Wes: Our last story takes us on a hunt for the origins of a Presidential hideaway. It’s early in 1942. The United States has been plunged into the Second World War. Reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor, and with German U-Boats lurking in the open waters, President Roosevelt’s secret service orders him off of his Presidential yacht for safer ground. His closest advisors are tasked with finding the perfect location...one secret enough for wartime business and pleasing enough for Presidential leisure. An isolated location in the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland is chosen and named “Shangri-La”. Today, we know the rustic cluster of cabins as Camp David, the retreat of American Presidents for nearly seventy years, and host to some of the world’s most powerful leaders. But in its earliest days, the planning of Camp David was a top secret operation. More than half a century later, Mike McQuate, a collector from San Francisco, California, has found a box containing a letter that may provide a rare insight into the development of FDR’s private retreat.

Mike: I’ve found a lot of strange and unusual stuff throughout the years but recently I found this letter, ah, signed by Ronald Reagan. And I wanted to find out more about it.

Wes: I’m Wes Cowan, and I’ve come to get a look at the contents of mike’s box.

Mike: Come on in.

Wes: Thank you. Wow mike, I can see by looking around that you like stuff.

Mike: Yeah.

Wes: And where did most of it come from?

Mike: Most of it is from dumpsters actually.

Wes: So you’re a dumpster diver?

Mike: Yeah.
Wes: People wouldn't believe the amount of great stuff that comes out of garbage. This is what you've got for me here?

Mike: Well, it's a box from a dumpster and it's a lot of navy memorabilia going back to before World War 1 and the interesting thing I thought was this letter that looks like it's signed by Ronald Regan.

Wes: You're kidding me. Let me take a look! It's on white house stationary, September 9, 1981.

"Dear Mrs Kevers. It has recently been brought to my attention that your late husband Captain John H Kevers gave many years of service to Presidents starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt. Because of Captain Kevers, we have the enjoyable facility of Camp David. It's an ideal spot for a Presidential retreat and I am thankful that Captain Kevers selected it." And then yep that looks like it's signed by Reagan. So what is it that you want me to find out?

Mike: Well, I was curious how and why did this guy get to pick the site for Camp David. Did he just jump off the boat and go to the top of a mount and say here's the spot? And also I was curious like if there was any family members that would want this stuff.

Wes: Well, I am going to have to take this box. I mean, I can see right now that there's a lot of stuff here for me to get my teeth into. So I am ready to get started. If the claim that's made in this letter is true, that this guy Captain John H. Kevers was somehow responsible for locating the land that would ultimately become Camp David the Presidential retreat, then it's a pretty cool story. Something's been bugging me from the moment mike showed me his letter. I hold it up the light and I can see that it's just you know relatively cheap copy paper and there is no texture to the ink on here, it's all just continuous. Particularly in the signature of Reagan. You know on a real signature the ink will sort of float on top of the paper and you can actually feel it with your finger; it's a Xerox copy. The box also contains some period photographs. These little snapshots are judging by the size of them and the kind of papers being used I would guess are from the 1930’s and right on top there are a couple of photographs of some navy guy. Wonder if that could be Kevers? A number of these photos are 40’s era black and white images of navy officers. The photos are autographed, and addressed to none other than John Kevers. To Lieutenant J.H. Kevers, US Navy, in appreciation of the assistance he has given me in the discharge of my duties as a naval aide to the president, John I. McCrae. 3rd of February, 1943. That may be a clue. But the papers are an odd assortment. Mostly they seem to be the legal and personal documents of people other than John Kevers. But if Mike's letter is authentic, there's some connection between Kevers and Camp David. The first thing I need to do is some
basic research. The idea of a Presidential retreat goes back to the 18th century. Before Camp David, most Presidents escaped to their ancestral homes. Thomas Jefferson enjoyed the grandeur of Monticello. For Teddy Roosevelt, it was a cabin in the woods named “pine knot”. Franklin Roosevelt preferred a Presidential yacht, the USS Potomac. But in 1942, with German U-Boats sinking ships along the U.S east coast, the “floating white house” was no longer an option for the president. FDR needed a secure land-based retreat that can also serve as a place to strategize about US involvement in the war. But exactly how was this spot chosen for Camp David?

Ed Wherle researched the history of Camp David and Catoctin Mountain Park for the National Park Service. How did the Presidential retreat end up in the mountains of western Maryland?

Ed: Roosevelt is looking for sort of some place for security reasons as well where he can get away from Washington yet return quickly if need be. There’s a lot of secrecy surrounding the issue, there’s not a lot of paper work being kept. From what I have seen the white house asked the national park service to choose the site. They came up with a couple of potential locations and ultimately the Catoctin Mountains was the best location.

Wes: The cooler air of the Catoctin Mountains was a huge help to a president with grave health concerns.

Ed: He has polio but he also has some serious sinus problems and air conditioning was a problem for him, those muggy Washington summers were a problem for him, so the National Park Service brought him up there, April 22nd 1942. As he emerged from his car he was suppose to have said this is Shangri-La.

Wes: Why Shangri-La?

Ed: Well, there was this very popular novel in the 1930’s by a guy named James Hilton called the lost horizon about a lost civilization in the Himalayas where no one ever grew old.

Wes : It was later renamed Camp David by President Eisenhower in honor of his grandson the land had been a Camp for federal employees, built by the works progress administration in 1939. Ed tells me that Roosevelt personally drew up plans to convert the Camp into his Shangri-La.
Ed: It was a very simple place and Roosevelt actually wanted to keep it simple, he liked kind of a rustic feel. They hooked together a couple of cabins, they put in a screened in porch but it remained very, very simple. The guests all had to share a bathroom; at one point the bathroom door broke and Roosevelt didn't even have it fixed. He sort of liked the idea of his guests roughing it. Winston Churchill, his most famous guest at the Catoctins described Shangri La as “in principle, a log cabin.”

Wes: Ed says FDR has good reasons for keeping Shangri-La simple. The country had long been divided over entry into the war in Europe. Before Pearl Harbor, isolationists had especially attacked Roosevelt for aiding Britain with munitions and money.

Ed: He doesn't want to give them any reason to call him lavish, to call him a spender. The country is coming out of the depression but people are making a lot of sacrifices in the war so they want to keep expenditures down. After he died, after World War 2, it was made public and the media was brought up there and sure to form as Roosevelt feared some newspapers depicted this as a lavish resort, in fact the Chicago tribune, a very anti-Roosevelt newspaper, claimed that this resort cost 100,000 dollars.

Wes: You know, Ed, my investigation is about a Naval Captain named John H. Kevers and he supposedly is the guy who picked the spot for Shangri La. Have you ever heard this story?

Ed: There is a lot of secrecy surrounding the issue, there is not a lot of paper work being kept. Whether Kevers had anything to do with the actual decision to put Shangri-La in the Catoctin Mountains that's kind of trickier to say.

We: Ed can't tell me anything about Mike’s letter, so I'm heading to the Ronald Reagan Presidential library in California. I'm hoping head archivist Mike Duggan can authenticate our letter and tell me more about why it was written. I know that this is a Xerox letter. This is sort of the size and type of stationary that Reagan would have used?

Mike: Yes it is. I have an example for you here.
Wes: Mike confirms that our letter is a photocopy of what appears to be an original White House letter. He also points out that the signature was not written by the President himself, but with an automatic device used by the white house staff called an autopen.

Mike: He received something like 500,000 pieces of correspondence in a month and there was no way that he could sign all those outgoing letters.

Wes: To learn more about why our letter was written by the President’s staff, mike wants to check the archives of President Reagan’s correspondence.

Mike: This is the lower ground floor textual storage area. This area holds one third of the collection.

Wes: Holy smokes! Mike takes me to the alphabetical files, a collection of eight to ten thousand routine messages, written by the White House correspondence unit.

Mike: There it is.

Wes: Terrific.

Mike Duggan: Okay. So here’s K.E.V. so it should be in this file. We’re looking for September of ’81, and here we are. So this is our copy of the letter that was sent out.

Wes: The White House keeps a copy of all outgoing correspondence. Turning a page in the file reveals a document that puts the origins of my letter into sharp focus. It’s from Carl Carlson, Captain US Navy retired. Carlson is requesting a birthday greeting from Reagan to his mother-in-law. I’m positive Mrs. Kevers, my mother in law, would appreciate a congratulatory message from her President. So our letter was written by President Reagan’s staff in response to Captain Keever’s son-in-law. Captain Kevers was directed by President Roosevelt’s naval aid to proceed and obtain a retreat where the president would be secure. That’s got to be talking about Camp David.

Mike Duggan: Right

Wes: It’s Captain Carlson who makes the original claim that Keevers was responsible for finding Camp David. But is it true?
Mike Duggan: there’s a note here: special handling. It could mean to expedite the request because they did turn this around fairly quickly. It’s fairly clear that they didn’t refer this to another office of the White House to do an investigation.

Wes: It doesn’t necessarily mean one way or the other that Kevers really did or did not find the ground for Camp David, is that right?

Mike Duggan: I think that is fair to say.

Wes: So all I really have is the word of Keevers’ son-in-law. If Keevers had been involved, it would have been when FDR moved his retreat from his Presidential yacht to Shangri-La. So I’m meeting Kim Nielson, the director of the US Navy Museum, aboard the USS Potomac, now harbored in Oakland, California

Kim: This is the yacht’s fantail, this is where FDR would come and relax – it was his farite spot on the ship.

Wes: Holy smokes! Now was he a fisherman? He must’ve been, right?

Kim: He was an avid fisherman. He would fish whenever he had an opportunity, he would drop a line right over the side of the yacht here, and fish for hours.

Wes: Kim tells me that through a series of modifications Roosevelt was able to get around on his own. The crew of the Potomac were among the very few who ever got to see a more vulnerable side of FDR.

Kim: Roosevelt considered himself a Navy man because he had been secretary…assistant secretary of the navy during World War 1 under Wilson, so the Navy played a large role in his administration.

Wes: My investigation involves a letter that I have here that is about a guy named Captain John H. Kevers, and in this letter it mentions that Kevers was the captain of the USS Potomac. Have you ever heard of Kevers?
Kim: Yes, Kevers was the captain of the Potomac in 1944 into 1945. Before that, he was on the staff of the Potomac. He was actually on the President’s staff for all of the yachts and yacht escorts since 1935.

Wes: So Kevers was a key member of FDR’s naval retinue. But is there a connection with Camp David? What would a navy guy have to do with finding a Presidential retreat?

Kim: The crew of the Presidential yacht was also the crew that supported the president at Camp Shangri-La, there was only one group of people. President Roosevelt was looking for some other place to have weekend getaways and he tasked his naval aid John McCrae to find him a hideout somewhere inland.

Wes: Wait a minute, did you say John McCrae? McCrae is the guy whose autographed picture was in the box Mike found with the note thanking Kevers for all his help.

Kim: The Naval aide was the President’s go to guy when he wanted to get something done. McCrae served through the year and was assigned by FDR to find his hideout, which turned out to be ultimately Camp Shangri-La or as we know today Camp David.

Wes: But if McCrae led the search for Camp David, then what role did John Kevers play? Kim tells me the answer is on board the Potomac.

Kim: Now this is what I wanted you to see. Read what that plaque says.

Wes: This is one of thirty-six bottle. The inscription on the plaque gives me the information I need to complete my investigation. You know this was a great story, I learned a lot about the Camp David or Shangri-la and world war two, Roosevelt's interest in the Navy and his yacht. I tell Mike that the effort to find Shangri-La was officially led by FDR’s naval aide John McCrea. But what Kim showed me on the Potomac proved that John Kevers was undoubtedly a trusted member of FDR’s inner circle. This is one of 36 bottles Prime Minister Winston Churchill presented to FDR when he visited Camp Shangri-La may 23rd 1943. This was given by Captain John H. Kevers in 1963. Kevers was the skipper of the President’s yacht. Holy smokes! Do you think it’s possible that Kevers would have been tasked by McCrae to actually go out and look at the property that became Shangri-La?
Kim: McCrea as the naval aide to the president had a tight circle of officers that he would trust to carry out his orders. Kevers was one of these officers.

Wes: Although Kim can't give me hard evidence that Kevers singlehandedly located the Camp David site, he says that by 1944, Kevers had certainly made his mark with FDR.

Kim: At that time Kevers was promoted to captain of this vessel and as a captain of this vessel he was also officer in charge of Camp Shangri-La.

Wes: You're kidding me. He knew about Shangri-La, he certainly knew Roosevelt, but whether he really found the ground, unfortunately the answer is I can't tell you. It seems certainly possible that Kevers did. Mike wanted to return his box of memorabilia to its rightful owner, so after discovering Captain Carlson's letter in the Reagan library, I made some calls, and arranged a little surprise. Hey Joel, come on in.

Mike: Hi. I'm Mike McQuate. How are you doing?

Joel: Joel J. Carlson, great-grandson to Mr. Kevers.

Wes: Joel tells us that after his grandfather, Carl Carlson, died, our box was accidentally included in the estate auction. But how it ended up in the trash remains a mystery.

Joel: Why someone would throw this in the trash is beyond me because you can see for yourself just from looking at the pictures you'd be going, “this is history. What am I doing?” You know?

Wes: And while Joel knew that his great-grandfather had been captain of the Potomac, he had no idea about the connection to Shangri-La. All because of the digging around in this little box – this little box. There are all kinds of stuff in here that I think that you are going to find very interesting.

Joel: Thank you so very much man, for me, my brother and my entire family, and my grandparents, I know they would be just thrilled to death.