparing for his new role as ambassador to Iraq while still working in the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. He also has made time for Whitman, meeting with President George Bridges in D.C., and agreeing to share with fellow alumni, via e-mail, the following insights about his career.

Q How has your career prepared you for this momentous role in Iraq?

A Most of my career has been in the Middle East, including an earlier tour in Iraq. I was in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam in 2003, and undertook several missions to the Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq in 2001 and 2002. I know many of the current leaders and speak Arabic. Now we’ll find out just how well prepared I am.

Continued on Page 16

Editor’s note: The U.S. Senate confirmed the nomination of Ryan Crocker as ambassador to Iraq on March 6, 2007, the day this issue went to press. When he was interviewed, prior to his confirmation, Crocker felt it would be inappropriate to answer questions on Iraq policy.
Q What parts of your liberal arts education at Whitman remain with you and inform your key role as an ambassador and diplomat?
A As an English major under the legendary Tom Howell, I learned to appreciate complexity and subtlety, to discern the figure in the carpet (the title of the Henry James story I analyzed for my senior oral). It was invaluable training in how to think about complex foreign societies. From history professor Fred Brett I learned discipline and mental toughness.

Q The Whitman experience continues to produce great talent for the State Department. Danielle Garber ’97 is a special assistant to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Ericka Olson ’05 is a watch officer in the department’s Operations Center. Mark Lanning ’02 is in Guangzhou, China. Hillary Ratjer Johnson ’92 works in the Office of Conflict Resolution. Of my generation, Sally Mathiasen Light ’68 directs senior Foreign Service assignments. Cliff Brown ’72 is a senator officer with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). I hope that some of Whitman’s current students will consider the Foreign Service. They will definitely have the skills to succeed.

Q What has been the most rewarding experience of your career?
A There have been many over the years. One of the more recent was coordinating the successful U.S. relief effort in the aftermath of the Oct. 8, 2005, earthquake that killed more than 70,000 Pakistanis in a few minutes. The U.S. needed to respond to a close friend and ally, and within 48 hours, U.S. military helicopters were on the ground in Pakistan and the first air shipment of U.S. relief supplies had arrived. A massive U.S. relief effort (lasting six months) that at its peak had more than 1,400 U.S. personnel deployed and included two military field hospitals in remote parts of the earthquake zone. The helicopter relief operation became the longest sustained humanitarian mission since the Berlin airlift. The entire relief operation was coordinated by the Embassy, whose staff worked seven days a week. It was a great example of unity of effort. The U.S. military and civilian agencies led by USAID saved thousands of lives.

Q Have you been on the verge of retiring when you agreed instead to accept the appointment to Iraq. What was the driving force behind your decision?
A It is still our intention to eventually retire to the Spokane Valley in Washington State, which is where I am from. I have been in the Foreign Service for 35 years. Before that, I grew up with a father who was a career Air Force officer. I learned early that when you are called to serve, you do not say no.

Q What has been the most rewarding experience of your career?
A As military. A dozen different U.S. agencies are represented at the Embassy. My job is to ensure that their efforts are coordinated and resourced to support these main goals. And we have to carry out our mission in a critical-threat environment — that training camp was a little over 150 miles from the Embassy. A car bomb attack on our Consulate General in Karachi nine months ago killed an American officer.

Q Each administration has its own priorities and style. The job of the career Foreign Service officer is to offer his best advice as policy is formulated and then to implement that policy. Our elected leaders need to have the confidence that we will carry out policies to the best of our ability.

Q What would you like to share with us about your family?
A I met my wife, Christine, in Baghdad in 1979. She was also a member of the Foreign Service. Our first assignment together was Beirut in 1981 at the height of the Lebanese civil war. It was clear then that the choice was a family or the Service. We have been together ever since and look forward to going back to Baghdad.

Q How did your passion for running begin? Do the “critical-threat” environments you work in slow you down?
A I ran track in high school and didn’t like it. I didn’t run at Whitman but got interested again during the first big running boom in the U.S. in the mid-’70s and have been a committed runner since 1975. I try to get in an hour a day, normally in the early morning — I find I have few schedule conflicts at 5 a.m. I have managed to run everywhere I’ve been — Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. Sometimes security conditions dictate a pretty short course — around and around the Embassy in Kabul, for example — but I have always managed.

Q You were on the verge of retiring when you agreed instead to accept the appointment to Iraq. What was the driving force behind your decision?
A It is still our intention to eventually retire to the Spokane Valley in Washington State, which is where I am from. I have been in the Foreign Service for 35 years. Before that, I grew up with a father who was a career Air Force officer. I learned early that when you are called to serve, you do not say no.

Q What is the driving force behind your decision to retire?
A A Jan. 11, 2007, Washington Post story noted that Crocker was “bloodied, but not seriously injured.” The same article quotes The New York Times correspondent Thomas Friedman, who lived nearby and raced to the site of the bombing: “I came around the corner and there was the American Embassy cut in half like a doll’s house, bodies hanging out of it, smoke belching, and the first person I saw staggering around in the ruins was Ryan, his sleeves rolled up, looking in the rubble.”

Honors: Presidential Distinguished Service Award, 1994; Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Civilian Service, 1997; Presidential Meritorious Service Award, 1999, 2003; State Department Distinguished Honor Award; Award for Valor; Three Superior Honor Awards; American Foreign Service Association Rivkin Award. In January 2002, Crocker was sent to Afghanistan to reopen the American Embassy in Kabul and subsequently received the Robert C. Frasere Memorial Award for “exceptional courage and leadership” in Afghanistan. In September 2004, President George W. Bush conferred on him the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the Foreign Service.

UP CLOSE

Born: June 19, 1949, in Spokane, Wash.

Attended schools: Morocco, Turkey, Canada and the United States.

Education: B.A. in English (1971) and honorary Doctor of Laws degree (2001), both from Whitman.

Foreign Service career: Since joining in 1971, Crocker has had assignments in Iran, Qatar, Iraq, Egypt and Washington, D.C., in addition to serving as ambassador in Lebanon (1990-93), Kuwait (1994-97), Syria (1998-2001) and Pakistan (2004-present). Other key posts include Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs (August 2001 to May 2003); first Director of Governance for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad (May-August 2003); International Affairs Adviser at the National War College (2003-2004).

Moments in Time: Crocker was assigned to the American Embassy in Beirut during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. On April 18, 1983, he and his wife were in their offices in the U.S. Embassy in Beirut when it was hit in the first suicide bombing by Islamic extremists against a U.S. target. The bomb killed 64, including one of his staff, and brought him closer to the truth of the bombing: “I came around the corner and there was the American Embassy cut in half like a doll’s house, bodies hanging out of it, smoke belching, and the first person I saw staggering around in the ruins was Ryan, his sleeves rolled up, looking in the rubble.”

Ryan Crocker ’71 and Christine Crocker.

Photos above and top left courtesy of Ryan Crocker ’71. Photos at top right courtesy of Mary Jane Corliss Shea ’71. Photos of first officer and top left courtesy of Ryan Crocker ’71.