

Did this man happen

Here's what a Winnipeg salesman can add to James Garrison's "conspiracy" case

THE WINNIPEG International Airport terminal, with its 42,546 square feet of Solex glass curtain walls, looks almost light enough to take off. Inside this \$18,000,000 monument to the Department of Transport the decor is determinedly modern, with \$35,000 worth of art objects including enormous geometric murals by prairie professors and metal sculptures imported from Toronto. There are fountains, birch trees, chairs that seem to have been made of chicken wire, a split-level black-carpeted lounge called the Horizon Room, and, under a milk-white ceiling illuminated by 8,000 fluorescent tubes, a marble-tiled mezzanine the size of a football field.

On February 13, 1964, in this improbably exotic setting, where James Bond might have struggled with SMERSH, an overweight Winnipeg salesman named Richard Giesbrecht was caught up in the maelstrom that had begun in Dallas three months before and continues to this day. Giesbrecht believes he was a witness to nothing less than a meeting of two men who had conspired to kill President John F. Kennedy, and swears that a third man, a burly, suitably ominous figure with a smashed nose and flushed cheeks, played a bizarre cat-and-mouse game with him all over the mezzanine to frighten him into silence.

"Too big" for FBI

Ever since, Giesbrecht, a palpably sincere and rational 35-year-old Menonite with four children, has swung between fear and frustration. Fear that the disclosure of his identity — his name is revealed here publicly for the first time — would lead to harassment by cranks, or worse. (He is aware that 20 or so people tenuously linked to investigations of an alleged conspiracy have died since November, 1963.) Frustration because he believes that the FBI deliberately squelched his story. Giesbrecht talked to an agent named Merry Nelson whom he con-

upon John Kennedy's

assassins?

tacted through the U.S. consulate in Winnipeg. He says that Nelson remarked, "This looks like the break we've been waiting for" — only to tell him a few months later to forget the whole thing. "It's too big," Nelson is supposed to have said. "We can't protect you in Canada."

Then, last February 23, visiting a hospitalized friend, Giesbrecht saw a newspaper photograph of David W. Ferrie, a New Orleans pilot who had been found dead, ostensibly of a hemorrhage caused by a ruptured blood vessel — although he had left behind two suicide notes. There was

something about the photograph that struck Giesbrecht. There was something familiar about the man's inordinately bushy eyebrows. Then it came to him that this was one of the men he had encountered at the airport three years before.

The picture's caption revealed that, before he died, Ferrie had told reporters that he'd been pegged as a "getaway pilot" by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney, who was conducting an independent investigation of Kennedy's death. Garrison concurred. "We had reached a decision to arrest him," he said. "Apparently we waited too long." Then the flamboyant D.A. added three lines that reverberated around the world: "My staff and I solved the assassination weeks ago. I wouldn't say this if we didn't have the evidence beyond the shadow of a doubt. We know the key individuals, the cities involved and how it was done."

The DA calls

All that was last February.

Throughout the spring and summer, Garrison had neither put up nor shut up, although he professed himself ready to reveal his findings at the trial this fall of Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans businessman arrested on March 1 on charges of conspiring to assassinate John F. Kennedy. (Most of the U.S. press attempted to discredit Garrison's case against Shaw, but a panel of three judges and a grand jury ruled that there was sufficient evidence to hold him for trial.) Garrison believes that Shaw, Ferrie, Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby and others — most of them hair-trigger anti-Castroites — conspired to kill Kennedy because of his plan for a *détente* with Cuba, and because Kennedy was cracking down on CIA-supported anti-Castro activity in Dallas, Miami and New Orleans. There is the chilling suggestion that, some time in the early fall of 1963, in New Orleans, a sizeable group of Right-wing extremists, deranged adventurers and Cuban exiles abruptly switched targets — from Castro to Kennedy.

With the help of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, which had printed an account of his story without using his name, Giesbrecht finally got in touch with an authority who wanted to use his testimony, and who did not, as he puts it, "just tell me to shut up about it": Jim Garrison. One of Garrison's assistants called Giesbrecht in March and expressed extreme interest in what he had overheard. There were more calls from the D.A.'s office to check details. In late September Giesbrecht

agreed tentatively to testify at Clay Shaw's trial, although Mrs. Giesbrecht was afraid to see her husband get mixed up in the case.

What spurred Giesbrecht to agree to testify was a call he had got in early summer from Garrison himself. "He told me that my evidence would be a great help to him, and that the pieces locked perfectly into place, although he didn't explain how. He confirmed that Ferrie had been in Winnipeg at the time and he said that no people from Winnipeg were involved. Maybe these men were making connections to Minneapolis or Chicago. They just happened to be here when I ran into them."

On that day, February 13, 1964, Giesbrecht had set up an appointment with a client who worked at nearby Bristol Aircraft. He arrived at the airport early, shortly after 2 p.m., to have his first look inside the new terminal. He sauntered around, went into the Horizon Room, had one drink, a Moscow Mule, walked out to have a look at Gerald Gladstone's sculpture, *Solar Cone*, in a fountain courtyard near the lounge, called his client, found he had more time to kill, returned to the lounge, sat at the same table half-way along a wall of windows and ordered a Seven-Up. Two men had taken the adjacent table. His back to them, Giesbrecht planned his sales approach and did some figuring on his weekly calendar pad. At some point, probably at about 2.45 p.m., he became aware that his neighbors were discussing the assassination in a way that seemed to implicate them.

He started to listen, then to take notes. It seemed to him that one of the men had a "Latin" accent; the other, the one he later concluded was Ferrie, an "American" accent. The voices were rather high-pitched, precise-sounding. He sensed that both men were homosexuals.

Oswald a pawn

"I got the impression that a man named Isaacs was to have been the assassin or one of them, but that he had taken on Oswald to do the dirty work," Giesbrecht says. "In the opinion of these men Oswald was a psycho. One of them said, 'How did Isaacs get mixed up with a psycho like that?' The man I think of as Ferrie wondered how much Oswald had passed on to his wife or, for that matter, anyone else. Being mixed up with Oswald had been a foolish thing. Ferrie said that Isaacs could be seen on some film of Kennedy getting off a plane shortly before the assassination. These men assured each other that when a man named Hochman or Hoffman got to Isaacs all loose ends would be tied up. He would also

make sure that a certain car was destroyed. Ferrie said there was more money now at their disposal than ever. They discussed a meeting to be held at the Townhouse Motor Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri, on March 18. There had been no meeting since early November of 1963."

During all this time Giesbrecht was hunched over his calendar pad, straining to pick up the low voices over the piped-in music, the muffled shriek of engines through the twin-paned windows and the conversation of about a dozen other people in the big dim room. He was aware of some girls at a corner table who laughed a lot.

"Auntie" flies in

There was more. The meeting would be registered under the name of a textile firm. Ferrie mentioned an "aunt" who would be flying in from California. A name that sounded like Romeniuk came up several times. Ferrie asked about paper or merchandise coming out of Nevada. Latin Accent said it was too risky and that a house or shop had been closed down at a place called Mercury. He said that "a good shipment" had reached Caracas from Newport. There was some speculation that investigation of Kennedy's death would not end if the Warren Commission found Oswald guilty.

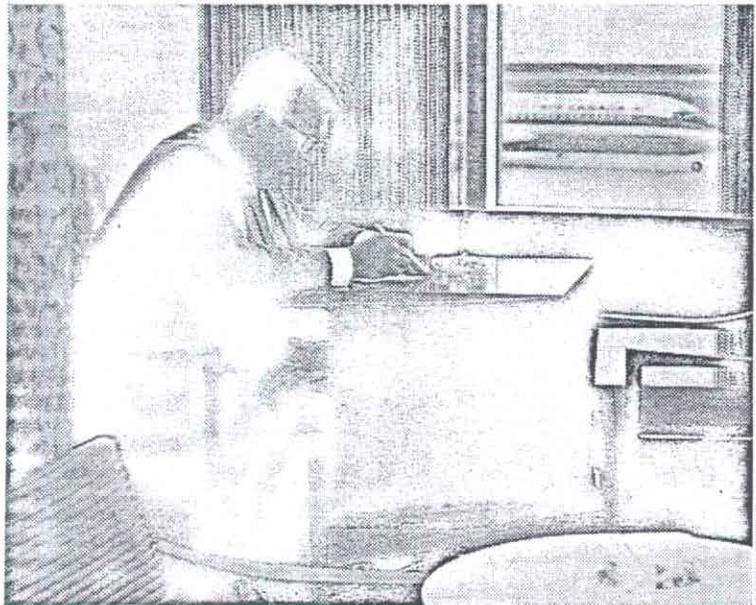
Giesbrecht managed to get a fast look at the man he later said was Ferrie. "I told the FBI that he had the oddest hair and eyebrows I'd ever seen," he says. "The eyebrows were wide and sort of streaky. The hair was very shiny and it started quite

far back on his head." (According to press reports, Ferrie wore a bright red wig and false eyebrows to conceal burns he had suffered years before. Giesbrecht says he didn't notice the color of his hair.) It seemed to him that the man resembled Stan Laurel "when he gets that look as if he's going to cry." Giesbrecht didn't really see the second man's face; they were sitting back to back. He noticed that his chin and neck were badly pock-marked and that he wore a hearing aid in his right ear. Both men were in their middle or late 40's; both wore light tweed suits and loafers.

Perhaps Giesbrecht was doing too much craning around in his chair. At any rate, two things happened almost simultaneously. The first was that he became aware he was being stared at by a man sitting alone across a corner of the lounge, in front of a metal drapery separating the lounge and the dining room. The second was that the conversation behind him changed, became innocuous. He can remember Ferrie saying that he had flown an airplane like one on the apron outside the window — a small, executive plane, Giesbrecht thinks it was, with two propellers.

"I felt a wee bit jittery or excited," he says. "I felt uneasy, uncomfortable. I put on my overcoat. The conversation had stopped. This third man was just staring at me. He was sort of an ugly man. He had a nose that seemed flat, a fighter's nose. It was a piggy nose. He was very fair, with very flushed cheeks. He was in his early thirties, a big man, odd-looking. I had to walk by him to get out."

Giesbrecht, feeling uneasy, hurried past Gladstone's *Solar Cone* into the



At this table in Winnipeg's airport, Richard Giesbrecht took notes while overhearing two men who may have been in on JFK's assassination.

GERRY CAIRNS

mezzanine, turned left and headed for a newsstand that forms an island in the middle of the 300-foot-long waiting area. He asked a saleslady if there were police in the airport. There was an RCMP detachment, Room 24. To get there Giesbrecht started to walk toward a covered bridge joining the terminal and the administration unit. He stopped. On the middle of three steps at the near end of the bridge was the man who had been staring at him in the Horizon Room. He was staring at Giesbrecht again.

"I felt uneasy," Giesbrecht says. He turned around, went back into the newsstand and asked where the nearest phone was. He walked into the mezzanine again, turned left and walked 100 feet or so, turned left again past a Walter Yarwood metal sculpture that crouches over a fountain in another courtyard, to a bank of 10 telephones mounted on a blue tile wall. Giesbrecht picked up the sixth phone, called the Winnipeg RCMP number, got on to a corporal, introduced himself and glanced to his right.

Tattooed stranger

"The same man, the third man, was just about a yard away. He was right on me. So I just hung up and walked away. I don't remember how much I said to the RCMP. As I hung up the phone I felt too uneasy to look at his face, but I noticed that he had markings on his fingers. I think they were tattoos. I walked into a large flight room, at gates two and three, where there were a lot of people. I stayed in there for a while and then I went out again and down the stairs at the north end of the mezzanine and into the parking lot. I drove away from the airport and then I did a sort of foolish thing. I never bothered about my client, and not only that, when I got about a mile away from the airport I took the notes and tore them up and burned them. Ask me why and I don't know. I rewrote the notes as best I could that night at home and hid them in a dresser drawer."

Giesbrecht doesn't have any pat explanations about what he overheard, but he says he believes that a conspiracy killed Kennedy. He says he is glad to be able to help Garrison, especially since he found his earlier dealings with the FBI upsetting. "I've had three years of feeling like a little child that wants to convey something, and nobody's listening," he says. "It bugs a person. It does. They're happy to hear what you have to say but then it's, 'Shut up, because it's too big.' If it's something that's too big for the authorities, then the United States is in a pretty bad way, isn't it?"

JON RUDDY