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Dale K. Myers: Dallas officer J.D. Tippit played pivotal role after Kennedy assassination

November 21, 2013 | 1 Comments

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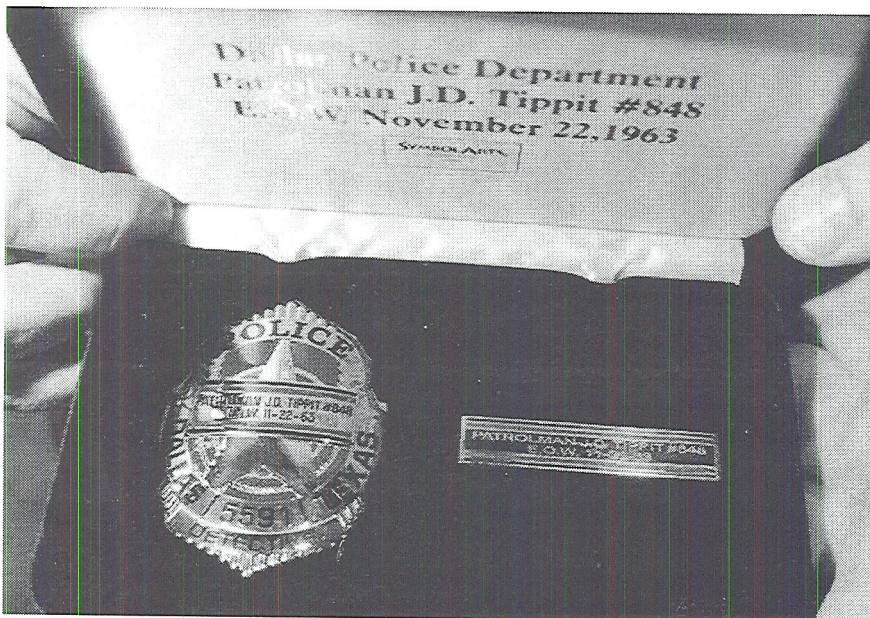
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In this Thursday, Oct. 31, 2013 photo, a Dallas Police Department memorial badge for patrolman J.D. Tippit is displayed in Dallas. For the month of November, which marks the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination and Tippit's slaying, police officers can wear a special badge paying tribute to the fallen officer who was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald. (AP Photo/LM Otero) / AP

By Dale K. Myers
Detroit Free Press
guest writer

Fifty years ago, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

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The images of that day are seared in the public consciousness and over the last few weeks have been revisited with television documentaries, newspaper and magazine articles, and what seems like an endless parade of conspiracy theories.

Yet, few remember J.D. Tippit, the Dallas cop who was gunned down on an Oak Cliff side street just 45 minutes after the assassination. Even fewer realize that Tippit's murder is what led to the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald, who was later charged with killing Kennedy.

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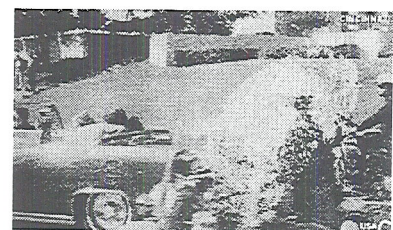
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J.D. Tippit, age 23, and Marie Francis Tippit, age 19, in 1947. / Robert Jack, Dorothy C. Christopher

For the Tippit family, the 50th anniversary of those four dark days in November is *personal*. The murder of one so loved was devastating beyond words.

Particularly painful for family and friends are the continuing allegations that J.D. was somehow involved in a conspiracy to kill the president or to murder Oswald. Of course, anyone who really knew the 39-year-old father of three knows that such claims are preposterous.

J.D. was a country boy raised in the depression-era farming community of Clarksville, Texas. During World War II, at age 19, he volunteered for the parachute infantry and jumped into France with the 17th Airborne Division earning a Bronze service star. After the war, he married his high school sweetheart, Marie Gasway, and tried to make a go of farming. But drought and floods took their toll on the young family and in 1952 he sought employment with the Dallas Police Department.

J.D. had a keen eye for police work. He was a good judge of people, compassionate, and dependable. Away from the force and the odd jobs he held to make ends meet, J.D. was a devoted family man. He liked Clark Gable movies, the music of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, bushy Christmas trees, and clowning around with friends and family. He was the funny brother, the favorite uncle, the lovable guy.

At 1:15 p.m. on Friday, November 22, 1963, Officer Tippit spotted a suspicious man walking near Tenth and Patton in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas. He stopped his squad car and got out to investigate. The man, identified by eyewitnesses as Lee Harvey Oswald, pulled a gun from under his jacket and shot Tippit in the chest and head, killing him instantly. Forty minutes later, police pounced on the cop-killer at the Texas Theater.

Late that night, Tippit's body lay in state at an Oak Cliff funeral home. "I don't suppose you could imagine what it was like to see your best friend laying up there," boyhood pal and brother-in-law Jack Christopher recalled. "His life was gone, just like that."

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Three days later, 700 policemen in dress blues joined as many mourners at the small, red brick Beckley Hills Baptist Church to say good-bye. An organist played "The Old Rugged Cross" as broad shouldered lawmen openly wept.

Few historians have considered the consequences for Dallas and the country had Oswald, an avowed pro-Castro Marxist, escaped the city. The president's assassination had lit the fuse of a Cold War powder keg that might never have been snuffed out. In that sense, Tippit's showdown with Oswald had a momentous impact on our nation's history.

J.D. Tippit was one of those ordinary men who, through extraordinary events, had the moniker of hero thrust upon them. And although his pivotal role in America's darkest days will forever be remembered, it is his likeable spirit that has left the deepest impression on those who loved him.

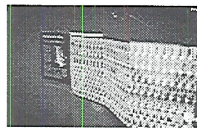
Duty, honor, and love — essential ingredients of a hero of the ordinary kind.

Dale K. Myers is a Milford resident and the author of "With Malice: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Murder of Officer J.D. Tippit" (Oak Cliff Press, 2013).

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