

## **Ronnie Wayne Belcher**

When you consider all the ways to serve your family and your country, a career in the Armed Forces is an honorable way to do both. Your military career might begin with no exact direction but possibilities were limitless. This is the adventure of a young 21-year-old farm boy's path into manhood serving the highest office in the country, the President of the United States of America at the White House. This is the course of Master Sergeant E-8 Ronnie Wayne Belcher's life.

Ronnie Wayne Belcher was born in Sutherlin, Virginia on August 7, 1941 to Thomas Belcher and Ruby Woodall Belcher. He was the 10th and last child born to the family who were already raising Rainie, Charlie, Aileen, Alease, Robert, Mozelle, Margaret, Nell and the youngest beloved sister Marie. The family all grew up farming tobacco as sharecroppers and as part of Danville's tobacco industry before Ronnie's birth and after he left for the Army, 60 plus years. They had moved around to different residences in and around Danville. Ronnie attended Dan River High School for 2 years and then moved to Alabama where he lived with his sister, Mozelle Floyd, and her family to complete high school. Soon after, Ronnie Belcher followed in the footsteps of his older brothers, Charlie Belcher (Army) and Robert Belcher (Army and Navy) by enlisting in the Army in August of 1962. Part of Ronnie's motivation was to send money home to his struggling mother and father back in Danville, VA.

He attended basic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. In May of 1963 a recruiter for the White House Communications Agency (WHCA) recognized Belcher's high standings and asked him if he would consider a post with WHCA. This agency serves both the President's and Vice President's offices to maintain secure and constant lines of communication with the White House and officials. Ronnie knew that accepting the position of working and traveling alongside the President and Vice President of the United States would be demanding on his time but serving the Commander in Chief was the highest honor an enlisted man could receive. He accepted the position with confidence. This would allow him to help his family back in Danville and answer his personal call of duty. Ronnie would later be faced with the same challenge of what comes first, his family or his service to his country and his President again.

Ronnie's ambition would take him through the extreme rigors of the FBI background checks and scrutiny to get the coveted top-secret clearance needed to be a member of WHCA. Having yourself and your family questioned and scrutinized by the FBI is a worthwhile but arduous process. When his top-secret clearance was granted, he would soon be connecting direct calls and conference calls for the offices of the President and the Vice Presidents to leaders all over the world.

Ronnie was first stationed at Camp David, Maryland after boot camp. His career with WHCA started there as a switchboard operator connecting calls for President John F. Kennedy while he and the first family were in residence at Camp David.

There was a special encounter with John F. Kennedy Jr. at the Camp David Presidential residence, the Aspen House, in 1963. A young John-John would pick up the telephone and ask the invisible voice on the other end of the phone "where am I?" Ronnie would tell John-John where he was in the house and then John-John would hang up on him. Minutes later another call,

the same question and the same response. Mr. Belcher would later recount that story to an Atlanta radio show when John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane went down in July 1999. Of course that tragic moment unfortunately echoed the loss of President Kennedy so many years earlier during his trip to Dallas, Texas. Ronnie was meant to be on that trip to Dallas but had to miss it due to a broken wrist.

Once Lyndon B. Johnson took office, communications officers quickly realized the new Commander in Chief was quite commanding. It was during this Presidential term, that Ronnie met his future wife, Mary Suzanne Thor Straten. She was a switchboard operator in Hanover, Pennsylvania and naturally, Ronnie met Mary over the phone. They would go on to have three children, Timothy, Kimberly and Christopher. Mr. & Mrs. Belcher may have been starting a family, but duty and country calls and Ronnie would always answer that call.

In 1967 while still stationed at Camp David, Ronnie would work long hours connecting the President with foreign dignitaries such as Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, and Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser prior to the Israeli 6-day war. Ronnie would remain on the line in case there was an immediate request to add additional officials to the call. This was unusual but due to the level of urgency it was necessary, allowing Ronnie to listen to historic conversation in an attempt to find peace. Johnson was keen on defusing the situation and continued to work from his ranch in Texas while the Secret Service and WHCA teams, including Ronnie, worked out of trailers on the property as the President would be seen driving by in his Cadillac convertible.

A memorable moment with WHCA came in July of 1969 while in Jakarta, Indonesia. Ronnie and members of WHCA arranged for a screen and projector for White House advance teams to watch Neil Armstrong take his first steps on the moon. They decided to openly include any interested Jakarta residents to witness this once-in-a-lifetime event, and the teams anticipated no more than 100 people would want to watch the event. However, a man landing on the moon was an event for the human race, so the screening drew 10,000 – 20,000 people to celebrate. The City of Jakarta was gridlocked by the throngs of people celebrating, crowding the city Square to get a glimpse of this historic achievement for mankind.

In 1970 Ronnie was transferred to Homestead Air Force Base to be part of the WHCA and other teams to set up a post at President Nixon's Beach compound in Key Biscayne, Florida. The residence in Florida afforded the President secured access to his family and friends. There were several occasions Nixon could be seen walking and talking on the beach, in swim trunks, dress socks and dress shoes. The sudden end to Nixon's Presidency sent Ronnie to Washington, D.C. to serve the WHCA as a Trip Duty Officer, which would take Ronnie around the world.

As Gerald Ford took office in 1974, the White House staff greeted his friendly manner as a welcomed new administration after the Watergate scandal. President Ford's 2 years in office were confronted with the challenges of mastering inflation, reviving a depressed economy, solving chronic energy shortages, and trying to ensure world peace. President Gerald Ford was noted as a man of integrity and openness. Ronnie remembers that President Ford was the only President during his time with WHCA, to have local government officials and law enforcement in a line at the airport upon his departure to thank them, along with chosen White House advance

team members, for their hard work. Ronnie was asked to be in this line during a trip to Orlando Florida.

The next President to enter the Oval office in 1976 was James “Jimmy” Carter during our country’s Bicentennial Celebration. Carter immediately went to work trying to establish peace in the Middle East between Israel and Egypt. The plan to ultimately get these two countries and leaders to sit down and talk would take many years. The White House worked tirelessly year-round on this, and other matters, which meant the support teams did as well. For two Christmases, all Presidential away teams worked from the Carters’ Georgia residence setting up base in a motel in the neighboring town of Americus, GA. This is where they would spend their holidays with each other and away from their families. Their sacrifice would finally be fruitful when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, together, signed the Camp David Accords, in 1978 at the White House.

Near the end of Jimmy Carter’s presidency, Ronnie was coming up on his 20th year in the Army and would have to decide his future service to the White House. The many years of traveling had taken a toll on Belcher’s health, his marriage, and his relationships with his family. His kids were too young, to really understand how important their father’s work really was, but thankfully they grew to recognize the patriotism that their father truly possessed. To them, now he is their definition of an American Hero. Ronnie notified WCHA his intent to retire from active duty in the summer of 1982, after 20 years of service. Ronnie would soon re-enter civilian life and spend more time with his family.

Ronald Reagan took office in 1980 and Ronnie became a Vice Presidential Trip Officer and with retirement in his near future he chose his final two trips with VP George H. Bush to Hawaii and then to Tokyo, Japan. In Hawaii, Ronnie was tasked to play a round of golf so the secret service could investigate the golf course for potential threats. Ronnie’s golf game was “Military Golf”.... left, right, then left, then right...all over the place. When Ronnie apologized, the secret service said that his game was perfect for them to prepare for VP George H. Bush’s upcoming rounds of golf.

A 20-year military career, and an unprecedented 19 years with the White House, afforded Ronnie an extraordinary global travel experience to 6 continents, over 15 countries, and 40 states in the USA. After retirement Ronnie moved to Georgia, then later realized that the best way to enjoy his retirement was to move to Northern California in 2004. He would be closer to his California family, which included his granddaughter Stephanie Belcher. The long distance didn’t keep Ronnie from traveling back to Danville, Virginia for family reunions, a tradition that has continued for over 100 years. By returning to Danville the second Sunday of August, Ronnie, honors the deep devotion and respect he has for his mother’s love and those very special 9 siblings who also shared the experience of “growing up Belcher.” His wish is that this tradition will carry on for the next 100 years. From his humble beginnings in Danville, Virginia instilled the ethics of hard work, loyalty, and love of family to shape a homegrown American Hero in the eyes of his family and perhaps yours also.