

Russell Andrews

- **Country of Service: 1967-69 – Palau (western Pacific islands between Guam and the Philippines)**
- **Assignment: Teaching Elementary School; Coordinating High School English as a Second Language (ESL) Program**
- **Service Term: 1967-1969**
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Service Description (Year 1):

I finished Dartmouth in 3 years and did not have a clue what I wanted to do with my life. Because of a motorcycle accident in the spring of my second year (metal pins for leg fractures), I was not draftable – a major consideration for many of my fellow ‘68s given the Vietnam War.

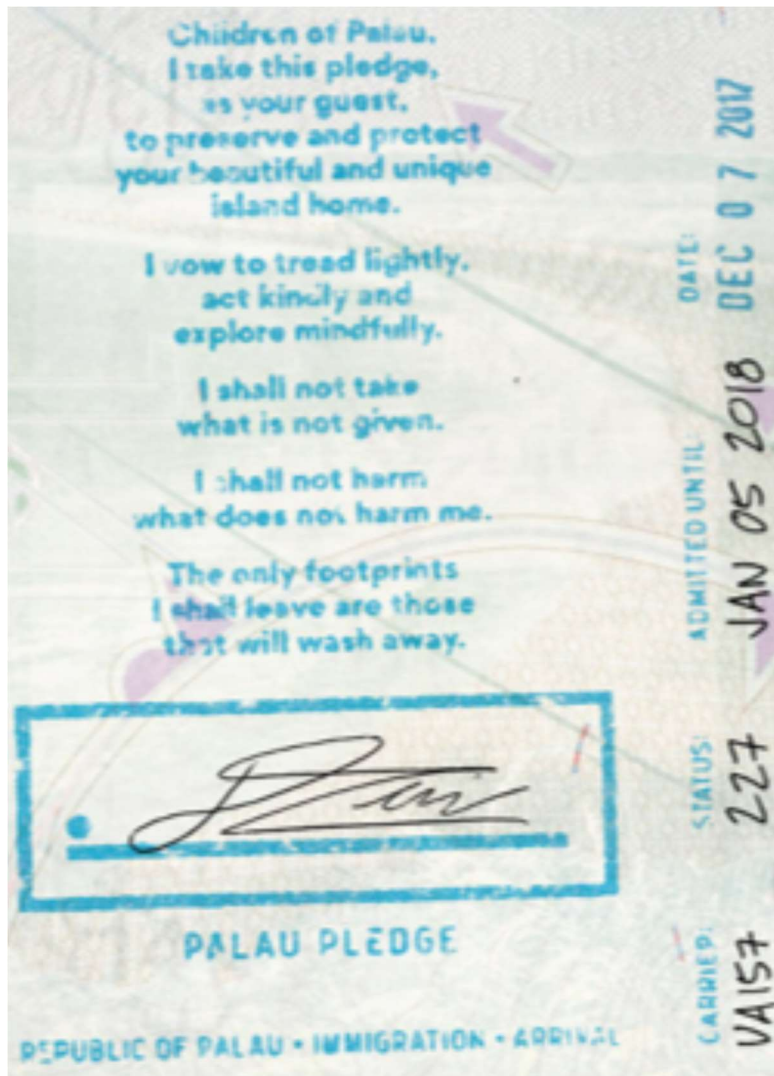
Everyone going to Micronesia trained in the Truk (now called Chuuk) Islands. We then split up, and I was dropped off at the dock for a rural village on the main island of Palau (about 30 miles long by 10 miles wide). My suitcase being lost on the several hour flight from Truk to Palau – with only my T-shirt and pants, wallet and passport, and a Coleman lantern I had just bought – I was told to head up the path through the mangrove swamp to the village about a mile or so away. Fortunately I was met part-way by one of the few English-speaking villagers – a young woman who was back home for a few weeks from Fiji, where she was training to be a doctor.

I was adopted into a family as the eldest son; my young Palauan siblings were students in the village elementary school where I taught. If I did not go spear-gun fishing, we ate Spam. Sleeping on a bamboo floor and surviving on taro were novel experiences – but also novel was the wonderful sense of community in that small village.

Spear-gun fishing (for food, not sport) introduced the magnificent undersea world. The first experience with 12-14 foot sharks swimming nearby was a lesson in “When in Rome, trust your Roman colleagues” – my fellow fishermen kept their catch on a string attached to a bamboo float that was 30 feet or so away, linked to each fisherman by a cord. Never did the warm-water sharks attack either the caught fish on the bamboo or the fishermen.

Palau is notable for their conservation efforts: the Palau National Marine Sanctuary (prohibiting all extractive activities for 80% of Palau’s Exclusive Economic Zone) is one of the largest in the world; all visitors to Palau must sign the Palau Pledge:

“Palau is the first nation to change its immigration laws for the cause of environmental protection. Upon entry, visitors must sign a passport pledge to act in an ecologically and culturally responsible way for the sake of Palau's children and future generations of Palauans.”



Service Description (Year 2):

I was asked to spend the second year coordinating – with a Palauan counterpart – the high school ESL program in the only “town” in Palau (Koror: population about 5,000 – half of Palau’s total population at the time). A very different experience – living in a Quonset hut with other PCVs and being very busy with the high school program. One aspect was especially educational for me: the high school principal was a retired US high school principal who was quite condescending toward the Palauans. A fellow PCV and I discussed with our Palauan teacher colleagues their frustration. They were too polite to complain outwardly but we convinced them to make their objections regarding the principal known to the education administration – and the principal was forced to resign. Politics in a different culture and country can be rewarding – if one “follows the lead of the locals.”

Another lesson was the diplomatic effectiveness of Palauan politicians. For generations their forebears had been isolated island dwellers: you could not afford to alienate others on your small island “universe”. The career of a Palauan politician who spewed insults rather than seeking consensus would be extremely brief!

Life and Career Impact:

What tweaked my intellect most about Palau was how their language reflected a culture so different from all Western (and Eastern) cultures in the 20th century that I knew. There were different counting systems for objects of different shapes, dozens if not hundreds of terms for blue and green (the dominant colors in island life), dozens of terms for different aspects of what in English would be “empty.” I went directly from Palau to graduate school in Cambridge (MA). Over the next several years my interests evolved from theoretical and cross-cultural linguistics to language and the brain. My dissertation was on language organization in the right and left cerebral hemispheres.

Thanks to having taken pre-med courses at Dartmouth (although I did not even consider applying to med school at the time), I went directly from graduate school to medical school (back at Dartmouth). I found neurosurgery fit me better than neurology; residency at Stanford was followed by both academic and private practice neurosurgery until I retired from operating at the end of 2017. Now I can devote more time to my “hobbies” of international neurosurgery/neuroscience (e.g. Editor of the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies Newsletter, international courses/training programs) and developing nanodevices to understand brain function (e.g. medical advisor at NASA Ames here in Silicon Valley, including their Nanotechnology Center, for more than two decades now).

Peace Corps in Palau has had other benefits: Palauan culture is matrilineal as well as both clan- and family-based. This freed up women to have children in their early adulthood (when it is healthiest) but also have shared support for raising young children. Thus my wife of nearly 45 years (who is from South Korea; we met while I was a US Army Flight Surgeon there 1979-80) and I benefitted greatly from having her parents live with us while our two daughters were growing up. And now that I am a “pensioner” my wife and I spend most weekdays with three of our five grandchildren – taking them to school, sports, etc. Perhaps life’s greatest joy is experiencing the development of the younger generations – from one’s grandchildren to one’s in-training junior professional colleagues.

Thanks to the people of Palau, I have learned much more from my Peace Corps experience in Palau than I taught them. Perhaps the ultimate compliment the Palauans are making is that the Peace Corps (after all Peace Corps Volunteers worldwide were returned to the USA during the COVID pandemic) has been invited to return to Palau, initially as village teachers, in 2025.

I have often said the two years in Palau with the Peace Corps were the best two years of my life. Those two years contributed immensely to my personal development – and set me on a path for my professional development during the years in Cambridge and beyond.

Peace Corps converted a “lost soul” into a “happy camper”!