

## *The Integration of Ceremonial Guard Company*

- The below article was written by 8th & I Marine DON KEELAN, 1957-1960, Arlington, VT, E-mail: [dbkeelan@comcast.net](mailto:dbkeelan@comcast.net). Don regularly writes columns for newspapers in southern Vermont. This particular article, "President Obama At Camp David," was written in February, 2009 in recognition of Black History Month, and is dedicated to his deceased Drill Team buddy, Corporal William J. "Willie" Freeman, 1958-1961 (a member of the New York State Police). In addition, Don is the author of *The Secret Of Camp David*, a 1994 fictional novel involving Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit at Camp David as the guest of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

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### ***President Obama at Camp David***

Last weekend, President Obama and his family made their first visit to Camp David. By having done so, he became the 13th president to stay over at the rustic presidential retreat, which is snuggled 1,600 feet above sea level in the Catocin Mountains of Maryland.

Many have heard and read about Camp David, but few realize why it has been a favorite getaway for so many of our past presidents (except for President Truman) dating back to FDR, our 31st president, who created the retreat in April of 1942 (then, referred to as Shangri-La) just months after the attack at Pearl Harbor. The physical setting that FDR had established during his 3 years of visiting the Retreat has little resemblance to what has been put in place by his 11 successors.

FDR had insisted that the camp's cabins were to be minimal in design. The security make up, Secret Service Agents and Marines, were housed in tents. It wasn't until many years later that a swimming pool, tennis courts, riding trails and a putting green were installed. President Obama and his guests will also see a medical clinic, a chapel, a library and a movie hall as well as modern cabins and barracks, all part of the 120 acre compound. Our 44th president will walk on the same stone paths that President Eisenhower and Chairman Khrushchev had walked in 1959, as well as did President Carter, President Anwar al Sadat and Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1978.

For this writer it is not so much the physical changes that have been put in place at Camp David these past 67 years or for that matter the Camp's prior visitors that are of such importance. Instead, it is the new occupant of Aspen Lodge that is so dramatic, as it is an African-American President. In 1957, as a member of the Camp David Security Detachment, I would never have thought it would be possible.

In the late 1950's, the security for Camp David was fairly routine and quite simple. Then, a 24-man Marine platoon was stationed at the Retreat for two weeks, after which the platoon was rotated back to Washington, D.C., when another platoon of similar size would take over. When President Eisenhower wished to go to his Retreat for the weekend, an additional 24-man platoon traveled the 70 miles from

Washington's Marine Barracks to augment the guard. The Marines went via a Marine Corps bus and usually, late on Friday night.

What makes this worth noting in 2009 is that in 1957-60 my platoon of 24 had 4 African American Marines. Up until then, the Washington, D.C. Marine Barracks never had a platoon of white and Black Marines. Raised in Mt. Vernon, New York I thought very little of having Blacks in the same unit. A significant percentage of the 75 thousand residents of the town I had been raised were African Americans.

Nevertheless, in 1957-60 being with a mixed racial group made a big difference when we would be on the bus, late at night and heading for guard duty at Camp David. At Hagerstown, Maryland and only a short distance from Camp David, the bus would pull into a diner so we could have sandwiches before our late-evening arrival at Camp David. All of us, except for the 4 Black Marines, would go into the diner. The diner's sign was not inviting — "Whites Only." Nor will I fully appreciate the humiliation that my 4 fellow Marines had to endure while they stayed on the bus and had to have sandwiches brought to them---knowing full well that within a short time all 24 of us would be walking post at the double fence line that secured the President of the United States.

Much has been written these past months about how far we have come as a country by the swearing in of an African American president. Many have relived the distance traveled since the Selma, Alabama March. Some have referred to Dr. King's 1963 address at the Lincoln Memorial as a major milestone in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. While others note the 1964 Civil Rights Act passage as a watershed in how far we have travelled in overcoming discrimination — and indeed we have.

However, for this former Camp David Marine guard, witnessing the occupancy of President Obama at Camp David, represents what really can be achieved in overcoming the stain and evil of bigotry, segregation and discrimination.

Don Keelan

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- **Editor's note:** The first black Marines were selected for CGC during the fall - winter of 1957-58, and first appeared in a formal parade at the Barracks at outset of the 1958 parade season. Each platoon of new CGC ceremonial Marines was individually selected from thousands of Marines undergoing post-boot camp combat training at Camp Lejeune, NC. Before the first selection team went to Camp Lejeune in the fall of 1957, the then Barracks CO (and later Commandant of the Marine Corps), Col. Leonard F. Chapman gathered the selection teams together and directed that black Marines were to be selected for CGC on exactly the same assessment criteria as white Marines.