

# AGENCY CELEBRATES KING HOLIDAY WITH CIVIL RIGHTS CO-WORKER

By Dick Cole, Former Chief, DCMA Public Affairs



*Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles spoke to nearly 200 Defense Contract Management Agency Headquarters personnel on his close relationship with the deceased civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Kyles was with King on the night of his tragic death. (Photos by Dick Cole, DCMA Public Affairs)*

The thin, aging African-American walked to the lectern slowly and deliberately. He grasped both sides of the lectern and bowed his head for just a split second, then raised his head and loudly proclaimed, "Never let go of your dreams ... lest you become like a broken-winged bird, unable to fly!"

He spoke the exhortation with such fervor and emphasis that there was no doubt he was a minister, used to preaching to large

congregations. The speaker was the Rev. Samuel "Billy" Kyles, and he was addressing approximately 200 headquarters personnel attending the Defense Contract Management Agency Martin Luther King, Jr., remembrance and celebration in recognition of what would have been King's 71st birthday. Kyles is the only person still living who shared the last hour of King's life with him.

Kyles explained to the audience that King and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference — SCLC — had come to Memphis in 1968 in support of striking African-American garbage workers. The garbage workers had been on strike for higher wages and better treatment.

Kyles gave the audience a brief history of King's efforts for equal rights, recounting his involvement in the 1955 Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott that ultimately ended racial segregation on all Montgomery public busses. Kyles even told the audience of his own arrest on a

bus in Memphis for sitting at the front of the bus. "I was arrested for sitting on the front of the bus, not in some foreign country, but in America! Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A.!" Kyles proclaimed. "The chairman of the trustees' board of the church that I pastor is the president and general manager of the same bus company that arrested me."

King "... was a servant leader," explained Kyles. "He had so much compassion for the poor, and he took the mandate seriously that the voice of the poor needed to be heard." King helped found the SCLC, which sought to harness the moral authority and organizing power of black churches to conduct non-violent protests urging civil rights reform. He spoke of King's efforts in Birmingham, Augustine and Selma, culminating in the historic March on Washington in 1963.

It was the Memphis sanitation workers strike of 1968 that brought Kyles and King together. Moreover, they were together on April 3, 1968,

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when King addressed a rally that nearly did not happen. The rally, at Memphis’ Mason Temple, the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ, was where King gave his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech — the last of his career.

“The weather was so inclement that [King] said, ‘I’m going to stay at the motel and work on the Poor People’s Campaign. You guys go to the church and have the meeting.’ He thought there wouldn’t be many people because of the weather. So we went to the church — [Rev. Ralph] Abernathy went, he came in, Jesse Jackson came in, Andy Young came in, and I came in. The people started clapping, and Abernathy sensed that these people ain’t clapping for us; they think Martin is coming in behind us. I ain’t making no speech tonight, and he went to the phone and called Martin. We almost missed the mountaintop speech. If Ralph had not made that call, there would have been no mountaintop speech,” explained Kyles. He further recounted how King referred to threats against his life in the speech and used language that seemed to foreshadow his impending death.

Kyles explained that King was to come to his new home for dinner the evening of April 4, before a rally scheduled for that evening. King jokingly warned Kyles not to treat him like another preacher in

Atlanta who had invited him to dinner at his house. When King and his wife Coretta arrived, the house had no furniture, and they ate their cold meal on a card table. “If I go to your house, and I discover that you bought a house and can’t buy food,” King told him, “I’m gonna call all the TV and radio stations and tell them, ‘Kyles bought a house, but he can’t buy food.’”

Kyles arrived at the Lorraine Motel to pick up his friends at 5 p.m. and went to King’s room, where he also met up with Abernathy. “The world has asked: what did three preachers do in a room for an hour?” Kyles said. “It was really just three guys hanging out.” He described the conversation as lighthearted. King did some remembering of his father, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., and his maternal grandfather, the powerful minister A.D. Williams. In fact, the mood was a complete switch from 24 hours before when King had been talking about death. “It was as if he had preached himself through the fear of death . . . and the next day he was in a lighthearted mood. He was almost giddy,” Kyles continued.

After the three men finished talking, Abernathy went into the bathroom to shave, and Kyles left the room for his car, beckoning everyone to hurry up. King exchanged a brief joke with Jackson, who wanted to introduce

band-leader Ben Branch to King. King liked Branch’s rendition of “Precious Lord.”

King decided to go outside of room 306 of the Lorraine Motel to greet the crowd that had gathered. “And Martin was leaning over the balcony, not trying to shake hands, but leaning over talking to Jesse and Ben Branch. I stepped away, and I started down the stairs. I said, ‘Guys, come on. We have a rally tonight, let’s go.’ I got about five or six steps and the shot rang out.”

“KA-PAOOOW!”

Everyone’s first instinct was to duck for cover, not knowing if the shooting would continue. “I looked back. He’d been knocked from the railing onto the floor. I rushed to his side. There was a gaping hole in the right side of his face and a bigger wound under his shirt I could not see. But there was so much blood — blood was everywhere. I ran in the room to use the phone. You couldn’t use the phone without the operator. When she heard the shot, she left the switchboard, came out into the courtyard, looked up and saw Martin lying on the floor, and she immediately had a heart attack.” She died a few days later, Kyles explained. “I thought I was having a nightmare, but I was awake. Forty years ago, I had no words to express my feelings. Forty years later, I still have no words to



“Yes, you can kill the dreamer but, no, you absolutely cannot kill the dream.” — Rev. Samuel “Billy” Kyles

express how I felt,” Kyles said in a near-whisper.

Kyles explained that the men on the balcony with King tried to get the attention of police officers to get an ambulance for King. “I hollered to the police, ‘Call an ambulance on your police radio!’” Kyles explained. They told police that King had been shot and when asked where the shot came from, Kyles explained that he, Abernathy, Jackson and Young pointed to the source of the shot in a famous photograph seen around the world.

“There was just so much blood,” Kyles continued. “And I took a spread and covered him from his neck down and told the ambulance where to take him, what hospital.

And we waited. Got somebody on the phone, told Jesse to call Mrs. King. I called my house. And then we waited, and we waited. And I wondered. Finally, the word came: we lost him. We lost him. And I wondered, ‘Why was I there?’ We were personal friends and all that, young pastors and preachers, but why was I there at that crucial moment in time? And God revealed to me why I was there: crucifixions have to have witnesses, and I was there to be a witness.”

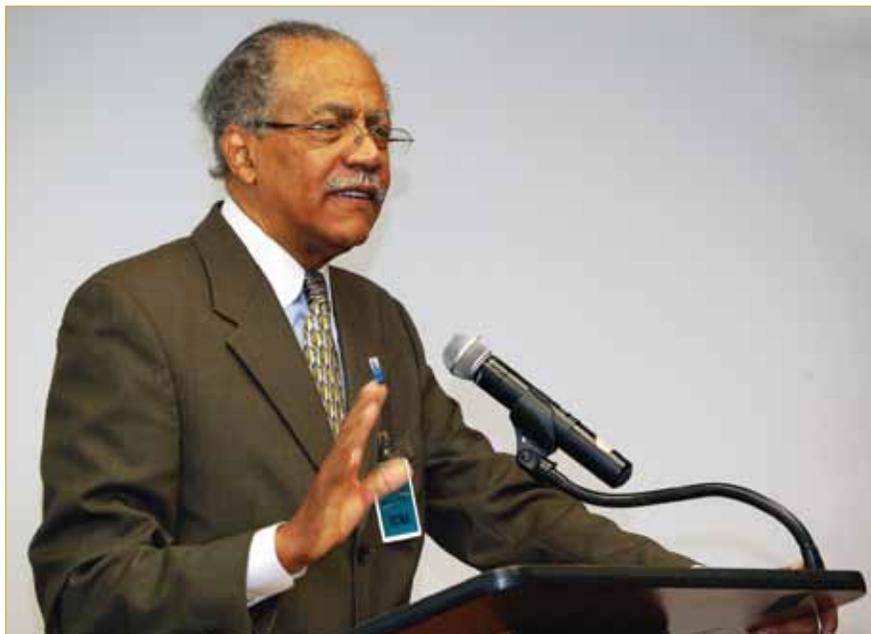
Once again, Kyles repeated the exhortation, “Never let go of your dreams ... lest you become like a broken-winged bird, unable to fly!”

“And so my witness is that Martin Luther King, Jr., didn’t

die in some foolish, untoward way. He didn’t overdose, a jealous lover didn’t shoot him and he wasn’t shot leaving the scene of a crime. He was a man with an earned Ph.D. degree at 28, a Nobel Peace Prize at 34 — at that time, the youngest to get one. Here he is, oratorical skills off the charts. I think of all the things he could have been — U.N. ambassador, university president, mega churches around the nation — but here he is with all of these skills ... dying on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, helping garbage workers,” Kyles proclaimed.

“And they said, ‘We will shoot this dreamer and see what happens to his dream.’ That’s where the witness comes in. The witness will tell all who will listen, ‘Yes, you can kill the dreamer, but, no, you absolutely cannot kill the dream.’ So, I have been a witness through all of this for the last 40 years. I know that’s what I’m supposed to do, and that’s what I do,” concluded Kyles.

Kyles has remained active in civil rights causes for the past 40 years and regularly addresses groups and organizations throughout the United States and abroad. DCMA Deputy Director James Russell presented Kyles with a DCMA coin and plaque in appreciation of his address. Kyles then joined DCMA employees for a lunch of tea, chicken, greens and potatoes. 🍌



Rev. Samuel “Billy” Kyles, a close friend of the deceased Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., remembered and celebrated the civil rights activist’s life at Defense Contract Management Agency Headquarters.