

'I HAD NOT HEARD A SHOT'

THAT NOVEMBER DAY IN DALLAS

Someone has taken a shot at the President. You're Dan Rather of CBS and, on the strength of what you've learned, you report that the President is dead—and that's what the network tells a waiting world. But what if you were wrong?

By DAN RATHER
With Mickey Herskowitz

UNTIL NEARLY THE last moment I had not planned to be in Dallas at the break of noon on Nov. 22, 1963. I had been asked only to set up the coverage—as chief of the new CBS bureau in New Orleans—for President Kennedy's pre-campaign swing through Texas. My first reaction was one of irritation. I was still struggling to get the bureau organized. The civil rights movement was exploding all around us. Now this.

Suddenly I was aware that a police car had passed me, taking the wrong turnoff, going like hell. Then I thought I saw the presidential limousine pass, a 1961 Lincoln, a blur. But I did not see the President. I thought I picked out Mrs. Kennedy. And Governor Connally. Or had I? The motorcade, or what was left of it, continued toward the Trade Mart.

I had not heard a shot. I was only vaguely aware of the hustle and bustle and noise and confusion taking place somewhere behind me. None of the scene came with any precision. All I had was this sense, an impression, of what I had observed—a police car, a limousine, then another limousine. One of them, I thought, was the President's. The rest of the motorcade was already in disarray. Something had happened. But what?

The long run

I had to hotfoot it back to the station. Whatever had happened, if anything, I was doing no one any good standing there. The five blocks back to KRDL seemed longer now, but I started off at a full run.

I headed straight for the open line to the Trade Mart. As I did, I yelled out, "Turn up the volume on every radio you got, all of them, state police, local police, sheriff's department. Get 'em up high." Nothing had flashed yet, but all of the police bands were becoming busy. I could hear news director Eddie Barker from the Trade Mart, asking, "Where's the motorcade? They're running late. What's happened?"

"Eddie, this is Dan," I said. "I think something happened out there. And I think it's bad."

He said, "So do I. We're picking up a lot of funny talk on the radio. The cops are all asking each other what the hell is going on."

By now it was total confusion on every radio. I kept hearing numbers and codes. I knew enough of them from my days as a police reporter to pick out pieces of what they were saying. One officer told another to "cool it" and switch to a nonpublic channel. Then I caught a reference to Parkland Hospital. Instantly, I looked up the number and dialed it. The



Jackie watching the castet being loaded on the plane.



Minutes later, the President was fatally shot.

EXTRA

WEATHER
Forecast
and 10
Day
Forecast
Partly
Cloudy
45-65

New York Post

BLUE
FINAL

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1963

switchboard jammed almost immediately. I sensed at the time that I was lucky to get through. The operator wasn't hysterical, or panicky, but she was clearly busy.

I found myself blurting out that I was a reporter and don't hang up on me. I got that out right away. She cut me off and said, "The President has been shot. I don't know anything else. I repeated myself. Please, don't hang up. You say the President has been shot. Are you certain of that?"

She said, "That's what I've been told. I don't know anything else."

I said, "Is there anyone around, anyone else who can talk to me? Is a doctor around?"

She said, yes, hold on, and the next thing I knew a male voice was on the line.

"Sir, are you a physician?" I asked.

"Yes, I am."

"The lady on the switchboard says that the President has been shot and I'd like to verify that with you."

"Yes," he replied, "the President has been brought in and it is my understanding that he's dead. But I'm not the person to talk to about it."

I said, "Would you repeat your name for me, Doctor?"

He said, "I'm not the person you need to talk with," and there was a click on the line.

I dialed right back, and as I did I shouted to the people in the newsroom, "He's been shot." I didn't add that a doctor at Parkland Hospital had told me he was dead. If you have covered enough police beats and emergency rooms, you tread very gently with that kind of information. At the moment the fact that the President of the United States had been shot was compelling enough. A reporter learns not to jump too fast.

Two dials and I was able to get through the switchboard a second time, and again I blurted out the words, "Please, don't hang up on

JFK SHOT TO DEATH



Stories on Pages 2, 3, 4 and 5—Full Page of Photos—President and Wife Before the War Assassinated—On the Next Page.

me. I'm a reporter with CBS and this is very important. I have been told that the President has been shot. I must verify that. Is there anyone there, who can?"

She said, "All the doctors are busy. There is great confusion here. But what you heard, yes, I believe that is correct."

I said, "Is there anyone in authority who will talk to me?"

She was losing her patience. "Don't you understand? All the doctors are busy." There was a pause, then she lowered her voice and said, "Two Catholic fathers are standing here in the hall."

I said, "Would you ask one of the priests if I might speak to him?" There was a mumbled con-

versation in the background, then a man's voice came on the phone.

I said, "Father, the operator tells me you just happened to be there. I'm Dan Rather, with CBS News, and I'm trying to confirm whether the President has been shot."

With a matter-of-factness that stunned me he said, "Yes, the President has been shot and he is dead."

I said, "Are you certain of that?"

He said, "Yes, unfortunately, I am," and he left the phone.

I cannot tell you what I thought at that moment. Certainly, this was no time to measure the magnitude of what had hap-

pened or to reflect on the insane chance that had caused it to happen at that time, and in that place. I only knew that a tumultuous few minutes had passed since I began my four-block run from behind the grassy knoll. On the United Press International news wire the first words of a bulletin dictated by Merriman Smith had clattered out to the rest of the world:

DALLAS, NOV. 22 (UPI) — THREE SHOTS WERE FIRED AT PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S MOTORCADE TODAY IN DOWNTOWN DALLAS.

I was on the phone to Eddie Barker at the Trade Mart, comparing notes. Quickly, I told him what I had.

It was now just past 12:18 p.m. by the clock. The first wire service details, suggesting strongly that the President had not survived, wouldn't move for another few minutes. At that point I heard what my mind then recognized clearly as someone in New York announce around the radio desk, "Rather says the President is dead."

I began shouting into the phone to New York, shouting that I had not authorized any bulletin or any other kind of report.

Confusion burst anew. I was told that I had said not once but twice that Kennedy was dead. Now it came through to me: those weren't Barker's questions I had been answering.

A chilling thought

I felt a chill. It dawned on me that it was possible I had committed a blunder beyond comprehension, beyond forgiving. I raced through my own mental checklist. What did I have? Well, I had a doctor at the hospital who said the President was dead. A priest who said definitely he was dead.

If you were working the cop shop in Houston, Texas, at Number 61 Riessner St., what you had was a dead man. But this was the President of the United States. It was a story no one wanted to believe, and you couldn't take it back. If I had been given, say, two seconds to think about it, if someone had asked, "Do you want us to announce that the President is dead and play the national anthem?" I would have said, whoa, better run that past someone else.

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TOMORROW: Covering Vietnam