

The Foreign Service Honor Roll

By John K. Naland, May 2024

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Behind each of the 321 names inscribed on the AFSA Memorial Plaques in the Department of State's Diplomatic Entrance is the story of a colleague who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation. This article does not recount those heroic, tragic, or other inspirational stories; rather, it tells the story of the plaques themselves -- their origin nearly a century ago, and the controversies in succeeding decades about whom should be honored on them.

Origins

The U.S. Foreign Service was created on July 1, 1924, when the Rogers Act of May 24, 1924, took effect, merging the previously separate consular and diplomatic services. AFSA was founded one month later when the six-year-old American Consular Association disbanded, and its members joined with their diplomatic colleagues to form AFSA.¹

In January 1929, members of the young organization read in the *American Foreign Service Journal* (as this magazine was named until 1951) that the AFSA Executive Committee (the governing board of the day) had received a proposal to create an honor roll to be displayed at the Department of State. This would memorialize all American consular and diplomatic officers who had died under tragic or heroic circumstances since the founding of the republic. The proponent, whose name was not given, listed 17 names for inscription. The Executive Committee did not explicitly endorse the proposal but did invite members to suggest additions or corrections.²

Letters came rolling in, and four months later the *Journal* published 29 more names. It also issued an invitation for additional submissions³, and in February 1932 published an updated and consolidated list containing 53 names.⁴

Meanwhile, the Executive Committee took until March 1930 to appoint a committee to move forward on what they called the Memorial Tablet project. Its members were *Journal* Editor Augustus E. Ingram, Foreign Service Officer Pierre de Lagarde Boal and retired Consul General Horace Lee Washington.⁵

Completion took another three years. First, AFSA had to obtain approval from Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson. Then Congress had to pass a joint resolution, signed by President

Herbert Hoover, authorizing placement of the AFSA-owned memorial on government property.⁶ Next, AFSA had to raise donations to cover the \$1,738.89 construction cost (around \$34,000 in today's dollars).⁷ Finally, after noted architect Waddy B. Wood designed a tablet of Virginia greenstone mounted in a framework of white Alabama marble, the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts approved the design.⁸

As work progressed, the Executive Committee grappled with a question that would arise again and again: Whom, exactly, should the tablet honor? The committee discarded a proposal to honor *all* diplomatic and consular officers dying abroad, which would have included those whose deaths (such as by heart attack or during a pandemic like the 1918-1920 Spanish flu) were not due to the distinctive risks of overseas service. Instead, the committee settled on honoring those diplomatic and consular officers who died on active duty overseas “under heroic or tragic circumstances.”⁹

That standard was vague, but the U.S. House of Representatives report that recommended placing the memorial on government property explained that it would honor those dying in natural disasters, from tropical diseases, during official travel and due to violence.¹⁰ Those criteria are apparent in the first 65 names inscribed on the plaque.¹¹ Forty-two died of contagious diseases encountered overseas, such as yellow fever and malaria. Seven were lost at sea traveling to or from their post of assignment (the first listed name, William Palfrey, elected by the Continental Congress as consul in France, died in 1780, lost at sea en route to his post). Six died in natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes at post. Four died while attempting to save a life. Three were murdered (in Colombia, Iran, and Madagascar), while two died of “exhaustion.” Another, Joel Barlow, was caught up in the maelstrom of Napoleon's 1812 retreat from Moscow and died of pneumonia in the bitter cold of a Polish winter.¹²

The Memorial Tablet's unveiling took place on March 3, 1933, in the north entrance of the State, War and Navy Building next to the White House (known today as the Eisenhower Executive Office Building). Secretary Stimson, who had donated the American flags and their brass bases that flanked the tablet, presided as 10 senators and congressmen looked on.¹³

The tablet, said the Secretary, “should serve as a means of bringing home to the people of this country the fact that we have a Service in our Government devoted to peaceful intercourse between the nations and the assistance of our peaceful commerce which, nevertheless, may occasionally exact from its servants a sacrifice the same as that which we expect from our soldiers and our sailors.” The memorial's second purpose, he said, is to “serve in the

development in our present Service -- the successors of the men whose names are recorded here -
- of that same spirit of devotion and sacrifice which those men evidenced.”

Before the ceremony ended with a Navy bugler sounding “Taps,” Secretary Stimson noted that there were undoubtedly other American diplomats and consular officers who had died in the performance of their duties in distant lands. But the facts of their deaths “have not survived the thickening veil of time.” Indeed, later research has revealed many more such cases (see sidebar).

Parting the “Veil of Time”: Historical Names

In 2007, Jason Vorderstrasse was an entry-level FSO serving in Hong Kong. When a colleague mentioned visiting a local cemetery where he had seen the grave of a U.S. diplomat whose name was not inscribed on the AFSA Memorial Plaques, Vorderstrasse was intrigued. He visited the cemetery, found the gravestone, and conducted internet and archival research that established that Consul F. Russell Engdahl had died in 1942 while a prisoner of the Japanese military. Additional research identified two U.S. envoys who had died of disease in Macau in 1844. Vorderstrasse nominated all three for inscription on the plaques. Their names were added on Foreign Service Day 2009.¹⁴ Vorderstrasse continued his research. By 2019, he had documented 39 additional early diplomats and consular officers who died due to tropical diseases, violence, or accidents while in official transit but were not honored on the plaques.¹⁵

Parallel research was undertaken by FSOs Lindsay Henderson and Kelly Landry over many off-duty hours during 2019-2020. They reviewed each of the approximately 6,500 “Consular Cards” on which the State Department tracked overseas assignments of consular officers and diplomats from the 1790s to the mid-1960s. On those mostly handwritten index cards, they found 762 annotations of death at post. For each case, they queried an online database of U.S. newspapers dating back to the 1700s to attempt to determine the cause of death. They found contemporary newspaper reporting on approximately half of the deaths. Those reports documented 11 previously unrecognized colleagues dying between 1826 and 1942 under circumstances qualifying for inscription on the plaques.¹⁶

In 2020, AFSA Retiree Vice President John Naland collected all those names plus 17 others discovered by him, retired FSO Peter Eicher, or others, totaling 67. AFSA approved their inscription which took place in May 2021 (see details at the end of this essay).

Second Thoughts

As the 1930s progressed, new AFSA leaders interpreted the criteria for inscription differently. In 1938, the Executive Committee declined to add the name of a vice consul who had died of malaria in Colombia. In August of that year, the *Journal* printed a full-page statement from Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who appeared to criticize that decision. Taking note of the tablet as “an appropriate and impressive reminder of what the work of the Service involves,” Hull said that the consul’s death “in the performance of his duties as a member of the Foreign

Service ... deserves more notice than it has received.”¹⁷

Despite the Secretary’s appeal and the original congressional intent in authorizing the memorial, AFSA Executive Committees in the late 1930s and early 1940s continued to reject candidates for inscription who died from tropical diseases and during official travel. They added only two names (one murdered and the other killed in an earthquake), reasoning that honoring those whose deaths were not “peculiarly” heroic or tragic “might tend to diminish the profound significance” of the memorial.¹⁸ During the 1940s AFSA began using the term “Memorial Plaque.”

In 1946 the Executive Committee sought advice from AFSA’s membership on two proposed changes to the criteria.¹⁹ The first would expand eligibility beyond Foreign Service officers to include Foreign Service staff members (today’s Foreign Service specialists). This was prompted by passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1946, which accorded Americans working overseas in clerical and administrative positions full professional status as members of the U.S. Foreign Service.²⁰ The second would explicitly exclude those who died abroad of tropical diseases (with exceptions in extraordinary cases) or of other causes that did not constitute “peculiarly heroic circumstances in the performance of acts abroad beyond and above the accepted high standard of duty in the Foreign Service.”

AFSA’s annual general meeting in 1948 “revealed considerable divergence of opinion,” the July 1948 *American Foreign Service Journal* reported, but adopted the two changes.²¹ In a 1949 report to members, AFSA noted that it had approved the inscription of only one of 15 names of Foreign Service members who had died abroad under tragic circumstances since 1942.²²

After the State Department moved to new headquarters at 21st Street and Virginia Avenue NW in 1947, the plaque followed in 1954.²³ Only six additional names had been inscribed since 1933. One was the first Foreign Service specialist on the plaque: Robert Lee Mikels, who died trying to save colleagues during a fire at Embassy Pusan in 1951. In 1961 the plaque was moved to its current location in the west end of the C Street lobby when the New State Extension completed today’s Harry S Truman Building.²⁴ Open space remained for additional inscriptions.

Vietnam and Terrorism

The names of 39 colleagues killed in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia between 1965 and

1975 filled that open space, but only after a mysterious delay. Even as the death toll mounted in Southeast Asia, no inscriptions were made between 1963 and 1972. “The extended delay,” as David T. Jones recalled in the October 1999 *FSJ*, “engendered suspicions among FSOs that the department was attempting to conceal the extent of its losses from a rank and file (and a larger public) increasingly skeptical of the purpose and value of the war effort.”²⁵ It is also true, however, that AFSA had had to go through all the steps required to erect a second plaque to hold all the names.

AFSA erected the second plaque sometime between 1966 and 1969 in the east end of the C Street lobby and took that opportunity to revise the criteria to require “heroic or other inspirational circumstances” in place of “heroic or tragic circumstances.”²⁶ The exchange of one set of vague criteria for another had little practical impact on subsequent inscriptions.

The new plaque responded to the scourge of war, but it was the scourge of terror that filled it. The addition in March 1973 of the names of two FSOs assassinated by terrorists in Sudan drew President Richard Nixon to become the first, and so far the only, president to speak at the plaques.²⁷ The next year, AFSA President Thomas Boyatt held the first of what would become annual memorial ceremonies at the plaque on Foreign Service Day.²⁸

After 1975, terrorism accounted for the deaths of most of those whose names were added to the plaque. By 1983, following the addition of 13 killed in the bombing of U.S. Embassy Beirut, the 11-year-old second plaque was nearly three-quarters filled.²⁹

Changing Criteria

Before 1982, eligibility for inscription was limited to Foreign Service members, Marine security guards, U.S. military personnel assigned to the U.S. Agency for International Development in Vietnam and employees of the Central Intelligence Agency under State Department cover at the time of death (see sidebar). But after terrorists murdered Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ray, assistant army attaché at U.S. Embassy Paris, the AFSA Governing Board expanded the plaque criteria to include all Americans serving under chief-of-mission authority.³⁰

CIA Employees on the AFSA Memorial Plaques

Of the 140 employees honored with stars on the Memorial Wall in the lobby of the CIA’s Original Headquarters Building, the names of 106 have been publicly acknowledged, but often only years after their deaths. In 21 cases, persons later recognized by the agency as

CIA employees were working under State Department cover at the time of their deaths and were inscribed (as State Department employees) on AFSA's Memorial Plaques.

They include: Douglas Mackiernan (the first CIA officer killed in the line of duty, 1950); Barbara Robins (a CIA officer, and the first female whose name was inscribed on the AFSA plaques, 1965); eight CIA officers killed in the 1984 bombing of Embassy Beirut; and Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty, who were killed during the 2012 attack on U.S. government facilities in Benghazi.

In making that change, it is unclear if the Governing Board considered the fact that, since World War II, American citizen staffing at U.S. embassies had shifted from being mostly Foreign Service to being mostly employees of other agencies. Thus, only 16 of the 43 names added to the AFSA plaques during the remainder of the 1980s were members of the Foreign Service.³¹ Those 43 names filled the remaining spaces on the second plaque in 1988, and the roll of honor spilled over to four side panels installed in 1985.³²

During the 1990s, victims of terrorism continued to account for most additions to the plaque. Eight names were inscribed in 1998 following the bombing of U.S. Embassy Nairobi. In 1996 many AFSA members objected to adding political appointee Ronald Brown's name after his death on an overseas trip, but the AFSA Governing Board did so judging that as secretary of the Department of Commerce Brown qualified as the head of a Foreign Service agency.

As the new millennium began, AFSA had accumulated numerous plaque nominations for Foreign Service members who had died in the line of duty overseas. These nominations would have met the original 1933 criteria for inscription but did not meet the criteria adopted in 1948. Pressure built from former colleagues to honor them nonetheless, and in 2001 the Governing Board restored authorization for personnel who died overseas "in the line of duty." AFSA invited members to suggest qualifying cases, and that resulted in the addition of 29 names in three years, all State Department or USAID employees with dates of death ranging from 1959 to 2000.³³

Iraq and Afghanistan

The next major change in plaque criteria took place in 2006.³⁴ The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had dramatically increased the number of American civilian employees in harm's way overseas. In war-zone Iraq, for example, FSOs led dozens of Provincial Reconstruction Teams on which Foreign Service members were a small minority. The AFSA Governing Board

became concerned that members of the Foreign Service would, in time, become a small minority of those honored on the plaques. Were that to happen, it would undermine the two purposes of the plaques articulated by Secretary Stimson in 1933: to increase public appreciation for the sacrifices of the Foreign Service, and to inspire a spirit of sacrifice in future generations of Foreign Service members.

The Governing Board also noted that many agencies or employee groups representing other federal employees who work at embassies -- including defense attachés, Marine security guards, Drug Enforcement Administration agents and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents -- have their own memorial walls. Indeed, within sight of the AFSA Memorial Plaques in the C Street lobby are 11 other memorials (see sidebar).

Other Memorials

The AFSA Memorial Plaques are not the only memorials displayed at the State Department. In the C Street lobby, there are 11 other plaques. Five are sponsored by AFSA honoring Foreign Service family members who died overseas, diplomatic couriers who died in the line of duty, Foreign Service Nationals killed in the line of duty, military service members killed in the 1980 Iran hostage rescue attempt, and Foreign Service members who died of COVID-19 contracted overseas early in the pandemic.

Non-AFSA plaques include those honoring U.S. Information Agency employees killed between 1950 and 1998; federal employees who died in an airplane crash during a Department of Commerce trade mission in Croatia in 1996; and employees and family members killed in the 1998 attacks on Embassies Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

State's 21st Street lobby has a memorial to Americans and foreign nationals who died overseas supporting the department's criminal justice and rule of law assistance programs.

Elsewhere, at USAID headquarters in the Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., the agency's Memorial Wall contains the names of nearly 100 USAID employees, Foreign Service Nationals, and Personal Services Contractors who died in the line of duty.

So the Governing Board reversed the 1982 criteria and limited inscription to "members of the Foreign Service and to U.S. citizen direct-hire employees of the five foreign affairs agencies serving the government abroad."³⁵ Exceptions could be made only in "compelling circumstances."

But world events soon prompted yet another revision. In 2007, civilians in a variety of employment categories from the foreign affairs agencies surged into Iraq, with staffing peaking in 2010. And between 2009 and 2012, civilian employees surged into Afghanistan, many of them temporary hires on non-Foreign Service appointments. The Governing Board became

concerned such individuals might come to dominate plaque inscriptions; and, in fact, five of the seven names added to the plaques from Iraq in this period were not Foreign Service members. In 2011 the Governing Board limited inscription to members of the Foreign Service, with other employees considered only in “exceptional or heroic circumstances.”³⁶ In 2014, the Governing Board eliminated all exceptions.³⁷ Plaque criteria have remained unchanged since then.

Plaque Expansion

In May 2021, AFSA unveiled a once-in-a-generation expansion of the memorial plaques. It removed and reinscribed the four 1985 side panels (leaving in place the 1933 and the late-1960s large plaques) plus added six new panels on the lobby columns. Reinscribing the side panels allowed the 67 newly identified historical names (see “Parting the ‘Veil of Time’” earlier in this essay) to be merged with the existing names in chronologically coherent, dignified commemoration of fallen colleagues.³⁸ The new column panels provided space inscribe the names of 102 future colleagues who die in the coming decades.

Virtual Plaque

Anticipating that researchers will continue to document additional deaths of colleagues from past decades or centuries, the Governing Board in April 2021 voted to memorialize newly-discovered historical names on a virtual Memorial Plaque on the AFSA website.³⁹ The alternative of inscribing them on the physical plaques would have produced a new jumble of dates (for example, a 2028 death followed by at 1870 death followed by a 2032 death) and left less room to inscribe future Foreign Service deaths. As of May 2024, five fallen colleagues from past decades had been so honored, thus validating the assumption that there are likely many more to be discovered.⁴⁰

¹ *American Consular Bulletin*, September 1924, pages 316-317, 347, 349.

² *American Foreign Service Journal*, January 1929, page 22.

³ *AFSJ*, May 1929, page 168.

⁴ *AFSJ*, February 1932, page 53

⁵ David T. Jones, *Foreign Service Journal*, May 1989, page 28, and David T. Jones, *FSJ*, October 1999, page 44 based Executive Committee minutes.

⁶ *Pub. Res. 72-55* (S. J. Res. 237) approved on February 23, 1933 (47 Stat. 902). For the legislative history, see *Congressional Record*, Volume 76 (1933) Part 4, pages 3761, 4209, and 4552-4553, and *Report of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds*, Report No. 2041, House of Representatives, 72nd Congress, 2nd Session, February 15, 1933.

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- ⁷ *AFSJ*, September 1933, page 355
- ⁸ *AFSJ*, February 1933, page 50.
- ⁹ Jones, *FSJ*, May 1989, page 30, and Jones, *FSJ*, October 1999, page 45 based on AFSA Executive Committee minutes.
- ¹⁰ *Report of the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds*, Report No. 2041, House of Representatives, 72nd Congress, 2nd Session, February 15, 1933.
- ¹¹ *AFSJ*, April 1933, page 155.
- ¹² Biographic sketches of individuals on the plaques can be viewed at www.afsa.org/afsa-memorial-plaque-list.
- ¹³ *AFSJ*, April 1933, pages 129-131.
- ¹⁴ Jason Vorderstrasse, *FSJ*, June 2019, pages 27-30.
- ¹⁵ Jason Vorderstrasse, *FSJ*, March 2014, page 49, and Vorderstrasse, *FSJ*, November 2020, page 66.
- ¹⁶ John Naland, *FSJ*, November 2020, page 68.
- ¹⁷ *AFSJ*, August 1938, page 463.
- ¹⁸ Jones 1989 pages 30-31 and Jones 1998 page 45. See also *AFSJ*, August 1938, page 463.
- ¹⁹ *AFSJ*, August 1946, page 30.
- ²⁰ Harry W. Kopp, *The Voice of the Foreign Service: A History of the American Foreign Service Association*, Foreign Service Books: Washington, D.C., 2015, page 21.
- ²¹ *AFSJ*, July 1948, page 47.
- ²² *AFSJ*, July 1949, pages 34, 49-50.
- ²³ *FSJ*, November 1954, pages 19 and 30.
- ²⁴ *FSJ*, February 1961, page 28.
- ²⁵ Jones 1999, page 46.
- ²⁶ Installation of the second plaque was not reported contemporaneously in the *FSJ*. It had not been installed as of July 1965 (*FSJ*, July 1965, page 28). William Harrop recalls that it was in place in 1970 (email to author, December 21, 2022). By 2023, many of the letters had faded so AFSA had them repainted.
- ²⁷ *FSJ*, April 1973, inside front cover.
- ²⁸ *FSJ*, December 1974, page 37.
- ²⁹ *FSJ*, June 1983, page 37.
- ³⁰ *FSJ*, October 1998, pages 4-5 of AFSA News section.
- ³¹ Author's analysis of list on AFSA website.
- ³² *FSJ*, December 1985, page 45.
- ³³ *FSJ*, June 2001, page 2 of AFSA news and September 2001, page 2 of AFSA News section.
- ³⁴ See <https://www.afsa.org/memorial-plaques>. This change was not reported contemporaneously in the *FSJ*.
- ³⁵ List of AFSA Governing Board motions maintained at AFSA headquarters.
- ³⁶ AFSA Awards and Plaques Committee report of May 15, 2014.
- ³⁷ AFSA Governing Board minutes for November 5, 2014.
- ³⁸ *FSJ*, April 2023, page 41. Three inadvertent errors were made during the expansion. James Holden who died in 1827 and John Meircken who died in 1832 were inscribed on new panels despite already being inscribed on the west side center panel and Felix Suau who died in 1843 was inscribed on a new panel without the final "u" in his name (AFSA plans to have that letter added the next time that the stonemason comes to inscribe new names).
- ³⁹ AFSA Governing Board minutes for April 21, 2021.
- ⁴⁰ <https://afsa.org/virtual-afsa-memorial-plaque>