

Kennedy Files to Detail Casket Disposal

Damaged Coffin Dumped Off Eastern Shore; Release Includes CIA Data on Oswald

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The National Archives this week will release the latest cache of documents relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, reportedly including details of the dumping at sea of the bronze casket in which his body was transported from Dallas to Washington.

The release also will include 50,000 pages of CIA documents relating to the presumed Kennedy assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, as well as intelligence files on Cuba and other matters.

CORRECTION

Today's Arts section, which was printed in advance, gives an incorrect opening date for the Shakespeare Theatre's production of "The Merchant of Venice." The play opens Tuesday.

It is the latest unveiling of information gathered in accordance with the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, which urged government agencies to review their files for information that could be released or declassified that might shed light on the assassination.

Although the release will include CIA materials and data about Kennedy's famous 1960 presidential campaign, the details about the casket are likely to draw the closest scrutiny.

The 43 pages on the casket are to be made available Tuesday at the National Archives center in College Park.

The information will discuss the disposition of the casket, the archives said, which reportedly had a handle knocked off as it was being used to transport the president's body from Dallas, where he was killed Nov. 22, 1963, to Washington.

The damaged casket was replaced with the mahogany one in which Kennedy was buried by Joseph Gawler's & Sons Inc. funeral home in Washington. But the fate of the damaged casket has long been a mystery.

The archive documents will detail how the casket was loaded aboard a military plane and flown off the Maryland-Delaware coast, where it was dropped into water 9,000 feet deep in an area used as a military dump site.

Kermit L. Hall, a historian with the now-defunct Assassination Records Review Board, which examined Kennedy documents, told the Associated Press that a map and coordinates marking the exact location exists.

Hall said the casket was dumped because of fears it might become an object of morbid curiosity.

There also was pressure from former U.S. representative Earle Cabell (D-Tex.), who was mayor of Dallas when Kennedy was assassinated, to dispose of the extra casket to keep it from becoming a public focus.

There were mixed reactions to the revelation yesterday.

David Lifton, the Los Angeles historian who long has speculated about irregularities in the investigation of the assassination, was fascinated by the report.

"If it's really true that they dropped it in the ocean, then there should be the name of the pilot"

among the archive papers, he said, suggesting another avenue for further investigation.

He said that if true, the casket's disposal at sea was deplorable. It was forensic evidence, he said, that ought to have been preserved.

"Now you're going to have this Titanic syndrome, where somebody is going to go out there and try to take a picture of it," he predicted. "Whoever heard of dumping a coffin in the ocean. It's so bizarre."

"Here we are 35 years later," he said. "It's so disrespectful. They've set the stage for confusion."

Lifton said one of the last times the casket may have been when author William Manchester had it uncrated in a government warehouse as part of research on the assassination and noted that it had been damaged.

But William L. Joyce, associate university librarian for rare books and special collections at Princeton University, said potential new information about the casket's disposal was not necessarily a big deal.

Joyce, who also a member of the assassination review board, acknowledged that the disposal sto-



1963 FILE PHOTO/BY WALLY MCNAMEE—THE WASHINGTON POST

The damaged casket used to transport President John F. Kennedy to Washington, shown above at Andrews Air Force Base, was dumped at sea.

ry presented another "untidy" detail surrounding the assassination.

"Whether that confers additional meaning on the event is, in my

view, very doubtful," he said. "I can almost hear the conspiracy buffs. I just don't think we can get all knotted up over this."