

Black Box Shadows President

Coded Messages for Atomic Attack Changed Hands in Dallas

Much has been written about the "little black box" that follows the President around. It contains the coded messages by which he could order an attack on an enemy. Two years ago, on the assassination of a President, the black box changed hands—probably the first act in the transition of power. Here's what happened on that day in Dallas.

By BOB HORTON

WASHINGTON (AP) — At 1 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963, a quiet man from Washington named Ira D. Gearheart was in Dallas. His assignment was vital, and it was secret.

So far as the official record goes, there is still nothing to show he was even there.

But while President John F. Kennedy lay dying in Trauma Room One at Parkland Hospital, Gearheart sat outside in the lobby, unobtrusively guarding a brown leather briefcase someone had nicknamed the "football."

Inside the case, coded messages by which the President could order nuclear missiles and bombs against any enemy.

Gearheart's one assignment that day: keeping the case within quick reach of the commander-in-chief.

He had flown with Kennedy into Dallas and was riding in the downtown motorcade that suddenly became a race to the hospital.

Moments after 1 p.m., with word that Kennedy was dead of an assassin's bullets, Gearheart picked up the briefcase and strode past the emergency room desk into a surgery suite where, behind drawn shades, sat Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson.

With those few steps came the first real, if not formal, transfer of presidential power.

Gearheart was now following a new leader.

"I can't describe how the vice-president looked when I entered the room," Gearheart said, "and I've never been able to decide what my feelings were at that moment. But it was a day I'll never forget."

Gearheart was one of the quiet, faceless individuals who have been entrusted to carry the "football," or the "message," or "black box," as the codes have been called, when the President leaves the White House.

All are Army warrant-officers who have been cleared for top security classification. These couriers alternate at carrying the case, although no regulations cover their secret assignment.

Their cargo is a national security portfolio of cryptographic orders the President would send his military chiefs to authorize nuclear retaliation.

The orders can be dispatched by telephone, teletype or microwave radio. All three means are established for the President wherever he goes by the little-known White House communications corps.

The courier is attached to this agency, once part of an Army Signal Corps group but now part of the Defense Communications Agency (DCA) at the Pentagon. The DCA rides herd on a worldwide military communications setup which links the Pentagon with such key security installations as the North American Air Defense Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the Strategic Air Command headquarters near Omaha, Neb.

The President can be in touch with any or all three installations in a matter of seconds—and the courier must be present with the coded orders to meet any emergency.

The courier is armed and usually wears civilian clothes to resemble just another of the men who go with the President. When the President stays overnight at a hotel, the courier usually sleeps in a room on the same floor. If a military safe is available, the briefcase, secured by a combination lock, may go there.

Lt. Col. George J. McNally, chief of the White House communications agency from 1946 until he retired a few weeks ago, recalls the system was first instituted late in the Eisenhower administration.

Before then, presidential aides carried the documents. They still do around the White House.

"Communications was our area, though, so logically it seemed we should be responsible for forwarding the 'message,'" McNally said. The Secret Service gave its blessing to an unwritten agreement, and the system was formalized.

The couriers are trained to know what the messages contain and how they are to be used—but they are powerless to use them.

"It would be impossible for anyone other than the President to give the word to use the bomb," the silver-haired, mustached McNally said in an interview at his Rockville, Md., home. "The Pentagon would merely disregard a message from anyone else."

This, then, makes any loss of the briefcase less critical.

For one thing, McNally said, the messages are coded and would be meaningless to a person lacking the code key to interpret them.

"Visualize the thing as a dollar bill torn in half," McNally said. "The President has one half, the Pentagon the other. Only when the President sends his half will the two pieces key together, or fit."

Second, he adds, the procedures of putting the nation's emergency defense plans into action involve too many people—among them the President, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense.

"The idea of one man pushing the button and starting World War III is just a phony idea that grew up in the atomic age," McNally says.

No one has ever tried to steal the football.

"During presidential travel the courier is secluded from outsiders," he says. "Everywhere, the President is heavily guarded. Security is too tight."

No public record exists of the courier role played by Gearheart the day of the assassination. The Warren Commission which examined all facets of the crime questioned neither Gearheart nor McNally, nor Maj. Gen. Chester V. Clifton, Kennedy's military aide.

But the commission quizzed 552 other persons ranging from

Mrs. John F. Kennedy to housewives and teen-agers.

One month after the assassination, Gearheart retired from the military as scheduled, completing 30 years in the Army, including 3 at the White House. Now 55 years old, he lives in Palm Bay, Fla.

Still the secret man, Gearheart will talk only cautiously about his assignment that Nov. 22, where he was trailing Kennedy through Dallas.

Gearheart said in a telephone interview that he was riding about 10 cars back in the motorcade, and couldn't see the black presidential limousine as it moved past the Texas School Book Depository building. The radio set was on.

"Suddenly, we heard something like, 'He's been shot,'" Gearheart recalls. "We didn't know, but we suspected who it might be."

"Next thing we heard a Secret Service agent or someone in the President's car say, 'Get to the hospital.' The motorcade took off.

"When we got to the hospital, I helped other communications people open up telephone lines to the airport. The Secret Service agent Roy Kellerman told me to stick by."

A few minutes after 1 p.m., presidential assistant Malcolm Kilduff officially told newsmen that the President was dead.

With the announcement, Gearheart carried the "football" to the suite where Mr. and Mrs. Johnson sat. He said nothing. The briefcase remained locked.

Quickly, secretly, Secret Service agents escorted Johnson to a waiting police car. Gearheart and agents followed close behind.

At 2:40 p.m., in stifling heat, Air Force 1 rose in a clear sky and headed for Washington. Among its passengers: A newly sworn President, a blood-stained widow and one silent man carrying a brown leather briefcase.