

Published by the Legion Publishing Corporation. Owned exclusively by The American Legion. Official publication of The American Legion and The American Legion Auxiliary.

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICES
627 West 43rd Street,
New York City.

FEBRUARY 10, 1922

Copyright, 1922, by the Legion Publishing Corporation.

PAGE 5

Some of My Recollections of Lincoln

By Robert W. McBride

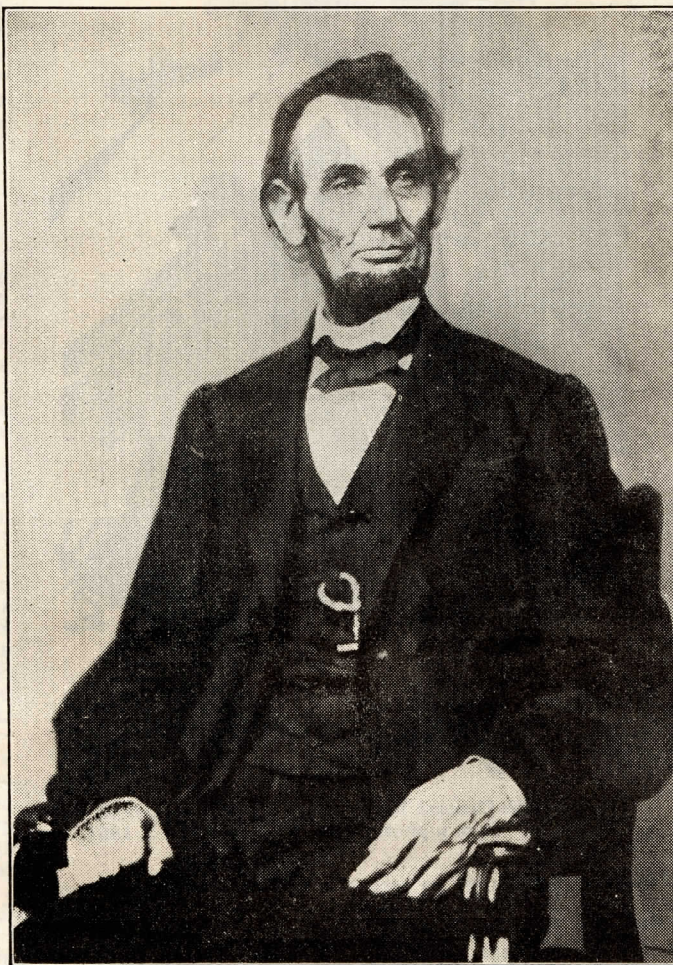
Formerly Corporal and Company Clerk, Union Light Guard of Ohio (President Lincoln's Bodyguard), now Senior Vice-Commander-in-Chief, Grand Army of the Republic.

JUST after midnight one morning in January, 1864, four mounted Union cavalymen were standing guard at the great iron gates to the White House grounds. The gates were open, but the double cavalry guard made it certain that no one not having business in the grounds at that hour could enter—certainly not through the gates. A non-commissioned officer of cavalry, the corporal of the guard, was lounging against the stone portico of the White House itself, in the rear of which his horse was picketed.

He was thinking, as I suppose every corporal and private of the guard that ever had the world to himself in the small hours always has thought, of home. It was a home he had left barely a month before, a home that was not so far away as miles are numbered, but months and perhaps years away in point of time, and he was recruit enough to be a little homesick. I happen to know just what he was thinking, because I was that corporal.

My outfit, organized in December, 1863, as the Seventh Independent Company of Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, had been recruited throughout Ohio and mustered in at Columbus for special service. Not a one of us knew at the time what that special service was to be. We were 108 men strong, and there were ten rumors for every man. The most persistent of these was that we were to help put a stop to the depredations of Moseby, the daring guerilla leader who was such a thorn in the side of the Union forces. It sounded exciting, and we were all looking forward to plenty of action within a few weeks or even days.

Imagine our disappointment, therefore, when, on reaching Washington and reporting, as our officers had been bidden to do, to the Secretary of War, Mr. Stanton, we were told for the first time that we were to be the bodyguard of President Lincoln! Now, with the war



This is how Lincoln looked just after his meeting with General Grant, an event described in Commander McBride's article

sixty years in the background, the fifteen of us who still survive out of the original 108 can see the honor that was paid us in having this assignment. But we could see no great honor in it in 1864. We had expected to go straight into action against one of the cleverest leaders on the Confederate side, and we were not even going to the front!

I was still thinking about the "disgrace" of it that night, less than a month after entering the service, when I stood lounging against the White House portico in what I admit must have been a pretty unsoldierly position. Suddenly the front door opened, and a tall, angular figure stood outlined for

an instant against the gas lights in the hallway behind it. It was clad in a long frock coat, and on its head was one of the straight-sided, genuine stove-pipe high hats that were then so much in vogue. There was sufficient light for me to see that it was not a new hat—that the wearer of it stuck to it more from habit than because it happened to be the fashion of the times.

The corporal of the guard sprang to attention as the tall, black-clad figure closed the door and came slowly toward the edge of the steps, head bowed, hands clasped behind. By this time the corporal had his saber at the Present position and was holding it there as if his life depended on it.

The figure paused several minutes at the head of the steps. A gas lamp played squarely upon it and I had an opportunity to study President Lincoln almost face to face in a manner that has been vouchsafed to few men now living. The face bore the ineradicable marks of the anxiety of nearly three years of war. For the rest, it was the gaunt, kindly face that is now so familiar to a hundred millions of Americans. At that time, however, there were thousands of equally good Americans who would not have known the Presi-

dent if they had passed him on the street. Our newspapers did not publish so many pictures as now, the arts of photography and engraving were not so highly developed, and only those of us who had a chance to look through the pages of *Harper's* and *Frank Leslie's Weeklies* were likely to be familiar with the portraits of the great men of the time. In fact, it was from having seen Mr. Lincoln's picture in those papers that I now recognized him. It was thanks to those same weeklies, too, that I was able to recognize General Grant when I saw him not long after, as I shall relate presently.

forces, and he was most anxious for the President's safety, though in view of their relative positions he was hesitant about speaking to him. But after the medical officer standing close to Mr. Lincoln had been stricken down, General Wright decided that the time for punctilious etiquette had passed. He went up to the President and said:

"Mr. Lincoln, you're commander-in-chief of the Army, but I'm in command here. You're too valuable to be exposed this way. I don't ask you—I order you to retire to a place of safety."

"All right, General," laughed Lincoln, and came calmly down from the parapet while the bullets were still peppering it.

Lincoln had bitter opponents in those days, and on this occasion hostile newspapers went so far as to accuse him of personal cowardice and printed elaborate lies detailing the measures he had taken for his own safety. One said he had a private ironclad anchored in the Potomac on which he had already placed his family and his valuables, ready to leave in case of emergency. And these newspapers I speak of were not Rebel sheets. Is it any wonder, in view of the calumnies which were spread, that we who were his bodyguard feared for his safety on his lone walks at night through the little woods that lay between the White House and the War Department?

I had the good fortune to be present when Grant and Lincoln met for the first time. I have found many people who were surprised to learn that the President and the soldier who became commander of his troops in the field had never seen each other before March, 1864, when the war was nearly three years old. And the circumstances of their meeting were somewhat unusual when it finally did occur.

A public reception was in progress at the White House. Public receptions were occasions when the President's bodyguard had its hands full. I don't think we enjoyed them especially. There was always present in our minds the foreboding that something might happen to the President, for these functions really were open to the public, and large crowds always attended. It was at an event very similar to one of these White House gatherings that President McKinley was shot two generations later. There were the same long lines of crowding, excited visitors, all eager to grasp the President's hand, all supposedly loyal Americans, but there was nothing to prevent an armed maniac from finding a place among them, exactly as happened at Buffalo.

I say this foreboding was always present in our minds—it never entered Mr. Lincoln's. We were present at these receptions only to keep the lines of visitors intact, and to see that arrangements were carried out as planned; our duties were virtually those of ushers. It was for this reason that we were not present at the time of the actual assassination—because Mr. Lincoln keenly resented any suggestion of possible danger when he was mingling with the people of his country, and insisted that he be unaccompanied. It was only owing to the urgent insistence of Secretary Stanton that he had consented to

have a mounted escort and a patrol around the White House. The infantry pickets were not even allowed to challenge anyone wishing to enter the White House, and its doors were as open as they are in the peace time of today. The following fall, when the President returned to the White House from his summer quarters at the Soldiers' Home, Mrs. Lincoln did secure the services of a detail from my company for service inside the White House at night, but this was done without the President's knowledge. I often wonder what would have happened if, awaking during the night, Mr. Lincoln had discovered an Ohio cavalryman pacing the corridor outside his chamber.

On the night in March, 1864, when the reception of which I speak was held, a detail of us were standing near the front door of the White House guiding the crowds as they came in. Two officers appeared among them, and we could tell from their shoulder straps that one was a major general, the other a brigadier. Each wore a heavy, dark beard. The face of neither was familiar. We wondered who they might be, as most of the general officers were well known to us by sight from their frequent visits to the White House.

"It's Grant!" whispered one of our number. "I can tell him from his picture in *Harper's Weekly*!"

Then I, too, recalled the woodcuts of the already famous soldier that had appeared in that universally read pictorial history of the war. Grant it was, attired in his field uniform—a uniform that was not shabby, but which still bore signs of having seen real service. The brigadier, we learned, was General Rawlings, his chief of staff. Grant at that time had already been promoted lieutenant general; he was now, in fact, in Washington to receive his commission and to become commander-in-chief of the Union Armies.

Grant took his place in line with the waiting hundreds. As he drew near the President, I saw Mr. Lincoln step aside to accord him a special greeting. The President, too, had apparently recognized the man whom he had just named head of his Armies from the pictures in *Harper's Weekly*!

I could not hear what was said, but I could see the cordial handclasp and the look which each gave the other, a look in each case of mingled curiosity and admiration. The soldier had heard so much of the President, and the President so much of the soldier!

Naturally everyone present tried to get in as close as possible to the famous pair, with whom Secretary Seward was standing, so that when General Grant turned to leave he could barely move for the crush. By this time I, with some other members of the company, had pushed through to his side. We formed a cordon around the General and Mr. Seward and, by steady efforts with our elbows, worked our charges to the opposite side of the East Room. So great was the crush that I was packed tightly against the General, and the brass shoulder insignia that indicated my branch of the service was broken off against his own shoulder.

"Quite a crowd, corporal," remarked Grant with a smile.

Our goal was a sofa against the

further wall, and when we reached it Secretary Seward mounted it as a rostrum, pulling Grant up beside him. The secretary then introduced the soldier, who shook hands with everyone who passed, just as the President was doing in the Blue Room.

I realize now what a privilege it was for me to be able to see thus intimately the President whom we now revere as the greatest American in history, but, as I was a humble corporal in his bodyguard, that intimacy was naturally limited. I know nothing of Lincoln the President, of Lincoln the statesman—no more, I mean, than the young men of today know from their own study of his magnificent life. But when I read that record, it is illumined for me by my remembrance of the kindly figure who stood silent on the White House doorstep, and raised his hat with dignity to return the salute of a freshly recruited Union soldier.