

ASSIGNMENT OSWALD: A REVIEW

by  
Ken Thompson

As the Dallas FBI agent charged with keeping tabs on Oswald prior to November 22, 1963, James P. Hosty, Jr. offers his perspective on the assassination and subsequent controversies in his 1996 book Assignment: Oswald [Arcade Publishing, Inc. New York, 328 pages]. For the most part, the book, written in first person, is a chronology of the author's experiences from November 18, 1963 until November 12, 1993.

We learn of his activities and feelings on that fateful weekend; his testimony to the Warren Commission and the HSCA; his interviews with Marina, whom he suspected of being a KGB-planted sleeper agent; as well as his dealings with Gordon Shanklin (Special Agent in Charge of the Dallas FBI Office), Dallas Police Lieutenant Jack Revill, and other key people.

Hosty has been repeatedly criticized for his actions and inactions related to the Oswald case. The book argues that throughout the ordeal he was just doing his job as best he could, caught in the crossfire of government policies and conflicting personalities. He writes that in the days just before the assassination:

*"At no time...was I interested in determining whether or not any of my case subjects [including Oswald] might be located along the motorcade route. It had been beaten into me, by both the Secret Service and the FBI, that this was not [any] of my concern."* p. 6

At 2:15 p.m. on Friday, the 22nd, his boss Ken Howe informed him:

*"They've just arrested a guy named Lee Oswald, and they're booking him for the killing of the policeman over in Oak Cliff. Officer's name was Tippit."* p. 16

*"It only took me a second or two to shift from the extreme right wing to Lee Oswald...a Communist who had defected...I had an active file on [him]...I remembered thinking Tippit's and Kennedy's killings were related, and then it hit me like a load of bricks. That's him! Ken, that must be him. Oswald has to be the one who shot Kennedy!"* p. 16

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Through the years assassination researchers have been intrigued by the unknown content of a note written by Oswald, and left at Hosty's office a few days before the murder. Among others, Oliver Stone has speculated that Oswald was an FBI informant, and that the note to Hosty might have been a warning of a forthcoming assassination plot. The author addresses the issue of the note, based on his memory.

*"I had the note in my file drawer. It said, in effect: 'If you want to talk to me, you should talk to me to my face. Stop harassing my wife, and stop trying to ask her about me. You have no right to harass her.' I had tossed [the note] in my file drawer at the office and not given it another thought. That is, not until November 22 at approximately 3:18 p.m."* p. 21

Clearly, as an insider, Hosty writes from a unique and relevant perspective. He also writes from a definite point of view.

*"Anyone who has examined the evidence carefully as I have over many years cannot help but come to the conclusion that Oswald was the lone gunman...Very few people have examined all the evidence. When they do, they follow step by step the actions Oswald took prior to the assassination—purchasing the rifle under an assumed name; trying to kill General Edwin Walker...With all this evidence and more, for the life of me, I don't understand why some people still don't think Oswald did it, or that there was a second gunman."* p. 254

Predictably, the book's author dismisses evidence that points to wider involvement. For example, the abrupt backward and leftward motion of Kennedy's body from the head shot can be explained adequately by the "jet effect", rendering other possible explanations unnecessary, according to Hosty. Similarly, he thinks Sylvia Odio was simply mistaken when she thought Oswald was one of three visitors to her home in September, 1963. Since the CIA alleged that Oswald was in Mexico City at the time in question, Hosty believes that mistaken identity must surely be the correct explanation.

Hosty places great confidence in the Warren Commission conclusions and in arguments more recently advanced by G. Posner. The reader should not expect to find many references to the research of Sylvia Meagher, Henry Hurt, Anthony Summers, or Harold

Weisberg.

Hosty does concede that a post-assassination cover-up occurred, but that it was benign.

*"...Johnson gave the Warren Commission its priorities. The commission was to reassure the public and calm everyone down, and to disclose as much evidence to the public as it could. The cover-up was on. The American public would not be told of Oswald's dealings with the Soviets and Cubans. It would be for their own good." p. 222*

The author acknowledges that this secrecy contributed to a decline in the government's credibility, but believes this was necessary to avoid a nuclear war with the Soviets.

Throughout the book, Hosty makes clear his impression of Oswald. Describing his encounter with Oswald in Captain Fritz' office the afternoon of the assassination, Hosty writes:

*"My first impression of him was that he was a young punk. He was sitting there with a wise-ass smirk...cocky and self-assured...I knew Oswald was spewing hot air regarding diplomatic law...Oswald was squirming like a snared rat." pp. 20-21*

And later in the book:

*"We know, too, that Oswald, a basically unstable, barely literate man, ...had almost an insane desire to be 'in the news.'" p. 226*

These impressions reveal the author's bias, in my opinion. Less than two hours after the murder (at 2:15 p.m.), James P. Hosty, Jr. concludes that "Oswald has to be the one who shot Kennedy!" (p. 16). And later that day Hosty describes the prisoner as a cocky and self-assured punk, squirming like a snared rat. The salient point here is that Mr. Hosty's well-formed opinion was made before hardly any objective assassination evidence had yet been collected, much less analyzed. As the months and years rolled on, and this subjective opinion hardened into official doctrine, attempts by others to interject questions and alternate scenarios created controversies annoying people like Mr. Hosty.

He believes that conspiracy buffs are to blame for these controversies because conspiracy buffs:

*"...always start...from their preconceived conviction or theory...They first decide who the guilty party is...and then they go about proving*

*this theory, using only the evidence that supports it." p. 246*

One could wish that lone-gunman buffs would adhere to the same standard of logic that they require of conspiracy buffs.

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## ASSIGNMENT OSWALD: ANOTHER REVIEW

by  
Randy Owen

Each book on the JFK assassination, in my opinion, adds something to the case. John Newman's Oswald and the CIA added information, Mortal Error added misinformation, and Case Closed, disinformation. Now, former FBI agent James Hosty offers his contribution of information, misinformation and disinformation.

In Assignment Oswald, we find that Hosty, the FBI agent assigned to investigate Lee Harvey Oswald before the assassination, is the man who began the cropping of the Mexico City surveillance photos. In his book, Hosty describes how one photo ended up in the hands of fellow agent Bardwell Odum. Hosty handed a pair of scissors to Odum to crop out the doorway to the Soviet Embassy so it wouldn't "blow one of our vital surveillance methods." [1] Although the point may now be moot with the recent release of several of the uncropped photos, Hosty never explains how his bright idea happened to catch on with other intelligence agents whose hands held several other photos and, apparently, several other pairs of scissors.

Hosty does provide a new clue: despite police claims to the contrary, Hosty says Oswald's wallet and identification were found near where Officer J.D. Tippit was killed and were not taken from him after his arrest. If true, this information has devastating implications for the Dallas police: they lied about the circumstances of how they obtained the wallet. And despite Hosty's speculation that this was still evidence of Oswald's

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guilt in the Tippit shooting, it could also be speculated that the wallet may have been planted to implicate Oswald.

Hosty's book also contains information of a trivial nature. His wife was a potential Ruby juror and wanted to serve but pressure from Hosty's boss, Gordon Shanklin, caused her to withdraw. [2] Hosty regularly had lunch at a restaurant where Tippit shooting witness Helen Markham worked as a waitress. [3]

His book contains several tidbits that struck me as I noted omissions in them. Hosty was at the corner of Murphy and Main (about half a dozen blocks from Dealey Plaza) when JFK was shot and rushed to the Trade Mart where his wife was working as one of the volunteer hostesses for the presidential luncheon. Hosty doesn't say which route he took. I had hoped he went through Dealey and would describe the scene as he saw it. Instead, he does go into detail about his trip back downtown after he determined his wife was safe and this time he went through Dealey and described the sight of the commotion. [4]

Throughout the book, Hosty relates conversations he had at various times with a number of people. The night of the assassination, Hosty tells of being at Dallas police headquarters until 7:10 p.m. at which time he went for a bite to eat with Emmett Murphy, another FBI agent, and a couple of detectives. I would be most interested to know what the dinner conversation was about between several law enforcement officers so soon after the crime of the century. But Hosty does not relate one single word or even indicate who the detectives were. [5]

Hosty's misinformation, or lack of knowledge about the basic facts of the case, really shows when he discusses the Tippit shooting. Shanklin, he reports, called all the agents together just before midnight on November 22 to brief them on various aspects of the investigation and Shanklin informs his men the police had determined Tippit had been shot five times. [6] But earlier in the book, Hosty described four wounds to Tippit: one to the chest, another striking a metal shirt button and driving it into the body, then a shot to the forehead and a final fourth bullet to the temple. [7]

Having obtained Tippit's autopsy report several years ago from the Institute of Forensic Sciences at Dallas (since the 26 volumes of the Warren Commission Hearings didn't publish the report), I can assure the reader that there was no bullet wound to Tippit's

forehead and there were three chest wounds, [8] not two chest wounds as Hosty claimed.

Regarding the note Oswald left for Hosty before the assassination, that Hosty destroyed after the assassination, the former G-man doesn't offer anything new. To his credit, he maintains the story he's told for years: the note contained no violent threat.

But in a recent series of articles in The Fourth Decade (July and September 1995), William Weston presented compelling reasons to believe the note did contain a bomb threat. In considering this possibility, I looked at the problem from another perspective: did Oswald have the capability to construct a bomb?

Three sources, two of a questionable degree, indicate the answer is yes. First, KGB surveillance of Oswald in Minsk indicates he built two bomb-like devices before he returned to the United States. [9] Second, when Oswald first met Carlos Bringuier in his dry-goods store in August 1963, Oswald talked with two young anti-Castro men about how to make gunpowder, a zipgun and how to blow up the Huey P. Long Bridge in New Orleans. [10] But far more compelling is the Guidebook for Marines Oswald left with Bringuier. When Bringuier showed the Guidebook on Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?, the 1993 Frontline TV program, a camera shot included a closeup of the pages which showed how to construct bombs and booby traps.

Once you realize Oswald had the knowledge to construct a bomb, it becomes easier to believe that the note probably did contain a bomb threat.

But the most striking aspect of Hosty's story is his view that everyone else is wrong and he is right. His fellow agents were wrong, J. Edgar Hoover was wrong, the Warren Commission, the House Select Committee, the researchers and writers were all wrong. The errors Hosty does admit to, he seems to suggest are not monumental. Overall, the reader gets the impression of a self-righteous Hosty at odds with almost everyone. But Hosty does name two books and their authors he admires: David Belin's You Are the Jury and Posner's Case Closed. Not the kind of company I'd like to keep.

Finally, Hosty should be thanked for publishing his story in more detail than we've seen from him before. But beware, Hosty urges the reader to study: "Anyone who has examined the evidence carefully as I have over many years cannot help but come to the conclusion that Oswald was the lone gunman." He adds "the evidence is there for anyone to examine." [11] Not so.

The list of evidence denied or destroyed in this case is alarming. And Hosty himself participated in part of the destruction.

#### Notes

1. James P. Hosty, Jr., Assignment Oswald (New York: Arcade, 1996, pp. 36–37.
2. Assignment Oswald, p. 127.
3. Assignment Oswald, p. 26.
4. Assignment Oswald, pp. 12–14.
5. Assignment Oswald, p. 29.
6. Assignment Oswald, p. 32.
7. Assignment Oswald, p. 26.
8. Tippit Autopsy Report, #M63–352, p. 1, body diagram and body diagram—head.
9. Oleg Nechiporenko, Passport to Assassination (New York: Birch Lane, 1993).
10. Paris Flammonde, The Kennedy Conspiracy (New York: Meredith, 1969), p. 121.
11. Assignment Oswald, p. 254.

## Myth of the Three Wallets

by  
Gerald Preposterous

FBI agent James Hosty's new book has this account of the finding of Lee Harvey Oswald's wallet:

*Near the puddle of blood where Tippit's body had lain, (Captain) Westbrook had found a man's leather wallet. In it, he discovered identification for Lee Harvey Oswald, as well as other identification for Alek J. Hidell. [1]*

Hosty's account is raising eyebrows. Thirty-two years ago Sergeant Gerald Hill testified under oath that he had supervised the finding of Oswald's wallet. [2] In the squad car bringing Oswald to police headquarters that afternoon, Hill said, he ordered Detective Paul Bentley to extract Oswald's billfold from his left hip pocket.

Then, according to the Warren Report, Oswald's wallet was found a third time. This time it was found in Marina's bedroom drawer, "intact," and this time it had \$170 in it. [3]

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It would appear then that Oswald had at least three operational wallets. Conspiracy buffs have seized on this seeming improbability to construct an elaborate plot.

Actually, for a person of Oswald's duplicity and even triplicity, three wallets isn't a lot. He used three different names. He had at least two physiques to go with them—from the "nice-looking six-footer" of Priscilla Johnson's interview to the slight five-foot nine assassin of the coroner's report. He was frequently two places at once. School records show that in the fall of 1953 he simultaneously attended two public schools, one in New York City and one in New Orleans. In October of 1963 he was sighted in Dallas and Mexico City at the same time. After shooting at General Walker, two of him fled the scene. In the Archives can be found pictures of two different rifles which are both "the fateful rifle of Lee Harvey Oswald" and two different bullets which are both the magic bullet he fired through the President's neck. At work at noon on November 22 he was again spotted in two places at once, lurking on the sixth floor and eating lunch on the first. He was, according to cab driver William Whaley, even wearing two jackets that afternoon.

But as to wallets the truth is that Oswald only had one. Piecing together the several reports we see that the explanation of the "three wallets" is simple and wholly innocent.

As the panicky Oswald fled down East 10th Street his billfold popped out of his hip pocket and tumbled to the curb.

Officer J.D. Tippit, cruising down the same street in his squad car minutes later, spotted the billfold, stopped, and picked it up. Dallas police officers had standing orders to be on the lookout for lost wallets. In that peaceful city they seldom had more serious matters to attend to. And in fact several missing billfolds had been reported that very morning.

Tippit caught up with the fleeing Oswald near the corner of Patton Avenue. He held out the wallet, "Is this yours, son?" he asked.

Oswald reacted badly to this generous act. He shot Tippit dead.

The billfold fell beside Tippit's bleeding body. When Captain Westbrook arrived at the scene of the shooting, he picked it up.

Realizing that the brave police officer was beyond help, Westbrook turned to his next priority. That was,

of course, returning the billfold to its rightful owner.

A tip led them to a nearby theater. The excited officers converged on the pretty ticket girl. Westbrook asked, "Anybody come to the movie complaining about a lost wallet?"

"No, but a young man did go in without paying."

"Sounds like our boy," said Westbrook with a smirk. But it wasn't a deadly smirk.

Inside the theater the film was interrupted and the lights raised. Westbrook commandeered the stage.

"Anybody in here lose a wallet?" he asked.

There was a murmur but no answer from the audience.

"We found this up on Tenth Street."

Still there was no response. Westbrook looked in the billfold.

"Anybody here named—Oswald? Or maybe—Hidell?"

Oswald suddenly stood up. He had a smirk too. And his smirk was a deadly smirk.

"Now everyone will know who both of me are," he said.

"Yes they will, son," said Westbrook, chuckling. He held out the wallet and walked toward the smirking Oswald.

Oswald reacted badly to this generous act. He reached for his pistol to try to shoot Westbrook dead.

While the officers wrestled the pistol [4] away from Oswald, Westbrook surreptitiously slipped Oswald's lost wallet back into his hip pocket. Which is, of course, exactly where Detective Bentley later found it.

So the buff's sinister "second wallet" is nothing more than a second finding of the first wallet.

But what about the third wallet?

Sorry, buffs. There's nothing suspicious about this one either.

Dallas police officers were under standing orders to be scrupulously respectful of suspects' rights. In that peaceful city there was no tolerance for high-handed police methods. Since Oswald wouldn't even let the officers call a lawyer for him, they realized that before long they were going to have to release him.

Yet his wallet had been whisked off to the sophisticated Dallas Police lab for fingerprinting, paraffin tests, handwriting analysis, jiggle analysis and neutron activation tests. Repeated calls to the lab yielded no guarantee that it would be returned in time.

Sensitive to the bruised condition of their prisoner

(they alone knew that his bruises had actually been inflicted by his wife Marina while the sexually inadequate Lee had routinely beaten her the night before) the officers sought a conciliatory gesture. They took up a collection for the smirking loner and raised \$186.

Detective Bentley was dispatched to Nieman-Marcus to pick out a pigskin wallet. This he did, for \$16. The officers tucked the \$170 left over into the shiny new billfold. Westbrook delivered it to the Paines' home. [5]

"We hoped he'd be coming home to his wife and babies," remembers one officer sadly. "We hoped a new billfold bulging with money would maybe help them patch things up. It was our way of saying, 'Sorry about this, Marina, Lee, Alek and O.H.'" [6]

But the happy ending the officers hoped for was not to be.

#### Notes

1. Hosty, James P. Jr. "Assignment: Oswald," p. 62.
2. Warren Commission Hearings, VII, p. 58.
3. Warren Commission Report, p. 34.
4. Later the officers would stand around wondering what kind of gun the pistol might be. "It's either a beebie gun or else a howitzer," ventured Captain Westbrook. His was an understandable mistake—in that peaceful city firearms of any sort were a rarity, and Dallas Police officers were under standing orders not to know much about them.
5. Some buffs question how the police could have known right away that Marina Oswald lived with Ruth Paine unless there was some sort of preconceived plot to frame Lee. The answer is simple. Immediately after the assassination Police Chief Curry rounded up every homeowner in Dallas for a roll-call. Chief Curry asked each of the sixty thousand homeowners, "Does someone married to someone named Oswald live at your house?" Nobody answered yes. Since the only Dallas homeowner absent from the roll-call was Mrs. Paine, it was instantly apparent that she was Marina's landlord.
6. Ironically, the police officers at first believed that "Alek" and "O.H." were the names of the Oswald children.