

Lost and Found Oswald Interrogation Notes

by Larry Haapanen

At the time that the Assassination Records Review Board was formed in April 1994, no notes were known to exist of the approximately twelve hours that Lee Harvey Oswald spent under interrogation on November 22-24, 1963. Although the official record established that several of his interrogators made some notes during or after the interrogations, these notes had either been destroyed or allowed to slip into the dustbin of history. But by the end of 1997, the ARRB had managed to acquire two sets of interrogation notes. The purpose of this article is to address the question of why these notes were not made public immediately after the assassination, and also to reveal the existence of a third set of notes that was “hidden in plain sight” by the Warren Commission.

Oswald’s interrogation on the afternoon of November 22, 1963, was attended by two FBI special agents, James Hosty and James Bookhout, both of whom recorded handwritten notes. Bookhout told the Warren Commission that he destroyed his notes later, after writing a formal report, as was the FBI’s custom.¹ Hosty told the Warren Commission much the same story, adding that he specifically recalled placing his notes in a wastebasket.²

Thirty-two years later, however, Hosty’s book *Assignment Oswald* appeared with a photographic reproduction of the notes, which turned out to have not been destroyed after all. Hosty explained that he had truthfully testified to the Warren Commission, in that at the time of his testimony he sincerely believed that he had destroyed the notes but subsequently he had discovered them in papers on his desk.³ Since it was standard FBI procedure to destroy such notes, it seems reasonable that Hosty felt no obligation to step forward with them after he came across them—if retaining the notes was not required, neither was producing them. Moreover, there is nothing in the notes to suggest any ulterior motive for suppressing them. While there are a few items of information in his formal report⁴ that

are not in the notes, he explained in his Warren Commission testimony that the notes would not be as fully written out as the report. The information supplied in the report but not covered in the notes seems unremarkable, amounting mostly to Oswald’s date of employment at the TSBD and the account Oswald gave of his activities on the day of the assassination. On the whole, there seems to be no reason to doubt Hosty’s explanation for the belated appearance of the notes, which he turned over to the ARRB in 1997.

A different story is presented by the second set of notes acquired by the ARRB. The Warren Commission observed that during Oswald’s various interrogations, “Captain [Will. Fritz of the homicide and robbery bureau did most of the questioning, but he kept no notes and there were no stenographic or tape recordings.”⁵ On the other hand, it was clear that Fritz possessed some sort of notes, for he told the Warren Commission, while recounting the interrogations, that “...I kept no notes at the time, and these notes and things I have made I would have to make several days later...”⁶ Whether these notes, or any part of them, were actually taken down by Fritz during the interrogations, rather than written several days later, has been the subject of speculation. Perhaps the best evidence that they were taken down contemporaneously is found in a comment attributed to Lee Harvey Oswald. Harry Holmes, the U.S. postal inspector who participated in the last interrogation of Oswald before the aborted jail transfer on November 24th, wrote a report in which he stated that Fritz asked Oswald about the Hidell I.D. card, and Oswald “flared up and stated ‘I’ve told you all I’m going to about that card. You took notes, just read them for yourself, if you want to refresh your memory.’”⁷

In a news release dated November 20, 1997, the ARRB announced that an anonymous donor had do-



nated Captain Fritz's handwritten interrogation notes to the board. Left unanswered was the question of why Fritz's notes had not been made public much sooner. As in Hosty's case, answering

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that question may rest on a comparison of Fritz's notes to the contents of his report to see if they differ in any important respect. But unlike in Hosty's case, they do indeed differ in a remarkable way. In *Assignment Oswald*, Hosty recalls that during the first Oswald interrogation, Oswald thanked Fritz for allowing his handcuffs to be moved from back to front, and then turned to Hosty and said he was sorry for blowing up at him and “for writing that letter to you.”⁸ This was a surprising admission to Hosty, as he had not previously connected Oswald to the anonymous note left for him at the Dallas FBI office. But it also caught the attention of Captain Fritz, and can be found recorded in Fritz's interrogation notes as released by the ARRB: “Admitted. [sic] wri[ri]ghting [sic] Russian Embassy & to Hosty.” By the time Fritz wrote his formal report of the interrogation, Oswald's latter admission was gone, and all the reader was told was that “Mr. Hosty asked Oswald if he had been to Russia. He told him, ‘Yes, he had been in Russia three years.’ He asked him if he had written to the Russian Embassy, and he said he had.”⁹

With Oswald's admission of writing the note omitted from Fritz's report, and the interrogation notes absent from the record, the FBI did not have to contend with what would have been a much earlier, and likely more embarrassing, exposure of the Oswald note than turned out to be the case. When news of the note finally surfaced in 1975, it was a big enough bombshell to bring on Congressional hearings, but it finally blew over. It is hard to imagine what repercussions could have occurred in 1964, but it might have shaken the Warren Commission's confidence in the FBI and perhaps prompted the establishment of a commission investigatory staff independent of the FBI and other federal agencies.

Did the reference to Oswald's note to the FBI cause the suppression of the Fritz notes? Or was it merely a fortuitous development for the FBI that the notes remained hidden from view? Without additional evidence, that question is impossible to answer. However, we do know that there was a conscious effort on someone's part to obscure the truth surrounding the note. Ruth Paine testified to the Warren Commission

that she had originally thought that Oswald was telling her the truth when he said that he'd visited the Dallas FBI office and left a note, but, prior to her Warren Commission appear-

ance, some unnamed person had told her that Oswald “never did go into the FBI office,” and, whoever that person was, she had taken their word for it and concluded that Oswald was telling his usual lies.¹⁰ Assuming that her informant was an FBI agent, whoever it was that misled Mrs. Paine could have seen to it, perhaps with a simple off-the-record request, that Captain Fritz's interrogation notes remained out of sight. Of course, even if the notes were suppressed to save the FBI from the embarrassment of an early disclosure of the Oswald note, the threat of embarrassment may have been the only motive, and, if so, such suppression does not imply that something truly sinister was going on. Embarrassment is something that all government agencies, and indeed all humans, find unpleasant, and sometimes their efforts to avoid it can go beyond what the public interest would dictate.

In its news release on the Fritz notes, the ARRB described them as “only the second set of original handwritten notes taken on the Oswald interrogations that have surfaced in the 34 years since the assassination,” the Hosty notes being the first. I wrote to the board soon afterwards, pointing out that their statement was incorrect, as the first set of Oswald interrogation notes to surface had done so in 1964 with the publication of the Warren Commission's 26 volumes. It so happened, however, that they were published in such a way as to hide them “in plain sight.” These were notes written by the Secret Service's Special-Agent-in-Charge in Dallas, Forrest Sorrels, who was present during interrogations of Oswald on all three days of his incarceration. Oddly, Sorrels does not seem to have written a report of his own on the interrogations, although Inspector Tom Kelley of the Secret Service did so on the final interrogation of November 24th. The Warren Report contains an Appendix XI entitled “Reports Relating to the Interrogation of Lee Harvey Oswald at the Dallas Police Department,” and reproduces “the most important of these reports”—including those of Fritz, Hosty, Bookhout, Holmes, Kelley, and FBI Special Agent Manning Clements—but NOT one from Sorrels.¹¹ Had Sorrels written such a report, it is hard to imagine it not being considered worthy of inclusion in

the appendix.

Sorrels also participated in two interrogations of Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963, and he did write a report on those, which the Warren Commission published as Sorrels Exhibit No. 1. Along with it were printed copies of his handwritten notes on the two interrogations, which were designated Sorrels Exhibits 2-A through 2-D and 3-A through 3-C.¹² As I wrote to the ARRB on November 24, 1997:

Comparing the contents of the notes to Sorrels' account of the two interrogations contained in his typed report dated February 3, 1964 (Sorrels Exhibit No. 1), one must conclude that the notes in Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A cover the beginning of his first interrogation of Ruby. However, the top half of Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A (above a squiggly line) obviously pertains to Lee Harvey Oswald[.]

To see how clearly the notes on the top half of the page pertain to Oswald and not to Ruby, one only has to read them:

since 15 - read Marxism
Went to Soviet Union to see it in practice
Says is a Marxist
Not a Marxist-Lenin
Residence =
Denies ord[er]ing gun by mail
Fam/his from Ft Worth-South

These notes are modest in extent, but they do stand out as the first notes of an Oswald interrogation to become part of the public record. The interrogation appears to be the one attended by Sorrels on Saturday, November 23rd, when Oswald was asked about the mail order rifle (its origin had not been traced yet on Friday).

I told the ARRB that it was likely that the half-page of Oswald notes in Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A was only part of Sorrels' notes on Oswald, as they do not contain any identifying information as is the case in the Ruby notes that begin on the bottom half of the page. As the notes that are reproduced take up seven sides of notebook paper, it is obvious that there is at least one side we do not see, and Sorrels' notebook may have contained other sheets of paper as well. When Sorrels told the Warren Commission that his notebook contained notes on "other stuff" besides the Ruby interrogations, the Warren Commission counsel (Leon D. Hubert, Jr.) responded by saying, "Well, we are interested of course only in the Ruby ones."¹³

One interesting aspect of Sorrels' notes is that the half-page referring to Oswald appears in the middle

of the Ruby notes, even though the lower half-page obviously marks the beginning of the Ruby interrogations. In other words, the notes are given exhibit numbers and reproduced out of chronological order, thus artificially placing the Oswald half-page in the middle and not at the beginning of the pages from Sorrels' notebook. It would be interesting to know if this was done intentionally to make the inclusion of the Oswald notes less obvious.

In response to my inquiry, the ARRB conducted a search for Sorrels' notebook, but reported that the Sorrels exhibits in the National Archives are only photocopies of pages from the notebook and no additional information on the fate of the original notebook could be found. It is troubling that neither a written report by Sorrels on the Oswald interrogations, nor more than a half-page of his Oswald interrogation notes, are to be found in evidence. Everything in public life has its secret side. The goal of research on the JFK assassination is to retrieve as much as possible from that secret side and use it to assemble a picture of what happened that is as historically accurate as possible. The discovery of Oswald interrogation notes contributes to that slow and incremental process, but seems to raise as many questions as it answers.

ENDNOTES:

1. *Hearings Before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, Volume VII, p. 313.
2. *Hearings*, Volume IV, p. 466.
3. James P. Hosty, Jr., with Thomas Hosty, *Assignment Oswald* (New York: Arcade, 1996), p. 146.
4. *Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, pp. 612- 613.
5. *Report*, p. 180.
6. *Hearings*, Volume IV, p. 209.
7. *Report*, p. 636. Holmes told the Warren Commission (*Hearings*, Volume VII, p. 297) that he "had a few notes" to go on when writing his interrogation report, but there is no indication of what happened to those notes. Interestingly, the Warren Report omits Oswald's reference to Fritz's notes when it quotes his response to Fritz on the I.D. card (*Report*, p. 181), and Holmes' testimony to the Warren Commission omits it as well (*Hearings*, Volume VII, p. 299).
8. *Assignment Oswald*, p. 22.
9. Commission Exhibit No. 2003, p. 3.
10. *Hearings*, Volume III, p. 19.
11. *Report*, pp. 598-636.
12. *Hearings*, Volume XXI, pp. 539-545.
13. *Hearings*, Volume XIII, p. 70.

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Residence =

Denies ord[er]ing gun by mail

Fam/his from Ft Worth-South

At Pittsboro
July 1964

John Kirby (Robertson) Clerk
Federal Court - Carroll

Had business records of
New York, 11/11/64

723 Lehighway 13th St
Waco, Tex

Appt 727 WTH-5601

F. Sorrell

Signature of F. Sorrell
May 6, 1964
Washington, D.C.

Sorrells Exhibit No. 3-A

FBI

SORRELLS EXHIBIT NO. 3-A

- since 15 - read Marxism
- Went to Soviet Union to see it in practice

- Says is a Marxist
- Not a Marxist-Lenin

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