

JFK's 1st Casket Lies in Watery Grave

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Washington — A bronze casket used to carry President John F. Kennedy's body from Dallas to Washington is in a watery grave — 9,000 feet down in the Atlantic Ocean, according to assassination documents. Materials to be released Tuesday at the National Archives will show that in early 1965, the casket was dropped from a military plane into an area where unstable and outdated weapons and ammunition are dumped, Kermit Hall, a member of the now-defunct Assassination Records Review Board, told The Associated Press.

"The documents that will be released show it was dropped off the Maryland-Delaware border in 9,000 feet of water," Hall said Friday night. "There's actually a map in the documents that pinpoints the coordinates where it was dropped."

The revelation — on the eve of what would have been Kennedy's 82nd birthday yesterday — that the casket was sunk resolves a lingering mystery about its whereabouts. But it also fuels speculation among assassination researchers that it was discarded to hide foul play.

Archive documents pinpoint location

"The coffin is evidence just like the body is evidence," said David Lifton, who wrote a book about medical evidence in the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination. "You don't destroy evidence."

What happened to the bronze casket has been a lingering question during the past three decades. Last year, a document released by the archives showed that a General Services Administration truck picked up the coffin March 19, 1964.

In its effort to ferret assassination-related documents and information from various government agencies, the review panel asked the GSA where the casket was. The agency said last summer that it didn't know.

Kennedy was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in a mahogany coffin that had been purchased in Washington to replace the bronze one, which was

missing a handle and had been damaged.

In September, 1965, former Texas Rep. Earle Cabell wrote to then-Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach recommending that the bronze casket be discarded so it could never become a relic.

"This item has . . . value for the morbidly curious," Cabell wrote. "And I believe that I am correct in stating that this morbid curiosity is that which we all seek to stop."

Katzenbach said in an interview Friday that he doesn't recall details about the disposition of the casket.

Lifton thinks there might have been a darker motive.

In conducting his research, Lifton talked with witnesses who said Kennedy's body arrived at Bethesda Naval Hospital in a gray metal shipping casket, not the bronze one obtained in Dallas. That the bronze casket was dumped in the ocean — after the Warren Commission issued its report in 1964 — makes him wonder what clues it might have yielded to investigators.

"If it had been an ongoing murder investigation, this would be obstruction of justice," Lifton said.

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