

'With your guns and drums and drums and guns Hurroo, Hurroo With your guns and drums and drums and guns Hurroo, Hurroo...'

From Irish folk song, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye."



Mark Shaw (J.F.K.'s personal photographer)

By Kenneth P. O'Donnell

A few minutes before President Kennedy was shot in Dallas nine years ago today, two of his traveling companions, Dave Powers and myself, in the motorcade close behind his limousine, were saying how happy he seemed that morning. As longtime aides to the President, Dave and I had seen him through many memorable days but we never saw him in a better mood than on that trip to Texas.

The big worry of his first two years in the White House—the threat of nuclear war with Russia—was safely behind him. He had decided to pull out of Vietnam. A few days before we went to Texas, Dave and I were talking with him about Vietnam. We asked how he could make a military withdrawal without losing American prestige in Southeast Asia. His reply, in view of today's withdrawal pains in Saigon, was interesting.

"Easy," he said. "Put a government in there that will ask us to withdraw." Thinking of his unserved second term, I often remember a hand-lettered sign of farewell, held up by somebody in the crowd at Shannon Airport when President Kennedy was ending his memorable visit to Ireland in 1963. The sign said, "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye," a line from the old Irish folk song. We borrowed the title when

we wrote our memories about him.

Those memories are filled with his wry humor. We recall him being questioned by a loyal worker dismayed by his choice of Lyndon Johnson as his Vice-Presidential running-mate.

"What will I say to all my friends in Boston," the lady asked, "when they ask me why you picked Johnson?"

Kennedy smiled, and said, "Pretend you know something they don't know."

During the summit meeting in Vienna, we sat at a window in the American Embassy residence, watching Khrushchev argue with Kennedy in the garden below. Khrushchev was snapping at him like a terrier, while the President remained unperturbed.

Powers said to the President later, "You seemed pretty calm while he was giving you a hard time out there."

"What did you expect me to do?" Kennedy said. "Take off one of my shoes and hit him over the head with it?"

Kennedy, and all of the Boston Irishmen on his White House staff, were surprised when Henry Cabot Lodge, our old Yankee Brahmin political adversary from Massachusetts, was suggested by Dean Rusk for the Ambassador's post in Saigon. The President told us that he decided to approve the appointment partly because the idea of getting Lodge mixed up in such a hopeless mess as the

bi- one in Vietnam was irresistible.

Lodge was a bit too stiffly patrician for Kennedy's taste and Richard Nixon was not classy enough. When we watched Lodge with Nixon on television, accepting the Vice-Presidential nomination at the 1960 Republican Convention, Kennedy said to us, "That's the last Nixon will see of Lodge. If Nixon ever tries to visit the Lodges at their house in Beverly, they won't let him in the door."

During the same convention, Kennedy watched Nixon accepting acclaim from the delegates, turned away from the TV screen with a grimace, and said, "If I have to stand up before a crowd and wave both of my arms above my head like that in order to become President of the United States, I'll never make it."

President Kennedy made his most courageous decision when he received the news of the failure of the C.I.A.-sponsored invasion of Cuba by a force of Cuban rebels at the Bay of Pigs. He had approved the plan with one stipulation — under no circumstances could any U.S. military forces join in combat.

Both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the C.I.A. then urged him to send in U.S. Marines and Navy jets from the nearby carrier Essex to help the outnumbered invaders. He said that he preferred the embarrassment of defeat

to ordering a military attack by the United States against a small and independent government.

"I'll take all the blame for it," he told the generals.

Publicly the President took the full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs disaster. But later he learned that the C.I.A. had assured the Cuban rebel leaders that they would be getting strong U.S. military support. That led him to a bitter conclusion.

Dave Powers remembers the President saying at the time, while they were swimming one day in the White House pool, "They couldn't believe I wouldn't panic and try to save my own face. Well, they had me figured wrong."

The Bay of Pigs experience made President Kennedy leery of military advice for the rest of his time in office. "If it wasn't for the Bay of Pigs," he said to us later, "I might have sent Marines into Laos in 1961, as a lot of people around here wanted me to do."

Nov. 22, 1963 began as a wonderful day for all of us but by 12:30 all our lives were darkened.

Kenneth P. O'Donnell, a member of President Kennedy's staff, is co-author with David P. Powers and Joe McCarthy of "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye."