

**JFK BOOKS:  
Review, Updates, Thoughts**  
--by Walt Brown

Every new JFK book brings *something*. If you have the time and energy, and are obsessive enough, you can plow through the thousands of new pages yearly. I've managed to do that, having only missed two recent releases, and the reasons for those oversights should be obvious.

But the rest of them do matter. Some are focused on the lone assassin, and they serve to highlight the ever-weakening essentials of that theory, although I expect it to be bolstered when Vincent Bugliosi publishes a work many years in the making.

Some works on both sides of the aisle are re-hashes of the same old tired ideas, but if nothing else, they force the memory to function and go back to the root of those ideas, and ultimately forward, to where that data has gone since the rehashed material first appeared.

Some are just drivel, but they make the reader all the more joyful for the good material. Some fall into the newest trend of Kennedy *family* works, and until that genre becomes exhausted, there is much to learn about the family which has a place in the history of November 22, 1963. Joseph P. Kennedy, for one, was far more than a spectator to events from early in the last century until his death in 1969.

Then there are the books which dig until they hit absolute bedrock and the shovel can go no farther until government archives spill forth their treasures...if ever. Since the Wecht Symposium, John Armstrong's *Harvey and Lee* was just such a work, and although it consumed much of January, 2004, a personally unique time for me, I look forward to reading it again, without stopping every twelve words to add a bit of punctuation or correct a misspelled word.

Since that time, *In the Eye of History; Disclosures in the JFK Assassination Medical Evidence*, by William Matson Law with Allan Eaglesham, is, to date, this year's runaway winner of the "best dig to be published" award. The book is just a sweet read, and a page-turner, to use the *Times* Book Review cliché, as it chronicles interviews, recorded on audio- or videotape over the last several years, with as many "Bethesda" autopsy people as are still alive—and willing to talk.

It also takes us for the first real in-depth look at two particular Bethesda witnesses: James Sibert, and Francis X. O'Neill, as well as capturing the thoughts and feelings of tangential participants, medical illustrator Harold A. "Skip" Rydberg and NPIC film technician Sandra K. Spencer, who gave an amazing deposition to the ARRB.

Author Law, it is clear, is not seeking to verify or, debunk David Lifton's "body alteration" hypothesis, nor is he an unceasing curmudgeon, gently nudging people to say what readers want to hear. On the contrary, he often interrupts decent factual blather with questions like, "But can you give me your perceptions of the autopsy, the crowd, the noise, Humes's words and behaviors..." The combination works sooooo well. In many cases, parts of interviews could be filed under "rehash," but virtually any interview is going to be, at least in part, rehash. If nothing else, the "state your name" segment.

Many basic questions are addressed: what was the time line? did Kennedy look that night as he did in the James K. Fox autopsy photos? was it a ceremonial casket, or a tin shipping box? body bag or casket liner? where were the entrance and exit wounds? was there a brain, and if so,

how much of it was left? could there have been alteration, *i.e.*, "surgery of the head area, namely in the top of the skull?" who's responsible for the issue still being an issue? what is the William Pitzer story? and finally, *What's the bottom line?*

The general consensus answer to those questions would run along the lines which follow.

Timing: the navy ambulance arrived out in front of Bethesda just before 7 p.m., and Jackie Kennedy emerged (few who saw this recalled RFK). Jackie was "greeted," and possibly consoled by such dignitaries as were present, and then she proceeded to the seventeenth floor suite, which was the presidential suite. The ambulance drove around back shortly thereafter, was unloaded, and the coffin was taken into the Bethesda morgue anteroom. Kennedy's body was visible when the casket was opened, and he was naked except for heavy, blood-soaked wrappings—either sheets or towels—around his head. Preliminary examinations consumed some bits of time, plus the taking of photos and x-rays, a time-consuming process as the various cameras and machines were not strictly-speaking hand-held, and tripods had to be moved and reset. [S/A Sibert, if memory serves, believed there was a planned "decoy" ambulance, to be the target, if necessary, of the idle curious, of which there were many, according to Harold Rydberg, who told of two cars being crushed out front simply by mobs of people standing on them.]

The Y-incision was made somewhere in the neighborhood of 8:15 p.m. and the autopsy concluded before midnight. [Earl Rose, Dallas coroner, claimed, in his anger, that had he autopsied the president, the procedure would have taken forty-five minutes.] A couple of people in this work insist "full autopsy," while others strongly dissent, noting procedures NOT done.

FBI S/A James Sibert believed that Humes and Boswell stayed in the morgue until 5 a.m. to aid the morticians, although we know the body was back at the White House at 4:21 a.m. The lab techs, who scrubbed the morgue after the autopsy, were not asked about that.

Did Kennedy look that night as he does in the autopsy photos? In most cases, the answer is "no," but I got the sense that the right questions were not always asked. Only a couple of participants saw any frontal damage, as it is reported that the head wound did severe damage to the right eye, possibly even loosening it from its socket, and Harold Rydberg reinforces at least some of that when he told of Humes's insistence that he blacken the right eye in his drawing. What should have been asked of each interviewee was, "Here is a photo of the back of the head, with no wound; and here's a photo of the top of the head, with a massive wound. Do these pictures reflect what you saw?"

All indicated the head wound was in the back, on the right side; some, when read Arlen Specter's rubbish about the "top," denied there was a wound in the top of the head. A couple indicated there was a bullet wound, presumably of entrance, in the forehead, close to the hairline, above the right eye. The two FBI S/As denied this vehemently, although make no mistake: they are not "lone-nut" obsessives.

**Casket type:** The opinions still diverge, and as author Law noted early, "They were there--they are merely telling it as they remember it."

Dennis David and Paul O'Connor weigh in on the shipping casket version, while others insist it was a broken, bronze ceremonial casket. Sibert insists that he, O'Neill, Greer and Kellerman struggled to get it out of the ambulance and onto a gurney, but O'Neill recalled an "honor guard" which removed the casket.

One confusion in the book is the printing of "Photo 18, Funeral-home document stating, 'Body removed from metal shipping casket.'" I've seen this document (not that seeing it changes anything), but my extremely strong suspicion is that given the knowledge that a new

coffin had been purchased to replace the cheaper (and broken) one (eventually to be dumped at sea), the autopsy prosecutors and their technicians took JFK's remains and placed them in a metal shipping casket when they finished the autopsy, and it was "officially" carried a few feet to the other autopsy table where, against their wishes, men from Gawler's Funeral Home worked on JFK in the Bethesda morgue, not at their home base, where the work would have been easier (but less protected from eventual scrutiny). The issue has never been the coffin the morticians got—it's the coffin that came in the door.

But still, there is confusion, as Sibert insists that the back wound was very shallow, according to Friday night's findings, and only early on Saturday did Humes talk to the people in Dallas "at which time JFK's body was in the Gawler funeral home." [It left Bethesda at 3:56 a.m. and arrived at the White House twenty-five minutes later. It was never at Gawler's. But again, forty-plus years of perceptions are at issue ]

**Body bag or casket liner:** Here, the lines are drawn similarly to the ceremonial/shipping casket issue. Nobody recalled a bronze casket with a body bag, nor a shipping coffin with only sheets. It was one or the other.

**Entrance and exit wounds:** The most common area of consensus is that JFK sustained a back wound, and that Arlen Specter, as well as future-President Gerald Ford, moved the wound to suit the single-bullet theory. Virtually all present insisted that the hole in the President's back was exactly where the clothing holes would have placed it, and that it was by no means a "neck wound." The FBI agents cited, neither of whom believes a syllable of the single-bullet theory (although O'Neill believes it was Oswald only, despite a pathetic investigation), were adamant in their placement of the wound, and equally frustrated that their observations, made from two feet away, were in extreme variance with the Warren Commission's "findings."

As noted, some believed there was an entrance wound in the upper forehead (Dennis David in particular), while others said there was no such thing. I don't recall anyone being able to locate the entrance wound in the head, and the photo, showing "an artifact" near the hairline, was a maybe yes/maybe no entrance point. Nobody put it in the cowlick, as did the HSCA, and nobody could recall seeing an entrance wound in the rear—just the large hole, on the right side, in the back.

**The brain:** Arguably the most widely divergent responses. There was a brain, there was part of one, there was a shredded part, there was virtually nothing. Choose one. S/A O'Neill, when shown a brain photo by the ARRB, said the photo showed "Too much brain," but most just spoke of "the brain" being shredded pieces that clung to bone or scalp. Nobody gave indication that a brain was removed at autopsy, (although Jenkins insists he infused a brain)—but not all were asked.

Methodologically, that is one concern: all of the now 60+ years of age veterans involved should have been asked a selected fifteen or twenty identical questions. As it happened, the interviews flowed wonderfully, and were revealing; but it would take some time to create a flow chart as to who said what about which.

I would add that even verbal descriptions are subject to interpretation, so videotaping, where possible, was an excellent opportunity for those who may continue this study. As I've said before, and I hope when Mr. Law reads this, he considers re-contacting the folks he came to know as just plain real people, and sending each a styrofoam mannequin head, and asking them to "mark the damage." That would make a fascinating photo spread.

Sandra K. Spencer, a relative unknown until the time of the ARRB deposition (published in the JFK/DPQ some time back, thanks to the CD by Rex Bradford), said she developed

photos which showed Kennedy's body, cleaned and pastoral looking, with a brain alongside it. As she stated it, it sounded like "a brain" meant a full brain.

**Alteration?** Nobody wanted to come out and say the concept was b.s., but there was little support for it. Sibert, a convert to conspiracy belief, and O'Neill, an Oswald-only (but both adamant against the single bullet), spoke of how their comment about surgery in the head, namely in the top of the skull, came to be, and how it could have caused the subsequent research efforts that it did. Apparently (despite allegations to the contrary), Humes *et al.*, (and Finck is portrayed as a very serious and dangerous "*et al.*,") were NOT aware of JFK's wounds prior to the body arriving at Bethesda. That's a tad difficult to accept, given that the media were announcing that the President had been killed by a gunshot to the head, and given that the majority of those interviewed indicated that the news of the President's assassination pretty much caused things to shut down for a while at Bethesda-before it was learned that a "special visitor" was coming. Most indicated they spent time watching television, and following the developing story.

Somebody had to know there were one or more head wounds.

But when the coffin was opened, (Sibert tells of the oddity of JFK's fists being clenched), the missing skull portion(s) caused commentary that it looked like something had been done—and that is how it got reported by Sibert and O'Neill in their FD 302. None of those interviewed saw any empirical evidence of any procedures done other than by rifle projectiles—although many spoke of "dumdum" bullets, which LHO did not fire—but which might well describe the official investigation. It almost reads as if someone were thinking allowed, "Geez, his head looks like somebody did surgery on it" because of the damage, and not because there was any genuine "surgery" thinking.

Who is at fault for the issue still being an issue? Clear consensus: Arlen Specter, and, to a lesser extent, Gerald Ford. One or both are taken to task for creating the "magic-bullet" or "single-bullet theory," which is rejected by all who are asked, and most vociferously by the two FBI agents. Sibert went to great lengths to ridicule Ford for moving the wound "for clarification's sake." "To clarify the single bullet," Sibert noted, with sarcasm.

To a lesser extent, the autopsy doctors take some heat, yet their naval counterparts are quick to admit that neither Humes nor Boswell (seen by Rydberg as "mousy") were trained for what they were asked to do that night, and that both did what they did with the full realization that their careers, their promotions (which they received not long after 11/22/63), and their pensions were as much "on the table" as JFK was. Rydberg, in response to question, went so far as to agree with Lifton (not stated by name) that Humes's language was always carefully chosen to send indirect messages about his perceptions of the damage done to the President. He also characterized Finck as aptly named, and saw him as the government go-to guy when a blanket needed to be thrown over something.

What about William Pitzer? Very little is said about him, except by Jerrol Custer, and that will be discussed below. The possibility is left open that he somehow either used the closed-circuit facilities to record the autopsy, or that he came into possession of materials that our elected officials would not want us to see.

Either way, the fact that Navy Department officials searched his house following his death strongly suggests they had an interest that far transcended things like stamp-collecting. All of these interviews also preceded Allan Eaglesham's articles in the April and July, 2005, *DPQ* and those would form the author's collective thoughts.

**Bottom line:** Simple. What the people saw at Bethesda bears no correlation to that which was reported by the Warren Commission. While S/A O'Neill holds to his "there's no evidence to the contrary" regarding Oswald, others—and it's strange for government pensioners to do such—have become true conspiracy believers, and somehow went from being people willing to talk on the phone to people reluctantly willing to go on camera, to finally being eager to be recorded for posterity. William Matson Law has done us all a great service by doggedly following the trail until he could bring all these people before the camera's lens, and leave us and our descendents an oral history by the people who were there.

Another item that seemed unusual, but not necessarily surprising is that many of the people were rather well-read in assassination publications, as they occasionally answered questions almost bibliographically: "Yeah, that's what so and so said in his book," or words to that effect.

**Observations:** You need to read this work to be truly able to absorb the depth of what it says, but a few snippets come through. A whole bullet was seen. The FBI insists two small, tip-of-a-pencil fragments. Dennis David says he typed the memo, and then held four fragments in his hands. After typing the memo, it, the fragments, and his typewriter ribbon were taken, not to be again seen.

Paul O'Connor: "I remember Curtis LeMay sitting there with a big cigar in his hand." "We dressed his whole body in his inaugural suit. They (who?) brought his inaugural suit in."

James Jenkins, on making markings on the face sheet: "Unusual scars like the back, you know, the injury that he had. The fact is that I believe that his left leg was shorter than the right, and that type of thing." Unusual, *but is it ON the face sheet?*

Jenkins: "No. I remember kind of a scuffle. I'm not sure it was a scuffle *per se*, but I was later told that someone had a camera taken away." "I came out of the autopsy totally expecting them to say there were two shooters. One from the right front, and one from behind."

FBI S/A Francis X. O'Neill comes across as a little testy at times, but that attitude is more than compensated for by the candid, down-to-earth discussions with Jim "Si" Sibert and Harold Rydberg. Both "chuckle" (Law's term) in several places when they are comparing their own thoughts to the eventual government pronouncements. Law has taken them from the mannequins with names that we have read about for so many years (and I've questioned the work of both Rydberg and Sibert in this journal, and they seem to say that the questions raised were proper), and they become real people. That, in the final analysis, is the greatest value of Law's work, as it does not answer the questions--it provides questions and data that may well fuel the ultimate answer. Beyond that, Law does not overindulge a pro-conspiracy mindset. It's clear he's not a go-fer for Gerald Posner, but he's not looking to sensationalize.

Just ask and report.

If I could have done this book, and I wish I had had the chance, I would have made one difference, and that is I would have published the autopsy photos as glossies, not as halftones on 20# book paper, as they lose their resolution and the comments made by the participants on the photos, about the photos, are not legible.

The one casualty of the book, and it is a serious one, is Jerrol Custer. In a chapter that should have been entitled "Custer's Last Stand," he reworks earlier stories, contradicts a number of things I have on tape from 1995, when he wrote a blurb for *Treachery in Dallas*,

and essentially discredits all he has said before. With his passing in July, 2000, it's unlikely he'll say more.

Custer's place in history came to be when he revealed that as he was taking the undeveloped x-ray plates of the President's remains upstairs to be developed, he saw Jackie Kennedy and RFK sweep through the lobby.

How, a skeptical conspiracy believer would ask, could he have x-rays of someone who is essentially still out front in a gray navy ambulance?

His story collapses in Law's book, and to his credit, Law adds an afterword regarding Custer that essentially casts serious doubt on his story, but since he was there, he's included. Custer indicates that he was told he'd be doing x-rays, and arrived in the autopsy room somewhere in the 6:30-8:30 p.m. time frame, which is clearly too broad if we are to believe his memory on 'anything else. JFK then arrived, ("He was coming in from Walter Reed") was removed—by Custer, along with everyone else there, was viewed by all parties, and "When we placed him on the autopsy table we were told we would not be needed at that time—we could leave and go back up to the department. So we left. In a matter of an hour or two we came back and the Y-incision had already been made. ... And I just proceeded to take x-ray films of the head."

We know Jackie Kennedy walked through the lobby of Bethesda within a minute or two either side of 7 p.m. Custer would have us believe--in addition to the presence of the joint chiefs, who could obviously be there because there was no reason for any military alert at that time—that he arrived, witnessed some things, left for an hour or two, came back to find the Y-incision made, and then took his x-rays.

And then passed Jackie Kennedy at 7 p.m.

It just isn't even a remote possibility. And you do not take x-rays AFTER the Y-incision unless there is a specific need to get an extra exposure or two. X-rays are taken before the cutting starts.

Custer indicated that the radiologist, his boss, Dr. John Ebersole, really didn't know what to do, so he left those decisions to Custer. In 1995, Custer told me, "Ebersole virtually ran the autopsy, telling flumes to look here, and then there..."

Custer also tells of being bird-dogged by both Sibert and O'Neill, as if the trio were joined at his hip, when in point of fact, neither ever accompanied Custer anywhere.

There's more, but it's best to let sleeping dogs lie, and Jerrol Custer, hopefully, is sleeping well. It is noted in passing that he carried a hatred for two researchers, both of whose last names start with the same consonant, and that he had serious difficulties with the IRS—a story he told me and one that might make interesting reading in a future issue.

Get the book. Get a copy for that doubting friend of yours. Read yours first and make up a template so the doubter knows who Dennis David, James Jenkins, Harold "Skip" Rydberg, and James Sibert are.

"Then ask them questions as did William Matson Law. You might just make a convert.