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MY BRUSH WITH HISTORY

Bringing the President Home

What were the protocols for deploying nearly two thousand people?

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In the late afternoon of Thursday, April 12, 1945, my wife and I were relaxing on the front terrace of our West Point quarters. Such a mild, sunny day seldom came to the Hudson Valley so early in the spring. Suddenly, from an open second-story window, one of our young sons who had been listening to the radio called out, "Momma, Papa —Roosevelt is dead!" We sat in stunned silence.

At last my wife spoke. "You'll have to plan the president's funeral." As assistant operations training officer for the U.S. Corps of Cadets I was responsible for all cadet ceremonies and the preparation and coordination of military training programs.

I shook my head. "No, Washington will take care of everything. The Military Academy won't be involved."

The next evening, my home telephone rang. It was Brigadier General George Honnen, the commandant of cadets. "Mac," he said, "you're it. The War Department has just ordered us to plan and supervise President Roosevelt's funeral at Hyde Park, set for 10:00 on Sunday morning. We'll go up there at 7:30 tomorrow and look over the situation." My wife was right, as usual.

General Honnen and I arrived at the Roosevelt home in Hyde Park early Saturday morning and introduced ourselves to the superintendent of the estate, William Plog. At his invitation, we briefly visited the inside of the house.

I shall never forget the sight of the dark blue Navy cape hanging in the closet of the president's upstairs bedroom, his Harvard pennant on the wall, his wheelchair, the ramps that replaced stairways. During his entire presidency, I had never seen him in a wheelchair.

Superintendent Plog led us outside and pointed to the exact spot in the rose garden that Mr. Roosevelt had selected for his gravesite some five years earlier. Then, we walked through the wooded grounds, reconnoitering the roads and paths that allowed access to the burial site. A dense hemlock hedge, planted in the 1840s and some 15 feet high, almost completely surrounded the garden. There was an opening on the west side through which a column of troops could pass, but the single opening to the south, facing the mansion, was much too narrow for the casket bearers. Mr. Plog promised to widen the archway by having his gardeners cut back several feet of tangled branches on both sides of the path.

Next, we drove down toward the Hudson River along the winding lane that led to a spur track on the New York Central right-of-way, to determine the distance to the nearest point where the train could stop. Afterward, we drove to the Hyde Park railroad station, clocking the mileage from the burial site.

Although these data would be useful, we still lacked much urgently needed information. How many mourners would attend the funeral? When and where would the casket leave the train? What other military units, besides the West Point cadets, would share in the final honors? Later in the day, when I saw workmen busily preparing the grave, my concern increased.

Nevertheless, some steps could be taken right away. Colonel A. A. Heidner, our supply officer, hurried to West Point to arrange for the movement to Hyde Park of a battalion, to be chosen by lot from the Corps of Cadets, together with the brigade colors and the U.S. Military Academy Band. In addition, a black funeral caisson with seven horses, a black caparisoned horse, and a battery of field artillery would be brought up from West Point by bus and truck. All these were to reach the estate by 8:00 A.M. Sunday.

Late Saturday afternoon, word came from Washington that two special trains carrying mourners would arrive at 9:00 A.M.; that our plans should provide for four battalions of Army, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard personnel, who would be there at 7:00 A.M.; and that the Army Air Force would he represented by a formation flight over

Hyde Park exactly five minutes before the service. A fleet of 200 Army staff sedans would meet the dignitaries arriving on the special trains and bring them from the Hyde Park railroad station.

Before I could tackle the problem of how to deploy nearly 2000 people, I needed to know the route the funeral cortege would travel. Would it come south, along the highway from the Hyde Park station, or up the narrow gravel lane from the spur track inside the estate? The former route was several miles longer and would present more difficulties. Increasingly urgent telephone calls to Washington yielded little information. With President Truman and the suddenly widowed Mrs. Roosevelt aboard, the movement of the closely guarded funeral train was classified secret. "You had better make alternative plans," I was told. This at a time when I thought I'd be lucky to come up with one plan!

Recalling the military adage "There is no substitute for thorough ground reconnaissance," I headed back to the New York Central right-of-way about three-quarters of a mile from the house. There, alongside the spur track, I found a group of railroad workmen building a temporary platform of heavy timbers. They said it was to be used to enable a 900-pound copper-lined casket to be transferred to the motor hearse. I ran back up the hill to our temporary headquarters with this information. At last, we knew exactly where to meet the funeral train and that we had to make only one plan after all.

Although service manuals prescribe the protocol for normal military funerals, these regulations did not seem appropriate on this most important occasion. Given the more personal nature of the traditional three rifle volleys, I recommended that the final salute be fired over the grave by a squad of cadets. (This would replace three salvos by distant cannon.) Only one artillery salute would be fired, the 21-gun presidential salute. It would begin as the motor hearse carried the casket from the train to the meadow below the mansion. The Army Air Force formations would fly over while the cannon were firing.

We decided to use the cadet battalion as an escort of honor in the funeral procession. The cadets would form in the meadow, render honors when the casket was transferred to the caisson, then march in a slender column of threes up the narrow lane. The route would be lined on both sides with about one thousand soldiers, sailors, and Marines standing shoulder to shoulder. On entering the rose garden, the cadet battalion would form in a compressed mass on the west side. Already posted around the other three sides of the garden, with their backs to the hedge, would be three hundred servicemen representing the other armed services. Barely sufficient standing room would then remain for individual mourners, journalists, and photographers.

My next task was to determine the specific military and musical honors to be rendered. After this had been worked out, I called the minister who was going to conduct the service and learned that he had never attended a military funeral. I asked him to come over to the garden. The dignified 78-year-old Reverend Dr. George W. Anthony, rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Hyde Park, where Mr. Roosevelt had served as the senior warden, arrived at dusk and quickly verified his part in the service.

Late that night, Mike Reilly, chief of the White House Secret Service detail, arrived from Washington and approved our plans. By midnight we had written up and mimeographed detailed orders to issue to unit commanders as soon as they arrived on Sunday morning. Then I went home for a few hours' rest.

Four hours later, at 6:30 A.M., I was back at Hyde Park, shivering in the chill, damp wind. At first, the quiet was broken only by the faint cawing of crows on the heavily wooded banks of the Hudson. Soon, long convoys of trucks and buses began arriving, and the commands of the quickly briefed leaders could be heard as they formed their units and marched them to their designated positions.

Inside the garden, a florist was arranging truckloads of floral tributes; when occasional gusts blew down the wire standards, he hastily replaced the wreaths.

I had requested a state trooper to keep people from occupying the square of lawn reserved for the cadet battalion. As more and more dignitaries arrived, however, he kept retreating from his post. Finally, I had to ask one gentleman to move backward about ten paces. Later the trooper came over and said, "Sir, do you know who that man was you moved? That was Mr. Morgenthau."

After I'd dislodged the Secretary of the Treasury, I stayed in the rose garden while fellow staff officers monitored the formation of the troops outside. When the first cannon boomed, I knew that the motor hearse was moving the half-mile from the railroad. The sound of the guns soon blended with the roar of approaching P-47s, led by a B-25 Mitchell bomber.

Simultaneously the far-off notes of bugles sounding "Hail to the Chief" could be heard as the flag-covered casket was transferred to the horse-drawn funeral caisson. The slow, uphill march of the cortege to the final resting place began. As the procession drew nearer, the muffled drumbeats ended, and the band began to play Chopin's funeral march.

Behind the black caisson, flanked by enlisted casket bearers chosen from all the services, a United States Military Academy private led the riderless, blackdraped horse, the traditional symbol of a fallen commander.

With slow, measured steps, the procession moved along the narrow gravel roads encircling the rose garden. The cadet battalion entered from the west and massed in a solid phalanx of some four hundred men facing east toward the grave. The caisson halted at the garden's narrow gateway. The long journey begun at Warm Springs three days before had come to an end.

The commands "Present arms " "Parade, rest "; the bowed heads; the tear-stained faces: these I remember.

The tall, white-haired Dr. Anthony walked slowly to the graveside. The prayer ended, the minister lifted his right hand in benediction and intoned John Ellerton's hymn: "Now the laborer's task is o'er;/Now the battle day is past. ... /Father, in thy gracious keeping/Leave we now thy servant sleeping." The casket was lowered into the freshly dug grave.

"Attention, escort, less firing party. Present arms .

"Firing party, fire three volleys.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

Three times eight rifles pointed skyward and cracked simultaneously.

The rifle volleys frightened Mr. Roosevelt's dog, FaIa—held on a leash by Margaret Suckley, a cousin and close confidant of the late president—and the little Scottish terrier barked repeatedly.

As the final volley echoed through the woods, muffled drums rolled once again, and the U.S.M.A. Band's cornet soloist sounded taps. FDR had come home.

After walking out of the garden, Mrs. Roosevelt talked with General Honnen. "General," she said, "I know that you were responsible for this heautiful service. But tell me, what officer arranged the many details? I would like to meet him." As the general graciously introduced me, she smiled, took my hand, and gave me a warm expression of appreciation.

The ceremony had proceeded as planned, despite the haste with which the arrangements had been made. When we departed, our mission complete, it was only 11:00. In a single hour, this spot that had been a peaceful, secluded garden for 134 years had become a national shrine.

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