

Wednesday, June 2, 1999 ■

The Columbus

Family ordered JFK

By Karen Gullo
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Loaded with 240 pounds of sand and drilled with holes so it would stay on the ocean floor, the coffin that carried John F. Kennedy's body from Dallas to Washington was dumped at sea in 1966 under orders of the Kennedy family.

Documents released yesterday by the National Archives showed that despite concerns over whether the casket should be destroyed, the government honored the Kennedy family's wishes and took pains to ensure that the casket would remain in a watery grave.

Kennedy, assassinated in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in a mahogany coffin obtained in Washington. The first coffin, made of bronze and lined with brushed satin, had been purchased from Dallas undertaker Vernon Oneal. It was replaced because it was damaged.

Its whereabouts had long been a mystery. And

Kennedy assassination researchers consider the coffin evidence that should not have been destroyed.

Documents show that the casket was in the basement of the National Archives building in Washington in February 1966 when Robert Kennedy, then a U.S. senator from New York, called the General Services Administration, which oversees government property, and asked for it to be released to the military for destruction.

"I think it belongs to the family and we can get rid of it any way we want to," Kennedy told Lawson Knott, agency administrator, according to a memo recounting the conversation.

"What I would like to have done is take it to sea," Kennedy told Knott. "I don't think anybody will be upset about the fact that we disposed of it."

Kennedy family spokeswoman Melody Miller said that destroying the casket was appropriate and "in keeping with the tradition of President Kennedy's naval service and his love of the sea."

coffin dumped in ocean

To ensure that the coffin would sink, three 80-pound bags of sand were put inside, metal tape was wrapped around it and it was placed inside a pine box that was wrapped in metal tape, documents said.

Numerous holes were drilled in both the casket and the box "to ensure that no air pockets would develop," according to a memo written by John Steadman, special assistant in the office of the Secretary of Defense.

One last precaution was taken: To keep the 660-pound load from shattering when it hit the water, two parachutes were attached to it.

On Feb. 18, 1966, an Air Force van picked up the casket and transported it to Andrews Air Force Base, where it was loaded onto a C-130 airplane, the documents said. The plane took off at 8:38 a.m. and flew over a calm ocean to a point approximately 131 nautical miles off the Maryland-Delaware coast.

The pilot descended to 500 feet and at 10 a.m., the plane's tail hatch was opened and the load was

pushed out. "The entire rigged load remained intact and sank sharply, clearly and immediately after the soft impact," wrote Steadman, who was on the plane.

Leaving nothing to chance, the plane circled the drop point for 20 minutes "to ensure that nothing returned to the surface."

Knott cautioned Kennedy that destroying the coffin might "raise loads of questions" in light of an upcoming book about the assassination. It was unclear whether the casket was covered by a law that mandated that certain items of evidence related to the Kennedy assassination be preserved.

The Justice Department would have to authorize release of the casket, Knott told Kennedy, who had been attorney general before he entered the Senate in 1965.

Kennedy was adamant and said he would call his successor as attorney general, Nicholas Katzenbach. Eight days later, Katzenbach wrote Knott and said the casket had no evidentiary value and didn't need to be preserved.

To ensure that the coffin would sink, three 80-pound bags of sand were put inside, metal tape was wrapped around it and it was placed inside a pine box that was wrapped in metal tape.