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Reliving the drama of Nov. 22, '63

THIS IS THE ONE you have to see. In the days and weeks surrounding the 25th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, there will be plenty of TV specials and documentaries devoted to that momentous event. But this is the one you have to see.

The name of the program is "JFK Assassination: As It Happened." It will appear on the A&E Cable Network, and its premise is deceptively simple. The cable network has obtained the rights to the live coverage broadcast by NBC News on the afternoon of the assassination.

The coverage has been preserved on videotape; next month, at precisely 1:56 p.m. EDT on Tuesday, Nov. 22, A&E will interrupt its regular programming — just as NBC did at 1:56 p.m., Nov. 22, 1963. Then the coverage will appear, without commercial interruptions, for the next 4½ hours.

I HAVE WATCHED all 4½ hours. In fact, I have several times. I don't know if you have A&E cable available to you, and even if you do, I don't know if you will be home on that Tuesday afternoon. You can

turn your VCR on or you can wait until Nov. 26, when the coverage is repeated.

In this current television era of fancy graphics and instant satellite hookups, the NBC coverage looks quaint and dated at first. The newsmen sit in a "flash studio" — used for emergency broadcasts. They begin by reading wire service reports.

Memory might make you

think that the NBC coverage that day was anchored by the then-dominant team of Huntley and David Brinkley. In fact, Huntley is on the screen at first, but soon is called away, not to return all afternoon. The anchoring is done by Frank McGee and a man named Bill Ryan. Today, a network would constantly superimpose the names of its anchors onto the screen. NBC didn't that afternoon. I recognized Frank McGee but I did not know who Bill Ryan was. I had to call the A&E cable people to learn his full name. They reported that he was a local newsman at WNBC in New York. Think about that happening today: a major network deciding to let a local, non-network person anchor the coverage of the assassination of a president.

IF YOU WANT a quick course in journalism, watch Frank McGee. On the air he had to establish telephone contact with correspondent Robert MacNeil, who was at Parkland Hospital in Dallas. McGee tried to attach an audio box to the receiver of the big black telephone on the desk. When it didn't work, he asked MacNeil to speak to him in sentence fragments. McGee would listen to half of a sentence, then repeat it into his microphone. The most impressive part came when — unbeknownst to McGee — the audio box began to work, so the audience suddenly could hear what MacNeil was saying and what McGee was repeating. McGee didn't change a word — didn't embellish, didn't polish, didn't boil down.

Before he disappeared from the coverage, Chet Huntley offered the observation that "probably few living Americans" who were watching did not find themselves remembering how they had felt on April 12, 1945, when Franklin D. Roosevelt had died. It makes you think: There were 18 years between the death of FDR and the death of Kennedy. Now there have been 25 years since the Kennedy assassination. We were closer in time to Roosevelt than we are to Kennedy today.