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## Doctor recalls helping treat mortally wounded President Kennedy

By Brad Kellar  
Greenville Herald Banner

FARMERSVILLE -- Like most people his age, Dr. Paul C. Peters, 65, of Dallas vividly recalls where he was and what he was doing the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963.

Peters was among the surgeons who treated President John F. Kennedy at Parkland Hospital following the shooting at Dealey Plaza.

Peters also investigated the claims there was a conspiracy connected to Kennedy's assassination and has contributed to works debunking the theory.

Earlier this week, Peters, now professor emeritus of urology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, recalled that dramatic day for students of Farmersville High School and the Farmersville Historical Society.

In November 1963, Peters, then 31, was assistant professor of urology at Parkland Hospital in Dallas. He had only recently arrived at Parkland after assignments at Indiana University and with the Air Force.

"I hardly knew where the restroom was or where to pick up my paycheck," Peters said.

The morning of Nov. 22, Peters had come in to the hospital to prepare for a scheduled lecture that afternoon.

He remembered listening to a radio broadcast of President John F. Kennedy's journey through downtown Dallas toward a scheduled appearance at the Dallas Trade Center.

"They rounded the corner at Houston and Elm and the announcer said . . . 'My God, the president's been shot!'", Peters said, instantly realizing Kennedy would likely be brought to Parkland, the major trauma center in the southwest.

Not aware of the extent of Kennedy's injuries, Peters thought there might be a chance to assist in his treatment and meet the president.

"If he's been shot through the arm or something, we can put a bandage on him and shake hands," Peters remembered thinking. The odds were with him, as most of the city's surgeons were in Galveston that day to attend a meeting of the Texas Surgical Society.

"I was to learn in the next 24 hours of the power of the presidency and how naive my approach was," Peters said.

As he neared the emergency room, all of the surgeons who were on duty at the hospital were being paged to immediately respond. Peters was recruited enroute and the next thing he knew he was entering Trauma Room One, where Kennedy had been brought, joining around a half-dozen other young physicians who would attempt to save a United States president not much older than they were.

"They shoved me through a couple of double doors and there he was," Peters said. "His forehead was pulled down just a little bit over his eye and I thought, 'My God, he's dead!'."

Those surgeons who were already there urged Peters to lend a hand.

"If they were willing to have a urologist help, they were in trouble," Peters recalled.

Peters said the first thing the medical team focused on was a wound in the president's neck.

As Dr. Charles Carrico, the hospital's resident surgeon, was attempting to insert a breathing tube in Kennedy's trachea, which required the enlarging of the wound, Peters said he obtained the tracheal tube and two other team members, Dr. Malcolm Perry and Dr. Charles Baxter, made the incision.

Perry was the assistant professor of surgery and Baxter was the professor of surgery and the director of the emergency room at Parkland.

"Meantime, (Dr.) Ron Jones had done a cut down on President Kennedy's ankle and we had ordered two pints of blood, two grams of steroids and two or three liters of fluid just in 15 or 20 minutes," Peters said. "We actually worked on him for about 35 minutes before we declared him dead."

As they worked, the team debated on whether to open Kennedy's chest to massage his heart directly, or to continue with closed chest resuscitation. Peters said the latter treatment was chosen.

After chest drain tubes had been placed on each side, Peters said his attention was drawn to Kennedy's head wound by Dr. Marion Jenkins, professor and chief of anesthesiology.

Peters said Jenkins had arrived to supervise the switching of breathing tubes from Kennedy's nose to the tracheal insert.

"I stepped up there and looked at the brain . . . and there was a seven-centimeter hole in the occipital and parietal area," Peters said. Blood was draining from the wound and Peters said the blood was not being shoved by a pulse.

"His EKG was a straight line," Peters said, referring to the measurement of the rate of heartbeat of the patient. "I never saw him take a definite breath. There was some 600 people who swear they were in the room at that time and say that they thought he was still alive, but I didn't see President Kennedy take a breath."

Despite the signs, Peters said the team continued to struggle to save Kennedy.

"You can't see six 30-year-old guys, young doctors, who still aren't shaving every day, walking in and saying, 'Oh, looks like he's dead' and then walk out. You couldn't do that," Peters said. "We did everything we could to save the President of the United States and he had excellent resuscitative efforts, even by today's standards."



And yet eventually the physicians realized there was no hope.

"So, I said we'd have to tell Mrs. Kennedy," Peters said. "And then someone said, 'She's standing right beside you!'"

Peters turned to indeed find Jacqueline Kennedy next to him, refusing to leave the room until after last rites had been conducted.

Peters said the priest, apparently overwhelmed by the moment, had begun to deliver the wrong sacrament, which prompted Mrs. Kennedy to call for the delivery of the sacrament then known as extreme unction.

"So, he turned to another section of the book and began reading obviously the right words and she was immediately soothed by that," Peters said. "It was after that she went out and sat down."

Peters would later relate to a Catholic friend of how he almost converted to the faith at that moment.

"Because it was so obvious to me how reassuring that was, even to the wife of the President of the United States, to know that the proper things were being said that should be said at that time," Peters explained.

The doctors then encountered Dr. Robert Shaw, whom Peters said was the leading thoracic surgeon in the southwest at that time, and who appeared to be on his way to help in the treatment of Kennedy.

Peters said he outlined the situation to Shaw and noted how then-Gov. John Connally, who had also been gravely wounded, was likewise in need of attention.

"I said 'Governor Connally is across the hall with a surgery resident and third-year medical student,'" Peters said. "That's they way things were that day. People weren't even being admitted into Parkland Hospital because of the priorities -- the president first and the janitors next."

Peters said the third-year medical student, one of his own, whom he had sent in to check on Connally while the others worked on Kennedy, at one point came rushing out of the other operating room.

"He said, 'Dr. Shaw is here and he's taken over and I just passed a catheter on Governor Connally,'" Peters recalled. "I said, 'You just made an A in urology for this semester'."

Peters said he knows that for most of the students, his experiences on that day 34 years ago may seem far away and long before their time. And yet he hoped they learned to appreciate the kinds of emotions a few dedicated doctors, as well as the entire country, went through during those few hours.

"It certainly stands out in my mind as a day I will remember forever," Peters said.

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