

25 years after his death, nation remembers JFK

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WASHINGTON — A quarter-century after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, hundreds are gathering here to honor his memory.

At noon Monday, 500 former Peace Corps volunteers began a 24-hour vigil in the Rotunda of the Capitol, reading aloud their thoughts about the 35th president from journals and letters they wrote while abroad.

At 1 p.m. today, the 25th anniversary, a commemorative service will be held at St. Matthew's Roman Catholic Cathedral,

where President Kennedy's coffin rested.

For weeks, more than 150 television crews from around the world have been filming at his grave, where, beginning today, an hourly round of tributes and visits will be offered.

The grave is visited by 4 million people each year.

"It didn't surprise me that Americans who visited his grave would invariably tell you in minute detail what they were doing when they first learned of his death," said Kerri Childress, who works in the office of the histori-

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an at Arlington Cemetery.

"But it has astounded me that foreign visitors, no matter where they come from — Africa, Latin America, Japan, Europe, the Soviet Union — do the same thing. They tell me exactly where they were that day.

"Five Soviet war generals recently told me how old they were when it happened, and what they were doing. I have had South Americans cry. It wasn't just an American tragedy. It affected people from all walks of life, all over the world."

The Kennedy family has expressed a preference that his life be celebrated by commemorating the day of his birth, May 29, not

the day of his death. But it was his violent death that helped to shape the way his presidency is remembered by many — buoyant, eloquent, and unfulfilled.

Letters have been streaming into the office of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

A teen-age girl from Ohio wrote: "When I was very young, looking through the pictures and books that my mother collected, I did not understand what he stood for, but I have since grown. What I try to understand is his personality, what he was like, how he hoped for the future of America and what he accomplished. And last, what I can do to pick up the goals and dreams he left behind."

This has been a time for a

number of informal Washington gatherings of Kennedy's old colleagues and friends.

At a dinner organized by Myer Feldman, his White House counsel, several dozen members of the Kennedy Cabinet and former administration officials reminisced about his thousand days in office.

"Those three years were the finest of my life — the top," said Douglas Dillon, who was treasury secretary.

"Jack was always rethinking something," said Charles Guggenheim, the film maker who produced the official Kennedy Library film about the president.

"You could see it when someone asked him an unanswerable question. What his eyes were say-

ing is that in many ways life is a joke, nothing is perfect, things go wrong and there is something that is ludicrous about life — especially in politics."

Several members of the 1963 White House press corps who were with the president that day in Dallas are gathering for a reunion and lunch at the Cosmos Club today.

"We have the list of people who made the trip," said Ray Scherer who covered the White House for NBC News.

Sen. Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat, who helped build health clinics in the Dominican Republic as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960s, introduced a congressional resolution making the Rotun-

da ceremony possible.

He was joined there on Monday by other members of Congress who were in the Peace Corps.

Each read aloud for three minutes. Some read from letters written on Nov. 22, 1963; some read from journals, recounting that Kennedy sent them off as "messengers of peace" in a Rose Garden ceremony.

"I know you didn't vote for him, Dad," Warren Kinsman wrote home from Turkey on Nov. 30, 1963, "but to all of us in the Peace Corps he was like an older brother who had a vision of Americans sharing their knowledge and experience with our brothers and sisters around the world."