

PIA

## Presidential visits: Kennedy and Key West



GEORGE FARALDO/Special to The Citizen

President John F. Kennedy, accompanied by Rear Adm. R.Y. McElroy, is greeted by local Navy brass at Boca Chica after arriving on Nov. 26, 1962, in Air Force One.

*Editor's note: Saturday marks the 40th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. This is the first of a five-part series by Mark Howell and Tim Gratz on Florida Keys connections to events related to the Kennedy assassination and subsequent investigation. Today we revisit President Kennedy's presence in Key West.*

### BY MARK HOWELL

Citizen Arts & Entertainment Editor

"Oswald's been shot!"

It was Sunday, Nov. 24, 1963.

Witnessed live on television by millions of Americans, Jack Ruby pumped a single bullet into Lee Harvey Oswald in the basement of the Dallas County Jail.

Many believe that bullet ended not only Oswald's life but the possibility the world will ever truly know if Oswald was the lone assassin of President John

Fitzgerald Kennedy.

In the 40 years since the killing of Kennedy on November 22, 1963, there have been three official investigations: The Warren Commission in 1964, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1976 and the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978. Each came up with new sets of clues but fewer and fewer certainties.

A number of the clues led directly to the Florida Keys and Key West. For example, a sighting of Ruby

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# Kennedy

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and Oswald together at Key West International Airport was reported to U.S. Sen. Richard Schweiker by airport manager George Faraldo.

## Presidential visit

President Kennedy first came to Key West on Sunday, March 26, 1961 to meet with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Their conference was a show of solidarity over a situation in Laos that "could explode into a third world war," reported The Citizen.

"Glad to see you," declared Kennedy, 43, at Naval Air Station Key West on Boca Chica Key, holding out his hand while Macmillan, 67, walked down the steps of his British jet aircraft arriving from Trinidad.

"How long have you been waiting?" asked Macmillan as they shook hands.

"I just got here," answered Kennedy, who arrived eight minutes earlier, at 10:46 a.m., in the black-nosed Boeing 707 known as Air Force One.

The presidential plane had flown to Key West from Palm Beach, Kennedy's winter home. For security and convenience, Palm Beach had been the preferred site for the conference. At the last minute it was decided that a meeting held at a major naval base would send a stronger message to Moscow.

Kennedy and Macmillan met as the "Big Two" of the Western world. They sat together at a conference room on the second

floor of the Naval Administration Building, next door to the Little White House in Truman Annex, to thrash out a problem in the Far East.

With a genuine cordiality between them, the two leaders came to "an absolute agreement" to call on Russia to accept a ceasefire in Laos, an embattled country 8,000 miles from Key West whose fight with communism immediately preceded America's war in Vietnam.

Cuba, too, was on everyone's mind. To get to the conference room, whose windows looked out over the Atlantic directly toward Castro's Soviet-supported country, Kennedy and Macmillan drove nine miles from the Boca Chica runway to downtown Key West, where they passed Cuban anti-communist demonstrators. One placard read "Mr. President — Help Cuba, the Hungary of the Americas," in reference to the European country invaded by the Soviets in 1956.

## Casual talk

The conference was over by 3:30 p.m. Before Kennedy took off for Palm Beach and Macmillan left on his return flight to Port of Spain, Trinidad, for the continuation of a Caribbean tour, Macmillan joked with Kennedy that if the his plane was shot down en route to Trinidad, the president would have an excuse to invade Cuba.

Another aside to the visit was noted by Harold Evans, at the time the British equivalent of Press Secretary Pierre Salinger;

both were in Key West for the conference. (Evans later became editor of The London Times, then acquired additional fame as the husband of Tina Brown, first-ever British editor of The New Yorker.)

Evans and the British newsmen accompanying Macmillan were "flabbergasted," according to Bruce Rothwell of the London Daily Mail, by the informality of Kennedy during a lunch break (shrimp salad, sherbet and coffee) at the Little White House.

Evans later wrote that he was even more amazed to hear from Macmillan that the president told the prime minister that the only thing keeping his headaches away was regular sex.

## Return engagement

Kennedy's second visit to Key West was as momentous as his first.

At 3:35 p.m. Monday, Nov. 26, 1962, the president arrived in Air Force One at Boca Chica. He had flown to the naval air station from Homestead Air Force Base, where the plane picked up Rear Adm. R.Y. McElroy, who would be the host of the president's two-hour visit of military facilities at Key West.

Accompanying Kennedy were Florida Gov. Farris Bryant, U.S. Rep. Dante Fascell and all the four-star admirals and generals in the Pentagon, including Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Gen. Curtis LeMay and Adm. George Anderson.

Among those greeting the president at Boca Chica was Key West Mayor C.B. Harvey, who told reporters that the national-

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ly publicized tour would do "a world of good for Key West."

A chartered aircraft arrived with Pierre Salinger and 75 members of the White House press corps. The Navy ordered up 30 extra typewriters for their use.

Local lawmen recruited by the Secret Service to assist in security included Monroe County Sheriff John M. Spottswood, Key West Police chief George G. Gomez, plus Keys' FBI agent Ralph Jensen and Marvin W. Smoot, a naval intelligence officer.

### Mystery man

A manifest of local officials invited to the base to watch Kennedy's arrival is in the historical archives at the Key West branch of the Monroe County Library. On that copy is scribbled, in pencil, an additional invitee: Diosdada.

Diosdada was Key West's only Customs officer at the time, a tough guy now retired in San Diego with alleged connections to the CIA. His name shows up later in this series as The Citizen looks at the CIA's alleged activities in the Keys.

The guests in Key West heard a speech from Kennedy thanking the Marine, Air Force and Navy fliers whose reconnaissance flights over Cuba during the missile crisis "played the most important and most critical part ... in the most danger-

ous days that America has faced since the end of World War II."

The president then visited anti-aircraft missile sites at the base, after which a motorcade of 10 automobiles, led by the president's Lincoln Continental convertible (acquired at a Miami dealership) sped from the air station to the Presidential Gates at NAS Key West on Whitehead Street.

On Duval Street, the fast-moving motorcade was greeted by crowds of onlookers and flag-wavers, though the mood of the crowd was somber. The convoy of cars finally arrived at the Little White House on a road that had

been paved since Kennedy's previous visit.

At sunset, the president and his party snapped to attention at the lowering of colors on all the ships.

Then he was gone.

As far as we know, Nov. 26, 1962, was the last time a sitting president visited the Keys.

*Tomorrow: A man marries a Key West woman and lives here for two years until 1963, when he goes to Texas, then flies via Mexico to Cuba in a sequence of events that the House Select Committee on Assassinations found "troublesome."*

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