

Mrs. Kennedy Beside Casket Most of Flight; Johnsons Place Call to Mother of President

Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who is covering his fifth President, was riding several cars behind President John F. Kennedy in a Dallas, Tex., motorcade yesterday when the assassin struck. Smith followed the President's car to the hospital. He was there for the announcement of death and witnessed President Lyndon B. Johnson's oath-taking as the only news service reporter aboard the plane back to Washington.

By MERRIMAN SMITH

WASHINGTON, Nov. 23 (UPI)—It was a balmy, sunny noon as we followed President John F. Kennedy's automobile through downtown Dallas yesterday. Then, suddenly, we heard three almost painfully loud cracks.

The first sounded as if it might have been a large firecracker. But the second and third were unmistakable. Gunfire.

I was riding in the White House press "pool" car, equipped with a radio-telephone. I was in the front seat between a telephone company driver and Malcolm Kilduff, acting White House press secretary. Three other pool reporters were in the back seat. As we heard the shots, the President's car, possibly as much as 150 or 200 yards ahead, appeared to falter. There was a flurry of activity in the secret service car behind the President's open limousine.

Saw Flash of Pink
Our car stopped for probably only a few seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime. Even for a trained observer there is a limit to what one can comprehend.

I could not see the President or Gov. John C. Connally of Texas in their car. I thought I saw a flash of pink which would have been Mrs. Kennedy.

Everybody in our car began shouting at the driver to pull up closer to the President's car. But at this moment, we saw the limousine and a motorcycle escort roar away at high speed.

We sped around Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's car and its escort and set out down the highway, barely able to keep in

sight of the President's car.

We cleared a curve and saw Parkland hospital, a large brick structure to the left of the highway. We spilled out of the pool car as it entered the hospital driveway.

I ran to the side of the Limousine.

The President lay face down on the back seat. Mrs. Kennedy made a cradle of her arms around the President's head and bent over him as if she were whispering to him.

Mrs. Connally Sobbing

Gov. Connally was on his back on the floor of the car, his head and shoulders resting in the arms of his wife, Nellie, who kept shaking her head and shaking with dry sobs.

Clint Hill, the Secret Service agent in charge of the detail assigned to Mrs. Kennedy, was leaning over into the rear of the car.

"How badly was he hurt, Clint?" I asked.

"He's dead," Hill replied curtly.

I have no further clear memory of the scene in the driveway. I recall a babble of anxiously voices, tense voices—"Where in hell are the stretchers . . . get a doctor out here . . . he's on the way . . . come on, hurry there." And from somewhere, nervous sobbing.

I raced down a short stretch of sidewalk into a hospital corridor. The first thing I spotted was a small clerical office. Inside, a bespectacled man was shuffling what appeared to be hospital forms. I spotted a telephone on the shelf.

Two Attempts to Dial
It took two shaky tries before I successfully dialed the Dallas UPI number. I dictated a bulletin saying the President had been seriously, perhaps fatally, injured by an assassin's bullets when driving through the streets of Dallas.

Litters bearing the President and the Governor then rolled by as my back was turned.

I knew they had passed, however, from the horrified expression that suddenly spread over the face of the clerk.

I watched a swift and confused panorama sweep be-

fore me.

Kilduff raced up and down the hall. Police captains barked at each other. Two priests hurried in behind a Secret Service agent. A police lieutenant ran down the hall with a large carton of blood for transfusions. A doctor came in and said he was responding to a call for "all neurosurgeons."

Then Kilduff and Wayne Hawks of the White House staff ran by me, shouting that Kilduff would make a statement shortly at the far end of the hospital.

Death Announced

We reached the door of the conference room and there were loud cries of "quiet!" Fighting to keep his emotions under control, Kilduff said "President John Fitzgerald Kennedy died at approximately 1 o'clock."

After calling my office I ran back through the hospital to the conference room, where a White House aid grabbed me and said Kilduff wanted a pool of three reporters immediately to fly

back to Washington.

I ran down the stairs and into the driveway, only to discover Kilduff had just pulled out in our telephone car.

Charles Roberts of Newsweek magazine, Sid Davis of Westinghouse Broadcasting and I got a police officer to take us to the airport in his squad car.

As we piled out of the car about 200 yards from the presidential aircraft, Kilduff saw us and said the plane could take two pool men to Washington; that Johnson was about to take the oath of office aboard the plane and would take off immediately thereafter.

Calls New York

I saw a bank of telephone booths beside the runway and asked whether I had time to call in the news. "For God's sake, hurry," he said.

All circuits were busy to the Dallas office and even Washington. I finally called the New York bureau of UPI and told them about the impending inauguration of a new President aboard the airplane.

Aboard Air Force One, an aircraft in which I had made so many trips as a press association reporter covering President Kennedy, all of the shades of the larger main cabin were drawn and the interior was hot and dimly lighted. The plane sat on the ground throughout the ceremony.

Kilduff propelled us to the President's suite two thirds of the way back in the plane. The

room normally could accommodate 8 to 10 persons seated. I wedged inside the door and counted 27 persons in this compartment. Johnson stood in the center with his wife, Lady Bird. United States District Judge Sarah T. Hughes, a kindly faced woman, stood with a small black Bible in her hands, waiting to give the oath.

Johnson waited for Mrs. Kennedy, who was composing herself in a small bedroom in the rear of the plane. She soon appeared alone, dressed in the same pink wool suit she had worn in the morning when she appeared so happy shaking hands with airport crowds at the side of her husband.

Slight Stumble

She was whitefaced but dry-eyed. Friendly hands stretched toward her as she stumbled slightly. Johnson took both of her hands in his and motioned her to his left side. Lady Bird stood on his right, a fixed half-smile showing the tension.

Johnson nodded to Judge Hughes, an old friend of his family and a Kennedy appointee. "Hold up your right hand and repeat after me," the woman jurist said to Johnson.

Outside a jet could be heard droning into a landing.

Judge Hughes held out the Bible and Johnson covered it with his large left hand. His right arm went slowly into the air and the jurist began to intone the constitutional oath. "I do solemnly swear I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States . . .

The brief ceremony ended when Johnson in a deep, firm voice, repeated after the judge, ". . . and so help me God."

Kisses His Wife

Johnson turned first to his wife, hugged her about the shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. Then he turned to Mr. Kennedy's widow, put his left arm around her and kissed her cheek.

2:38 St. Louis Time

The two-minute ceremony concluded at 2:38 p.m. and seconds

later, the President said firmly, "Now, let's get airborne."

Several persons, including Sid Davis of Westinghouse, left the plane at that time. The White House had room for only two pool reporters on the return flight and these posts were filled by Roberts and me.

When the President's plane reached operating altitude, Mrs. Kennedy left her bedchamber and walked to the rear compartment of the plane. The casket had been placed in this compartment.

Mrs. Kennedy went into the rear lounge and took a chair beside the casket. There she remained throughout the flight. Her vigil was shared at times by staff members close to the assassinated chief executive.

Johnson walked back into the main compartment.

"I'm going to make a short statement in a few minutes and give you copies of it," he said. "Then when I get on the ground, I'll do it over again."

Calls President's Mother

When the plane was about 45 minutes from Washington, the new President got on a radiotelephone and placed a call to Mrs. Rose Kennedy, the late President's mother.

"I wish to God there was something I could do," he told her. "I just wanted you to know that."

"We feel like the heart has been cut out of us," Mrs. Johnson told the elder Mrs. Kennedy. Then she broke down for a moment and began to sob. Recovering in a few seconds, she continued, "Our love and our prayers are with you."

After we landed in Washington, Roberts and I were given seats on a helicopter bound for the White House. In the compartment next to ours, in one of the large chairs beside a window, sat Theodore C. Sorensen, one of Mr. Kennedy's closest associates with the title of special counsel to the President. He had not gone to Texas with his chief but had come to the air base for the somber return of the dead President.

Sorensen sat wilted in the large chair, crying softly. The dignity of his deep grief seemed to sum up all of the tragedy and sadness of the previous six hours.