

The JFK Assassination – 50 Years Later

by Brian Hollstein (1967-1977)

All of us of a certain age know where we were when news of President John Kennedy's assassination broke. Four of our interviewees for the FBI Oral History Heritage Program not only know where they were, but went on to help make history through their assignments on that fateful day. Bob Gemberling (1941-1976) in Dallas "caught the paper" and ended up managing the reporting process. Joe Ziel (1942-1943, 1946-1975) conducted the investigation of Jack Ruby in Chicago. Jim Sibert (1951-1972) witnessed the autopsy of JFK at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. And Bob Barrett (1952-1978) arrested Lee Harvey Oswald and recovered the famous Zapruder movie. The primary goal of the oral history program is to make available the memories of everyday Agents like most of us who were caught up in major events.

Gemberling

Special Agent Bob Gemberling was in his car covering leads and observed the JFK motorcade pass a couple of blocks away. Traffic was fouled up due to the visit, but people were in a good mood because of the opportunity to host the President. A few minutes later, at lunch, Gemberling heard the sad news from a passer-by. A call to the office resulted in the assignment to go to the Dallas Police headquarters to establish liaison and offer assistance. At the time, it was not against federal law to assassinate the president, so the Dallas Police Department was the lead law enforcement organization.

The police headquarters was in bedlam with the murder of Dallas Police officer Tippett, the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassination of JFK, along with many rumors flying around. News media showed up in force and quickly became ensconced in the building. Gemberling stood by with his offer of assistance until he was called back to the FBI office.

During an all-Agent's meeting, Special Agent in Charge Shanklin made assignments and Gemberling was given the task of writing the reports of investigation. Gemberling swore that he got the assignment because he was shorter than the rest of the Agents and therefore couldn't hide in the back of the room. Gemberling, who was a relief supervisor, immediately had 20 clerical personnel and 48 Special Agents on special working the case in Dallas.

The first report was delivered to the Bureau eight days later and consisted of 515 pages of text and exhibits. Communications flooded into Dallas from all Bureau offices and Legats, along with other government agencies. These communications had to be read and indexed, and appropriate leads had to be set out and included in a report, if relevant. Gemberling rose to the occasion, but it was an unforgettable few months as the investigation played out.

Sibert

Special Agents Jim Sibert and Francis X. O'Neill were undergoing an inspection at their Hyattsville (MD) Resident Agency when they heard of the assassination on a commercial radio broadcast. Jim immediately contacted Andrews Air Force Base, where they were responsible for liaison. JFK's body arrived around 6 p.m. and was immediately moved to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD. Sibert and O'Neill were part of the motorcade with the body.

They had orders to observe the autopsy and obtain ballistic evidence. Conducting the autopsy were two Navy surgeons and an Army surgeon. Either Sibert or O'Neill, or both, were present throughout the autopsy. In his oral history interview Sibert describes the autopsy in great detail and points out elements of the procedure conducted by the pathologists that were later identified as sources of criticism by the Warren Commission.

During the autopsy there was no communication between the physicians in Dallas who had tried to save the president's life and the pathologists in Bethesda. Confusion ensued in the description of the location of one wound sustained in the president's back, which was found not to have a bullet (later discovered on the stretcher used in Dallas to transport him); a missing 3-inch-by-5-inch piece of JFK's skull; and the fact that a tracheotomy performed in Dallas obscured a wound.

The Agents produced an FD 302 reporting their observations and went home to bed. Quite some time later, Sibert received a call from a writer who was preparing a book on the assassination, commenting that Sibert and O'Neill's FD 302 did not match the official autopsy report. Sibert stated that he stood by their report and says today that the official autopsy report was changed after the procedure without their knowledge to reflect information received after it was completed.

Ziel

Joe Ziel had just come home from church on the Sunday after the assassination. He received a call from the Special Agent in Charge in Chicago asking if he had seen the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby on television. Ziel immediately went into the office where he was assigned to coordinate the investigation of Ruby, who came from Chicago and was believed to be the owner of strip clubs in that area. Ziel was given 32 Special Agents, five stenographers and five clerks, along with hundreds of leads needing immediate attention.

Ruby had changed his name from Rubenstein and was the owner of a strip club in Dallas. Interviews started to pour in as the Agents began work. Fortunately, one of the early leads to interview was Bernie Ross, a former world welterweight boxing champion. He reported that he knew the Jack Ruby in Dallas and he was not the same as the Jack Ruby in Chicago who owned three or four strip clubs in the area. The Jack Ruby in Dallas was a hapless loser who was the laughing stock of his neighborhood in Chicago before he left the area after a series of feckless investments. Ziel and his team immediately redirected investigative efforts based on this new lead and recovered all the FD302s concerning the wrong Jack Ruby.

Hosty

Jim Hosty was the third Special Agent to be assigned to investigating Lee Harvey Oswald prior to the assassination. Hosty said that he received the case only one month before the incident. Due to interagency agreements, he was not allowed to interview Oswald prior to the assassination. The Warren Commission criticized him and the Bureau for not interviewing Oswald, a criticism that Hosty rejects in his book, *Assignment Oswald*. Hosty observed the Dallas Police Department officers interrogating Oswald after his arrest. He later interviewed Oswald's wife, Marina, who was portrayed in the media as an ignorant peasant girl but who actually was a tough minded, educated person. An orphan, she was brought up in the Soviet Union by her aunt and uncle, a Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) colonel. She married Oswald while he was in the country and was one of the rare Russians who were allowed to leave the country with a foreign spouse.

Barrett

Bob Barrett was just returning to Dallas from an out of town police school when he got the news. His first assignment was to help the Dallas Police with the search of the Schoolbook Repository. He didn't find anything in his sector and stopped to greet Sheriff Decker in front of the building. At this point, word came out that Dallas police officer Tippett had been shot and the sheriff asked Barrett to help out at the scene. Upon arrival, Barrett checked in with the police, who had just received a tip that a suspect had entered the Texas Movie Theater. Barrett joined the police and was one of the arresting officers. Oswald pulled a gun and during a struggle with a police detective was lightly injured. He tried to claim police brutality, but Barrett was right there as a witness and ready to testify if there was a complaint.

After a night's rest (three hours), Barrett and his partner were assigned to take photos and measurements in Dealy Plaza and to interview witnesses. As luck would have it, they interviewed Abraham Zapruder who took the famous moving pictures of the assassination. Zapruder kept the original film from the camera, but surrendered two exact copies to Barrett along with the camera, all of which were rushed to the FBI Laboratory for forensic examination. Bob spent the remainder of his Dallas assignment on the JFK assassination squad, conducting investigations for the Warren Commission.

While all of the Special Agents agree with the Warren Commission Report that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin of John F. Kennedy, they take exception to many of the criticisms of the Bureau voiced in the report.

Details of each Agent's observations are available in the oral history transcripts that are available online at the National Law Enforcement Museum archives. Go to the Society Web site, www.socxfbi.org, for a link to the museum archives. Or go directly to: www.nleomf.org/museum/the-collection/oral-histories.