

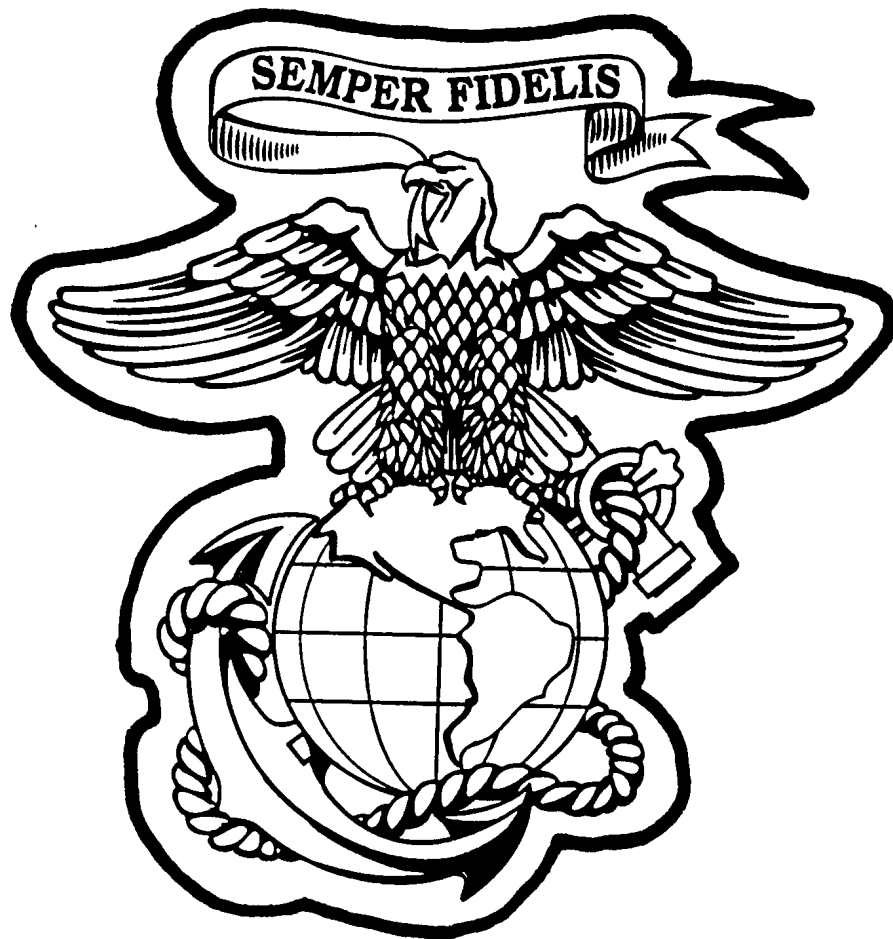
# *"Ceremonial Adventures"*

Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C.

1955 – 1959

## One Marine's Story

*An Autobiography*



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## **PRESIDENTIAL RETREAT - CAMP DAVID, MARYLAND**

We traveled the 80 or so miles to Camp David by bus. There were no super highways, just narrow, twisting country roads and it turned into a long, boring ride. The young Marines quickly got restless and they began to shed the stress of life at the barracks. Cat-calls out the windows at young women in passing cars, flicking ears with snapping fingers, and anything else one would expect from a school bus full of third and fourth graders. Their conduct was embarrassing and I applied every bit of leadership I knew, but it produced limited results. These were the days when enlisted Marines below the rank of Staff Sergeant were required to carry a liberty card. No liberty card, no liberty. Suddenly, everything became quiet and as I patted myself on the back for my leadership ability, I realized that the PltSgt, SSgt Coffin had lowered his window and was flipping the platoon's liberty cards out the window. The men became quiet as they watched the liberty cards sail out the window with a measured precision. There would be no liberty for the next week. I learned another valuable leadership lesson. Mass punishment, though not desirable, was an effective tool. The remainder of the ride was quiet as the men sulked and brooded a bit. Little did they, or I for that matter, realize that there would be no liberty while the President was at Camp David. Also, these were old liberty cards from Coffin's previous platoon. Another valuable lesson was learned, "Stay one step ahead of children and young Marines."

We passed through the little town of Thurmont, MD, and started up into the mountains. The road up the mountain was barely two lanes and wound thru the heavy woods like a snake. There were several small bridges along the route. SSgt Coffin pointed out that the Marines were responsible to check them for explosives and then, from a hidden location, ensure that they were not tampered with when the President was en route. It was exciting to think that we would be guarding the President of the United States. Camp David was located on top of Catoclin Mountain. It consisted of the main lodge for the President, several smaller lodges for visiting dignitaries, and a large building which housed the Navy personnel, the messhall and the guard office. All of these buildings were rustic and resembled hunting lodges for the rich and famous. Scattered among the many trees were small cabins, much like those found at summer camp, that housed the Marines. We froze in the winter and sweated profusely

in the summer. There was a small cabin that served as a gate house, a helicopter landing pad, an Army communications tower and for President Eisenhower, a well manicured two hole golf course on the side of the mountain. Basically, the Marines were responsible for security along the outer perimeter, the Secret Service the interior security, the Army operated the communications and the Navy was responsible for maintaining the buildings and grounds. The senior naval officer assigned billeting, established meal times and requested working parties for grounds maintenance. Whenever possible, he made our life miserable, but set himself up as the recipient of many a practical joke. The Marines would bait him and then thoroughly enjoy his frustration and pathetic attempt at being military. I felt sorry for him, but his discomfort kept the young Marines from finding more devious ways of getting into trouble.

These were hand picked, intelligent, highly motivated troops, but, at times, they acted like the mischievous teenagers they were. They only responded to Marine authority, all others were fair game. One of their favorite stunts was hiding the navy lieutenant's jeep in the woods. Once they even dug a hole and buried it. SSgt Coffin and I hated to be summoned to his office, because we knew the troops had once again gotten to him. We managed to keep him from "pressing charges," if the pranks stopped. It was fun watching the navy lieutenant get red in the face and jump up and down. The game between the Marines and the lieutenant resembled the Three Stooges, or Wiley Coyote and the Roadrunner. Reluctantly, we stepped in and put an end to the pranks.

Fortunately, things became much calmer as word reached us that The President would arrive the next day. The camp became a beehive of activity. The Secret Service was everywhere and we actually saw one of the army communicators. The President's Limousine and accompanying security vehicles would arrive around noon. It was Spring of 1956 and the use of helicopters was limited, however, this would change over the next few years. At first light a detail of Marines would proceed down the mountain and visually check each of the bridges along the mountain road. A security team would remain at each location to ensure the President's safety. The perimeter fence was checked for possible tampering and armed sentries were posted. The guard detail at the gate was increased and all communications were checked. We were ready! When the President's cavalcade proceeded up the mountain, the sentries would be picked up and returned to camp. In 1957-1958, helicopters would be used instead of the limousine and our job was a little easier.

Everyone not physically on watch was turned to on various police details. The entire camp was well policed and looked ship-shape. The Marines seemed to sense that it was time to be extremely serious. The seriousness was evident in the orders concerning lethal force. At any normal duty station, a sentry would challenge three times and shoot to disable, that is, if he was permitted to have live ammo. At Camp

David, all rifles and/or pistols were loaded with live ammo and the orders to the sentries were, "Challenge and shoot to kill!" This was serious business and the young Marines responded accordingly.

The Head of the Secret Service, Mr. Rowley, briefed Lt Foster, SSgt Coffin and myself on our duties prior to the President's arrival and what would be expected during his stay at Camp David. As the designated Sergeant of the Guard, I took Mr. Rowley on a jeep tour of the outer perimeter, which was a bulldozed road just inside the 10 or 12 ft. high fence topped with concertina wire. There were small sentry booths at irregular points along the trace. They were spaced in such a way as to allow a visual inspection of the entire length of the trace. Each sentry booth was equipped with a direct phone line to the Sergeant of the Guard's office, which in turn had direct access to the Secret Service duty desk. Mr. Rowley was satisfied with our preparations and took Lt Foster, SSgt Coffin and myself on a tour of the President's lodge. The walls of the lodge were expensively paneled or highly stained logs, giving it a rustic look. It was magnificently furnished, like something out of a movie. A very large stone fireplace dominated the main room, and it was adorned with an intricately carved eagle with a wingspan of 6-8 feet. It was a beautiful eagle and, for the next three years I dreamed of acquiring it, or if you must, I wanted to steal it. What a souvenir that would make? It never happened, but it was fun to plan. Mr. Rowley explained that the vital parts of Camp David were underground. Out of necessity, I must remain vague on many of the specific aspects of Camp David. Anything I mention here is fairly common knowledge and most likely, completely obsolete. Just being there was unbelievable. Being a key player in protecting the President of the United States was almost more than any 21 year old ego could handle. The fact that we could fail in our mission. or that I could be killed doing this, never entered my mind.

Under the President's lodge there was a Command Center, which he could enter by elevator from several locations within the lodge, including his bedroom. From the command Center, his image could be televised to any location in the world to assure people that he was alive and the government was functioning. There was a War Room from which a global war could be directed. There was a heavy security door leading into this area from the side of the President's lodge. A Marine, armed with a loaded M-1 rifle, was always stationed at this door during a presidential visit. Special badges were required to enter this door and the sentry's orders were specific No Badge . . . No Entry . . . PERIOD! This created my first crisis as the Sergeant of the Guard at Camp David. It wouldn't be the last, but in many ways was the most serious.

Early one morning, during the President's visit, Mr. Rowley approached the Marine sentry posted at the door leading into the underground command center. The Marine snapped to attention and saluted by presenting arms, and said, "Good morning Mr. Rowley." Mr. Rowley snarled a greeting and proceeded to pass the sentry. The sentry widened his stance and blocked the way with his rifle. Mr. Rowley glared and

wanted to know why he was being banned from entering. The Marine informed him that he wasn't wearing the required badge. No badge . . . No entry, was an order Mr. Rowley stressed. Mr. Rowley became highly irritated and declared, "You idiot! You know who I am, you called me by name!" The sentry replied, "You look like Mr. Rowley, but without the badge, you're not opening that door ." Mr. Rowley screamed obscenities and attempted to push his way past the sentry. The sentry swung the butt of his rifle in an arc that hit Mr. Rowley squarely on the shoulder and catapulted him into the rock garden on one side of the walkway. His pride damaged, his trousers torn and his body bruised from the fall onto the rocks, he jumped up scowling at the sentry. He stormed off threatening to send him to Adak, Alaska for duty. The sentry picked up the phone and when I answered, he quickly explained what had happened. I asked only one question! "Were you in the right?" He said, " Yes!" I left the guard office at a run, heading for the Secret Service cabin. I could see Mr. Rowley running through the trees heading for the same place. I could tell he was really pissed and that he would beat me to the cabin. He entered the cabin and slammed the door. I arrived shortly after him and quickly opened the door. He was already on the phone holding for the Commanding Officer of the Marine Barracks. He held up his hand to keep me from saying anything and proceeded to tell the CO what had happened. He finished by recommending the sentry for a Letter of Commendation and telling Colonel Williams that this was exactly why they used Marines for security. They were young, full of esprit de corps and they obeyed orders, almost to a fault. He looked at me and asked if I would convey his apology to the sentry. Before I could answer, he declared, "NO! I made an ass of myself and I should apologize in person!" He thanked me and, after putting on his badge, proceeded to the sentry's post. His apology to a Marine went over well with the troops. He gained their respect and, believe me, " No Badge . . . No Entry" meant just that. To the best of my knowledge, it was never questioned or challenged again. Working with the Secret Service was an exciting experience. They are real professionals and they take their job seriously. I would work closely with Mr. Rowley in the years ahead and the mutual respect fostered by this incident never waned.

The President's stay was brief and uneventful from a security aspect. He unexpectedly visited the guard office one morning and we were introduced by Mr. Rowley. I cannot describe the thrill of shaking hands with Dwight D. Eisenhower. In fact, I don't think it really sunk in until much later. I shook hands with the President .... WOW! The reason for his visit was to meet the young Marine who had upended his security chief. I immediately summoned the Marine, a 6' 3" Irishman from Boston. The President shook his hand and told him to keep up the good work. President Eisenhower was always very gracious with the young enlisted Marines he encountered during his visits to Camp David or in the White House. There is no doubt that we would have died to protect him.

Our stay at Camp David was short, as was the case in 1956, but everything

would change in 1957-58. A fourth platoon would be added to Ceremonial Guard Company and one platoon would be billeted at Camp David. The duty at Camp David would rotate every two weeks and provide a welcome relief from the spit-and-polish of Washington, DC. On the down side, it would take creative leadership to keep the young Marines mentally and physically alert and gainfully occupied. When the President wasn't at Camp David, or his farm in Gettysburg, the troops were given liberty passes. This rural community would never be the same. The favorite hangout in Thurmont was the "Thurmont Tavern," a bar that served hamburgers and other easy to prepare foods. Eventually, live music was added and this place became a goldmine for Sonny, the owner. As the word spread, women from as far away as Fredricksburg, MD and Gettysburg, PA would show up on the weekends. These tall (6'-6'4") well proportioned Marines, in the prime of their youth, would soon be invited to church and community socials and to the homes of some of the local girls. Due to their age, some of them began attending high school dances. Love was in bloom, but none of the relationships seemed to flourish. We were in Thurmont for two weeks and gone for six weeks, a lifetime when you're a teenager. At 21-22, I was an old man and as a sergeant trying to maintain unit integrity, soon became quite adept at counseling my love birds. I learned quickly that everyone is an individual, especially in matters of the heart. It soon became known that with our rotating schedule, some of the more precocious young ladies had a "special friend" in each platoon. Another place that benefitted from our presence was the delicatessen across the street from the Thurmont Tavern. They made the greatest sandwiches, whether you called them hoagies, subs or poorboys, they were big and they were good. Almost every night, a sandwich run was made from the mountain to the deli. At night, the hairpin turns on the sharply curved mountain road took their toll on the guard jeep and, as you might expect, the naval lieutenant went a little crazy at times. During one of our stays on the mountain, one of my gate guards threw an uneaten piece of sandwich out the door of the gate house. To his utter amazement, a full grown skunk came out from under the shack and ate the sandwich. He told the other reliefs and they began feeding the skunk each evening. After the skunk ate the sandwich, he returned to his home under the gate house. This went on for two weeks, but when we briefed the incoming platoon, we forgot to mention our pet skunk. To this day, I don't know if it was intentional, but it created a humorous incident. That first night on duty, the usual sandwich run was made. It was a starless night and a light mist hung close to the ground. The one light at the gate cast eerie shadows as it moved on a gentle breeze. The gate sentry finished his sandwich and leaned back in his chair wondering what to do for the rest of his four hour watch. When the President wasn't at Camp David, it was very quiet and boredom was a constant companion. He heard a scraping noise at the Dutch door. The top was open and he could see no one at the door. Suspecting a prank, he got up and jerked the door open and out of the mist came a black and white form . . . A SKUNK! The startled sentry didn't know the skunk only wanted his piece of sandwich and as the skunk started into the gate house, the sentry panicked. He drew his .45 Caliber pistol and fired three shots at what he called an "Attacking Beast!" All three shots missed the

skunk, but he put two holes in the floor and one in the wall. He had missed, but the skunk didn't. As the frightened skunk headed for the woods, he let go with a spray that got the sentry and the gate house. The relieving sentry took up his post, but quite a distance from the gate house, which had to be burned down the next day. The sentry became a loner. They put him in a separate cabin and made him take his meals outside. The smell lingered for several weeks, but was gone by the time we returned. My platoon never told anyone about feeding the skunk and when we returned, they put out pieces of sandwich, but the skunk never reappeared. I'll revisit Camp David later in my story, but for now we'll return to the Marine Barracks, Washington, DC and our first parade season. It is late spring, 1956.

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