

DATE-TIME: 01/26/1981 - 16:15 COPY 01 OF 01 KENNEDY

- WCOOPERSVILLE, Mich. (UPI) _ Military officials used two caskets _ one of them empty _ to slip the body of slain President John F. Kennedy into Bethesda Naval Hospital, dsud a former Navy veteran who took part in the charade.
- WDonald Rebentisch, a former petty officer stationed at Bethesda, said his commanding officers told him the secrecy was planned to avoid the media and other onlookers.
- WBut assassination researcher David S. Lifton, who later this month will release a book entitled "Best Evidence," claims the two-casket ploy was part of a scheme to alter Kennedy's wounds and perpetuate official reports that Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald.
- WRebentisch said he didn't realize the importance of the casket-shuffling incident.
- W"For 17 years, I've known something that I thought everybody knew," said Rebentisch, 43, now a mechanic living just outside Grand Rapids. "I just assumed all along that the Warren Commission knew about all of this.
- W"I couldn't believe with all the thousands of dollars they spent they wouldn't have known that we took the casket in the back door."
- WRebentisch said two ambulances carrying two caskets _ one empty and one with the body of Kennedy _ were brought to Bethesda. The empty casket was brought in the front door, he said, while the casket carrying Kennedy's body was wheeled in the back where medical officials were to perform an autopsy.
- W"It was about 4:30 p.m. when our chief petty officer came to me and about five other petty officers and told us to go to the back of the hospital. I'm talking about the loading ramps where they used to bring in supplies.

• ¶“He told all of us that we were going to be there and we were going to bring the President’s casket into the mortuary. We were told not to leave our posts.

• ¶“The chief said we got all the ... ghouls and reporters and the TV and everybody at the front of the hospital. He said there would be an empty casket in the ambulance. He said the President’s body would really come in the back.

• ¶“This made sense to me. I felt there was nothing wrong with this. I just bought it, as did the rest of us.”

• ¶Rebentisch said Kennedy’s body was brought to the back of the hospital in a black 1958 Chevrolet hearse.

• ¶“We took the casket out ... and pushed it down a long, illuminated hall. Now this is a service area, not the main part of the hospital.”

• ¶Rebentisch said he recalled the incident when he saw a recent article detailing the two-casket conspiracy argument promoted by author Lifton.

• ¶The article said the Warren Commission made no mention of the casket trade in all of its 26 volumes of research.

• ¶Two of Rebentisch’s former colleagues in the Navy _ Richard Muma and Paul Neigler _ both corroborated the former petty officer’s story.

• ¶“It was common knowledge that there were two caskets,” Muma said.

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