

Submitted by Col. John B. Melvin, 1945-1946

Note: During the Korean War, Col. Melvin was awarded the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism, as well as the Purple Heart

My two assignments while at the Barracks in the mid-1940's:

Back then the U.S. State Department, because of a shortage of qualified people, drew from the military stationed in the D.C. area for diplomatic courier work in delivering highly classified mail to our embassies in Europe, Africa, and, in one case, Canada. I don't recall whether or not Central and South America were included in their territory, but, it would appear logical that they were.

The Marine Barracks had about four or five of these billets. In 1945, the Commanding Officer of the Barracks, Colonel Donald J. Kendall, sent for me shortly after I reported in and assigned me to the Diplomatic Courier job as Temporary Additional Duty. My principal job was as a platoon leader in the Barracks Detachment. (Incidentally, my Company Commander was Medal of Honor recipient Major Louis H. Wilson, Jr, who, as you know, later was our 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps. He was as fine an officer as I ever served with.)

After receiving Top Secret clearance, the Dept of State gave me a short course in the duties and protocol of being a Diplomatic Courier. At that time, all military personnel were still required to wear our uniforms 24/7. On the other hand, State Dept employees dressed in civilian attire, and therefore I was given a chit for \$100 to acquire civvies. I bought one sport coat, two pairs of trousers, two shirts, two ties, and a belt, with that \$100! There's a prime example of inflation since 1945.

My first courier run was typical. I was performing my duties at 8th and I when I received a call from the State Department alerting me that I was to be picked up by a driver early the next morning. I was informed of my destination. The driver drove me to the old State Department (next to the White House) where I picked up the classified mail. I'm little hazy on this next point, but we were armed with a .32 revolver, which we wore in a shoulder holster under our jacket. I can't remember whether this was issued to us at the Barracks or the State Dept. From the State Department, I was driven to, what used to be the Washington National Airport.

My first courier run was to London. It was also the first time I had ever been on an airplane. We flew to Philadelphia, then to an airport outside of Boston, then to Gander, Newfoundland. From there we flew to Shannon Airport in western Ireland. We finished our flight at the Hurn Airport near Bournemouth on the southern coast of England. The reason for landing so far from London, of course, was that the city and its suburbs had been severely damaged by the German bombings during WWII and the war had only been over

a short while.

The last leg of the courier run was by train and I was on my last leg also, because, we were supposed to be alert at all times and the trip in those days took about seventeen hours.

On this, my first courier run to London, I was carrying (along with other diplomatic mail) a letter to be delivered to Secretary of State James Byrnes, who was attending the first General Assembly of the United Nations. This had to be delivered by me to Mr. Byrnes at his suite at the Claridge Hotel. In looking back on this exchange, I am amazed to recollect that I went directly to his suite, knocked on the door, and handed over the letter. Can you imagine doing that today in the highly charged atmosphere of security?

During that particular run, incidentally, I was requested to be at the Claridge Hotel the next morning to accompany (ride shotgun) a VIP to the United Nations meeting. I think this was mainly due to the fact that I was armed and I was available. In any event, the person of importance turned out to be Eleanor Roosevelt! So it was she in the backseat, with the driver and me in the front. The drive took about fifteen or twenty minutes, and I was very sorry it wasn't longer. I never met a more charming lady.

The return trip was just a retracing of steps to deliver whatever diplomatic mail there was to be delivered to the State Department in Washington, D.C. That's not entirely accurate, because I had a humorous experience (although it didn't seem so at the time) when we landed at LaGuardia Field, NYC, instead of the airport outside of Boston.

When a Courier went through Customs in those days, if he had a State Department waxed seal on the clasp of his briefcase it was immune to Customs search. I had an inexperienced inspector checking me through and he grabbed my briefcase to check it out. I reached across the table and took it out of his hand and said, "You can't inspect that. It's classified mail and I'm a Diplomatic Courier." In leaning over the table, my jacket swung open revealing the butt end of my revolver. The Inspector lurched backward and cried out, "Look out, this man has a gun!" Well, that brought all sorts of Customs people surging around me. I immediately showed my diplomatic passport and that seemed to quiet them down. Regrettably that wasn't the end of the story, because the State Department people in D.C. hadn't gotten around to adding my name to the authorized list of Diplomatic Couriers. Thankfully, a call to Washington straightened out the mess and I was allowed to proceed on to D.C.

I made several more trips to London, and to Paris, and one to Ottawa, Canada. The latter was very clandestine and had to do with the atomic weapons secrets involving the Russians. But, that's another story.

I presume that the practice of using military personnel as diplomatic couriers has long since been discontinued, but I thought perhaps it would be interesting to the members of our Association to see one of the many different tasks that we Marines are asked to

perform.

The second subject that may be of interest to our members is my experience with duty at Camp David.

In late 1945 and during the first half of 1946 the Marine Corps experienced a drastic reduction of personnel, both officer and enlisted. This, of course, was the result of WWII ending. The Marine Barracks, 8th and I, was not immune to this situation.

Camp David was then known as Shangri La, a name given to it during the Roosevelt Administration. FDR used it a great deal, but President Truman did not. We heard that this was because Mrs. Truman did not care for its remoteness, although that was purely rumor. In any event, at that time, it's security was provided by a permanent unit from 8th and I. The CO was the Executive Officer of the Marine Barracks, Major William Dickinson. As I recall, the t/o called for three officers and ninety enlisted on board at the Camp reporting to Major Dickinson back at the MB in D.C.

With the exodus of reserve officers to inactive duty, the summer of 1946 found the Shangri La without a single officer; therefore, I was transferred to the Camp from the Barracks to fill the duties of three officers! I was the senior rank on station, as well as being assigned the duties of the Mess Officer, the Special Services Officer, and a few others I can't remember. It was a busy time, but the compensations were great; particularly for a young second lieutenant of the age of 21. I had my own jeep, the food was good, and the accommodations were fabulous! My quarters were huge, with a large bed, and my own private bath.

As you can imagine, the primary duty was (and, in all probability, still is) the security of the Camp. To that end, we had the last contingent of War Dogs to assist us in providing that security. They had all seen service in WWII, most of them in the Pacific. They were a collection of German Police Dogs and Dobermans and we used them to patrol the perimeter of the installation. If I had been an enemy invader I would have thought twice about trying to secretly get through our lines. They were a ferocious appearing bunch, although their handlers said they were quite docile around our Marines. I've often wondered if those dogs were replaced by a new generation of watch dogs. In my mind, those old veterans of WWII were irreplaceable.

My duty at Shangri La (Camp David) was all too brief. Since I was no longer going overseas as a Diplomatic Courier, I was therefore in the pipeline to go overseas — I never could figure out that logic — so after about a month I received orders to the 1stMarDiv in Tientsin, China. I left Shangri La (and the Marine Barracks) with many fond memories.

Semper Fidelis

John B. Melvin

