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Colonel Donald Albert Dubay USA-Ret., a short autobiography

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A Brief History of Donald Albert Dubay

I was born on August 17, 1942, at Saint Mary's Hospital, Lewiston, Maine, eleven months after the birth of my sister, Carol, also at Saint Mary's Hospital. At the time my family lived on Bartlett Street, in the second floor apartment of a two story building. My grandparents and two of my unmarried aunts lived in the first floor apartment. At home we spoke primarily in French, but once I began school we used English more frequently.

My father was Albert Francis Dubay, who passed away in 2004, and my mother was Marie Ivette Fraser Dubay, who passed away in 1997. She had preferred to be called Ivette. My father was born in Van Buren, Maine in 1918. His parents were Levite Dubé and Alvina Pellitier, also of Van Buren. My father changed the spelling of his name to Dubay. His mother died when he was two years old, and was raised by his grandmother and an aunt. He had one brother, Fred, and three sisters, Alfreda, Ida and Margaret.

My mother was from Frenchville, Maine, as were her parents, Donat Fraser and Marie Jane Vaillancourt. My mother had two brothers, Louis and Carmen, and four sisters, Annette, Antoinette, Joan and Lorraine.

My parents were married in Van Buren in 1939 and moved soon thereafter to Lewiston, likely because of better employment opportunities. My father's brother and sisters also eventually moved to Lewiston. In 1942 my mother's family also moved to Lewiston, where her father, Donat, worked for a wood products manufacturer. My father first worked in restaurants as a cook, then for the H P Hood and Sons Dairy in the twin city of Auburn, where he eventually became plant foreman.

My mother, along with two of her sisters, were employed by the Bates textile mill. Several years later she studied for and was hired as the state's first licensed psychiatric office secretary. She later became the state's first licensed legal secretary.

Our home on Bartlett Street was approximately one-half mile from Saint Peter and Paul Church, where I attended school through the fourth grade. Approximately one-half mile in the other direction of Bartlett Street was Saint Dominic High School. Our neighborhood mostly was made up of apartment houses, primarily homes for textile mill workers and their families. Most of my playmates (and there were many) spoke mostly in French, and whose families also attended Saint Peter and Paul Church. In my last year in school I was asked to become one of the church's altar boys. School classes were taught in French for religious and language arts classes and English for math and other courses.

In 1952 my parents purchased a 40 acre farm on the outskirts of Auburn, where we lived for five years. The farmhouse was of late 1800's vintage, heated by a wood burning furnace. Attached to the house was a newer, spacious barn where we stored the hay we harvested annually, along with two stalls for young steers we raised for food.

I suspect the reason why my parents moved us to a farm was because their own childhoods had been spent on similar farms in Frenchville and Van Buren. At our farm I spent many post-school afternoons sawing mountains of firewood to last us through the cold, snowy winters. I also had daily chores of feeding and caring for chickens and rabbits that we raised for food. Of our forty acres, the ten-acre field in front of the farmhouse was equally divided in wild blueberries, which we froze for year-round consumption, and hay for the steers. The remaining acreage was hilly and heavily wooded and where, in winter, I hunted wild rabbits, usually unsuccessfully.

When we first moved to Auburn, I spent the first two years attending a small parochial school, then attended Walton Junior High School for three years. The only French I now spoke was in French classes and sometimes with my maternal grandparents when we visited them in Lewiston.

After junior high school in 1957 I attended Edward Little High School, enrolled in the pre-college tract. As at Walton, I was active in sports (football and baseball), school band, and a mix of social clubs (4H, etc.), giving me more free time when my parents sold our farm and moved us to a ranch style home on Bolton Street, within walking distance of school.

After high school I attended Norwich University military college in Northfield Vermont, along with a few of my high school classmates. At the end of my sophomore year I transferred to the University of Maine in Orono. Even though I had an academic scholarship at Norwich, I transferred to UofM as the overall costs at Norwich were too expensive. Throughout college, as I had done in junior high and high school, I continued with my French classes.

Considering the mandatory military draft after college, I had continued with ROTC at UofM, preferring to spend my two years as a junior officer rather than a young enlistee and, in June, 1964 was sworn in as an Army Second Lieutenant. In October I reported for duty at Fort Benning, Georgia as an infantry officer trainee. While at Benning, because of my French I was asked to volunteer into the Army's new military intelligence career field. After Benning, I began my new career, with basic intelligence officer training at Fort Holabird in Baltimore, followed by one year at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California to study Hungarian, classified as a "hard" language, to be followed by additional specialized intelligence courses. I had been recruited for the Hungarian course because of high marks in a language aptitude test.

Prior to graduating, I was placed on orders for Germany, to operate a Hungarian refugee center. Unfortunately, US government decisions to greatly expand our effort in South Vietnam derailed my planned Germany assignment. I did complete specialized intelligence training at Fort Holabird, where I met my future wife, Gail. Prior to my deployment to South Vietnam, I proposed marriage, to which she agreed, happily for me. Following a brief honeymoon in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, I reported for duty with my new unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and went off to Vietnam.

My intelligence unit and other soldiers crossed the Pacific to Vietnam by transport ship. Along with a fellow French speaker, Charlie Ray, I volunteered to teach others in my unit basic,

survival phrases in French. Arriving in Saigon, I was assigned to a covert civilian position working with South Vietnamese military, In Hue and then Danang, where I used my French for communication with my Vietnamese counterparts. Our principal tasks primarily were to identify North Vietnamese military infiltrations into the south. We also made every effort to locate where American POW's were being held in the jungle by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. This latter mission was the most frustrating, as each site we did locate typically was abandoned by the time US military units arrived.

Over the next few years I was assigned to various military schools for training and teaching, and a second year to the Vietnam War. As a recently promoted captain, I was then asked to apply for a new Army career tract, as a Foreign Area Officer, or FAO, once again because of my now much improved French language fluency. The Army used FAO's as regional specialists, working with host nation military forces as advisors in their home countries, as military attaches and other related duties. Speaking French, I initially asked for assignment to the European theater, but then, so did everyone else.

The Army's real need, however, was in North Africa and the Middle East. As a new FAO, my family (wife and two young children) and I were off to the US Embassy in Rabat, Morocco, which I used as a base for 15 months as I travelled throughout North Africa and parts of the Middle East learning all I could of this most complicated part of the world. As spouses play important roles in embassy assignments by interacting with local officials as well as foreign diplomats and their families, Gail took French lessons at the embassy, and would continue taking French language classes at the US State Department's Foreign Service Institute.

As part of the FAO training, I then completed a Master's program at Florida State University followed by the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. Next would be assignments in Tunisia (military advisor), Algeria (US Defense Attache), and Jordan (US Defense Attache and Chief, Advisory Group), interspersed with Pentagon (Joint Staff) and other related assignments. In addition to maintaining and improving my French fluency, this facilitated my studies in Arabic dialects.

I should mention here that Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ray, with whom I had taught French phrases while enroute to Vietnam, had been assigned to the US Embassy in Paris as the Assistant Army Attache before my embassy assignment in Algiers. Sadly, walking from his apartment to the US Embassy one morning, he was assassinated by a member of a Lebanese terrorist group who was later identified but not brought to justice.

The use of French was useful in all former French colonies of North Africa. Reliance on French was most important in Alegria, which at the time was closely aligned with the Soviet Union. I saw my challenge as drawing the country's military leadership toward a closer, more cooperative relationship with the US and NATO. Interestingly, Algerians preferred to speak French rather than Arabic, as their dialect was guttural whereas speaking French was a sign of an educated individual. I used every opportunity to develop a relationship of trust and respect and succeeded in having the military led government to accept a resumption of US Navy ship

visits at Algerian ports to balance Russian ship visits, plus arranging the first ever professional military training of Algerian officers in US schools.

The most important event that reflected how much our relationship had improved took place near the end of my tour of duty. Members of Hezbollah, a Lebanese based extremist group, had hijacked a TWA flight at the Greek Athens airport, forcing the pilot to fly to the Beirut International Airport, where the hijackers murdered one of the passengers, a young US Navy enlisted man, throwing his lifeless body down on the tarmac. They then added a few more hijackers and had the plane flown to Algiers, all without releasing any of the crew and passengers, most of whom were American.

As the plane arrived in Algiers I drove to the airport, along with the Ambassador and his deputy with the intent of gaining release of the crew and passengers. The ambassador's deputy, Nat Howell, and I met with the Algerian national security chief, who promised to do all he could to help, and with whom I had worked closely during an earlier visit to Algiers by Vice President Bush. The principal objective was to avoid any more American deaths at the hands of the hijackers.

As policy, US Government officials were prohibited from direct negotiations with the hijackers, so we worked through the Algerian national security chief who, after many hours of tense back and forth discussions over two days, managed to obtain the release of over 100 passengers as well as the crew, except for the pilot.

While negotiations with the hijackers continued, the passengers and crew were brought to the embassy for food, showers and such, and I debriefed members of the crew on every detail they had on the hijackers, to see if a US special operations rescue attempt could be made for the pilot and plane. Working with the Algerian officials it was clear the operation would be too risky, so the Algerians allowed the plane to depart, arriving at a desert airstrip in the Kingdom of Jordan, where the hijackers released the pilot and blew up the plane.

Several years have passed since our family's experiences overseas. We have maintained some of our friendships from these days, including friendships with European diplomatic colleagues, as have our children, whose appreciation of the world outside of the US has enriched their lives. Our son became a US Air Force pilot, with experiences in the Afghan and Iraqi wars. Additionally, two of our four granddaughters attended a local elementary school in Belgium where only French was spoken. One granddaughter has just completed a special Governor's School in a French language and international studies summer program at a local college and is considering a career in foreign relations.

As for advice to young Franco-Americans, I would recommend they take advantage of opportunities that bring them into contact with foreign cultures, through education, travel and work. I also would recommend that they maintain their bilingual language fluency.