

Frontline

WHO WAS LEE HARVEY OSWALD?

(Tues. (16), 9 p.m.-midnight, PBS)

Taped by InVision Prods. Ltd. and BBC-TV. Exec producer, David Fanning; senior producers, William Cran, Michael Sullivan (for Frontline); producers-directors-writers, Cran, Ben Loeterman; reporters, Gus Russo, W. Scott Malone.

Narrator: Will Lyman.

Lee Harvey Oswald rises again like a phoenix from the ashes in a well-organized, thoughtful rundown on the man and the myths, though innuendoes, inferential apprais-

als, hearsay, hedging, conflicting observations and missing pieces still cloud the picture.

In addition to rounding up the facts, producers-writers William Cran and Ben Loeterman add weight with newly uncovered evidence — a CIA contretemps, a photo of Oswald and David Ferrie together, rifle fingerprints. Surmises weaken the report, but give the docu dramatic flourishes. Chief asset of the program is the straight, chronological form the program uses to unfold what is known about Oswald.

Program fully uses its three hours to examine Oswald and hear from assorted associates, including older brother Robert.

Detailed are his lonely New Orleans childhood and maternal rejection (a little pop psychology here), early-teens life in New York ("emotionally frozen," a social worker terms him), rotten living conditions back in New Orleans, his turn to socialism, a hitch in the Marines, shift to Marxism, life in Russia (where the Rusksies, distrusting him, couldn't believe the FBI or CIA would hire him), his marriage to Russian Marina and birth of daughter June, and his return to the U.S.

Reporters Gus Russo and W. Scott Malone, whose work is inestimable, have uncovered info about a post-Russia CIA briefing

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that's always been denied (ex-CIA topper Richard Helms still says it didn't take place) and explore a possible bizarre connection among Oswald, shadowy figure Ferrie (who would deny knowing Oswald until he died) and Layton Martens, all Civil Air Patrol cadets at different times.

The photo Marina took of Oswald with rifle and pistol again becomes a significant part of the story. Oswald signed a copy of the photo on the back and gave it to a friend — which would apparently end the idea that the photo was a composite made after his death.

Though Marina doesn't appear on the docu, writer Priscilla McMillan speaks for her, as does Dallas neighbor and eloquent friend Ruth Paine, who indirectly helped Oswald get a job as a clerk at the Texas School Book Depository.

Understandably, little light is thrown on the crux of the case: Oswald's mental processes, which are indiscernible. The attempted murder of fervent anti-communist, anti-Castro Gen. Edwin Walker looks for certain to be Oswald's failed job. But he himself engaged in anti-Castro as well as pro-Castro activities. Responsible officials in Russia, Cuba and Mexico,

where he went to try to get to Cuba, didn't trust him because they thought him unstable.

Program plays a tape of Oswald in Russia reading from Hemingway's "The Killers" as he helps a Russian learning English. In a fascinating demo of Oswald's personality, "Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?" broadcasts his voice in a radio debate he made in Mexico City with two anti-Castroites.

The final, grim hour of the telecast plays with tragic certainty. In the Depository, Oswald goes about his unstoppable business. A computer graphic clearly nails down the track of the bullets, and, three minutes after the assassination, Oswald steps out of the building. A morbid note: Oswald was buried on the same day as JFK.

"Frontline" supplies a stern piece of evidence that Oswald did fire the rifle. Through sophisticated techniques, it is now possible to bring out partial fingerprints on the weapon, as the docu shows, and they belong to Oswald. That doesn't necessarily mean Oswald worked alone, or that he had any clear-cut reason to shoot JFK. Footage does show, however, that only one man was poised in the sixth-floor window behind a stack of boxes waiting for his target.

The long study of Oswald's odyssey is compelling storytelling.

—Tony Scott