

The Eyes & Ears of the Smithsonian



When he retired in 1986, the late Corporal Robert Riley Harris, who was known as "Railroad" around the Institution, had worked at the Smithsonian for forty years.

Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution

James I. Deutsch

When Emanuel Chase came home to Washington, D.C., in August 1970 after serving with the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam, he was in no rush to find a new job. "I was twenty-one years old, and like most veterans who have been discharged from the military, you kind of want to exercise your freedom," he recalls. But after just one week of leisure, his mother-in-law brought him back to reality. "You're running up and down the street having a good time, and you haven't given any thought to taking care of your family." So, feeling slightly guilty, Chase visited an employment office the next day, and learned that the Smithsonian security force was hiring people like himself under two legislative acts passed by Congress in 1966 and 1967 for the readjustment of U.S. veterans. An interview led to a job offer, and "ten days after I left Vietnam, I was working for the Smithsonian Institution." Today he is the security manager for the Quadrangle Building.

Preston Herald, currently security manager at the National Air and Space Museum, had a similar experience. Discharged from the U.S. Navy in October 1968, Herald intended to take "a little vacation and draw some unemployment." But after filling out the application forms, Herald answered yes when asked if he might be interested in a job as a security officer. "I got out of the Navy on Wednesday and started at the Smithsonian on Monday, so I never got my vacation — and I've been here ever since."

For veterans like Chase and Herald, the transition from the military to security work at

the Smithsonian went smoothly. "Almost all military personnel at one point or another have to do some type of security work," usually pulling guard duty on evenings or weekends, explains Lawrence Chatman, who served three years in the U.S. Army and is now security manager at the National Museum of American Art/Portrait Gallery. Making the transition even easier was the fact that the security force at the Smithsonian then was organized just like the military. There were "echelons of officer rank" starting with colonel, all the way down through captain, lieutenant, sergeant, corporal, and private first-class, according to Dave Liston, currently training officer for the Office of Protection Services, which administers the security force at the Smithsonian.

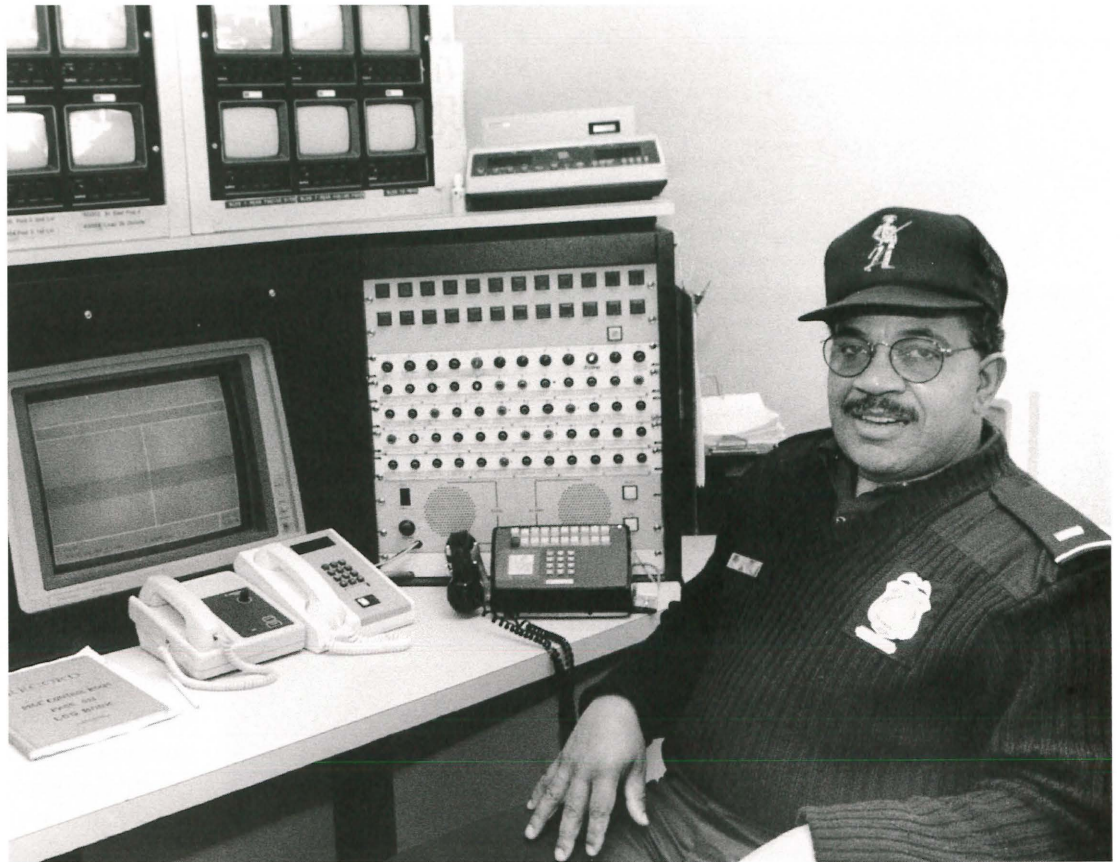
As in the military, each security shift began with a roll-call formation and inspection of the company, and continued with individual assignments to patrol a specific post in one of the Smithsonian buildings. "When you were given an assignment, you knew that you had



to remain there, and keep ever surveillant of what was going on around you. Anything out of the ordinary you had to respond to," explains Kenny Thomas, a Vietnam veteran and currently an inspector in Protection Services. "That's basically what the military taught you," Thomas comments. "When you guarded something, you would know the perimeters, and you would remain there until you were relieved."

Also as in the military, the security staff at the Smithsonian was predominantly male. When Martha Cavanaugh (currently acting security manager at the Hirshhorn Museum) joined Smithsonian Security in 1978 after three years in the U.S. Navy, she expected her reception at the Smithsonian to compare with her military experience. As the only female on board her torpedo retriever, Cavanaugh had encountered many sailors who "did a lot of things to discourage me, to get [me] off the ship, but I hung in there." The difference at the Smithsonian, she found, was that many of her fellow security officers "were glad to see females coming to work."

Because of the preference mandated by Congress for hiring U.S. veterans, nearly one hundred percent of all new personnel in the Smithsonian's security force had some military experience. And these new employees brought to their positions not only the discipline and professional training they had learned in the armed forces, but the principles of camaraderie and *esprit de corps*. For those outside this occupational group, however, the image of security at the Smithsonian remained stuck in the past. They "still were going



toward the cliché of guard, that all we did was guard" the objects in the museums, according to James Wooten, currently assistant security manager at the Air and Space Museum. Similarly, Ron Colaprete, recently retired chief of the Protection Division, observed that in the mid-1970s, the attitude was that "if you're a guard, you were seen as being lower than the garbage collector. The security officers weren't made to feel like they were part of the museum. They felt like the museum was going on around them, and they weren't part of anything." One of the important victories for the security force was to revise their job classification from "guard" to "security officer." "Changing that one word gave the staff a little bit more reason to respect us," maintained Lieutenant Ray Sebelsky in the Quadrangle Building.

The general attitude among security officers today is that their job is primarily one of "customer service," according to Lieutenant

William Johnson, acting executive security officer at the Museum Support Center, started working at the Smithsonian in March 1980.

Photo by Rick Vargas, courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Lieutenant Deborah Watkins, who joined the security force of the Smithsonian in 1982, thinks a security officer may be the best tour guide. "We read everything. We know a gallery and exhibit inside and out, and I'm not just talking alarms."

Photo by Rick Vargas, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

William Adams at the Hirshhorn. With more and more visitors to the Smithsonian, they have to be prepared for a wide variety of situations: safety hazards, lost children, accidents and illnesses, shoplifters and pickpockets, celebrities and VIPs, persons with disabilities trying to negotiate nineteenth-century buildings, sophisticated networks of alarms, special events after hours, and, of course, question upon question.

Because they are so easily recognizable as employees of the Smithsonian, security officers

in uniform receive the brunt of queries from the public, and must prepare themselves accordingly. "Information is a byproduct of our visibility," explains Al Smith, security manager at the Arts & Industries Building, "so you learn where things are, you learn what people ask for most." Not surprisingly, the most frequently asked question is where the restroom is, followed by various inquiries on the location of the sales shop, the nearest Metro station, the Hope Diamond (is it jinxed?), and the moon rocks (are they real?).

As Lieutenant Deborah Watkins (who served eight years in the U.S. Army and currently works in Protection Services Headquarters) puts it, there is "nothing more embarrassing than to have kids come up to you and ask 'What's that?' and you can't tell them." Consequently, many security officers spend time, both on and off the job, studying the collections closely and trying to anticipate questions from the public. William Adams, for example, discovered that it takes at least a day and a half to read every single label and examine every single artifact in just "one normal-size hall" in the American History and Natural History museums, and "even then, you may miss something. I've done any number of halls that way."

Other security officers try to specialize in particular topics, such as William Gaghan at the Freer Gallery of Art, who through reading, conversations, and asking questions has become somewhat of an authority on James McNeill Whistler and the Peacock Room. "I like Whistler's style and ambience," Gaghan explains, and "when there are no docents around, I'll give lectures on the Peacock Room to the visitors myself." Other security officers are accomplished artists themselves, such as Charles Johnson at American Art/Portrait Gallery and Eric Scott at the Renwick Gallery. For them, working in an art museum can be both a continual source of inspiration and a challenge to improve. Johnson estimates that on the job he has "had a chance to witness a thousand techniques as far as art is concerned. I've learned a lot [by being here] and am still



learning.” And Scott points out that while he sometimes wishes he could be painting instead of patrolling, he usually comes away with a desire to pursue his art more seriously.

Myron Curtis at American Art/Portrait Gallery has another special talent. He has developed a technique for identifying where international visitors hail from, by studying their clothing and physical appearance, and then he uses one of the twenty-two different foreign-language greetings he has memorized to welcome them. Most of the time Curtis surmises correctly. But when he guesses wrong, he quickly rectifies his mistake with an apology in the correct language. “I don’t want to cause any international incidents, no World War Threes.” Curtis also has compiled a book of handy phrases in ten foreign languages for other security officers to use on the job.

Perhaps above all else, the security force aims to be what some have termed “the eyes and ears of the Smithsonian.” For instance, James Kelly, security manager at the Museum Support Center, knows from firsthand experience that most children get lost in the Air and Space Museum almost as soon as they enter the building. “The family walks in together,” Kelly explains, but while the parents suddenly stop to stare in awe at the planes hanging high from the ceiling, “the kids just keep on walking, looking at things at their own eye level.” Likewise, Eleese Hall, who chose to stay for many years at the North Door of American Art, and Harold Hancock, stationed at the South Door of Natural History, were able to develop over time an intuitive sense of their posts, which enabled them to quickly notice when anything went awry. “If you’ve been doing something for so long,” explains Hall, you develop a certain “instinct,” you can tell if the visitors are coming in “to see the museum, or whether they have other things on their mind.”

Many security officers today have expressed amazement that they have remained on the job for so long. “My plan was only to be here maybe a year or so,” declares William Johnson, acting executive officer at the Museum

Support Center, “and [fifteen years later] I’m still here.”

When asked what has kept him at the Smithsonian, Johnson explained. “The thing that really attracted my attention was the slogan of the Smithsonian Institution, which is ‘the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.’ And I kept looking at that slogan, and then thought of all the artifacts that you have available to the public at all of our facilities, and that is actually what the Smithsonian is all about — the idea that you can expand on knowledge just by working here.” In ways that James Smithson probably never envisioned, William Johnson and the 600 other security officers working at the Smithsonian today are trying not only to protect the knowledge that the Institution has already accumulated over the past 150 years, but also to help the public make optimum use of those resources.

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Suggested Reading

Barnett, Catherine. 1988. Mischief with Mummies: What’s on the Minds of Those Who Mind Our Art? *Art & Antiques* (September):66-71.

Security officers working at museums in New York, Boston, Paris, and London share their thoughts on the works of art that surround them.

Gardner, Paul. 1994. Quick, Which Way to the Restroom? *ARTnews* 93:168-69.

A New York reporter spends a day in uniform, working as a security officer at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and receives a lesson in the demands of the job.

Lewton, Val. 1975. Museum Security: Now You See It, Now You Don’t. *Washington Review of the Arts* 1:28-29.

An overview of security issues at the major museums in Washington, including a comparative rating of their “rip-off potential.”

Liston, David, ed. 1993. *Museum Security and Protection: A Handbook for Cultural Heritage Institutions*. London and New York: Routledge (in conjunction with the International Council of Museums).

An authoritative volume, including contributions by Smithsonian personnel, that covers all major aspects of protection services.