

# Reporting the death of JFK

By Alan Robinson  
Associated Press

Few journalists have ever heard teletypes sound 10 bells. The seemingly incessant pings on the old machines were reserved for the biggest of stories: the end of a world war or a major disaster. Or the assassination of a president.

NBC correspondent Bill Ryan was preparing the 2 p.m. network radio newscast on Nov. 22, 1963, when an unnerved staffer burst into his office, shouting, "Get back to TV right away! The President has been shot!"

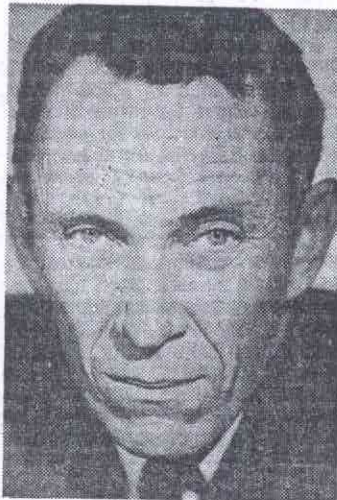
It was 1:45 p.m., and NBC was off the air for its daily noon-to-2 p.m. break, giving way to affiliates. Technicians had to hastily rig a patchwork network of telephone lines before NBC could tell America that President John F. Kennedy had been shot in Dallas.

Even then, NBC couldn't tell an anxious nation whether Kennedy was alive or dead. It didn't know. In 1963, there were no satellite links, no microwave relays, no you-heard-it-here-first reports from on-the-scene correspondents.

Seated in a closet-size studio, Ryan and Chet Huntley scrambled not only to report the news but also to learn it, reading verbatim from Associated Press bulletins fed to them by technicians crouched at their feet.

A phone patch to NBC correspondent Robert MacNeil at Parkland Hospital in Dallas failed because of overloaded circuits, so anchorman Frank McGee, phone to his ear, passed along news from MacNeil bit by precious bit. A medical student kept the line open when MacNeil abandoned the phone to get fresh news.

There was no videotape and no film, so Ryan on camera held up AP photos of Kennedy's motorcade through Dallas. A visibly shaken Huntley stuttered and stumbled, as he recalled the day 18 years before when President Franklin D. Roosevelt died.



Correspondent Bill Ryan in 1968. He was on duty at NBC on Nov. 22, 1963.

It was Ryan who read the AP flash that Kennedy was dead.

"It's jarring when somebody comes up to you and says, 'You're the one who told me President Kennedy was dead,'" Ryan said during a recent interview. "But a couple of people have phrased it exactly that way."

What Ryan, McGee, Huntley, David Brinkley and millions of others couldn't know was that on that day, American television changed forever.

The first 4½ hours of NBC's assassination coverage will be carried today by cable's Arts & Entertainment network starting at 1:56 p.m., the same time NBC returned to the air on that late-autumn afternoon in 1963. (On Thursday night, CBS ran a two-hour condensation of its weekend of coverage of Kennedy's death.)

Until the day Kennedy died, the networks had been poor cousins to radio and newspapers in dispatching news to the nation. Nightly newscasts were only 15 minutes long, and

news specials were reserved for major events such as space launches.

The assassination created a new hunger for TV news and, almost overnight, made television the pre-eminent medium for information. According to the Nielsen ratings, 96 percent of the nation's households watched assassination news that weekend. The average viewer watched nearly nine hours a day, from 1:56 p.m. Friday to midnight Monday, the day Kennedy was buried.

Ryan, 60, now host of a public-TV magazine show in Morgantown, W. Va., recently viewed the NBC tapes and was struck by the lack of technical sophistication.

"We didn't even have a regular news studio," he said. "We had to go to what they called the flash studio in New York, a little room where they had one black-and-white camera set up. It wasn't like today, where you could punch up the whole world by satellite in a minute and a half."

Ryan, who was on the air until 11:30 that night, showed no emotion until he walked out of the studio and "just fell apart."

"Obviously, it was a momentous story. I was desperately trying to concentrate on getting it right. All other thoughts were out of my head," he said. "I got off the air, and I cried like hell, my one emotional outburst of the weekend."

Ryan also was anchoring on Nov. 24, when nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot and killed Lee Harvey Oswald in the basement of a Dallas jail. Police had provided no advance word before starting to transfer Oswald to another jail, and Ryan's quick work enabled NBC to air the shooting live.

But Ryan said it took years to derive any personal satisfaction from his calm professionalism.

"Yeah, I feel good about it now," Ryan said. "I feel thankful now about the job I did. It's not easy going before a camera and telling a nation the President is dead."