



## 22 November 1963: Where Were You?

Our Class had a unique relationship with President John F. Kennedy. He became president when we became upper class. He was a Navy Man, war hero, skipper of PT-109. He loved football and the Army-Navy game. We lost our 'rubbers' when we marched in his Inaugural Parade, and we lost our innocence on 22 November 1963. Our experiences that day were unique, and for the first time since throwing our hats in Halsey Field House five months earlier, we were all unified via a single event.

What is your story? Where were you when you first heard that the President had been assassinated? Our classmates contributed the following memories.

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**Ron Walters** (6<sup>th</sup> Co): I remember that day. I was on the *USS Cromwell* (DE-1014) off the coast of Brazil when President Kennedy was assassinated.

**Mike Blackledge** (4<sup>th</sup> Co): I had just returned from [grad school] math class at North Carolina State and as I came through the quadrangle, I heard the radios reporting from the open windows of the dormitories. I received a second shock when one of the undergrads called out, "Hey, I wonder what Jackie's doing tonight?" Two different worlds.

**Bob Lagassa** (2<sup>nd</sup> Co): I will never forget that day. I, along with a large group of '63 classmates, was in the middle of a typical Submarine School day of study and lectures at SubBase New London when we heard the fateful news. We were stunned, shocked, angry, tearful! Classes were suspended the remainder of the day and we went to our loved ones for consolation.

**Mike Shelley** (4<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on the bridge of CHARLES F. ADAMS (DDG-2), standing out of Key West on our way home from Gitmo to Charleston.

**Mike Schery** (2<sup>nd</sup> Co): I was headed forward in the fore/aft passageway of USS SARFIELD (DD-837) moored alongside in Charleston, SC. As I passed the Supply Office, there was a radio announcing that the President had been shot.

I hurried to the wardroom where there was a TV. The XO was sitting alone at the wardroom table doing what XOs do most, paperwork. He had alternately been watching and listening to the TV news. As I came in he looked up at me and said: "I'll bet IBM drops 30 points today." That remark must be viewed in context of the fact that Kennedy, as a sitting President, was not nearly as popular then as he has become since.

**Jim Shull** (2<sup>nd</sup> Co): I was in Key West at ASW School.

**Jack Hood** (9<sup>th</sup> Co): Oh yes, I have a story that will not be forgotten. I was escorting the remains of our classmate **Tom Puckett** [15<sup>th</sup> Co] via train from Pensacola, FL to Holdenville, OK for burial. We arrived in Memphis late on Nov 22 to switch trains and that was the first I heard of the assassination. That late notification put me in one of the last 1% in the country to learn of it. In the little time we had I quickly discovered there were no newspapers to be had so learned nothing more.

When I arrived in Holdenville on the afternoon of the 23rd I was able to watch a little TV and get caught up a little but with the preparations for a funeral and people galore to meet, I was sort of left out. Ginger and I took the train back to Pensacola after the funeral when I finally learned the details of that sad day. To this day I feel just a little left out but I had a job to do and that was much more important at the time.

**Steve Coester** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): I know I was somewhere on Lemoore NAS, probably in the Public Works office. Do know Yvonne was upset because it was her 21st birthday and her party at the O-Club got canceled. Bigger memory was a couple of days later when I had to go to pick up Yvonne's mother at the Hanford Greyhound station and at the moment I was to leave Ruby did his thing on live TV. Big decision whether to pick up Mom or continue watching TV. Her mom was on her first trip from Sweden to America and passing through Texas at the time of the assassination and the bus was stopped and searched. She spoke no

English so didn't really know what had happened until she finally arrived in California.

**Bob Little** (2<sup>nd</sup> Co): I was on the destroyer *USS John A. Bole* (DD-755). We had left Sasebo, Japan the day before and had cleared Cape Sata steering a course of 095 headed for Midway Island. It was 0540 and I had the deck and the conn.

A radioman came up to the bridge and asked where the Captain was. I told him that he was in his sea cabin behind the bridge. He knocked and the captain told him to enter. He left a few minutes later and the captain came out to the bridge and told me to "steam in circles". He then said that he would make an important announcement at 0800. At 0800 he went on the 1MC and told the crew that the president had been assassinated and we were waiting for orders. Until such time we would continue to hold our position which we did for several hours.

**Dick Williams** (6<sup>th</sup> Co): I was aboard USS TAUSSIG (DD-746) returning from a WestPac deployment and enroute our home port of San Diego. TAUSSIG was about 200 NM north of Midway Is., and it was mid-day, transiting in moderately heavy seas. HF communications were bad in that geographic area, and the fleet broadcast was laced with static. But, after listening carefully several times to the news announcement, which the bridge had piped in to the 1MC, the horrible truth fell upon the ship. The elation of returning home was replaced by the news of having lost the Commander-in-Chief.

**Chuck Maclin** (6<sup>th</sup> Co): I remember that day. I was having breakfast at the Damage Control School mess hall on Treasure Island that morning. The announcement came over the PA system in the mess hall and everyone was stunned.

**Gay Hopkins** (16<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on I-495 near Norton Massachusetts, going to visit my sister who was enrolled at Wheaton College. I had just recently checked out of VF 74 in Oceana Virginia, and was due to check into flight training a week later at Pensacola.

I, along with a lot of other vehicles, had pulled over to the side of the road to listen to the ongoing broadcast of the events in Dallas.

However, for me, the big event was the postponing of the Army Navy game for 1 week due to JFK's death. Because the game was postponed, I was able to check in at Pensacola and attend the viewing of the game at the Officers Club on the base. It was there I would meet my future wife, who sat at the same table

where I sat. She originally was going to attend the game in Philadelphia (her brother was Class of '64), but when the game was postponed, had to change her plans due to her exams the next week at Pensacola Junior College. After the game, her father invited the group at our table over to their house for more drinks (like we needed more) and celebration. At the house I ended up asking her out for the next weekend, and as they say, the rest is history.

**Bill Brinkley** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): I was in the wardroom of the USS Gyatt (DD-712) at the Norfolk, Destroyer - Submarine Piers when the radio message came in and I was assigned the duty of announcing it to the ship's crew over the ship's PA system.

**Doc Varanini** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was at the USMC Basic School Quantico VA in the base of fire operating an automatic weapon in a live fire exercise – combat against fortified positions. Suddenly and unexpectedly the order to cease fire was given. Maneuvering elements were ordered back to the starting point (the LOD). Weapons were immediately cleared and locked; and all ammunition was accounted for. We were ordered onto “cattle cars” and returned to the TBS BOQ. We were confined to quarters for a period of time. I later learned from some “sea – lawyer” that the confinement allegedly was SOP to preclude or frustrate any possibility of a military coup d'état by units in the DC area. Imagine that!

Later my roommates and I went to the Capitol and paid our respects to the President in person. The lines were very long and exceptionally orderly and respectful. It was a sad and powerful experience.

During Second Class Summer our classmate **Tom Buckley** [21<sup>st</sup> Co] and I visited the White House where his dad was head telegrapher. Because of his responsibilities Tom's Dad had the run of the entire facility. Since the President was in Hyannis Port, Mr. Buckley provided a tour of the White House including the oval office. I even got a chance to sit in the President's rocker when the Marine Guard wasn't looking.

**Sandy Stoddard** (10<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on a destroyer in the mid-Pacific, between Midway and Guam. The CO made an announcement over the 1MC in the middle of the night.

**Ed Hutcheson** (10<sup>th</sup> Co): On the day the President Kennedy was assassinated I was driving from Key West, FL to Charleston, SC. I had just completed ASW

School in Key West and was in the company of a shipmate from the *USS Leahy* (DLG16). We got the news somewhere a bit north of Miami. For the rest of the drive to Charleston, traffic slowed way down, everyone had headlights on, and the radio had nothing on but news about the assassination and its impact.

**Bob Abate** (21<sup>st</sup> Co): I was academically discharged in February 1963 - done in by EE, Thermodynamics and Entropy. My first job as an insurance representative entailed traveling throughout New York City's borough of Manhattan. I was also taking a full college course in the evenings and was generally able to arrange my daily schedule so that most of my business work was conducted in the morning leaving a fair amount of the afternoon open for my course studies. My main goal at that time was to get a college degree as soon as possible and then apply to OCS at Newport.

On Friday - November 22nd - around noontime as usual, I was taking a bus from the lower Broadway/Wall Street area up to Washington Heights and 181st street - the northernmost part of Manhattan. I happened to notice two or three religious nuns on the bus but paid no particular attention. As we neared central Harlem at about 116th Street near Columbia University someone boarded the bus announcing " ...the President has just been shot!"

The entire bus fell silent and the nuns immediately began praying the Rosary aloud. At each subsequent stop, people boarding the bus either knew an update about the dreadful news or learned about it once on board. There was a kaleidoscope of reactions and emotions at each stop.

Also, along the way, the people in the streets were in various degrees of shock, amazement, confusion and despair. People were crying and mourning singularly and in clusters as the bus slowly headed north. At one point, the bus driver considered pulling over in some sort of respect but the passengers, almost in unison said, "No we have to get home to our families." And so onward he drove.

Of course, inside the bus there was very little means of communication and at each stop, the new passengers had worse and worse updates on the President's condition. Finally at 181st street - the terminus point - I disembarked and, ironically, was within walking distance of my apartment and my family but I had a very strong desire to return to work and my associates and buddies.

So I took the next bus south toward my office at 26th Street. By now, the

streets were blocked by almost wall-to-wall traffic and people in total confusion. What would normally be a 45 minute trip took almost two hours to get halfway. Going south on Fifth Avenue - a one way street - seemed to take forever and the mood of the passengers became darker and darker with many crying and sobbing.

Finally, at 86th Street, I decided it would be quicker to get off the bus and walk the three or four miles to the office. Fifth Avenue had become a virtual pedestrian thoroughfare at that time - approximately 3 PM - and it seemed that just about everybody was heading southward in one massive crowd.

I especially remember one very professional, forty-somethingish businessman (in hindsight, probably a World War 2 Veteran) well-dressed in a suit and overcoat seething in anger and repeating over and over "Oh No !!! - God Dammit !!!" Many in the crowd - mothers with children, elderly couples, singles of all types and sizes were heading to Saint Patrick's Cathedral - New York City's largest Catholic Church - at Fifth Avenue and 51st Street. I also was drawn there to standing room only and everyone was praying the Rosary, led by several priests.

I left after a brief time and finally got back to the office at about 5 PM. The building was totally empty and I took the elevator to my office bullpen where I flung my attaché case in a fit of fury and despair across the office knocking items off various desks. I realized that life for me, my family, friends, and country has changed forever and would never be the same again. Camelot was dead.

**Doug Tozour** (4<sup>th</sup> Co): A memory that's hard to suppress!

Had just returned to USMC Basic School after spending the afternoon at the base gym and met a bunch of other Marine Brown Bars walking down the street. We encountered a Captain who appeared in shock coming out of HQ. We asked if he was alright and he asked us "What, you haven't heard the news?"

Well from there it was all downhill as we had no idea of what it could mean to us other than rapid deployment somewhere!

**Pete Deuteran** (12<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on the quarterdeck of *USS Morton* (DD-948) as OOD; a jimmy-legs (SDiego base cop truck) slammed on its brakes on the

pier and the cop jumped out. He started yelling something about the president being shot. I was not a fan of JFK, but I remember being outraged that someone had shot the president.

**Frank Holmes** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was aboard *USS Meredith* (DD-890) in our home port, Mayport, Fla. I was in CIC participating in a pre-deployment training exercise (I was the CIC Officer and needed the training just as badly as did my OI Division troopers - My Senior Chief was conducting the training).

**Donald Sheaffer** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): As a CEC officer I was at the Great Lakes Public Works working on building a dental clinic for recruits.

**Raymond Heins** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was one day out of Karachi Pakistan, on USS BIGELOW (DD-942). Our first word came immediately after reveille, in an announcement over the 1MC. Our only news over the next several days came in via Fleet Broadcast TTY.

**Dave Byrnes** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): Interesting survey...yes I remember when the Chief came into the classroom and said, "The President's been shot. Everyone return to your ship immediately."

I had to drive from school in San Diego to my [apartment] in Long Beach. I made it to about Camp Pendleton before the San Diego Freeway was choked with cars headed both north and south. I was parked on the Freeway with "millions" of other cars. People gathered in small groups listening to the radio for more news. It was after sunset before traffic started moving.

**Mike Cronin** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): I had just gotten back to the BOQ at Meridian, MS after a morning training flight in the T2A.

**Ollie Donelan** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on my way to my one o'clock class with a large group of prospective aviators at NAS Pensacola. We were all shocked.

**James Fisher** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was in Officer's Basic School, Quantico walking through the common area when the news came on the TV in the room. Everything stopped while we all watched in a state of shock. I can still picture the layout of the room (somewhat vaguely).

**Joe Kotowski** (15<sup>th</sup> Co): I was at the San Diego Naval base when an officer came into our classroom and announced that Kennedy had been shot. The class was dismissed and I went outside and saluted the flag on the base.

**Art Roper** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): **Pete Vermaire** [21<sup>st</sup> Co] (no longer with us) and I went Air Force and were going to graduate school at the University of Michigan. We had just finished playing paddle ball and heard the news on the radio going back to our house in Ann Arbor.

**Ron Jarvis** (10<sup>th</sup> Co): I was in the wardroom of *USS Dewey* (DLG-14) in the Mediterranean watching a movie. A radioman brought a message to the CO who stopped the movie and told us the President had been shot. Of course we adjourned to our staterooms awaiting further information. Not much later we learned via the 1MC that President Kennedy had died. We immediately broke off NATO exercises and headed for port in France. The French were totally distraught.

**Dave Moore** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was on the USS HOLLISTER (DD-788) in Long Beach. We were getting the ship ready to depart on Monday for a large exercise in Hawaii. That departure was postponed one day. We watched Kennedy's funeral on the Wardroom TV.

**Ed Brady** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was in the Army Ranger school in the mountain phase in northern Georgia. We were out on patrol and suddenly brought back to Base Camp.

We formed up and were told Kennedy was dead!

And we should immediately prepare to deploy to any U S city to restore control!

**Jim Stewart** (20<sup>th</sup> Co): After graduation and commissioning on June 5, 1963, my first duty assignment was a return to USNA in the physical education department with the new class of 1967 entry and to remain there as an assistant football coach with the Plebe Team under Dick Duden along with fellow classmates **Steve Hoy** [23<sup>rd</sup> Co], **Walt Pierce** [4<sup>th</sup> Co], **Ron Testa** [23<sup>rd</sup> Co], and **Ron Klemick** [5<sup>th</sup> Co]. We had a great season and went undefeated with only 6 points scored against us all year. Of course the Varsity Team also had a great season as well. After the Plebe season ended, we remained at the Academy giving evaluations to the Varsity coaches about the Plebes we had on our squad that year. The Army-Navy game was scheduled for November 30, 1963 and all of us were looking forward to the game in Philadelphia where we all were going to enjoy the game. As we now know, the game was delayed for a week and was played on December 7.

On Friday, November 22, 1963, I was in Coach Wayne Hardin's office giving him a report on some of Class of 1967 football players and also getting ready as Officer in Charge to go to Andrews Air Force Base with a couple of buses to pick up some prospective recruits who would be visiting the Academy that weekend. The phone in Coach Hardin's office rang and when he answered, he



was noticeably stunned, and tears came to his eyes. It was then that I learned that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Having had the honor of meeting President Kennedy in 1962 at our preseason workouts at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, my hope was that he might survive. It did not happen.

My trip to Andrews to pick up the recruits was something I will always remember. Cars and people lined both sides of the highway leading into Andrews awaiting the arrival of President Kennedy's body. We got the recruits and returned to the Academy without incident but the recruits had a very quiet first impression about the Academy as I recall. The Army-Navy game was delayed a week and Ron Testa and I had to be in Pensacola to begin flight training and watched the game together in Pensacola and cheered Navy to a very close win. Please pass on to our classmates and families that I wish them all Peace, Love, and Joy in their lives. God bless, Jim

**Tim Cook** (20<sup>th</sup> Co): I was in the cafeteria at NAS Pensacola (Mainside) on lunch break from the first phase of flight training...ground school. The news came over a small TV used by the serving staff behind the serving line. Everything stopped, and all present gathered at the serving line. I had a TV in my room in the BOQ, and **Ralph Stowell** [20<sup>th</sup> Co] and I eventually went back there and spent the rest of the weekend watching developments.

**Ralph Stowell** (20<sup>th</sup> Co): I was a Flight Student in Pensacola having lunch at the NEX with Mike Madalo (USNA '62) when I heard the news. The memories are clear as a bell.

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**John Lesko** (2<sup>nd</sup> Co): On the day of the Kennedy Assassination, I was an Ensign aboard the *USS John W. Thomason*, (DD-760), returning home from a six-month deployment in WestPac. On this very day, our ship was en route to San Diego, CA from Hawaii.

**Scotty Wilson** (15<sup>th</sup> Co.): I had just completed the ground school portion of my Navair training that week at NAS Pensacola. Together with my "graduating class" I was standing in formation for the ceremony when the news came down.

**Lew Lewis** (6<sup>th</sup> Co): I, like quite a number of our classmates, was in class at Nuclear Power School, USNTC, Bainbridge, MD, when the XO of Nuclear Power School came into the classroom and made the announcement that President Kennedy had been assassinated. We all went into what was probably a form of shock and the rest of the afternoon became nothing but a blur as we were unable to get our minds around the idea. We all felt totally lost and, while we wanted to help, we had no idea how to do anything worthwhile. It was a truly black day for America.

**Denver Key** (14<sup>th</sup> Co): I was waiting for a “speedy board” (a senior pilots group to determine if a student pilot was worthy to continue pilot training after having some troubles) after getting a “down” in instrument flying. The board was postponed until another day. Depression upon depression.

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**Denny Vaughan** (18<sup>th</sup> Co): I was standing the 4 to 8 watch as OOD on the USS FRANK E. EVANS (DD-754) when the radioman brought the message to me. I was alone on the port wing of the bridge in the early morning as the sun was just rising over the calm seas in the middle of the Pacific on our way to my first WESTPAC. I remember it clearly - the world seemed to stop.

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**Bill Sheehan** (1<sup>st</sup> Co): Like a number of our classmates, I was in Class at Nuclear Power School Mare Island when our Section Leader, LCDR Sullivan, came in to inform us that the President had been shot and school was cancelled for the rest of the Day.

Needless to say, we all were in shock and went to our apartment to watch what was happening on TV. My roommates at the time were Jim Williamson, Ray Ritter, and Merrill Dorman. There was a SSBN launching scheduled for that Saturday which we all attended. The launching was very somber and the programs were outlined in black. My memory says it was the USS STONEWALL JACKSON (SSBN 634).

I missed Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald live because I had gone to Mass at the local Catholic Church.

My memory says we did not have class until after the JFK funeral so there was some additional cramming required so we could graduate from NPS on time.

**Jim Ring** (16<sup>th</sup> Co): I was a lowly Ensign on a beat up WW II destroyer *USS Samuel N. Moore* (DD-747). We had just passed under the Golden Gate Bridge after a week of firefighting school at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay and were headed South to Long Beach. That was a prelude to a very sad weekend.

**Spencer Johnson** (7th Co): On that day I was aboard my first destroyer, the *James C. Owens* (DD776), deployed in the Mediterranean Sea. All ships of the Sixth Fleet were ordered to sea on short notice where we remained until it was determined that Kennedy’s assassination was not a Soviet plot or an opening to war between the two countries. It was a time of increased readiness as well as profound sadness even as it is now.

**Jack Dranttel** (16<sup>th</sup> Co) [*submitted by his widow Mary Jo Dranttel*]: I found this article so very interesting, and I remember that day so well. I am writing on behalf of my husband, Jack G. Dranttel, who died on July 19, 2021. Jack had taken his commission in the Air Force and his first assignment was at Andrews Air Force Base as a second Lieutenant in the Presidential Wing. He was enrolled in Georgetown Law School, where he was attending classes at night. After the news came through, Jack called me to let me know that the Base was on lock-down, and he didn't know when he'd be home. He, along with the whole Wing, was there on the tarmac when Air Force One arrived back with the President's body. They were forming an honor guard. It sure was a sad day for our country. Jack went on to serve as an Air Force Attorney and Judge for almost 25 years.  
*Mary Jo Dranttel*

