

David:

“A Memorable Visit to the White House” is another Medal of Honor (MOH) Story. It is about two Marines, Major Robert J. Modrzejewski and Second Lieutenant John J. McGinty being awarded the MOH by President Lyndon B. Johnson, on March 12, 1968. It was the first DUAL Award of the Medal of Honor (MOH) since the Korean War (where I served as an ATA Section Leader with WpnsCo-1stBn-5thMarines and later as a Platoon Sergeant with EasyCo-2ndBn-5thMarines).

I was invited to the White House for this very special occasion because of my experiences in Vietnam (1966-67) with these two MOH recipients. As a 36 year old (Mustang) Second Lieutenant (former Master Gunnery Sgt.) I was serving as the Asst. Division Adjutant and/Awards Officer of the Third Marine Division (Forward), and had the privilege to be tasked with investigating and verifying these award recommendations for the Commanding General of the Third Marine Division. Their MOH recommendations were for the same actions that took place during Operation Hastings in Quang Tri Province, in mid-July of 1966.

Captain Modrzejewski and SSgt. McGinty, both members of K Co, 3rdBn, 4th Marines during *Operations Hastings*, fought during one of the largest operations at that time in the Vietnam War. Throughout the course of four days of fierce fighting in rugged jungle mountain terrain. Very close to the DMZ, their company killed over 200 of the enemy, captured large numbers of their weapons and large quantities of medical supplies. McGinty estimated that his platoon killed at least 150 North Vietnamese, with one squad alone accounting for 35 to 40 of them, and was quoted as saying "*We certainly messed them up beautifully.*" Captain Modrzejewski, finally reduced to firing only his .45 caliber pistol, remarked that "*It's not too often that we have to requisition .45 cal. pistol ammunition.*" Both officers were also wounded during this Operation.

I returned to the U.S. in 1967, and on March 12, 1968 was invited to the ceremony when then President Lyndon B. Johnson presented those medals to these two heroes. I would retire from the Marine Corps on October 2 of that same year, after 22-years of active duty. In a cherished picture I later received, I am shown shaking hands with President Johnson with Second Lieutenant McGinty and Major Modrzejewski standing on my right wearing their new MOH's. The Marine pictured in front of me in the receiving line was 1stLt. Chapman, son of then Marine Corps Commandant Leonard F. Chapman, who I served with at Camp Lejeune when he was a new Brigadier General. (When he retired, he was appointed Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization and served from 1973 until 1976). The lady behind me in the receiving line was Mrs. Chapman.

Thanks again for your assistance in posting this story.

**JERRY MERNA
March 22, 2016**

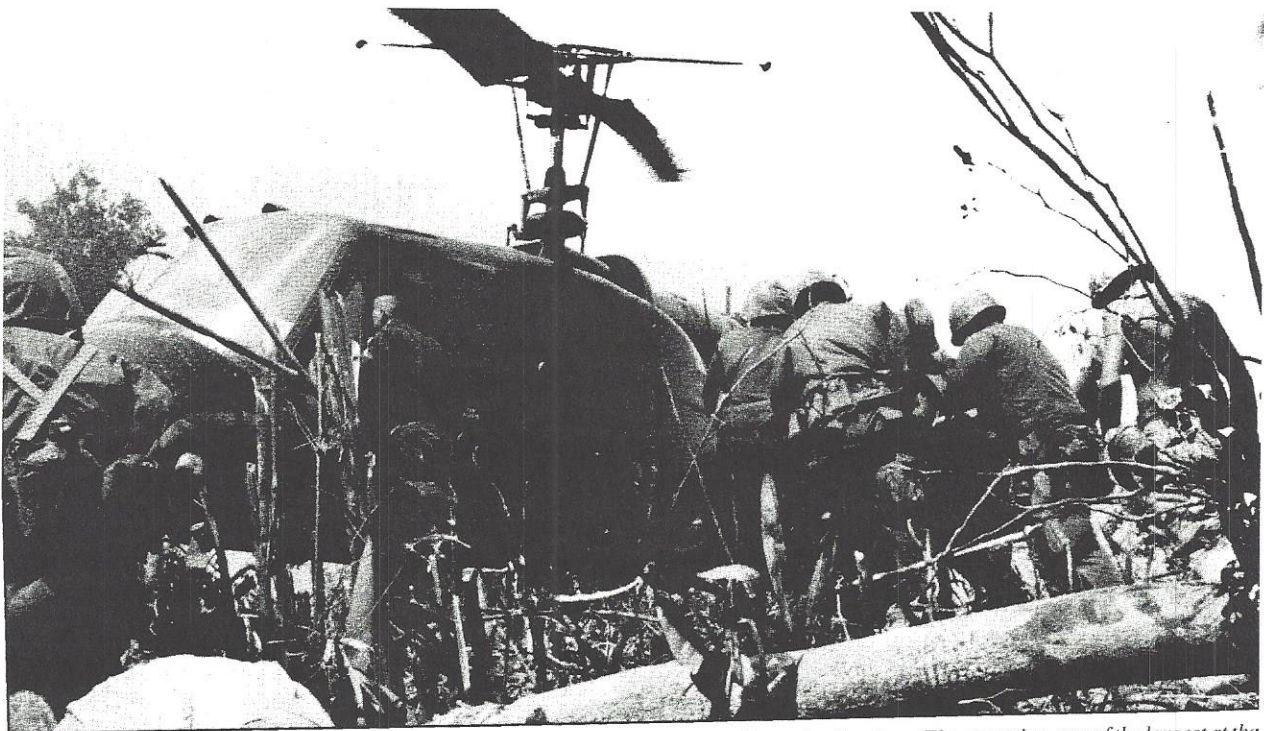
A MEMORABLE VISIT TO THE WHITE HOUSE, MARCH 12, 1968

By Gerald F. Merna, 1stLt, USMC (Ret.)

My service and experiences in Vietnam (1966-67) as a 36 year old *Mustang*¹ Second Lieutenant (commissioned from the rank of Master Gunnery Sergeant), and promoted to First Lieutenant while in Vietnam, upon my return would result in one of the highest honors of my life.

I had no idea that on March 12, 1968 that this “kid,”² then a Marine who was born in the Bronx, New York, and a former resident of *two* Catholic Homes (Convents) in Rockland County, New York, and with two years of high school ran away at 16 from the second Convent to join the Marines at 17, would one day be invited *by name* to the White House in Washington, DC.

The occasion? I was invited to witness the then President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, present not one, but TWO Medals of Honor to two Marine Corps heroes, Major Robert Modrzewski and Second Lieutenant John McGinty. They were earned when Modrzewski was a Captain and McGinty a Staff Sergeant, for their extraordinary actions and courage while serving with K Company, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, Third Marine Division in Vietnam in Quang Tri Province during Operation Hastings from 15 to 18 July 1966, during one of the largest operations at that time in the Vietnam War. This was to be the first DUAL award of that prestigious award since the Korean War.



Third Division Marines load wounded men aboard a HU1E MedEvac copter during Operation Hastings. The operation, one of the largest at the time in 1966, took place a few miles south of the demilitarized zone between North Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam. (Official USMC Photo)

¹ A Marine Corps “Mustang” refers to an enlisted Marine who becomes a Marine Officer. See: www.marinecorpsmustang.org/.

² Though “Kid” is used as a term of address (“*here’s looking at you, kid*”) for a young child, person or someone younger, especially of two siblings, it has an even truer explanation in my life. At the St. Dominic’s Convent in Sparkill, NY we youngsters placed there were informally called “House’s Kids,” a term somehow associated with our being housed in the huge “attic” of an equally huge building. The nickname persists to this date at annual reunions, etc.

So why was I invited? Because while I was in Vietnam I had the privilege to visit front line units to interview witnesses, and was specifically tasked with investigating and verifying the Medal of Honor recommendations for Modrzjewski and McGinty. Modrzjewski and I shared a tent for part of that time. I was also a voting member of the Third Marine Division Awards Board.



First Lt. Gerald F. Merna, Vietnam, 1966

Modrzjewski and fought throughout the course of four days of fierce fighting in rugged jungle mountain terrain very close to the DMZ. Their company killed over 200 of the enemy, captured large numbers of their weapons and large quantities of medical supplies. McGinty estimated that his platoon killed at least 150 North Vietnamese, with one squad alone accounting for 35 to 40 of them, and was quoted as saying "*We certainly messed them up beautifully.*" Captain Modrzjewski, finally reduced to firing only his .45 caliber pistol, remarked that "*It's not too often that we have to requisition .45 cal. pistol ammunition.*" Both Marines were also wounded during this Operation.

Modrzjewski and McGinty were the first dual MOH awardees for Marines since the Korean War (where I also served as an ATA Section Leader with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and later as a Platoon Sergeant with Easy Co., 2ndBn, 5thMarines).

In a cherished picture I later received, autographed by the President, I am shown shaking hands with the President as Second Lieutenant McGinty and Major Modrzjewski are standing on my right with their Medals of Honor draped around their neck. The Marine pictured in front of me in the receiving line was 1stLt. Chapman, son of then Marine Commandant Leonard F. Chapman, who was also present for the ceremony, and the lady behind me was Mrs. Chapman.



Medal of Honor Presentation
by
Lyndon Baines Johnson
President of the United States of America

to
Robert J. Modrzejewski
Major, United States Marine Corps
and

John J. McGinty III
Second Lieutenant, United States Marine Corps

AT THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

ON
12 MARCH 1968
AT
1230 HOURS

element of his command and was constantly present wherever the fighting was heaviest. Despite numerous casualties, a dwindling supply of ammunition and the knowledge that they were surrounded, he skillfully directed artillery fire to within a few meters of his position and courageously inspired the efforts of his company in repelling the aggressive enemy attack. On 18 July, Company K was attacked by a regimental size enemy force. Although his unit was vastly outnumbered and weakened by the previous fighting, Major Modrzejewski reorganized his men and calmly moved among them to encourage and direct their efforts to heroic limits as they fought to overcome the vicious enemy onslaught. Again he called in air and artillery strikes at close range with devastating effect on the enemy, which together with the bold and determined fighting of the men of Company K, repulsed the fanatical attack of the larger North Vietnamese force. His unparalleled personal heroism and indomitable leadership inspired his men to a significant victory over the enemy force and reflected great credit upon himself, the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to

Second Lieutenant John J. McGinty III
United States Marine Corps

for service as set forth in the following

Citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as Acting Platoon Leader,



The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Medal of Honor to

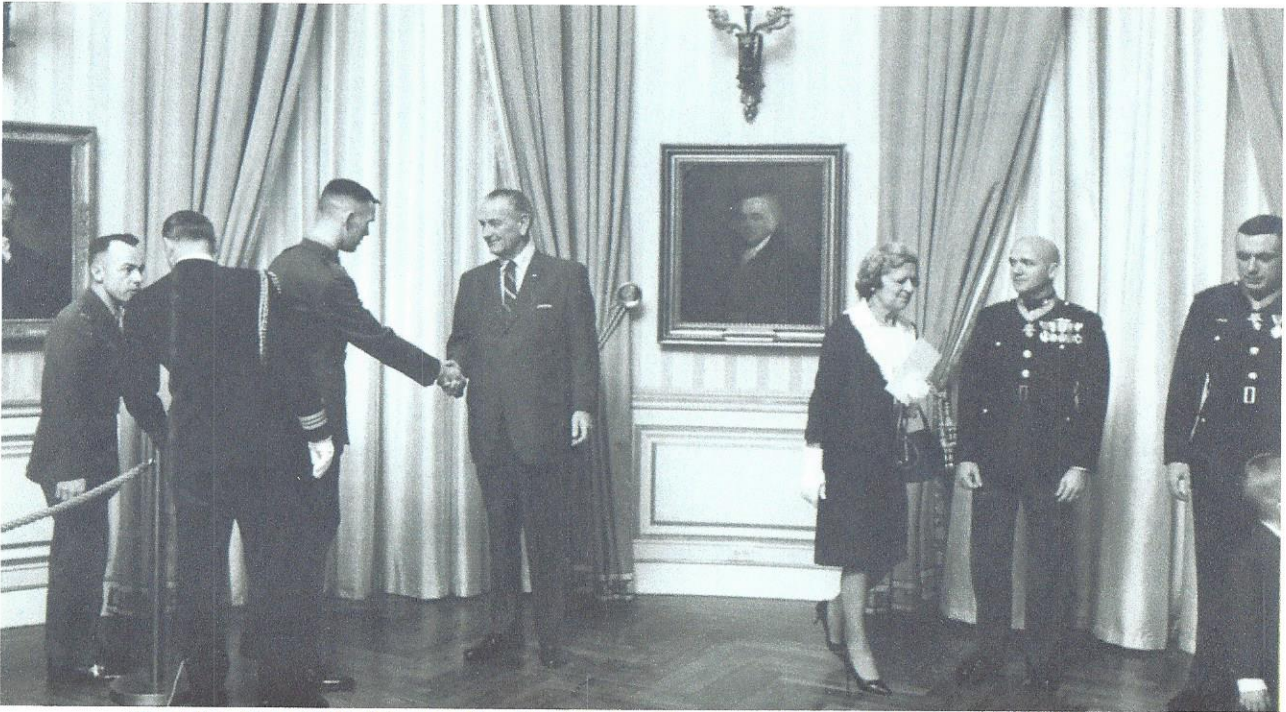
Major Robert J. Modrzejewski
United States Marine Corps

for service as set forth in the following

Citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as Commanding Officer, Company K, Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division, in the Republic of Vietnam from 15 to 18 July 1966. On 15 July, during OPERATION HASTINGS, Company K was landed in an enemy infested jungle area to establish a blocking position at a major enemy trail network. Shortly after landing, the company encountered a reinforced enemy platoon in a well organized, defensive position. Major (then Captain) Modrzejewski led his men in the successful seizure of the enemy redoubt, which contained large quantities of ammunition and supplies. That evening a numerically superior enemy force counter-attacked in an effort to retake the vital supply area, thus setting the pattern of activity for the next two and one-half days. In the first series of attacks, the enemy assaulted repeatedly in overwhelming numbers but each time was repulsed by the gallant Marines. The second night the enemy struck in battalion strength, and Major Modrzejewski was wounded in this intensive action which was fought at close quarters. Although exposed to enemy fire, and despite his painful wounds, he crawled 200 meters to provide critically needed ammunition to an exposed

First Platoon, Company K, Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, Third Marine Division, in the Republic of Vietnam on 18 July 1966. Second Lieutenant (then Staff Sergeant) McGinty's platoon, which was providing rear security to protect the withdrawal of the battalion from a position which had been under attack for three days, came under heavy small arms, automatic weapons and mortar fire from an estimated enemy regiment. With each successive human wave which assaulted his thirty-two-man platoon during the four-hour battle, Second Lieutenant McGinty rallied his men to bear off the enemy. In one bitter assault, two of the squads became separated from the remainder of the platoon. With complete disregard for his safety, Second Lieutenant McGinty charged through intense automatic weapons and mortar fire to their position. Finding twenty men wounded and the medical corpsman killed, he quickly reloaded ammunition magazines and weapons for the wounded men and directed their fire upon the enemy. Although he was painfully wounded as he moved to care for the disabled men, he continued to shout encouragement to his troops and to direct their fire so effectively that the attacking hordes were beaten off. When the enemy tried to out-flank his position, he killed five of them at point-blank range with his pistol. When they again seemed on the verge of overrunning the small force, he skillfully adjusted artillery and air strikes within fifty yards of his position. This destructive fire power routed the enemy, who left an estimated 500 bodies on the battlefield. Second Lieutenant McGinty's personal heroism, indomitable leadership, selfless devotion to duty, and bold fighting spirit inspired his men to resist the repeated attacks by a fanatical enemy, reflected great credit upon himself, and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



**First Lt. Gerald F. Merna-Naval Aide-Lt Chapman-President Lyndon B. Johnson
Unknown Guest-Maj. Robert Modrzjewski and Second Lt John McGinty, Medals of Honor**

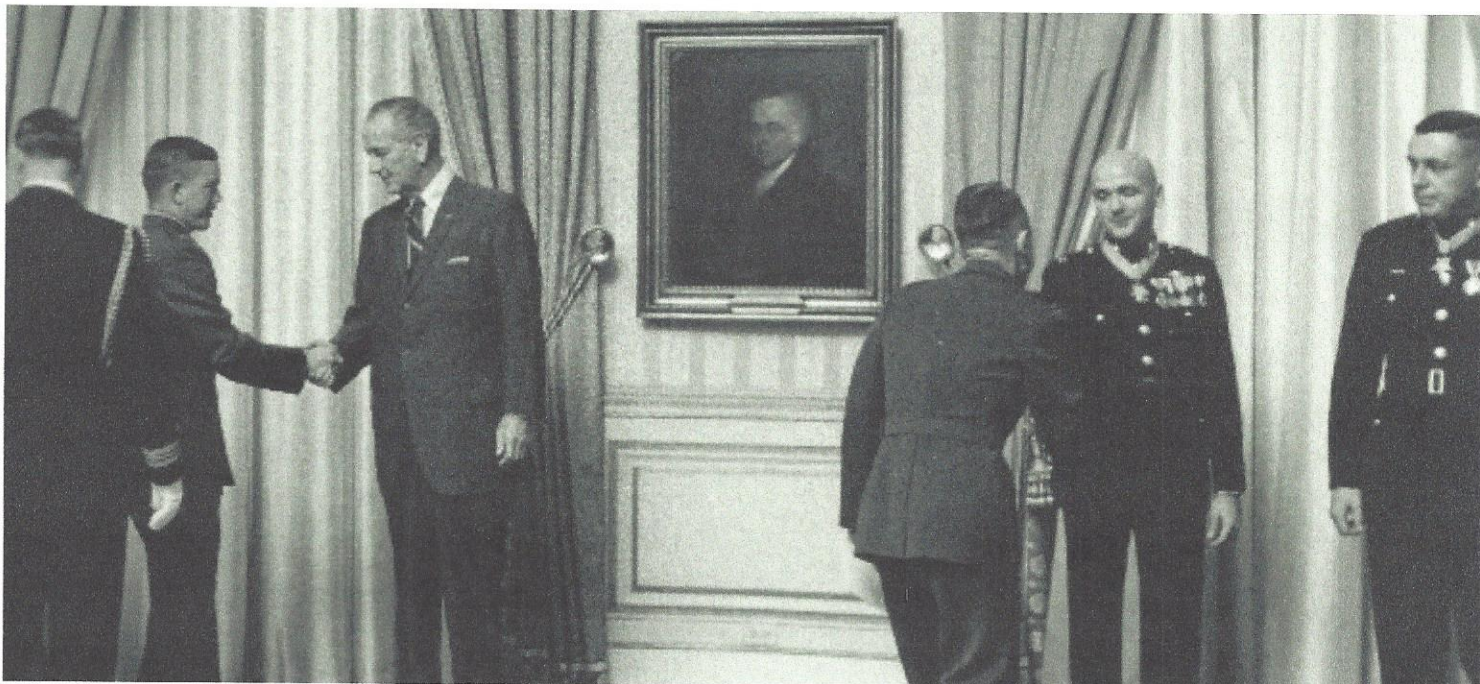


Lyndon Baines Johnson
President of the United States of America

*To Gerald F. Merna
with every good wish
Lyndon B. Johnson*

The White House
24 March 1968

Mrs. Leonard F. Chapman, Son 1stLt. Chapman, Naval Aide, 1stLt. Gerald F. Merna, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson, Unknown Captain, Major Robert Modrzjewski (and out of picture, 2ndLt John McGinty)



Naval Aide, 1stLt. Chapman, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson, 1stLt. Gerald F. Merna, Major Robert Modrzewski and Second Lieutenant John McGinty)

EQNC

Washington, D. C.

12Mar68 Photog: SSgt Zane Wilson

Major Robert J. Modrzewski, USMC, and Second Lieutenant John J. McGinty III, USMC, shown shortly after both received the Medal of Honor in the first dual award for Marines since the Korean conflict.

DEFENSE DEPT. PHOTO (MARINE CORPS)

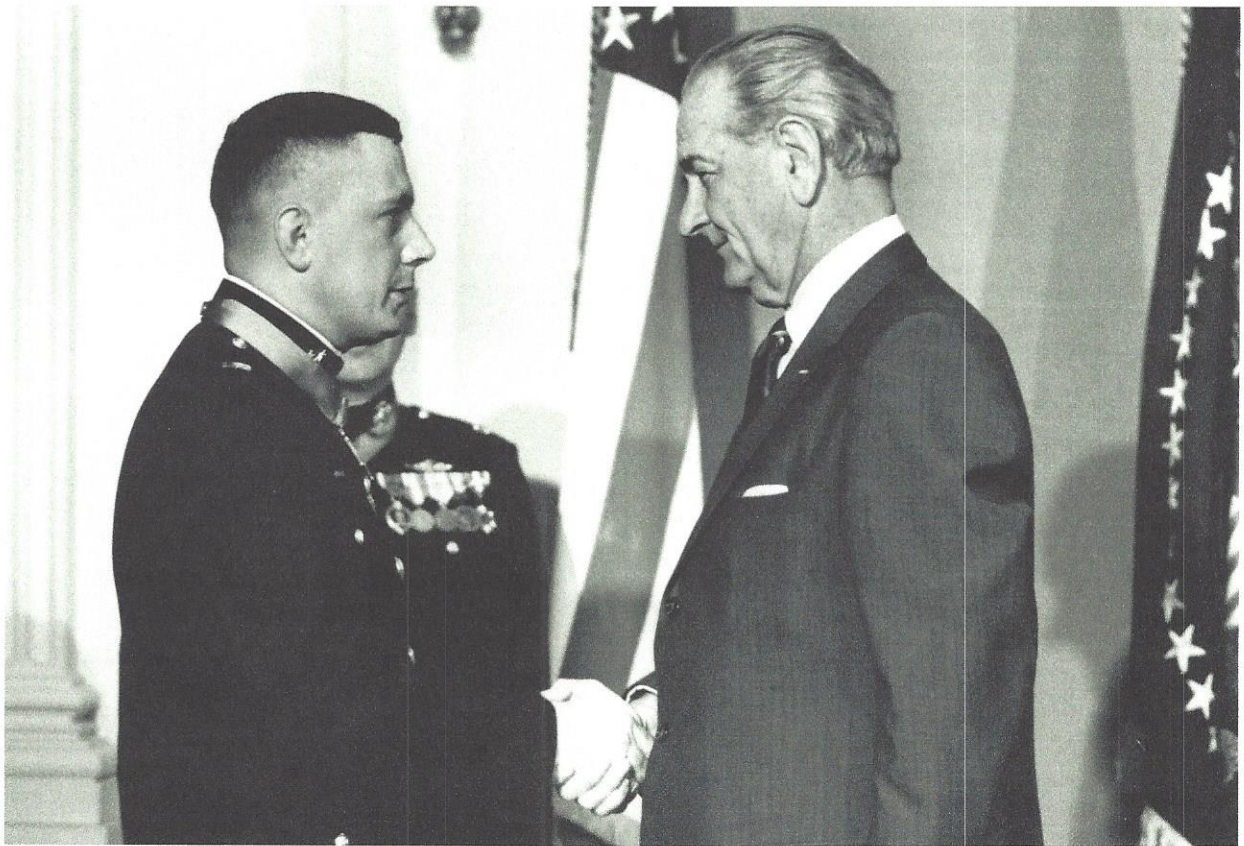
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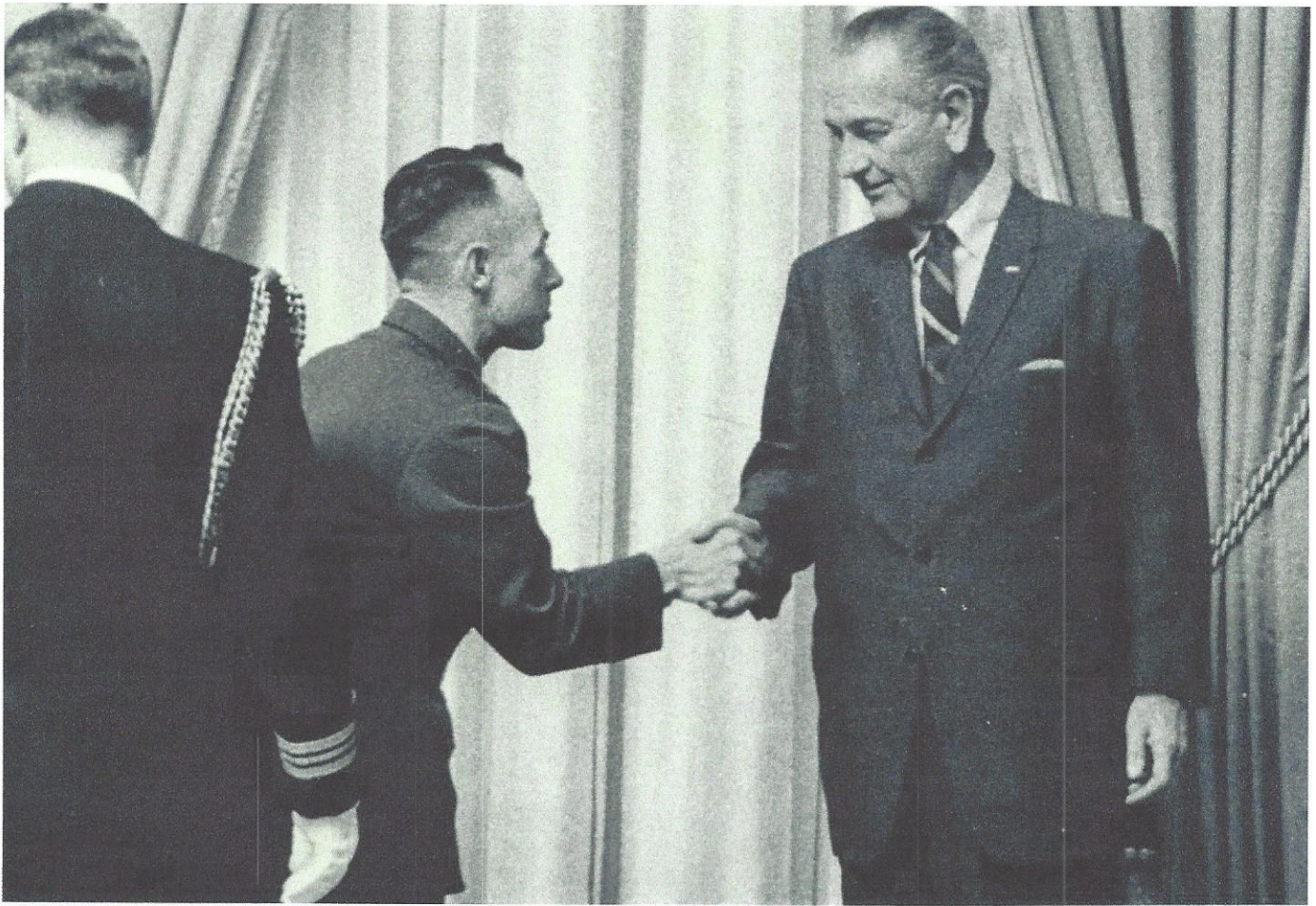




Major Robert Modrzjewski and President Lyndon B. Johnson



Second Lieutenant John McGinty and President Lyndon B. Johnson



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

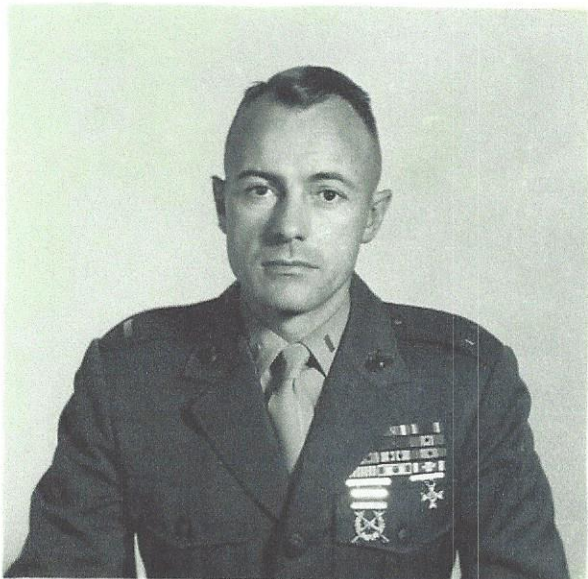
March 26, 1968

Dear Lieutenant Merna:

The President asked that
I forward the enclosed to you
with his very best wishes.

Haywood R. Smith

HAYWOOD R. SMITH
Lieutenant Colonel, U. S. Marine Corps
Marine Corps Assistant to the
Armed Forces Aide to the President



News of Our Men in Service

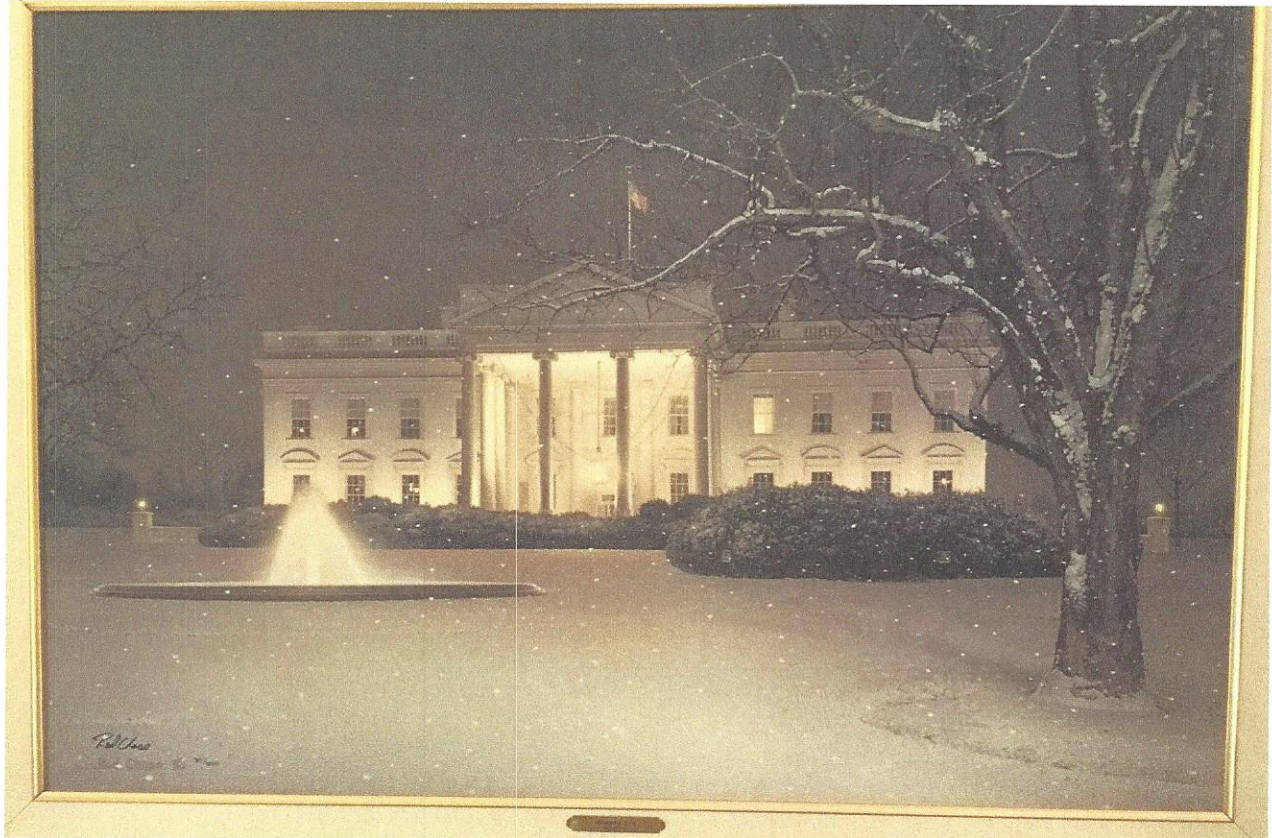
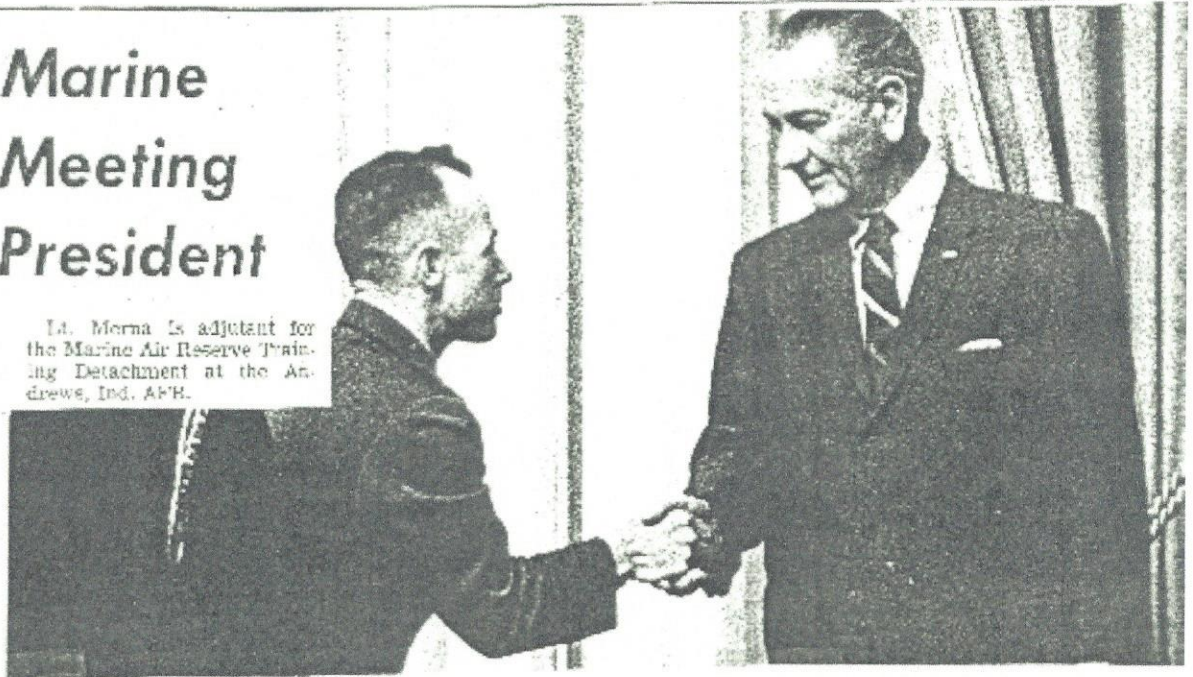
Piermont Marine Proud of Meeting With the President

Marine First Lt. Gerald F. Merna of Piermont, a former student at St. Dominic's Convent, Blauvelt, and St. Agnes Convent, Sparkill, says he is more proud of having shaken hands recently with President Johnson at the White House than he is of the medals he was awarded for service in Korea and Vietnam.

He had the opportunity to speak with the President during ceremonies honoring two Marine Medal of Honor recipients.

A veteran of 21 years of active duty, Lt. Merna served 14 months in the Korean War and 13 months in Vietnam.

Lt. Merna is adjutant for the Marine Air Reserve Training Detachment at the Andrews, Ind. AFB.



White House Painting hanging in home office of Gerald F. Merna, Arlington, VA (Photo by GFM)

Inaugural



Committee

This certificate is awarded to

MASTER SERGEANT GERALD F. MERNA 640984 USMC

in recognition for his participation on behalf of the
Armed Forces of the United States
in the Presidential Inauguration of

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

on the twentieth day of January
one thousand nine hundred sixty-five
in Washington, District of Columbia

DALE MILLER
Chairman
1965 Inaugural Committee

PHILIP C. WEHLE
Major General, USA
Chairman, Armed Forces
Participation Committee

In yet another irony, only three years before this historic White House visit, on January 20, 1965, while a Master Sergeant, I was part of the Marine Corps Inaugural Detail for President Johnson.