

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Guy Swan**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**January 25, 2011**

Smith: Thank you for doing this. We really do appreciate it. Tell me how your path crossed with the Fords.

Gen. Swan: At the time of the President's death, I was serving as the U.S. Army Military District of Washington commander here in D.C. And part of the responsibilities in that position are to help coordinate the military aspects of a state funeral. And this has been one of the traditional roles for that command.

In addition to doing all of the planning, there is a personal role that goes with that position, and that is to serve as the personal escort for the widow of the past president. My predecessor had done that for the Reagan family and then I had that privilege with the Ford family. So planning had been ongoing for the state funeral for many years, as it is for all the surviving presidents. But my personal relationship with the family actually began on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, the day that the President passed away, when I received the call that he had died. And the indications were fairly quick. I mean, the family had been together, as I understand, for Christmas Day. The notification and the failing health, was pretty quick, so we had to respond pretty quickly.

Smith: Let me back up, maybe rephrase the question. What career path culminates in this position?

Gen. Swan: I was a traditional armor tank officer and had grown up in various troop units in the United States and Germany and Korea. Spent time in the Gulf War, and had, prior to that position, here at the Military District of Washington, I'd served three years as the Chief of Congressional Affairs, of all things, for the Army. So I'd had a lot of recent experience here in the Washington area, with Capitol Hill, with the senior leaders in the Army and the Department of Defense. So it seemed like a good fit when the Chief of Staff of the Army appointed me to that position. And I felt well prepared to do that job, which is

a wide ranging job, from Homeland Security issues in the Washington area to some of the ceremonial activities.

Smith: I wonder whether 9/11 had an impact at all on this job?

Gen. Swan: It has. In fact, the position now is dual command - as an Army command in the Washington area, but also serves the broader U. S. Northern Command now, which has overall Homeland defense responsibilities that headquarters out in Colorado. So the Washington command is a subordinate, and in that capacity is a lot of coordination with local, state, and federal authorities in the Washington area for security, disaster response, and so forth. In fact, the officer that's in that position today is heavily involved in today's State of the Union Address and the security apparatus for that.

Smith: So now, the President passed away on the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>. Were you in D.C. at that point?

Gen. Swan: I was in D.C. at that time, just happened to be here and received word. And because the planning for the President's state funeral is so well-rehearsed, there's almost a battle drill that immediately goes into effect. In my case, my aide decamps and I gathered our uniforms and our personal effects and literally, within hours, we were at Andrews Air Force Base, getting on an aircraft to fly to Palm Springs. That was literally within eight to twelve hours after he passed away.

Smith: And I assume the proximity to New Year's affected the plan to some degree.

Gen. Swan: To some degree.

Smith: An extra day at the Capitol?

Gen. Swan: That's right. And we realized that we would have to make timing adjustments. Of course around the holidays, a lot of the senior officials and former administration officials were literally spread out all over the country. I think President Carter was actually out of the country at the time. So we knew that

that was going to be a challenge, gathering all the individuals that wanted to be part of that event. So not just New Year's, but the Christmas holiday and the other holidays kind of generated some rapid adjustments to the plan.

Smith: You met the family for the first time when?

Gen. Swan: Interestingly, we flew into Palm Springs airport, went over to the Ford residence there in Palm Springs, and literally, the first event or the first activity was a very small, one-on-one session – myself and Mrs. Ford – in their living room. It was almost an introductory kind of session. She obviously knew who I was from Greg Willard's many discussions with her and the President; but we'd never met. I actually tried to avoid – it's interesting, Richard – I tried to avoid being too involved in the planning because there was always the perception that if General Swan or my predecessor was near the family, there was some indication that something was wrong with the President - that I may be some indicator. We were very conscious of that. So I met her, literally, one-on-one. One of her sons, Steve was there, and the three of us just talked. It was an informal session with me conveying to her, obviously, my condolences, and what might be occurring over the next seven to ten days - to just kind of frame for her what would be occurring. She'd been very involved in the extensive funeral planning with Greg Willard and the President for several years. But on that first visit I thought it was useful to describe - here's the sequence of things that will occur here, Washington, and then Grand Rapids. It was very cordial.

Smith: Pretty daunting. When Harry Truman signed off on his plans, he famously said, "It looks like it's going to be quite a show, too bad I won't be around to see it." And in the event, because of Mrs. Truman's advanced age, they dropped the Washington portion. And in many ways, I think it turned out to be more affecting because it was limited to Independence. Mrs. Truman, at that point, was younger than Mrs. Ford was. She was being asked to take on quite a physical challenge.

Gen. Swan: She was. And I think – there was never any hesitation on her part or the sons or Susan – to deviate, or significant deviations, from the original plan. They knew full well what their husband and their father meant to the country. And I felt that sense of obligation on their part. It was quite an interesting – just aura – around the whole family. That there was this typical Midwestern family dealing with the loss of a loved one, yet fully aware that they had some public role that they had to play. And felt that it was quite well balanced. They were very well balanced in doing all of that. So I felt gratified that they were confident that the plan that had been put together was one that they were comfortable with.

Smith: I was wearing two hats that week – I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second part. And my sense was, journalists in particular were surprised at how much reaction there was, and how it seemed to build as the week went by.

Gen. Swan: I noticed that, too.

Smith: Were you surprised?

Gen. Swan: Clearly, it's a shock to the nation that a former president has passed away. But I think we were still operating somewhat in the shadow of President Reagan's state funeral. And that had been such a monumental event, that it took longer for, as you said, for the nation to grasp that another president had passed away. The family wasn't overly concerned by any of that, nor was I. We had a job to do. But I don't think it really hit most Americans or even ourselves, or even the family, until he was brought back to Washington. And then it started to gain some momentum, as you said.

Smith: For example, I've been told that they were really surprised and very moved by the crowds on a Saturday night on the streets in Alexandria.

Gen. Swan: They were. As all the presidents do, they had some very specific things they wanted to accomplish, and a story to tell about their father, their husband, our president. And one of those things was to go back to their home where they

had lived in Alexandria when he was serving in Congress. So the circuitous route that we took from Andrews Air Force Base to downtown Washington took us through Alexandria and the outpouring – I think all of the family members were amazed. Here we are during the holiday period, how many people actually came out on the streets of Alexandria and elsewhere in Washington, I think it was very gratifying for them that their husband had not been forgotten and had been appreciated - more than maybe most Americans realized.

Smith: And the irony for someone who was adamant in not wanting a formal caisson, but I'm told that the morning of the cathedral service, when they drove from the Capitol past the White House and up to the cathedral, that there were still large numbers of people out on the streets.

Gen. Swan: There were. And back to the evening when we drove in. We drove in the evening, so we actually drove through Alexandria at night – part of that route, you know, took us past the World War II Memorial. And he was very adamant that, like most World War II veterans, that was a great accomplishment, to get that monument built. And that was a tip of the hat to fellow World War II veterans that took us past there. And that was moving because there were a lot of senior citizens, so to speak, that were there right between the Washington Monument and the World War II Memorial. A lot of World War II veterans. It was interesting, and I'll mention it later, the demographics of the audiences that participated in this was quite interesting as we went through Alexandria, their hometown for many years, World War II veterans, Grand Rapids Boy Scouts. I mean, more Boy Scouts than I've ever seen. It was just really interesting looking at the demographics of the crowds. Just fascinating.

I think you mentioned going up to the cathedral there were still a lot of people out. The city had prepared very well, too. And we worked a lot with the city officials and the police in the city. They had done a fabulous job in preparing

the city for that event. And just like everyone else, they have to react on relatively short notice to make all that happen.

Smith: How was she holding up? Because we knew later on, she wasn't altogether healthy that week.

Gen. Swan: When I got there to Palm Springs I noticed that she was a little congested, and I was told later that she had had some form of bronchitis and had not been feeling well. And frankly, I thought that might cause us some challenges. So things like wheelchairs and being prepared for whatever she could deal with became part of our planning. But a very, very strong woman and extremely impressive in her resilience – let me say resilience - during the week. Because there were ups and downs, and when she was in the public eye, she was very much aware of that and as others, I'm sure, have told you, she was very intent on doing her husband proud. But those periods when she was just with the family or not on stage, so to speak, she took a break and paced herself. I was proud to see her pace herself, because she knew that this was going to be a lengthy process and she was going to have to find strength during certain periods and then try to rebuild the strength as she went on. I was quite proud of how she handled herself through that. And it certainly lightened the load on the rest of us who were very concerned about her. So just a fascinating woman and a very strong woman.

Smith: Was there anything about her that surprised you? This was your first exposure to her.

Gen. Swan: She was extremely gracious. She could have been somewhat hostile to someone like me, or even distant, because when a person in my capacity arrived on the scene, it meant that her husband had passed and so I was a little concerned that that might stand between us. Because I think part of my responsibility was to build an appropriate relationship with her immediately that would take us both through this process and make it as easy on her as it could be. Not that her focus should be on me, but I wanted to be there in a capacity that made sense for her. And I was surprised at how well received I was by Mrs. Ford. That did surprise me.

Smith: The family that week, when they were off stage, was there a lot of reminiscing going on?

Gen. Swan: There was when we got to Palm Springs. As you know, Greg Willard was President and Mrs. Ford's personal representative for the entire state funeral. Greg had worked very closely with our team for several years as the principal family agent for planning and then overseeing the conduct every detail of it. My first morning in Palm Springs, after that one-on-one session I had with Mrs. Ford, Greg gathered the family—gathered the whole family together - and took all of us through the sequence of events - this is what's going to occur over the next several days. Some had been privy to the plan and some of the distant relatives had not. It was fascinating because there were babies in there, there were older people, there were men and women. There were about thirty in the small conference room at the residence with him. And there was an intense focus on what they were being told by Greg. They wanted to know what would occur, what would their role be? And as soon as they all understood that, there was a lot of laughing and a lot of reminiscing and it was a family reunion atmosphere. I was glad to see that because it could have been just a dark day. But they would not allow that to happen. They really wanted to focus on the bright things they remembered about the President.

Smith: One of the remarkable sights I've ever seen and I'll never forget it - on Air Force One, flying back to Grand Rapids, President Carter hoisting on his shoulder the Fords' newest grandchild, or great grandchild, I guess, walking up and down the aisle of Air Force One. And again, who would have thought thirty years ago that that's how the story ends?

Gen. Swan: That's right. And there were many moments like that where the family really, I think, took advantage of being together. I think what I was experiencing was a great deal of gratification, gratitude to their parents that they had been part of such a wonderful family. A number of them had been together for the Christmas holidays, so they had been together. But this was a celebration, not only of the President's life, but of this wonderful family. And they made the most of it under the circumstances.

Smith: And I think that a theme from the beginning that in some ways set this apart from other grander, if you will, presidential funerals - the emphasis upon family. I don't want to pry, but I had heard - I knew that the Johnson girls after this said we've got to get serious about Mother's plans and so on. And I was told that the Carters took a fresh look at their own plans in light of what they'd been through. And I understand that they were particularly impressed with the lines in Grand Rapids, two miles long at one point. On a January night, that's impressive.

Gen. Swan: And you saw it, Richard, when the President was lying in state in the Capitol, the lines grew overnight. He was there for two days. And the thing that struck me there, as well as in Grand Rapids, was that the children of the President, all four children, took turns - I mean, it still brings tears to my eyes that they were out thanking people for coming to see their father. I couldn't believe it. You know, Americans will come see their president, but they took this far more personally, like - why would you come and see my father - we're so grateful that you would come and see our father. And they took turns throughout the entire time in the Capitol to walk the lines, talk with family members, and it was really something to behold. Other presidential families - I can't speak for them - it might have been odd. But that was the nature of the Ford family. They were very grateful for the outpouring. And the same thing occurred in Grand Rapids, as I mentioned. Boy Scouts and his great association with the Boy Scouts of America and his own service as a Boy Scout, it was incredible. Scouts came from all over the Midwest and, as you said, miles and miles of streets lined from the airport to the library. And then the lines - it was somewhat disappointing, somewhat sad that the line had to be closed at certain times because there were people still wanting to pay their respects. But that was what he meant to that part of the country.

Smith: And the weather was glorious.

Gen. Swan: It was.

Smith: I mean, for January.

Gen. Swan: It was cold, but it was beautiful weather, it really was.

Smith: I assume, maybe one of the unintended consequences of the holiday, that extra day maybe, in DC, gave her a little more chance to rest...she was at Blair House.

Gen. Swan: She was.

Smith: And I know there were a lot of visits, some ceremonial and some more personal.

Gen. Swan: She took a lot of visitors, and, again, that was to her credit.

Smith: Former presidents came by.

Gen. Swan: That's right.

Smith: And I think the Nixon girls and the Johnson girls.

Gen. Swan: They did. A number of his Cabinet and others had come by. And so she never turned anyone away. She was very, very intent on allowing those leaders to come and pay their respects. So she exhibited a lot of strength throughout all of this, and again, it was a remarkable thing to be part of. There were times when I was a bit concerned about her, but she surprised me with her strength.

Smith: She looked so frail, but there is coiled steel there.

Gen. Swan: There is. And an example was in the National Cathedral. We were scrambling ahead of time to make sure we had a wheelchair ready for her to make the long walk.

Smith: That is a long walk.

Gen. Swan: It's a long walk, and she walked with President Bush. Even President Bush asked her, "Would you like to use the wheelchair?" She absolutely refused, and made that walk. And then again the walk in Grand Rapids as well. But she was intent on walking the distance there.

Smith: We were told that the following week when she got home, someone commented upon this and she said, "I just did what my husband would have wanted me to."

Gen. Swan: Well, let me tell you this, if I can get through this part. The day of the interment, at the library, we came from the hotel and arrived at the library and a wheelchair was positioned for her. And even her children - "Mother, is everything okay?" and "We have the wheelchair here." And it was the darnedest thing, and it is the one thing I will remember about the entire event. She told me that she had walked along that river, along the Grand River there many times in that exact spot with President Ford throughout their lives. And she wanted to make one more walk with him to the final resting place. I mean, when I relate this to people I can't believe I get emotional about this, but we were all so concerned about her health, and she was more concerned about their relationship and doing the right thing. And the last thing she said, and if she sees this I hope she'll pardon me for saying this, but she said,

"This is the last time I'll make this walk."

She knew this was a quintessential moment in her life and she absolutely had to do this. It was a lengthy walk, as you recall, it was probably well over a football field length, and it was cold and she did have to hold and we did steady her. But she said, "I have to make this walk because I won't be making it again." That was so very touching. These things, you know, I really, at that point, felt like almost like part of their family. Not just me, but other Americans, too, who watched this were very moved by that final interment ceremony.

Smith: It's interesting you say that because I'll never forget, reading Peggy Noonan, who said she didn't understand it herself, she wasn't particularly a Ford Republican, but she found herself sobbing as she watched. And she was talking to a friend who had the same reaction. I think it was that family. It was a family.

Gen. Swan: It was. It was an amazing experience, and their sons and their daughter were, throughout the week, were coaching their children, the President's

grandchildren and great grandchildren, about what this all meant. They were very – not just that their grandfather or great grandfather as a former president – but their grandfather and what this was all about. Almost as if you need to remember what is happening here as you go on with your lives. So a great sense of family as the week went on. Much different than other state funerals. But that moment, that struck me when she said, “My husband and I have made this walk many times, and I won’t be making this walk again.” I almost lost it right there. We had a job to do and that was what our focus was, was to make sure that the entire ceremony, from start to finish, was respectful of a great leader and something that our nation could be proud of. And that was our objective. And I’m very pleased that it came off the way it did.

Smith: Did you see interaction between her and the Carters?

Gen. Swan: It was an interesting dynamic, as you mentioned. Arch rivals, political rivals, but in 2006 and into 2007, what I gathered from that – and there were many remarks about this in the press – that in this year in where there is much discussion about civility in Washington, there was a moment there during the state funeral for the President that we had come back to the civility that they recalled. Even when they are arch rivals, even when the President was in Congress, there was a time when party leaders would socialize. I heard that numerous times from a lot of former Cabinet officials and former Congressional leaders who were there - that they missed that. That camaraderie, that collegiality. And I think having President Carter there reminded them of those days.

Smith: I wonder if that, in some way, didn’t contribute to this building emotion as the week went by. We were in some ways mourning an era and a culture that we were burying, as well as a man.

Gen. Swan: I think so. Part of the Greatest Generation, with President Ford, there was some of that, the political environment that I mentioned that they were part of. There was kind of a reminiscence there of days gone by, and maybe we could recapture some of the collegiality and bipartisanship. And I think President

Carter was somewhat aware of that, and others were, too. That this is a bit of a lesson to all of us about how things could be, ought to be, might me in our political dynamic.

Smith: Plus, the country had come around on the pardon.

Gen. Swan: Absolutely.

Smith: The Profiles in Courage Award was the imprimatur. He said for twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same questions. And after the award, they don't ask the questions anymore.

Gen. Swan: They don't. And it was interesting. I think, sadly, it took his passing for people to re-look at the Ford presidency and what it meant. As brief as it was, the tumultuous time after Watergate, coming out of Vietnam. I actually graduated from West Point in 1976. He was my president when I was graduating, and that time was appropriate for a man like Jerry Ford. We needed him at that time. We didn't realize it at the time. And now, as we look back, he was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Smith: Last question. Do you think, without getting into any specifics, that Ford's funeral, how it unfolded and the impact that it had, may influence future planning?

Gen. Swan: I think from a technical standpoint, yes. But each state funeral is very much a family affair with a real intent to tell a story about that individual. And as you saw, there were idiosyncrasies to President Ford's funeral that were very personally meaningful to the Ford family. A lot of emphasis on the Congress during the funeral, that you might not see in another presidential state funeral. That was an example. The piece in Alexandria, and at the World War II Memorial. There was a well-designed theme behind the planning – "thematic mosaic" is how Greg Willard described it. How do we at MDW, along with the family, tell the story the family would like to have told about their loved one, and a former president. But from a technical standpoint, we learned a lot. Just like any military operation, we did various after action reviews and have

most definitely applied that to the other state funeral plans that are underway as well.

Smith: In your current position, if a former president were to pass away tomorrow, would you be repeating your role?

Gen. Swan: No, there is an officer in that position now who will play that role. And my contribution to him might just be some words of advice, if he asks. I did ask my predecessor about his experiences with the Reagan family, which were very helpful. And if the current commander asks for that help, I'd certainly do that.

Smith: I can't thank you enough. It's been great.

Gen. Swan: Thank you, Richard. This was a great privilege, one of the high points of my career, and I have to absolutely thank the Ford family for their hospitality in all of this. They could have really treated me far differently. But that's not the nature of that family. They are a very welcoming family, and even under the circumstances, they almost welcomed me as part of their family and I do try to carry on a relationship with them as they see fit. But we keep in touch, and I know that there will be a time when they may ask me to come back, when Mrs. Ford's time comes. I don't look forward to that. It's almost like she's my own mother now, in some ways, if I could be so presumptuous about that. But she is just a wonderful lady.

Smith: Well, you've certainly bonded. You've been through a uniquely personal, very intense...

Gen. Swan: Let me close with one thing.

We came back to – we were at Grand Rapids after the interment and everything had been completed, and we went back to the airport at Grand Rapids. And Mrs. Ford was flying with the family on Air Force One back to Palm Springs. I was departing at that point from Grand Rapids; everything was complete. My aide de camp and I were ready to jump in the vehicle and go catch our flight out of Grand Rapids. Suddenly, some Secret Service guys ran up to us and said, "You can't go yet! She wants to see you." So we went

up into Air Force One, into the President's compartment. And Mrs. Ford spent an amazing several minutes, quietly thanking me for what we'd done for her and her family; totally unnecessary on her part. It was a remarkable moment and an act of kindness I'll never forget.

We parted as friends. It was such a gracious and moving gesture that she would even think to do that. I'm forever grateful to her for her graciousness and her hospitality under such an extraordinarily trying time in her life. It was an amazing experience.

Smith: Thank you.

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