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THE MANNLICHER CARCANO
—A PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT IN ITS REASSEMBLY

by

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Introduction

At the end of a recent presentation on the subject of the rifle allegedly used in the assassination of President Kennedy¹, I was pleased to answer questions from an enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience. One question concerned a screwdriver or breakdown tool for the Mannlicher-Carcano.² I confirmed that there was no evidence to suggest that either a breakdown tool or a screwdriver had been found either on the sixth floor or in Lee Harvey Oswald's possession. It was then suggested that perhaps it could have been possible for the Mannlicher to have been disassembled and later reassembled with the aid of a small coin. It is known that Oswald had cash amounting to \$13.87 on him when he was arrested³.

Much of my presentation was centred on the fact that I distrust the Warren Commission's account of the finding and subsequent handling of the Mannlicher-Carcano.⁴ Furthermore, I seriously question the very existence of the paper sack in which the weapon is alleged to have been carried by Oswald from Irving to the Texas School Book Depository on the morning of the assassination. The 'official version' would have us believe that Oswald carried the disassembled rifle in a "heavy brown bag" - the paper sack CE 142 - on the back seat of Buell Wesley Frazier's car that morning.⁵ The word 'disassembled' is one which very few, if any, researchers have taken the trouble to examine in any depth. What exactly does this word mean in the present context?

'Disassembled'

This is a word which we all seem to have accepted without question. We know that the Mannlicher-Carcano, CE 139, measures 40.2 inches in length in its assembled condition. When broken down or disassembled, its longest component, the wooden stock, is 34.8 inches.⁶ FBI weapons expert Robert A Frazier explains this but goes no further. We are left to assume that to disassemble the weapon is a straightforward and simple action at the end of which we have the rifle in two pieces - the wooden stock and the remainder of it consisting of the metal part. In reality, this is far from the truth.

Perhaps it is appropriate at this stage to explain exactly what you have when you disassemble this weapon. Despite the automatic assumption that you have a 'wooden part' and a 'metal part' there is far more to it than that. When fully disassembled, which it *has* to be to isolate the wooden stock, you find yourself with no fewer than *twelve* separate components. Yes, twelve!

If we then go along with the Warren Commission's main argument that Oswald was the lone assassin, then we have to add the rifle sling, an ammunition clip and four unexpended cartridges - a grand total of eighteen individual bits and pieces. I can just imagine Oswald climbing into Frazier's car carrying a paper sack in which all those assorted ingredients of the rifle were jangling about.

The Warren Report claims that Oswald had disassembled the Mannlicher to enable it to fit into the paper sack.⁷ It then uses CE 1304 to show us that the rifle is in just two pieces at this point. CE 1304 purports to be a photograph showing the Mannlicher-Carcano in its disassembled state. It does indeed show the weapon broken down into two parts, one wooden and one metal, as described

above. Like much of the Warren Commission's so-called evidence, however, all is not what it seems at first glance.

The CE 1304 photograph shows a rifle which has been disassembled and then reassembled but without the main metal part (barrel, firing pin, trigger, chamber, etc.) being included. Close examination of the photograph will reveal that all five retaining screws are in their correct positions but they are certainly not retaining the main metal component. The photograph is a complete waste of time - with an evidential value of precisely nil. It is totally misleading - and perhaps deliberately so.

A re-enactment

During a visit to Dallas in June 1994 I again had the opportunity to handle and examine a Mannlicher-Carcano identical to that allegedly found on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book

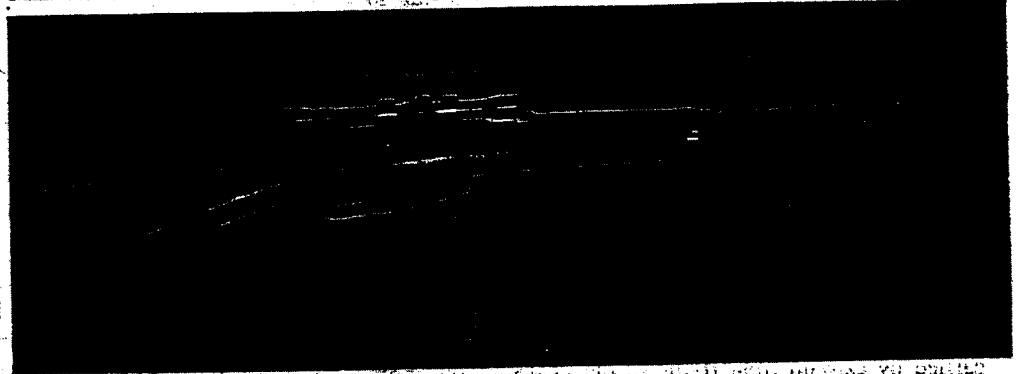


fig 1. The five retaining screws and the order in which they must be secured.

Depository on 22nd November 1963. This is the same weapon which, together with a group of fellow British researchers, I had studied in November 1963 when it had formed a central part of the JFK-Assassination Information Center display.

This time, I spent an hour on Friday 24th June, followed by the entire afternoon of Saturday 25th, doing nothing but handle, photograph, measure and study that rifle. Most important, I took it to pieces and then put it together again over a dozen times. Not having the correct breakdown tool for this type of weapon, I experimented with two makeshift alternatives - a screwdriver and a dime coin. The small change in Oswald's possession when he was arrested consisted of one half dollar, three dimes, one nickle (sic) and two pennies.⁸ It was therefore possible that one of Oswald's dime coins could have been used as a temporary breakdown tool for the Mannlicher-Carcano.

In his testimony before the Warren Commission, Cortlandt Cunningham, a Special Agent at the FBI Laboratory (Firearms Identity Unit) stated that he had been able to reassemble the Mannlicher (CE 139) in "a few seconds over two minutes" using a screwdriver and in six minutes with a dime.⁹

The twelve separate components

I make no claim to be a weapons expert and so I cannot quote all the correct technical names for the various parts of the disassembled Mannlicher. I shall therefore describe them in basic layman's terms.

As already explained, the longest individual part is the wooden stock. There is a second wooden component - a short piece about seven and a half inches long known as the top stock - which

sits atop the wooden stock just forward of and below the front end of the scope. This serves no functional purpose in the actual firing of the rifle but is necessary to keep other parts in position.

The main metal component consists of the barrel and the firing mechanism. The latter includes the chamber, firing pin, bolt and trigger. For the purposes of this exercise, the telescopic sight, permanently screwed to the top of this metal section, can be described as being part of it. It is not necessary to remove the scope when disassembling the weapon.

There are two metal collars which serve to hold the main metal part into a recessed section on top of the larger of the two wooden parts (the stock).

The first of these two collars is at the forward end of the wooden stock, just five and a half inches from the end of the barrel. The second collar is situated a further five and a half inches behind it.

The combined magazine well/trigger guard fits into place directly beneath the trigger mechanism.

All the above parts are held in place by five retaining screws. Two identical screws secure the forward collar to hold together the front end of the wooden stock and the barrel. Another slightly longer screw similarly holds the rear collar firm and this in turn keeps the top stock in position. This screw also fits into the forward sling swivel to hold it in place on the left side of the rifle. The magazine well/trigger guard is secured by two larger and heavier screws, the forward one being considerably longer than the one at the rear.

Those, then, are the twelve separate components into which the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle is broken down.

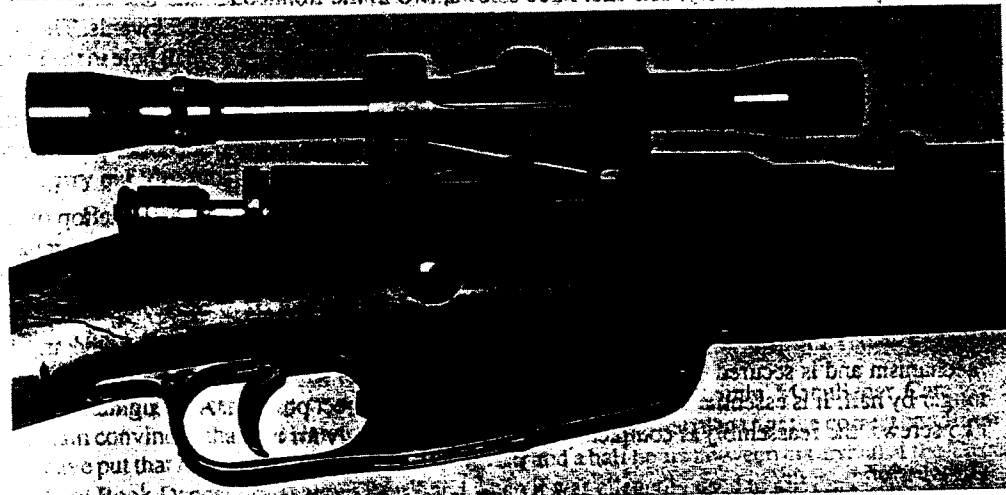


fig 2. The telescopic sight, bolt and combined magazine well/trigger guard. (Note that due to its closeness to the protruding part of the magazine well, the front screw is almost impossible to adjust with a dime coin).

The practical experiment

As mentioned earlier, I spent several hours familiarising myself with the weapon and the method by which it is disassembled and then put back together. Assuming that Lee Harvey Oswald did indeed carry the disassembled rifle into the depository (a view to which I personally do not subscribe), then it would have been a difficult task for him to reassemble the weapon.

He would have had limited time (somebody could disturb him) and he would probably have been in a confined space.^{10,11} Most significant of all, of course, would be knowledge of his purpose

in reassembling the rifle - to deliberately kill the most powerful and important man in the world. I that factor alone did not make his fingers sticky with sweat and his heart beat at twice its normal rate then nothing would have done. Such a person would obviously have been in a greatly increased state of emotion, anxiety and downright fear!

The conditions which prevailed when I assembled the weapon were very much more relaxed. I was in a roomy, well-lit, air-conditioned environment with no external pressures whatsoever. I knew that if I accidentally dropped one of the screws or mistakenly tried to fit one of the rifle parts in the wrong place, it would not matter. I could always begin all over again.

I sat on a low, revolving chair with all the rifle components lined up in the correct order on a table beside me. I began with the wooden stock across my lap. My good friend Tom Jones (JFK Resource Group Dallas) was with me and in accordance with my prior request, he took photographs at each stage of the experiment.

Stage one was possibly the trickiest of all. The rearmost of the two collars has to be fitted loosely around the barrel section of the main metal part and then the other collar is pushed into position in front of it. The entire metal part then has to be manipulated into position along the recessed section at the top of the wooden stock. This requires considerable dexterity since there is only one position in which it will sit cleanly in the correct place. The two collars are then pushed along the barrel until they engage in their correct positions. The front collar is particularly tight and is not easy to site accurately. The first three screws, two in the front collar and one in the other, are repositioned and tightened at this stage, beginning at the front and working backwards. The first is the most difficult since great care is needed to ensure that it also engages a small hole in the metal at the base of the barrel. Having had considerable practice, and being under no pressure, I found that this had become fairly straightforward. Under the 'Oswald' conditions, however, I can well imagine some moments of great anxiety and near panic. The second screw in the front collar presents no problem provided the first one is correctly placed.

Before fixing the second collar, the wooden top stock piece is placed along the top of the recessed barrel in its correct position. According to FBI weapons expert Cordandt Cunningham: "Once in a while with regard to the top portion - namely the retaining screw and the top stock - you have trouble getting them engaged on this particular model." ¹²

Finally, the combined magazine well/trigger guard is held in place below the trigger mechanism and is secured by the final two screws. These are of similar gauge but the front one is longer by half. It is essential that the correct screw is in the correct position. After tightening these two screws, the reassembly is complete and the weapon is ready for use.

Conclusion

I felt very privileged at being able to conduct a *practical* experiment of this nature. It is one thing to study books and documents - and perhaps unearth some important new facts - but to physically duplicate the actual actions allegedly undertaken by the supposed assassin was a source of great satisfaction and considerable pride.

So what did I learn from all this?

Well, number one - it is no simple task to assemble this rifle! Certainly not as simple as those glib words in the Warren Report or that misleading CE 1304 photograph would suggest.

Secondly - whilst it was relatively easy to tighten the screws with a screwdriver, it was by no means a simple task using a dime. The coin is thin enough to fit into the recessed head of the screws but due to its tiny diameter (about two thirds of an inch) there is hardly any leverage and this makes

it very difficult to exert the pressure needed to tighten the screws sufficiently. A similar problem is encountered when trying to disassemble the weapon, particularly with the front screw on the magazine well/trigger guard.

Thirdly - as already mentioned, I was under no pressure whatsoever whereas Oswald would have been confronted with indescribable mental and physical problems - everything from near panic to sweat running from his forehead into his eyes.

Finally - I had practised many times before undertaking my 'real attempt' at putting the gun together. I knew precisely where each piece was and where and in what order it should be fitted. I knew when I had to change the position of the rifle from horizontal (across my lap) to vertical (between my knees).

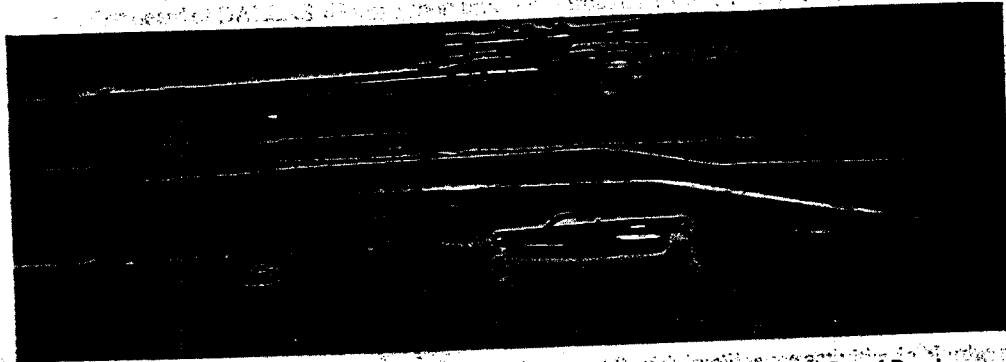


fig.3. The 6.5 Mannlicher-Carcano broken down into its twelve separate components. Grand Prairie, Texas, Saturday 25th June 1994.

I wonder how many times and under what conditions, Oswald would have had the opportunity to carry out 'dry runs' or rehearsals. Nowhere near as many as me, I am sure.

How long did it take me to reassemble the Mannlicher-Carcano? Well, my best time was two minutes and four seconds with a screwdriver. I have to confess that I admitted defeat using a dime. Having begun several times and fallen hopelessly behind the clock, I have to look upon SA Cunningham's time of six minutes with a certain degree of suspicion. Trying to put the gun together with a dime resulted in me sustaining two blood blisters on my fingers and a small cut on the joint of my right thumb.

Having successfully completed my experiments with the 6.5mm Mannlicher Carcano I remain convinced that Lee Harvey Oswald had neither the time, the place nor the correct conditions to have put that rifle together at any time in the four and a half hours between his arrival at the Texas School Book Depository at about 8am¹³ and when it was allegedly used to kill the President of the United States, 12.30pm.¹⁴

Notes

1. Meeting of DALLAS '63, the British Forum for Views and Research into the Assassination of President John F Kennedy, Liverpool, England, Monday 9th May 1994.
2. Question from John Rudd, Secretary, DALLAS '63.
3. Warren Commission Hearings and Exhibits, Commission Exhibit 1149. Cited hereafter in format CE 1149.
4. Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F Kennedy (Warren Report). Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office; 1964, page 79. Cited hereafter in format WCR 79.
5. WCR 131.
6. Warren Commission Hearings and Exhibits, Vol. 3, page 395. (Cited hereafter in format 3H395). Testimony of Robert A Frazier, 31st March 1964.

- 7. WCR 134 and 135.
- 8. CE 1149
- 9. 2H252. Testimony of Cortlandt Cunningham, 11th March 1964.
- 10. WCR 135.
- 11. The Fourth Decade, Vol. 1, No. 5; July 1994, page 5: The Sniper's Nest that never was by Allan R J Eaglesham, quoting from The New York Times, 23rd November 1963.
- 12. 2H252. Testimony of Cortlandt Cunningham, 11th March 1964.
- 13. 2H214. Testimony of Buell Wesley Frazier, 11th March 1964.
- 14. WCR 3.

Acknowledgments

It would be remiss of me not to express my gratitude to Mrs Daryll Howard and Mr Thomas A Jones, both of the JFK Resource Group Dallas, for their kind assistance in allowing me to carry out these experiments with the Mannlicher-Carcano, formerly the property of my friend the late Larry N Howard.

I am also grateful for the help given to me by Craig Roberts (author, Kill Zone) in telephone conversations, correspondence and meetings during the past few months. His very specialist knowledge of firearms in general, and the Mannlicher-Carcano on particular, has been invaluable to me.

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THE RELEASED FILES — OFTEN THEY TELL US NOTHING!

Vol. 1, no. 1 of The Fourth Decade has another of its unique back covers which we reproduce here with the kind permission of editor and publisher, Professor Jerry D Rose.

This is one of the documents recently released from the papers of the House Select Committee on Assassinations and is part of the Lopez Report dealing with the HSCA's investigation of Oswald in Mexico. The document has been released with the approval of the CIA and its prime classification TOP SECRET has been cancelled.

The document has been so thoroughly sanitized prior to its release, however, that it has become nothing more than a sick joke. It seems that these people seal the files for 30-something years and then eventually release them in such a highly-sanitized state as to negate any evidential value they may once have had.

Are we still being taken for mugs?

If anybody can translate any of the content of this document perhaps they could let us know what it means!

