



Ex-Sgt. Ayric Dierenfeld, who used to tend White House electronic gear, now runs a music store, above. He helped remove 120 of Johnson's TV sets before the Nixon family moved in.

Memoirs of a White House Sergeant

by Lloyd Shearer

OMAHA, NEBR.

When Bob Haldeman's sidekick, Alex Butterfield, now head of the Federal Aviation Administration, revealed to the Watergate committee staff that Richard Nixon had ordered his offices in the White House and elsewhere bugged, that revelation came as no surprise to Ayric Dierenfeld.

Today Dierenfeld is manager of Hospe's Mr. Music Store in Omaha. But from 1968 to late 1969 he served as an Air Force communications sergeant, charged with taking care of the electronics equipment in the White House.

"Long before all that stuff came out about the Watergate tapes," the tall, 27-year-old ex-sergeant recalls, "I remember watching the Watergate hearings with my wife Sally, and saying,

"Why doesn't one of those Senators ask about the tapes?" I learned about the tapes from a friend of mine who was in the same outfit [the White House Communications Agency]."

Dierenfeld, born in Storm Lake, Iowa, enlisted in the Air Force in 1964 when he was 18. After a stint at Hickam Field in Hawaii, he was trained at Ft. Monmouth, N.J., by the Signal Corps.

"In 1968," he explains, "I was given a top security clearance and assigned to the White House. Lyndon Johnson was then President, and he had somewhere between 120 and 150 TV sets in the White House. My job, the job of our cadre which was stationed in Arlington, Va., was to look after the equipment, run the video tape machines, see that the White House transmitter was in good shape, jobs like that.

"The first time I saw President John-

son he was rehearsing a TV speech to the nation. I was a lowly sergeant at the time, an E-4, and I was filled with great awe and respect. But then Johnson missed a few lines and became very profane. He knew all the curse words, and he had a violent temper. I was really shocked at both his temper and his vocabulary. I remember one time we were on Air Force One, and he got so angry he hurled a glass of champagne against the plane.

'I was shocked'

"As I say, I was really shocked that the President of the United States should act that way, but it was explained to me that he was a human being like the rest of us. I was told to forget it, to shake it off, to go on about my business, which I did.

"I must say, however, that I respected President and Mrs. Johnson very much. They really had control of their staffs. They knew what was going on every minute. That sure wasn't true of Nixon. From what I could see he had no control. It seemed to me his staff men were on their own, feathering their own nests. Johnson's was a friendly Administration. Nixon's was not.

"Matter of fact, the only one in the Nixon family that seemed warm and friendly was Julie Nixon Eisenhower. She was always cheerful and willing to talk, and it was a pleasure to be with her. Her sister, Tricia—I don't want to go into details—but she was not particularly likable, at least not to me. I'd call her stuckup or conceited or afraid or cold—anything but friendly. And Mrs. Nixon, she was sort of standoffish, too, sort of shy and timid and afraid—this was in 1969. And it was all in great contrast to the Johnsons.

"The Johnsons seemed so open, so down-to-earth, and together so much of the time. Lady Bird used to sit in on most of the TV rehearsals. When the President was rehearsing a speech, she would give him tips on phrasing. She

continued



Together: Lady Bird Johnson attending one of her husband's news conferences. Dierenfeld found her "remarkable . . . She always made you feel that you mattered."



"It was a pleasure to be with Julie Nixon Eisenhower, the only one in the Nixon family who seemed warm and friendly," says Dierenfeld. "She was always cheerful."

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was always diplomatic and kind. 'Lyndon,' she would say, 'I think it would sound much better if you didn't rush those last three words—they're very important.' And generally he would agree with her.

"Mrs. Johnson is a remarkable woman," Dierenfeld asserts. "She always made you feel that you were important, that you mattered. I had several little occasions to talk to her, like when I went up to the private quarters to repair a TV set or something like that, or when she called me on Thursday nights. That was her night for a rubdown, and she would like to see 'Gunsmoke' then. She couldn't watch it on Monday nights, so we would videotape-record the program for her and play it back on Thursday nights. We could do it easily because we had our own transmitter at the White House which has its own closed circuit system."

Dierenfeld, who left the Air Force late in 1969 to attend Concordia College in St. Paul, Minn., once studied for the ministry. Later he sold insurance for Aid Associates for Lutherans. He admits that he is no ardent Nixon admirer.

Contrasting styles

"In contrast to Johnson," he points out, "Nixon never said a word to me. He seemed to prefer solitude, to be a loner. On one occasion I was assigned to his Oval Office in the White House to repair one of his phones. When I walked in, he walked out. Johnson

would never have done that. He would have remained at his desk and exchanged at least a few words with me.

"I guess Nixon likes his solitude. I remember one of his first orders to our group when he got into the White House was to remove all the TV sets President Johnson had installed. We removed at least 120. I think we left only eight, and he had just one in his private quarters. Johnson used to look at all three network stations almost simultaneously."

Dierenfeld, a husky 6-footer, brown-eyed, brown-haired with sideburns, claims that he knew the Secret Service was taping all the conversations in the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room, the Executive Office Building and Camp David, "because after all I was a communications technician, and I learned from friends what was going on, and that's all I'm going to say about it."

Although he doesn't like Nixon personally, the young manager of Hospe's Mr. Music Store on Southroads, says, "I feel sorry for him, because he's done a lot for our country, and he would have been a very good President, but he hired the wrong kind of people and then lost control of them, and my personal opinion is that he should resign. Of course, a lot of my friends don't agree with me. My old roommate back in Arlington who was on the White House detail with me—the special activities squad in which we all had civilian status—he had some talks with Nixon and liked him very much. He said he was great—so there you are—to each his own."