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'You Just Play It By Ear,' Says Foreign Service Aide Retiring After 44 Years

WASHINGTON, Feb. 19 (AP)—Jefferson Caffery joined America's career diplomatic service "for a lark" and stayed on for forty-four years.

He is retiring Feb. 28 after having served in most of the world's hot spots and coming close to death "only twice," as he puts it.

Today, at 68, he looks like only a slightly mellowed version of the adventure seeking youngster who quit Louisiana plantation life in 1911 to roam the globe.

Spare of build, he wears his clothes jauntily, combs his full iron-gray head of hair firmly back and speaks in the guarded tones of the diplomat. But a twinkle in his eye seems to say he doesn't take himself too seriously.

"Why did I join the Foreign Service? I guess because I had nothing better to do. Looking back on it now, there's nothing better I could have done."

Taft Then President

In these words he recalls the decision that led him, on March 2, 1911, to forsake the life of a plantation squire for service with the State Department. William Howard Taft was President then and Philander C. Knox was Secretary of State.

Mr. Caffery took his latest post, Ambassador to Egypt, in 1949. His total service, however, reads like a listing of United States missions around the globe. He is the dean of the United States corps and has held the rank of Ambassador longer than any other—twenty years.

Witty and courtly, he has a reputation as a student of patient, old style diplomacy, but he has no ready definition for such diplomacy. "Getting things done," he says. "That's about all it amounts to. How is it done? You just play it by ear."

He declines to discuss his latest diplomatic achievement, helping to settle the British-Egyptian dispute over the Suez Canal bases. He was permitted to stay on nearly three years beyond the retirement age to aid in reaching that settlement.

"You know, it's hard to quit," he confesses, "but if you must, it's better to quit while you're winning."

He consented to sketch in an account of his two brushes with death. Both are connected with the Roman Catholic religion, which he follows with devotion.

"The first time was in Paris in 1918," he said. "It was Good Friday. I was going to church, but when I got to the door I looked at my watch.

Escaped Big Bertha

"I saw I would not have time to visit church because I had an appontment at the embassy. I turned away and, just as I got to the subway, I heard a terrific explosion. They told me later at the embassy that Big Bertha, the German cannon, had dropped a shell on the church."

His other near miss was more personal. It was in Havana in 1934, when Cuban politics were particularly uproarious.

"I had gotten threatening letters, so I had a guard," he related. "It was Sunday morning and I came down to my car at the usual time to go to mass.

"But I discovered I had left my missal (a prayer book for following the mass) in my apartment. I went back and soon heard a lot of shooting.

"Downstairs a black touring car had passed by and, Chicago style, had riddled my car with submachine-gun bullets. They killed my guard."

Mr. Caffery was born Dec. 1, 1886, at Lafayete, in the heart of Louisiana's Evangeline country.

As the scion of a wealthy family he could have lived out his days in leisure. He tried it for a few years after being graduated from Tulane University at New Orleans in 1906. By 1909 he had read enough law to pass an oral examination for the bar. But two years later the lure of the Foreign Service came along.

Mr. Caffery was married Nov. 20, 1937, to the former Gertrude McCarthy of Indiana. They plan to visit Indiana before going to his Lafayette home in April. He is not sure where he will live thereafter.

He expects to write a book and has three publishers bidding for it.

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