

Interview with Lieutenant Benjamin King

Security Officer: My name is Benjamin King, and I'm from the State of Guyana, formerly British Guyana. When I joined the United Nations in 1955, my nationality was United Kingdom and I was a member of the British Empire. I served in the British Guyana Police Force for eight years, from 1944 until my resignation in 1952. I think it's because of my previous service with the Guyana Police that I am here now. I think it gave me the kind of foundation that is necessary for the kind of work I have done with the United Nations.

I proceeded to the United States in 1952. I applied for a U.N. job in 1954. At first I was afraid to come to the U.N. because of the weather. I passed by and saw men standing out there in 12 degree temperatures, and I thought I wouldn't be able to stand it. But after they called me in for an appointment, I found myself back in uniform and standing out in zero degree temperatures and below.

My break came in 1960 with the Congo uprising. They needed four Security Guards to proceed to Leopoldville as aides to the late Dr. Ralph Bunche. He was in charge there, as the representative of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold. They needed four non-NATO nationals and I was selec-

ted along with Mr. Redman of Trinidad, Mr. Lupu from Romania, and Victor Noble, who is now a United States citizen. We proceeded by air to Brazzaville and crossed the ferry into Leopoldville. It was one of the highlights of my career here.

While we were in Leopoldville, Dag Hammarskjold arrived for the first time. He made a trip to meet Tshombe, who was the Katanga Chief, perhaps a thousand miles east of Leopoldville, which is now called Kinshasa. I was selected to accompany him, along with Victor Noble. The Belgian military yielded to the U.N.-Swedish troops and they secured the airport and took over command. I remained at that post for one week while Dag Hammarskjold and all the others returned to Headquarters. On his second trip to meet Tshombe, one year later, he never made it back. I just happened to have left there to come home for Christmas, or else I might have been on that plane on the fatal flight.

I went on a similar trip with a uniformed escort accompanying U Thant. It was in October 1962. There was a confrontation between the East and West, and missiles were allegedly proceeding towards Cuba. John F. Kennedy, the President of the United States, and Khrushchev of Russia were having a showdown. I wasn't too sure what was going on. Sixteen of us left New York on a chartered Varig Airlines plane to accompany U Thant. When we arrived in Havana, there was a conference with Fidel Castro. I was not present at the first conference, but one of my colleagues, Claude Williams, was there. On the second day, I did ac-

company U Thant's party with his aide, Donald Thomas. Twenty-four hours later, we were requested to return to New York.

I didn't know what was happening. I thought the war might have broken out right there and caught me on the island of Cuba. I knew that missiles were proceeding towards Cuba in Russian vessels, and from the coastline of Havana I could see what I thought to be smoke stacks of American destroyers, three or four miles out. I actually wrote a letter, so that in case anything should happen, my family would know that I was thinking of them at the last moment. When we returned to New York, Idlewild Airport—the name at the time—was filled with Secret Servicemen and all sorts of Federal authorities. It was the scariest time, I think, in my Security service and in my life.

A week after we returned to New York, a colleague of mine said that the very plane that we traveled to Havana in, proceeded to Brazil, circled around South America and then crashed somewhere near Los Angeles right after leaving us. While we were proceeding to Cuba, they were testing missiles at Cape Canaveral, and I was told that our plane had no radar and that there was a near miss; but that I cannot substantiate. Since then I've found that I have no love for trips or flying.

Question: Did you ever speak to U Thant at all during that time?

Security Officer: You could have gotten close to U Thant. He was a fatherly type of man. Dag Hammarskjöld was rather aloof, but since we were so close together there in the group in Elizabethville, I did get to know him somewhat. There in Elizabethville, we were given a villa for the U.N. staff and we raised the U.N. flag. Since we did not trust anyone in the area—it was rather hostile—we had to chop and cook for ourselves. We lived together under the same roof. The Secretary-General didn't eat in the same room as the Security personnel and the other staff, but we all ate the same food. And before you knew it, he got to know us. When he was proceeding to the airport to leave, he stopped the car, came out and said to me, "King, I understand that you have been selected to stay behind here and I wish you luck. I'm leaving now. Good-bye." That's the only thing he ever said to me and it was the last thing, unfortunately.

I spoke with U Thant several times. I've also spoken with Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. On the evening when the Yom Kippur War broke out, I was Duty Officer here. I received a request from the U.S. Mission to get in touch with Secretary-General Waldheim right away. I called to his country home by direct line and spoke with him, and he gave me instructions. Within three or four hours after my call they had requested a meeting of the Security Council. The Security Council met at 9:30 that night and by midnight New York time there was a cease-fire in the Middle East. So I felt that in my little way I had contributed. We are kind of unheard and unseen in Security. But even though

we're not known, it gives us a lot of satisfaction to be a part of the world stage.

Question: What were some of the times when you spoke to U Thant?

Security Officer: When you're in the Security business, you really do not have the opportunity to speak to these people; we don't get a chance to say, "Mr. Secretary-General, I like the way you carry on the business of the U.N.," because we're always looking the other way. We would like to be part of the action, but many times when there's a conference going on here, I find myself on an outpost a hundred yards away, taking care of the perimeter. I've never been his close bodyguard, except on the trip to Cuba. He was so tense then—just like I was—that there wasn't time for talk.

You were asking about the humorous things. In 1970, I was a Sergeant on the Conference Platoon, and a young man, who was not properly dressed, came into the Cafeteria. He ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee—I think it totaled 99 cents—and he was unable to pay for it. I received a call on the radio, and I went over there. Well, I was supposed to take him under arrest but my heart went out to this little guy. I've paid from my pocket many times for these little things, but I was kind of upset with him. So I went up to the information desk, asked the receptionist for an envelope and I wrote on that envelope: "United Nations Coffee Shop, U.N. Plaza." Then I said,

"Here. You put a dollar in here within one week and mail it back to the U.N. or else. Give me your name and address or I'll get to you." Then I went on vacation and two weeks later I had a chat with the manager of the Coffee Shop. I said, "By the way, did you ever receive an envelope that had a dollar in it?" He said, "Yes. A money order came for one dollar." Then he asked me, "Why did you do that?" I said, "Well, look: this is the United Nations; we have to start somewhere. You were upset because I didn't grab him and take him to the office and handcuff him and all that, but do you know what inspired me to do that that day? You would be surprised." He said, "What?" I said, "The Lord's Prayer. It's right there: 'Give us this day our daily bread'. All he had was a hamburger which is bread and meat. And 'Forgive us our trespasses'; so this is what I did. Somehow I felt that that man would not let me down. He did send in a money order for a dollar which was a penny more than he owed."

I'm philosophical about my job. I may seem to have a hard exterior. That's from my training. But in my country I sang in the Cathedral Choir of the Anglican Church. Here they call it the Protestant Church. I love semi-classical music. When I have a tense night here, I go home at one in the morning and I play my ukulele very quietly, and that relaxes me better than a martini.

Once there was an old man, a retired man in his seventies, who was in the habit of walking around the park. He would chat with us. One day I spoke

to him, when I was on duty there as a Security Officer, and he told me that he was a retired journalist, and that he loved to come here because it's the safest park in the city. So I said to him, "Did you see the newspaper today?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Isn't it wonderful about the rockets?" I think it was the time when the manned rockets were being sent up into outer space. He said, "I'm not impressed." I said, "What? John Glenn and all these people are going up there and you're not impressed?" He said, "If a person puts an apple in my hand and says to me, 'I've made this,' then I will be impressed." I thought about that for a while. I could never forget that man. He brought home to me that nature is the greatest inventor.

No matter where you go, you do have racial friction, but whenever I see it coming, I manage to handle it by turning it into humour. Let me give you an example. I was in the plain clothes investigation unit and I had to come down to the office to check my revolver for the night. When I came down, one of my colleagues said to me, "Oooh! You have a revolver? You should have a spear!" Everyone in the office looked around to see if there would be a boxing match or something. I paused a bit and looked around with a serious look on my face and I said, "You know something? It's funny. When my ancestors used it, they called it a spear. When your ancestors carried it, they called it a javelin. But my ancestors were smart. They used it to hunt for food. What did you guys use it for?" They were silent, and I left.

I remember one other thing that happened to me. As a very junior Security Officer I had a very slim, sharp-looking uniform. I was up front one Sunday afternoon. The building was closed to the public, and a Caucasian man came up, trying to get in. I said, "I'm sorry, sir," very politely. "It's six-thirty. No visitors." He looked at me and said, "What do you mean I can't get in here? I am a taxpayer!" I said, "I'm very sorry, sir, that I have to tell you that." He said to me, "By the way, how did you get this job? Was your father the Mayor's bootblack?" I said, "No, he was a Mau Mau. I'm from Kenya." He knew I was kidding, I guess, because we started talking and I could not get rid of that man for an hour and a half. I was relieved for coffee, and eventually I had to bring him into the building and show him around.

Question: So just by using your sense of humour, you became friends?

Security Officer: Yes. Now another time a man came up to me and said, "Why don't you guards carry guns?" Before I could answer him, he said, "Suppose I slap you in the face?" I said, "Well, sir, I don't know. I might turn around, swing you around and kick you in the behind. That's all." That was another guy I couldn't get rid of.

Another time I was in the Meditation Room, on duty, and a man came in. He was kicking at the rail or something, so I spoke to him. He said, "You have a foreign accent. You're not American." I said, "Unfortunately, no, sir." He said, "Where are you

from?" I told him that I was from South America, from Guyana. He said, "Do you have TV there?" I said, "No, sir, we do not have TV." He said, "How do you make out if you don't have TV there?" I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, the average heat there is 86 degrees. So even if we had television, it would be very late at night before we would be able to enjoy it, and people go to bed very early in those areas—in the Caribbean." Then I asked him where he was from and he said, "Nebraska." I said, "Do you work?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Do you get vacation?" He said, "Oh, yes. I get three weeks' vacation every year." I said, "What do you do when you get vacation?" He said, "Oh, I fish, I hunt, I swim." I said, "Oh?" I smiled. He wanted to know why I was smiling, and I said, "That's what my people are doing all year around."

So we turn these troubles into laughter, and it's better that way. For instance, tonight I have men of something like eleven different nationalities working here. Right now on this squad, I have staff from Guyana, Tunisia, U.S.A., Italy, Ireland, India and Trinidad and Tobago. The most important thing here, when they recruit men from these different areas, is to train them and teach them to work as a team under the same supervision, in one language. You cannot discriminate.

Question: But if the need comes up, you can call on these men to speak their various different languages.

Security Officer: Yes, this pays off sometimes. You asked me some time ago what type of person a Security Officer is. This is not necessarily the assessment of the Security Service, but if I were asked to describe the ideal Security Officer at the United Nations, I would say that he must be capable of feeding a newborn baby with the left hand and simultaneously being able to choke a rattlesnake to death with the right. Because in this Service we have had to change from one to the other within a moment's notice.

One day I was on duty, and suddenly I saw a man taking down the Cuban flag. I dashed a hundred yards to him and I grabbed him. He was an anti-Castro Cuban who had come to the U.N. to embarrass the other Cubans by taking down the flag and photographing the bare, empty pole. But I caught him in time and brought him in and so forth. He said to me, "If I knew there were guards like you here, I would never have come here to do this." I didn't really know what he meant by that.

I'd like to close here with a few verses I wrote. These are my own verses, but I think they apply to my men here in Security, too.

MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

Give not your lips precedence o'er your thoughts,
For on your words may many lives depend.
Let not jailor's keys nor hangman's rope be wrought
Since evidence in chief you can't amend.

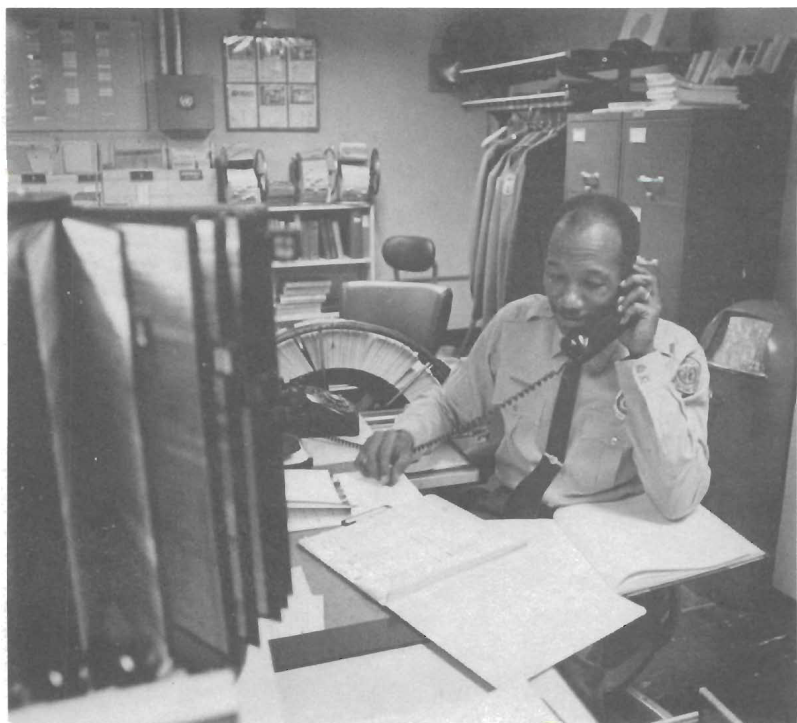
Be active, but in acting be polite.
Your duty is to guide the human race
Through multifarious deeds by day, by night
As surely you will go from place to place.

Be tolerant and infinitely kind.
Be strong in mind and body, wise and brave,
For come what may in time to come you'll find
Your duty calls from cradle to the grave.

When duty calls, with swiftness do obey.
Fulfil your tasks with honour and with pride.
Make wisdom, law and justice lead the way
And leave judge alone or jury to decide.

Let truthfulness and candor be your guide,
And honesty of purpose be your aim.
Set anger, greed and hatred well aside.
Then do your duty as you play the perfect game.

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An officer on duty during the early morning hours.
[Photo: United Nations]

Interview with Officer Robert Chittenden

Question: How long have you been with the Service?

Security Officer: Nineteen years.

Question: What is the most interesting thing that has happened to you since you've been with the service?

Security Officer: The most interesting thing that happened to me on the job was the incident in 1973 or '74 in the General Assembly Hall, when one Foreign Minister threatened the life of another. I was assigned to protect the Foreign Minister who was under attack, and individuals from the other delegation entered the General Assembly floor area and displayed guns. One of our Lieutenants stood between them and the Foreign Minister whose life was in danger and escorted him out.

Question: They actually brought guns into the General Assembly?

Security Officer: Oh, yes, they had guns. And the other thing was the Arafat visit. I found that very, very interesting and revealing.

Question: How did the Security have to deal with that?

Security Officer: When Arafat was here, I was in charge of the clearing centre, which was across the street. It was a very, very interesting week. We had tight security for a week, but he was only here for two days.

Question: What is the quality that you think is the most important for somebody in Security?

Security Officer: I think first of all he has to be dedicated to the principles of the Organization and also to the realities of good security. And being a good Security Officer means making sure that the job is properly done and realizing you have a responsibility for a large number of people and property and being proud of the Organization that you're here to serve. I know we have never had an incident where anybody has been seriously injured or killed, and I think it's primarily because of the fact that the members of the Security and Safety Service are dedicated to the principles of both the Charter and of being good Security Officers.

Question: What has been the proudest time for you?

Security Officer: I think the Organization was at its peak at the time of Dag Hammarskjöld. I think at that time the entire staff was at its peak and that includes, obviously, the Security Force.

Question: What is your main interest away from the job, away from the U.N.?

Security Officer: Sports. I like sailing, football games, soccer and hockey.

Question: Do you feel the U.N. is doing anything?

Security Officer: Oh, I feel the United Nations has definitely done a great deal for the world. Many of us in fact wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the U.N. I think in the political field the U.N. has done a fantastic job. They haven't solved all the problems of the world. Nobody expects them to do that—it would be impossible. As far as the economic area goes, again, I think they are doing a fantastic job.

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The following account of two particularly outstanding incidents in his U.N. experience was offered by Special Security Officer John Alo:

Providing Security for prominent United Nations visitors, staff members and delegations presents unique problems for the uniformed Security Officer.

A Security Officer never knows to whom he is speaking or what danger he may be approaching. By just thinking he is going to answer a simple question or give a simple direction the Officer may be facing instant death.

On the evening of 6 November 1967 at 5:50 p.m. a drama unfolded within the view of staff members, who were unaware of the danger of the first possible shooting in the history of the United Nations. While assigned to the visitors' lobby of the General Assembly area, I started to clear the area of all visitors with the assistance of my area supervisor, Sgt. Frank Worabel. As both of us were explaining to a well-dressed visitor the reason for him to leave, we found ourselves within a matter of seconds looking down the muzzle of a cocked, fully loaded 9MM Browning Automated Pistol. I saw my complete life flash by me in a second and was awaiting a flash and sound from his first shot. Because of my first action, which was to get armed help without upsetting the threat of a shoot-out, and the action of our plain clothes officers, who responded immediately, a shoot-out was avoided.

Another incident in which I was involved was on 25 August 1967 when I was threatened by the head of a student movement and two of his associates. At that time, the young man was indicted by the U.S. District Court in New York City for illegally carrying a concealed weapon. This incident took place at one of our entrance gates while we were scrutinizing all persons entering the United Nations grounds. Tight security was in effect because we had received threats on the lives of the Royal Family of Greece, who were visiting that day.