

NBC News' Tom Pettit Dies, Saw Oswald Shot

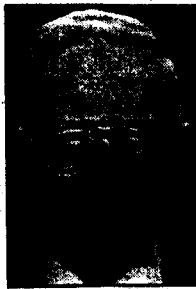
Newsday
12/23/95

By Verne Gay

STAFF WRITER

Tom Pettit, one of the premiere political reporters in TV news history, died yesterday following surgery for a ruptured aorta. Pettit, 64, had undergone a kidney transplant some months ago but had suffered from complications.

Pettit was the only TV newsman who was on the scene when Lee Harvey Oswald was shot by Jack Ruby on Nov. 24, 1963. Despite the chaos that ensued, Pettit's trademark clipped voice conveyed the details of the shooting without emotion or strain. NBC News, which Pettit had joined only a year earlier, had the major scoop in the wake of the JFK assassination.



NBC Photo

Tom Pettit

But Pettit's career went beyond being in the right place at the right time. He also made an hour-long report on chemical and biological warfare which aired on the NBC News magazine, "First Tuesday" in 1969. The report led to changes in federal law.

"He was above all a hell of a reporter," said Reuven Frank, former NBC News president, who had appointed Pettit an executive vice president in 1982. "I think he was one of the very first reporters who did it all on television. He never worked for a newspaper, but started out in a tiny station in Iowa that was so poor that whenever they sent him out on a story, they sent him out with a Polaroid."

Frank added that "everybody has something that they regret being remembered for," and for Pettit, that was the Oswald shooting. On the 25th anniversary of the shooting, Pettit said, "For me it was so horrendous a situation to be in and so emotional and so charged with fear, concern and a sense of pending doom that I would not like to relive it."

Born in Cincinnati and raised in Iowa, Pettit was a reporter with NBC's Philadelphia station, WRCV, where his work was often used by the network. He joined the NBC News Los Angeles bureau in 1962. He retired last June.

"He and his wife moved to Bermuda, and then a hurricane hit," said Frank. "NBC News has the only reporter there with a microphone." Pettit is survived by his wife, Patricia, and his four children from a previous marriage, Debra, Anne, James and Robert.

Daily News 12/23/95

TOM PETTIT

Award-winning television reporter Tom Pettit, best known for his exclusive coverage of Lee Harvey Oswald's slaying, died yesterday of complications after surgery at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center.

Pettit, 64, died after an operation to repair a ruptured aorta, said Beth Comstock, NBC vice president. Earlier this year, Pettit underwent a kidney transplant.

Pettit, who retired from NBC News this year, cap-

tured three Emmys, a Peabody Award and the Polk Memorial Award during a career that stretched from the Eisenhower era to the Clinton administration.

"For more than a generation, Tom Pettit represented NBC News with skill and style," said NBC News Vice President Bill Wheatley. "His work was always distinctive."

Pettit's most famous report came from outside the Dallas City Jail, where he alone was providing live commentary as police led the presidential assassin out for transfer to the county lockup.