

CONTACT PROFILE**Document's Author:** Douglas Home/ARRB **Date Created:** 06/18/96**Contact Description**

Contact Name: Thomas E. Robinson**Company:****Title:****Category:** Witnesses/Consultants**Street Address:** [REDACTED]**Phone Number:****FAX Number:****E-mail Address:**

HSCA Letter Sent:

Additional Information

Tom Robinson was one of three "hands on" embalmers at Bethesda who worked under the supervision of Joe Hagan on 11/22/63. According to Joe Hagan, Mr. Robinson is the one person who had the most to do with the reconstruction of President Kennedy's head, and should be able to give us the best description. Tom Robinson was interviewed by HSCA staffers and a transcript of their interview exists in the HSCA records.

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MEETING REPORT



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB

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Meeting Logistics

Date: 06/21/96
Agecny Name: Witnesses/Consultants
Attendees: Tom Robinson, David Marwell, Jeremy Gunn, Tim Wray, and Doug Home
Topic: Interview of Tom Robinson

Summary of the Meeting

At ARRB's request, Mr. Robinson came to Washington this date for an interview with selected staff (see above for names of staff members).

[Information provided below is a paraphrased summation of both questions and answers during this interview; only remarks in quotations are direct quotes of Mr. Robinson.]

When asked to provide a chronology of basic events in which he was involved on November 22-23, 1963, Mr. Robinson recalled the following:

- Came to work at Gawler's funeral home in Washington, D.C. about 4:00 in the afternoon on 11/22/63;
- Everyone at Gawler's thought JFK's body would be coming to Gawler's. MDW had sent a military contingent to Gawler's funeral home...there were guards posted at every door.
- About suppertime, the plans changed. Joe Hagan told Robinson to "get the House Grips...you're going to Navy." ("House grips" were defined by Mr. Robinson as portable embalming equipment.)
- He and Joe Hagan drove from Gawler's to Bethesda at extremely high speed in the Gawler's hearse. They transported in the hearse the new casket selected by the Kennedy aides who had visited Gawler's, a Marcellus 710 model, made of plank mahogany. It was covered in an American flag when transported out to Bethesda.
- Mr. Stroble and Mr. Van Hoesen drove out to Bethesda in another vehicle, with the portable embalming equipment ("house grips")...they may have arrived subsequent to Hagan and Robinson.
- Robinson said that he and Hagan arrived "early" in the autopsy, prior to the chest incision being made, and just as the gross examination of the head was starting.
- Work by the Gawler's team started "after midnight;"
- Saw the President's body (in the Marcellus casket) leave Bethesda in the gray Navy ambulance before he left the premissis himself.

Observations regarding the autopsy of President Kennedy:

-Robinson said he had seen approximately 50 autopsies prior to observing President Kennedy's autopsy.

-When asked by ARRB, Robinson said he did see one other casket that night aside from the Marcellus mahogany casket brought from Gawler's: he said it was a metallic, bronze casket which was copper-colored. He said this casket had a dent or break in the handle, where it is attached to the casket by lugs.

-He and Joe Hagan arrived "early in the autopsy," meaning that he knew it had not been underway long because the chest incision had not been made yet, and the gross examination of the head was just beginning.

-Robinson said he had a "50 yard-line seat" at the autopsy, and was leaning on the rail with his arms, from his seat in the gallery. He said the President's head was to his right, which means that he was on the anatomical left of the President during the autopsy. He said that most of the pathologists and their assistants were opposite him, on the anatomical right of the President during the autopsy. The gallery

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observers were behind him in the gallery.

-He said the amphitheater was practically filled--that there were way too many people in the morgue. At one point in the interview, he said the atmosphere was like a "cocktail party," and at another point he said the atmosphere in the morgue was "like a circus." When asked to specify what he meant by those descriptions, he said that there were people there who clearly had no business being there, and that there was continuous and loud discussion from the gallery which he thought was both improper, and distracting. He said that a federal agent (either Secret Service or FBI) took him aside during the autopsy (after the head examination was well underway) and offered to get him some coffee, knowing that he was upset. Robinson said that the agent told him that "it had to be this way" (in regard to having so many observers in the room), since there had to be "credible witnesses" to the wounds observed and procedures performed during the autopsy, because the "world was watching."

-Robinson said the same agent claimed to be a ballistics expert, and showed him a glass vial, similar to a test tube (which may have had a cork stopper on it), containing several pieces of tiny bullet fragments which had been removed from the President's head by the pathologists, and that it contained "quite a few" fragments of "shrapnel." Robinson said that these bullet fragments were very small. When asked by ARRB staffers whether the number of fragments was closer to 2, 5, 10, or 15 fragments, he said that the total number would be close to 10 fragments.

-Robinson said that one man was definitely in charge of the autopsy, and that there was no doubt about that, but that he didn't know his name. When asked by ARRB, Robinson said he did not recall anyone trying to rush the doctors.

-Robinson said that he saw the brain removed from President Kennedy's body, and that a large percentage of it was gone "in the back," from the "medulla," and that the portion of the brain that was missing was about the size of a closed fist. He described the condition of the brain in this area as the consistency of "soup." He said that the brain was "not cut up" at the autopsy. When ARRB staff asked whether the brain was weighed at the autopsy, he said that "he was sure they did," but he had no specific recollection of that happening.

-Visible damage to skull caused by bullet or bullets (as opposed to damage caused by pathologists): Robinson described 3 locations of wounds:

-he saw 2 or 3 small perforations or holes in the right cheek during embalming, when formaldehyde seeped through these small wounds and slight discoloration began to occur (and executed a drawing of three slits, or holes, in the right cheek of the President on a photocopy of a frontal photograph of the President);

-he described a "blow-out" which consisted of a flap of skin in the right temple of the President's head, which he believed to be an exit wound based on conversations he heard in the morgue amongst the pathologists (and executed two drawings of this right temporal defect on both a photocopy of a right lateral photograph of the President, and on a right lateral anatomy diagram of the human skull);

-he described a large, open head wound in the back of the President's head, centrally located right between the ears, where the bone was gone, as well as some scalp. He related his opinion that this wound in the back of the President's head was an entry wound occurring from a bullet fired from behind, based on conversations he heard in the morgue among the pathologists. (Robinson executed two drawings of the hole in the back of the President's head, one on an anatomy drawing of the posterior skull, and one on an anatomy drawing of the lateral skull. On the annotated lateral skull drawing, the wound in the rear of the head is much larger than the wound in the right temple.)

-skull fractures: Robinson said that every bone in the President's face was broken, but that this could not be determined when viewing the body from the front. He also said that there were fractures all over the cranium, including the floor of the skull, saying on another occasion, "every bone in his head was broken." (Regarding this interior skull damage, it is unclear how much of this was observed by Robinson during the autopsy, and how much during embalming and reconstruction.)

-when asked, Mr. Robinson said he had no recollection of any skull fragments being brought into the morgue during the autopsy.

-when asked, Mr. Robinson said he had no recollection of photography the night of the autopsy, one way or the other--no recollection whatsoever.

-Removal of President's Brain: Robinson drew dotted lines on the drawing he executed of the posterior skull which shows the wound between the ears. When asked by ARRB staff what the dotted

lines represented, he said "saw cuts." He explained that some sawing was done to remove some bone before the brain could be removed, and then went on to describe what is a normal craniotomy procedure, saying that this procedure was performed on JFK. He seemed to remember the use of a saw, and the scalp being reflected forward.

-Tracheotomy: Robinson remembered the tracheotomy wound in the anterior throat. In his opinion that wound also represented an exit wound for a bullet.

-Use of Probes: Robinson had vivid recollections of a very long, malleable probe being used during the autopsy. His most vivid recollection of the probe is seeing it inserted near the base of the brain in the back of the head (after removal of the brain), and seeing the tip of the probe come out of the tracheotomy incision in the anterior neck. He was adamant about this recollection. He also recalls seeing the wound high in the back probed unsuccessfully, meaning that the probe did not exit anywhere. When asked, Robinson said he could not recall anything about the angle at which the probe went into the back wound (i.e., whether it was steep or shallow).

Embalming and reconstruction of the President's head:

-Mr. Robinson said he worked right over the President for over 3 hours, but that he was NOT the person who reconstructed the President's head; he said that was done by John Van Hoesen.

-Embalming was done before reconstruction.

-The President suffered from some very slight blue discoloration under the eyes, but that the area around his eyes was not "black and blue" by any means; to Robinson this was evidence that President Kennedy was "instantly dead" when shot. He based this opinion on his previous observations of autopsies and cadavers during embalming.

-Robinson said that Ed Stroble (now deceased) had cut out a piece of rubber to cover the open wound in the back of the head, so that the embalming fluid would not leak; the piece of rubber was slightly larger than the hole in the back of the head, and Robinson estimated that the rubber sheet was a circular patch about the size of a large orange (demonstrating this with a circular motion joining the index fingers and thumbs of his two hands).

-He said the cranium was packed with material during reconstruction, but that he did not believe it was plaster-of-Paris; rather, he said it was either cotton or kapok material used in conjunction with a hardening compound. The Rubber sheet was used outside of this material to close the wound in the area of missing bone. The scalp was sutured together, and also onto the rubber sheet to the maximum extent possible, and the damage in the back of the head was obscured by the pillow in the casket when the body lay in repose, so that upon completion of embalming and application of restorative art, President Kennedy's body was ready for an open casket funeral, if one had been requested. No damage to the head could be seen when Gawler's crew had finished their work. In this condition, President Kennedy's head was laying on the pillow in the casket, turned slightly to the right.

-Robinson described in considerable detail the embalming procedures employed re: infusion of the thoracic region and head with formaldehyde.

-Robinson said that there was considerable pressure on the Gawler's crew to finish their work as soon as possible, and that it was coming from an Admiral. He recalled becoming upset by this, and being calmed down by Joe Hagan; he recalled responding to one query about when they would be finished by saying, "You can't put on make-up with a barn brush!" He remembered with pride that someone else in the morgue said that the President "looked good" when they had finished their work, and Robinson reiterated at this point that an open casket funeral could have been held if the Kennedy family had desired one.

-When asked whether the pathologists stayed in the morgue during the embalming and reconstructive work, he said they did not.

Fox Autopsy Photographs:

After completing his four drawings of head wounds and describing those wounds, ARRB staff showed Mr. Robinson a set of what is alleged to be the Fox autopsy photographs to see whether they were consistent with what he remembered seeing in the morgue at Bethesda. His comments follow, related to

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various Fox photos:

-Right Superior Profile (corresponds to B & W #s 5 and 6): He does not see the small shrapnel holes he noted in the right cheek, but he assumes this is because of the photo's poor quality.

-Back of Head (corresponds to B & W #s 15 and 16): Robinson said: "You see, this is the flap of skin, the blow-out in the right temple that I told you about, and which I drew in my drawing." When asked by ARRB where the hole in the back of the head was in relation to this photograph, Robinson responded by placing his fingers in a circle just above the white spot in the hairline in the photograph, and said "The hole was right here, where I said it was in my drawing, but it just doesn't show up in this photo."

-Top of Head/Superior View of Cranium (corresponds to B & W #s 7-10): Robinson frowned, and said with apparent disagreement, "This makes it look like the wound was in the top of the head." He explained that the damage in this photograph was "what the doctors did," and explained that they cut this scalp open and reflected it back in order to remove bullet fragments (the fragments he had observed in a glass vial). ARRB staff members asked Robinson whether there was damage to the top of the head when he arrived at the morgue and before the brain was removed; he replied by saying that this area was "all broken," but that it was not open like the wound in the back of the head.

-Stare of Death (corresponds with B & W #s 13 and 14): Robinson confirmed the tracheotomy in this photo as consistent with what he saw in the morgue on the anterior neck.

Gawler's Documents:

-"First Call Sheet:" He has seen this document before; upon close examination, he recognized some of the handwriting as his own, specifically the sections labeled "dressing" and "remarks" at the top of the page. In the area near the bottom third of the page, ARRB staff asked him to describe what the entry "2 A.M." meant under "Casket Delivery Details." He said that the time "2 A.M. is "not right," i.e., incorrect, since he knows he and Joe Hagan arrived with the Marcellus casket early in the autopsy.

-Regarding the tripartite fold-out document reproduced in multiple photocopy pages, Robinson said that the times of "11:45" and "3:30" under "Personal Remarks" look like they were written in Joe Hagan's handwriting. He said that the body chart on the page titled "Embalmer's Report" would normally have been filled in by Gawler's personnel, and he did not know why it was not filled in for President Kennedy.

-He said that he did not recognize the report titled "Funeral Arrangements for John F. Kennedy."