

# GUARDING FDR

SECRET SERVICE AGENT VAL NOLAN JR.



(left) Franklin Delano Roosevelt, U.S. president from 1933 to 1945. (right) Twenty-one-year-old Secret Service Agent Val Nolan Jr. in 1942. *Courtesy photos*



Val Nolan Jr., in the center of this picture, guarding the left side of FDR's car during a 1942 tour of a shipbuilding facility. *Courtesy photo*

The late, esteemed  
Indiana University law professor  
and noted ornithologist protected  
President Franklin Delano  
Roosevelt in the early days of  
World War II.

EDITED BY ELISABETH ANDREWS

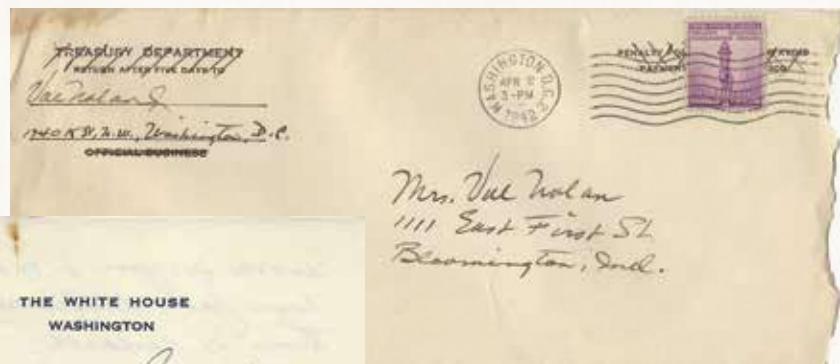
**V**al Nolan Jr. was known to the Bloomington community as an exceptional scholar of uncommon breadth. While serving as a professor in Indiana University's law school and twice as its acting dean, he also joined the Department of Biology, where he made substantial contributions to the field of ornithology.

Nolan was so beloved a teacher that his former student Michael "Mickey" Maurer, the attorney and entrepreneur after whom the law school is now named, endowed the Val Nolan Chair in Law now held by IU Bloomington's provost, Lauren Robel. Describing Nolan as one of her own mentors, Robel said after his death in 2008, "He was a giant, but a gentle one. His integrity and intellectuality set the standard for many of us at the school."

Those who knew this gentle man may be surprised to learn that the legal scholar and ornithologist began his professional life with top-secret security clearance, access to the president of the United States, and a cache of firearms including a .38-pistol and a submachine gun. At just 21 years of age, Nolan was the youngest Secret Service agent in the White House, assigned to protect Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Here, we tell the story of Nolan's Secret Service detail in his own words, drawn from two oral histories and found in letters (in italics) to his mother, Jeanette, written in 1942. The bulk of his recollections are transcribed from videos his niece Elizabeth Nolan recorded in 2005, with some additional details provided by a 2006 interview with IU Culbertson Chair Emeritus of English Donald J. Gray.

The story begins in December 1941. Nolan, a native of Evansville, Indiana, and a '41 IU grad, was working as a deputy U.S. marshal serving subpoenas and making federal arrests. After his father's sudden passing the previous year, Nolan was helping to support his mother and two younger siblings, who were living in Indianapolis.



During his time at the White House, Nolan wrote frequently to his mother, Jeannette. She is pictured at left with Nolan's father, Val Nolan Sr., who died in 1940. Courtesy photos

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON  
August 4-5  
Dearest Mother  
I got your letter when I got back from Hyde Park today. I'm glad you stay at Kroy's turned out better than we anticipated - it really looked as if it might be quite a pain when I was there.  
I think the Bull being in a fine idea and I know you could write a swell one if it isn't too much



files. It became one of the big McCarthyite [enterprises], but at that time I'm not sure it was, although I looked up Mrs. Roosevelt just for the hell of it one time and they had a long dossier on her. I looked up myself and I had not made any impression.

One [other] thing the Secret Service did was that it protected the president.

The other day I was on the detail, which took FDR (known to the boys as "The Boss") to the train to go ----- (sorry, I really didn't mean to do that but I can't tell you by mail). Today I got up at 6 and went out to get him. We took him & [FDR's close friend and adviser] Harry Hopkins to the White House and then went over to a church where he goes on the anniversary of his inauguration. I was on the door FDR went in by so I didn't see some of those who attended. I did see Hopkins, [Supreme Court Justice] Frank Murphy, [Secretary of the Navy Frank] Knox, [Vice President Henry] Wallace, Princess somebody of Norway & her family, and a good few others. The whole cabinet and everybody who is anybody were there. Many pictures were taken so if you see any look for my back. Needless to say I was pacing the ground, playing restless eyes over it like powerful search lights. I got quite a kick out of tearing down the street in a huge car, talking (I don't talk myself) in code on a two-way radio out to other huge cars and pulling up at the White House.

There was never any individualized training. The agents, we'd all talk about it constantly, "What would you do if such and such? Hey, suppose a guy comes in, when would you draw your gun? When would you shoot?" We all carried guns all the time. The instructions were all very vague: "Shoot when you think you should."

#### RECOLLECTIONS OF VAL NOLAN JR. INTERPERSED WITH LETTERS HOME TO HIS MOTHER.

On December 7, 1941, I went out to Riverside Park, where it was snowing, on a bird hike by myself. I came back, walked into the house, and there was an old guy there that was the father of the woman I rented from. He said, "We're at war! They attacked Pearl Harbor!"

Indiana was a hugely isolationist state, but I'm sure that the next day, the 8th of December, there were as many Indiana people enlisting as anywhere else.

There went the isolationism.

Immediately the federal offices, including the marshal offices, went on special alerts. Radios were going and the news was just disastrous, following the war day by day, hour by hour.

I couldn't just stay there as a marshal with all of this going on. I had worked with the Secret Service and with the FBI and I had a chance to choose among some of [the agencies] where I already knew the agents. I applied to the Secret Service.

Dearest Mother,

I got in at 1100 a.m. this morning & went directly to the Treasury Building where I stayed signing blanks till 5 this evening. I am sworn in etc., and I guess I'm now an agent. I have an agent badge to get in & out of the building. I don't know what I'll be doing but I'll be in Washington indefinitely I'm pretty sure. I think from what they said I'll go on the White House detail in a few days - until then I'll be in the D.C. office of the Secret Service.

One of the activities we did was to check out the background of people who were being hired by the Treasury Department. Everything was growing and the idea was to clear [the applicants]. Were they good Americans? Were they honest? I was assigned to some cases at the House Un-American Activities Committee, which maintained very big

We were practiced; you were supposed to shoot x number of rounds on a firing range maintained by the Treasury in the Treasury Building, which was connected to the White House by a tunnel. You'd go over there and shoot so many rounds of a .38 Special. I was a good shot. I had a steady hand.

I shot my first rounds with a .38 today ... it goes off like a cannon & has a terrific recoil. However I got used to it and qualified as a marksman today so I'm through with the pistol course. I now go around armed to the teeth and am a dangerous character.

I was assigned for a weekend to the White House, to that detail. I did whatever we did that day. Guarded the President. I was assigned again once or twice. They were looking over people the way you would in a pledge situation at a fraternity or sorority.

I've been doing a lot of interesting things lately. Saturday I was at the White House when [Australian Minister for External Affairs] Dr. [Herbert Vere] Evatt, the Australian you've been reading about, called. I sat and listened to the [horse] race at Tropical [Park in Florida] with Harry Hopkins, saw [Secretary of Commerce] Jesse Jones, the boss, et al.

I took the President from the swimming pool to the house yesterday, followed by the Crown Prince & Princess of Norway & their kids. . . then later I went in to the President's office, took his basket of official business and went with him from the Exec Office to the house.

It was swing shift, so you'd have eight hours on for a week, say from 7 to 3 or something like that. The next week, you'd swing to 3 to 11, then next would be all night.

That was the stated rule, but the fact was that often they'd want the whole detail out doing something or other, driving in a parade or something, so you'd have to be on duty at that time, too. The other thing that ate into the 8-hour-day rule was visiting royalty or visiting [dignitaries]: the Queen of Norway, King of Greece, or non-regal people but just the head of this or that. Winston Churchill.

# THE RECORD

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE

FRANK J. WILSON, CHIEF

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1 - Lieutenant Thomas Hanson, USNR (District #5, agent); 2 - Lieut. (j. g.) Martin G. Kalix, USNR (District #5, agent); 3 - Lieut. (j. g.) Bruce B. Swegle, USNR (District #15, agent); 4 - Lieut. (j. g.) Val Nolan, Jr., USNR (District #5, agent); 5 - Lieut. (j. g.) John T. Sherwood, USNR (District #5, agent)

A 1945 issue of the Secret Service's weekly bulletin, *The Record*, featured Nolan (bottom left) along with other former agents serving in the military. By then, Nolan was a Navy officer interrogating Japanese prisoners of war in the Philippines. Courtesy photo

So you'd be on duty with them, too. You'd have to guard them. And they would just split off eight of the White House detail people and you'd do that.

In that time of great stress you rarely worked as little as 15 [hours each day]. Really. No weekend, no nothing. You almost never had a day off; I'm not kidding you. You could never make a date with a girl - you'd almost surely have to break it. It was a very monkish existence.

Dearest Mother,

I have been temporarily assigned to the White House detail. I don't know how long it will last, but I am pretty sure this is the beginning of a permanent assignment. Today the boss went for a long ride and I had my first taste of doing gymnastics from the running board of a moving car. We drove about 120 miles during most of which time I

was training a Thompson sub-machine gun on every body we passed. Tomorrow I am on the detail to take him to church. You will probably see pictures of this so look for me - I will be right with him all the time.

All of this is highly interesting of course and I enjoy it. The hours are pretty awful though. Today, I worked from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. with no time off for lunch and I have the same tomorrow. Last night I went to my first show since I've been here. I've made 2 dates and had to break both.

We wore plainclothes. We were with the President under all circumstances. You met and talked to anybody under the sun - the guy waiting there secretly being introduced for a meeting that others weren't supposed to know about [or] the Secretary of State.

Since coming here I have become proficient in the use of a pistol, sub-machine gun, riot gun, gas, and have learned the layout of the White House, Hyde Park estate, special train, etc. etc. I know the staff here and am pretty well broken in to all the details of the job. Always the importance of the work has been stressed, and the detail is a very clannish group. I have just begun to [be] a part of the set-up. We are told that in one day we may have to chat with a cabinet member, deny an ambassador entrance, handle a crank who wants to see the boss, or an axis [Germany, Italy, Japan] agent with a bomb, etc.

[When the President would go up to his residence], we went up to Hyde Park, with 20 or 30 men. There were three shifts of eight men each, and there were drivers and clericals, so by the time you got the 24 activations, plus the support, plus the supervising agent, you had about 30 people.

We stayed at the Vanderbilt Mansion. We slept in a great big room or two, like sleeping in a college fraternity. You weren't going out and doing anything else. You'd go off duty, play poker, sleep, go back on duty. If Roosevelt took a ride, you'd take a ride.

We got in from Hyde Park this morning after a good trip . . . Harry [Hopkins] had just got in from England with Gen. [George] Marshall. I sat up on the President's car all night and played with Fala – his dog.

You really ought to see the Vanderbilt Mansion where we stayed – it's no wonder that socialism and communism are a problem. I can't tell you of all the absurd luxury and the ridiculous refinements in it. Still it is an interesting place and has a wonderful library. Roosevelt's home is just a big country place with a nice view and pretty grounds.

It was interesting as hell. The Supreme Court in and out. You really would say, "How are you, Mr. Secretary [or] General Marshall?" It was a terribly, terribly busy time, that first year of the war.

The President would not talk to you. You'd say, "Good morning, Mr. President," and "Mrs. Roosevelt." Harry Hopkins, who was his informal [chief adviser], he was sociable. I seem to recall he would not play at poker

with us but would watch the game. There were some of [FDR's] secretaries that I got to know pretty well – secretary in the broad sense of guys doing his bidding. His personal secretary was Grace Tully and she got to be a friend of mine.

Dearest Mother,

We got back Sunday from Charlottesville [Virginia] where the President visited Gen. [Edwin Martin "Pa"] Watson at his house in the mountains near there. From Watson's you can see Monticello about a 1/2 mile away and near it is Michie Tavern where Patrick Henry lived.

I was on the night shift at Gen. Watson's and worked from 11:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. It was one of the oddest nights I have ever spent – it was very cold and windy right on the top of the mountain, and I stood a post for 8 hrs, laden with a flash light, a huge dry cell battery and a flood light strapped on my back, my pistol strapped on outside my coat (under which I wore a raincoat, suit, pajamas & underwear) and a sub-machine gun with a heavy load of ammunition under my arm. It was clear as a bell though, and for some reason I enjoyed it. I imagined myself as three people, the naturalist, the historian, and the bodyguard (who enjoyed it least). The sunrise was lovely on the valley and Monticello, and on the whole it was a good experience.

Yesterday I attended the president's press conference – they really are interesting as the devil. He is plenty smart, don't think he's not. He said he thought the war would be over in 2 or 3 years which is less than most experts say and confirms my belief – that it will be shorter than that, especially if Russia keeps its head above water this summer. [Gossip columnist] Hedda Hopper was there if you are interested in that lovely lady (who must be 70 years old). Last night during the blackout (which was plenty black) Gen. [Henry] Arnold and some others were at the White House.

I was hearing [conversations]. We were at Hyde Park, and Roosevelt had an open car that he used to like to drive around in. It had been fixed so that he could do it all with his hands because he couldn't use his legs. He

would drive around and we would tail him. Whether he knew it or not, we were somewhere just right behind him.

One time we drove around in the country somewhere. It was sunny, probably a summer day, and we drove out to a place and came out in a clearing and there was an airstrip there, and not much more really than an airstrip. A little plane came in, and off came Winston Churchill. I was outside the window when they were talking. I wasn't eavesdropping but you could hear them.

Just fairly recently I read a very detailed history of the relationship between [Roosevelt] and Winston Churchill. It seems weird but apparently that night that I was standing out there was the night they agreed to manufacture the atomic bomb. I could hear them talk about "Uncle Joe." That was Joe Stalin. I didn't know what they were saying, but the decision was made at Hyde Park at that time. It's interesting obviously to read histories of it now.

Whatever happened on your shift where you were, you saw it.

Tomorrow we head for our mountain hideout, which you must never mention to a soul – its existence isn't even known. We've been up twice before & I like it a lot – plenty wild . . . The boss always takes a buddy up with him – [Supreme Court] Justice [James Francis] Byrnes, [Postmaster General] Frank Walker, [Office of Strategic Services head] Wild Bill Donovan, etc. I've overheard some interesting stories up there.

You got to see [FDR] in action an awful lot. There were a lot of things about him that I greatly admired, like his ability to get his strength up when he had to.

I was a great admirer of [Eleanor Roosevelt]. She was very gracious. Her politics were more left than [FDR's]. She was taking much stronger positions on racist and black and labor and everything else. And I agreed with those positions.

I'm becoming more and more interested in international relations all the time – I'm really exactly opposite myself 5 years ago in that respect. I'm a confirmed believer in the folly of isolationism now and from now on – not because I want to help mankind but because I

believe it's the best way we can serve ourselves. I'm really convinced that we must participate in any international organizations and must be prepared to make people hold to the line by force if necessary, every time they begin to run contrary to our best interest. We can do it and we're the only ones who'll do it with the sole object of bettering world and not national conditions. I'm not an altruist, but I believe we must protect our interests to keep out of future trouble.

[My schedule] was very irregular but almost constant. It was very austere. It was quite lonely and I read a million books when I was not on duty or sometimes when I was on duty at night.

It is very interesting for brief periods but at other times it is really stifling – some days I sit for 8 whole hours outside FDR's door – can't read, move, etc. You can imagine how that gets. Also, after you've seen one big reception, parade, etc., they are all alike except for the person honored. I have now seen every body in Washington, several kings, commanders, presidents, etc., and to be frank with you it is beginning to lose the romance it had at first . . . I would much rather see a friend or a new bird than any president or king.

I was the youngest one but [all the agents] were youngish men. And at that point there were bigwigs in the military coming through every day and they would spot somebody and say, "That would be a good guy." They were constantly offering, "I'll get you a commission as a major. You can come work in my office." So all my colleagues in the Secret Service White House detail were dropping away to get into the military, and I was very nervous that if I just sat there the draft might get me.

I want to be in an important job where I can feel that I'm doing some good and I want to feel that I'll be there as long as the war lasts. If it's the army or navy, okay. But this business of watching the boys walking out with commissions under their arms and telling us that we'll be sorry if we don't do the same is getting my goat.



Indiana University Professor Emeritus Val Nolan Jr. in 1986, shortly after his retirement. Courtesy photo

[Eventually] I had the feeling that everyone else was in the damn war and here I was not in uniform. Sometimes people seemed to be looking at you wondering why you weren't in uniform.

I asked around and found out about the Japanese language program. They were looking for people they thought could learn the language fast. I decided to go into the Navy as a language student.

I'm told that shortly after that the Secret Service and the draft people made a rule that you couldn't join the [military] service, because they were being depleted and having to train new people all the time. I'm told I was the last man out.

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After nearly a year in the Secret Service, Nolan went on to train for 14 months at the Navy's Japanese language school at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Upon graduation, he was assigned to an amphibious training unit near San Diego headed by FDR's son James Roosevelt. ("I seem to be

thrown in with the Roosevelts no matter where I go," he wrote in 1944.) To practice his Japanese prior to deployment, Nolan spent time with internees at the Poston War Relocation Center in Arizona.

Nolan's unit deployed to the Philippines in the spring of 1945, where he was responsible for interrogating Japanese prisoners of war (many of whom became his friends) and, after Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender in August, facilitating the local Japanese troops' surrender on Leyte Island.

Following a brief post-war assignment in Japan assessing damage to national railroads, Nolan returned to Bloomington and enrolled in law school in 1946. He joined the faculty in 1949, retiring in 1985 but continuing his ornithological research until his death at the age of 87.

Nolan is survived by his three children – William Nolan of Columbus, Ohio, and Ann Clare Nolan and Val Nolan III of Bloomington – and his wife of 28 years and primary collaborator, Indiana University Distinguished Professor of Biology and Gender Studies Ellen Ketterson. ✨