

MEMORANDUM

000971

TO: Jim Kelly  
Kenneth Klein

FROM: Andy Purdy

DATE: August 17, 1977

RE: Notes of Interview with Dr. J. Thornton Boswell -  
August 17, 1977, National Orthopedic Hospital,  
Arlington, Virginia

(Jim: Request your comments, additions and corrections concerning the following account of the interview.)

On Tuesday, August 16, 1977, we interviewed DR. J. THORNTON BOSWELL (Colleen Boland, Jim Kelly, and Andy Purdy) at the National Orthopedic Hospital in Arlington, Virginia.

DR. BOSWELL said that DR. HUMES had just stopped by on his way to the beach (Ocean City) for his vacation. He recalls that HUMES was Director of Laboratories and BOSWELL was the Chief of Pathology of the Naval Hospital at the time of the hospital. DR. BOSWELL indicated that he was interviewed by MR. SPECTER a few weeks after the autopsy and that he testified before the Warren Commission but that he wasn't interviewed by anyone else in their official governmental capacities.

DR. BOSWELL was notified by BRUCE SMITH, Acting Director of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in the early afternoon that he would have to participate in the autopsy of the President. Apparently the Navy Department had gotten a commun-

ique from Dallas. BOSWELL indicated that he was the first one contacted (HUMES was on vacation at the time). BOSWELL then contacted the command officer of the medical school and hospital. BOSWELL said he told BRUCE SMITH that it was "ridiculous to do the post here." He said that he was told that DR. BURKLEY had insisted that the President be brought there. BOSWELL felt the post-mortem should have been done at DFIP.

DR. BOSWELL had been concerned that they began the autopsy without any written authorization which is something they never do. Such authorization has to come from the next of kin. He said that JACKIE finally signed an authorization which arrived in the morgue near the end of the autopsy. He indicated that DR. BURKLEY was basically supervising everything that went on in the autopsy room and that the commanding officer was also responding to BURKLEY's wishes. He indicated that ROBERT MCNAMARA seemed to have acted as liaison between the family and DR. BURKLEY, and that MCNAMARA kept his head throughout. He implied that MCNAMARA was never actually in the autopsy room but was working out of the room where the family was staying. DR. BOSWELL indicated that he was notified in the early afternoon of his forthcoming role in the autopsy.

Later that afternoon he went to do some "moonlighting" at Suburban Hospital and was called back approximately 6:00. He said the autopsy began around 8:00 p.m. He said the President's body was removed from the casket. There were a pillowcase and sheets around the head area. Regarding those sheets, DR. BOSWELL

000305

said that DR. HUMES was very concerned about the potential distress to anyone if any items connected with the autopsy were misused. For example, he said he was afraid the sheets would end up in somebody's barn on Highway 66 as exhibits. DR. BOSWELL said they missed some things they shouldn't have missed but they didn't make any mistakes in regard to that concerned with DR. HUMES. He said that DR. HUMES later personally threw the sheets in the washing machine.

At the beginning DR. BURKLEY gave instructions and said very early on that the police had "...captured the guy who did this, all we need is the bullet." DR. BOSWELL said "...we argued with him at that point...saying the autopsy must be complete and thorough."

The radiologist began his work very early on using a portable machine. The photographer was also there looking on. DR. BOSWELL indicated that regarding the tracheostomy, the doctors "...thought it was a wound." He meant to convey the impression that the doctors thought it was a bullet wound. (This becomes potentially significant in later stages of the interview.)

DR. BOSWELL indicated that he has reviewed the X-rays on several occasions. He said he doesn't think they took X-rays of the extremities. He recalls a number of fine metal fragments in the head but doesn't remember if there were any in the neck path. He said there was a small fleck in the spinal canal; but said the radiologist said there was no damage to the cervical

spine. (Note his later description of the radio-opaque object lower down in the back.)

DR. BURKLEY indicated he wanted just a limited autopsy to the thorax and this was then extended to the head. DR. HUMES insisted there be a complete autopsy, saying, for example, the adrenals were extremely important. DR. BURKLEY said it would be okay to examine the adrenals if they could reach them through the upper opening. DR. BOSWELL reached down and tried to reach the adrenals but could not and DR. BURKLEY agreed that they could do a full autopsy. DR. BOSWELL indicated they didn't do a "Y" incision, rather they did an incision from the axilla down below the nipples and the area was opened up. The organs were removed from the chest.

DR. BOSWELL indicated that "...we had gotten ourselves in dutch with the neck and throat wounds with regard to the Secret Service." DR. BOSWELL indicated that one of the agents (he wasn't sure if FBI or Secret Service) was on the phone most of the time. (He seemed to be implying they were on the phone that was in the main autopsy room.)

DR. BURKLEY made clear that he didn't want a report on the adrenal glands, wanting instead that that information be reported informally.

DR. BOSWELL indicated that the slides (not photographic slides, rather those of the tissue sections apparently) were processed immediately. Normally the procedure was that the

slides would be ready in a week or ten days. He said that normally the doctors doing an autopsy write a provisional report including a diagnosis and gross descriptions and write a supplemental report some time after that when they can study the slides and other material more closely.

BOSWELL said the brain was examined and described at the time of the autopsy and was examined further two days later. He said the brain was "sufficiently exposed" so that the doctors didn't feel they had to cut into it. In other words, they thought that they could sufficiently see the injury without doing serial sections. He said he didn't remember whether or not they took serial sections or any other sections, saying "the records" should show if the doctors had cut into it. He indicated that DR. HUMES and he worked on this procedure with possibly two lab technicians, including DR. KARNEI (who served as chief assistant) and the chief hospital corpsman, who he believes was a man named MASON (status - HMC). DR. BOSWELL said following the examination, the brain was taken by the doctors in a chrome bucket up to CAPTAIN STOVER's office along with the slides, paraffin blocks (from which the slides were made), tissue blocks from each organ in a mason jar and the brain. He said these materials were hand carried to ADMIRAL BURKLEY, presumably by a Secret Service man. During the chain of custody of this material, DR. BOSWELL said he believed "SMOKY" STOVER undoubtedly had a receipt for "... everything which transpired...."

DR. BOSWELL indicated that in the area of the neck wound there was a "...contusion along the inner margin of the apex of

his lung" which was "...the only way we could trace the entire path of the tract of the bullet." He said the bullet passed through the upper thorax; he said he thought they photographed "...the exposed thoracic cavity and lung..." but doesn't remember ever seeing those photographs. He indicated that he is certain there was no major blood vessel damaged by the path of the missile.

According to BOSWELL, HUMES probed the neck wound with his little finger (indicating a point on the little finger which did not go past the first knuckle, less than one inch). He said HUMES also probed it with a metal probe. He said no one gave orders that they not probe that wound.

Regarding the head wound, DR. BOSWELL said the wound was fairly low in the back of the head and that the bone was completely gone above the entry wound. He said that during the autopsy, a piece of skull fragment was brought in which included a portion which corresponded to the missing half of the entry wound in the head.

DR. BOSWELL related generally the facts of the 1966 review of the autopsy material in the Archives by the autopsy principals. He said that their reviewing was at the behalf of the Archivist of the United States and to some extent the Justice Department. He said their purposes were twofold: to identify the materials and to catalogue them (Archives has the inventory they did and the autopsy photographs are initialed accordingly).

000309

He said he had received a lot of pressure from critics of the Warren Commission, and it was in response to this that he suggested to the Justice Department that they conduct an independent review of the material. Apparently his letter led to the creation of the Clark Panel which studied the materials in 1968. DR. BOSWELL indicated that he didn't think there were any inconsistencies between the Clark Panel findings and their own, though he said the "...material is not ideal...." He said the X-rays were taken "...just to identify a bullet, they were not taken as clinical X-rays." He stated the photographs "...didn't portray as much of the things as we would have liked."

He said the X-rays showed a unique object in the lower back which he described as a "radio-opaque piece of material" which he characterized as a "miligram die residual." He said the Clark Panel explicitly agreed with the autopsy doctors essential findings with regard to the entry and exit wounds of the head.

000310

Dr. Boswell said the autopsy doctors assumed that the anterior neck wound was a wound of exit, saying the hole is not that big and that it was " ... far bigger than a wound of entry." He said the doctors didn't explicitly discuss the possibility of a tracheotomy having been performed but said it was assumed that this was a possibility. He said Parkland did not really do a tracheotomy in the sense that they never inserted a tube. (See notes on interview with Dr. Perry.) Dr. Boswell said that if a full autopsy had been performed they would have removed the trachea. Dr. Boswell said he remembered seeing part of the perimeter of a bullet wound in the anterior neck.

Dr. Boswell said one of the problems with the treatment at Parkland was that the doctors did not fully realize the extent of the head wound.

Dr. Boswell said the tissue people were given the tissue that was removed following the autopsy. He indicated that the slides were available about noon on the 23d. He indicated that a microscopic report was dictated at that time. When the doctors got together on the 23rd, Dr. Humes arrived with a " ... reasonably good report of the gross findings."

Dr. Boswell indicated that he and Dr. Humes decided during the autopsy that Dr. FINCK should be brought in from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. Previously, the AFIP had offered the services of anyone on their staff. Humes and Boswell decided on FINCK when they first examined the body

000311

and recognized that the main problem was bullet wounds.

Dr. BOSWELL said that he believes he is the only one who took notes during the autopsy. He said the purpose of the face-sheet was for use in the final write-up. He said the measurements were noted based on measurements actually made on the body. He said the drawings were meant to be a point of reference. Regarding the head wounds he said the entry hole was only approximately half in evidence, the other half being part of the skull fragment which was brought in.

Dr. BOSWELL said that the notation on the autopsy face sheet showing an arrow going to the upper left in the vicinity of the entry wound was made for a purpose he cannot remember. He said he assumed that he must have " ... thought the bullet transversed in that direction, at least the wound of entry." He indicated that he was not sure when he made the markings on the face sheet but believes that he made them all in the morgue. He said his accuracy may have been somewhat limited and the neatness lessened by the fact that he was writing with gloves on. He indicated first that he wrote with a pen and then said he wrote with a pencil. (The original face sheet has notations in pencil and pen; the neck wounds notation is made in pen.)

Dr. BOSWELL explained the fact that Dr. HUMES burned his preliminary notes by saying that HUMES had been working on the autopsy report in a room in his house where there was a fire place and a fire was going. Rather than get up to throw

000312

the notes in the trash can he merely tossed them in the fire. Dr. BOSWELL believed that he is the one that actually measured the location of the back wound and he thought that both men measured the head wound. (Earlier Dr. BOSWELL had said that he had responsibility for the neck wound and Dr. HUMES was responsible for the head wound.) He was not able to explain where the figure in the autopsy report for the location of the head wound came from in light of the fact that there was no such measurement on the autopsy face sheet. He said that the number possibly came from some other doctor or was remembered by Dr. HUMES.

Dr. BOSWELL said he could not recall whether or not a posterior-anterior x-ray was taken of the head. He did say that he suspected that a lateral and anterior-posterior were taken. He didn't feel a posterior-anterior would necessarily have been required or been taken. He indicated that his subsequent viewing of the x-rays was consistent with his understanding of the location of the entry wound to the head. (It should be noted that the CLARK Panel report of the location of the head wound was also based on the x-ray in addition to the photograph and they placed the entry wound to the head approximately 100mm, higher up than the autopsy doctors.)

Dr. BOSWELL couldn't recall if there was more than one interior chest photograph taken. He did say he didn't believe the track of the missile through the body could be seen.

000313

He said that if a photograph was taken of the apex of the lung and of the apex of the chest, this would have demonstrated the track better than not having such a photograph. Dr. BOSWELL did not state that such a photograph was not taken, saying instead that he "...thought a photograph was taken of the lung."

Dr. BOSWELL said he recalls the x-rays being examined in the autopsy. He said he deferred at the time and since to the radiologist's (Dr. EBERSOLE) analysis of the significance of the x-rays.

Although the autopsy supplemental report says that seven sections were taken from the brain, Dr. BOSWELL said he couldn't specifically recall whether or not this was the case. He said the lab supervisor, who he believes was Mr. MASON (who was head of the histology lab), would know this better than he. He said it was possible that they had taken some small pieces of brain tissue or actually taken sections.

Dr. BOSWELL said that Dr. KARNEI was the resident on duty during the autopsy and said he served in effect as the chief assistant of the autopsy doctors. He said Dr. KARNEI was also present during the examination of the brain.

Regarding the autopsy face sheet, Dr. BOSWELL said that the entry wound to the head, if not exactly accurate, may have been "...possibly off a little to the left."

Dr. BOSWELL was asked why the back wound was probed if the autopsy doctors knew the bullet had exited out the anterior neck (as Dr. BOSWELL stated earlier in the interview).

Dr. BOSWELL said that Dr. BURKLEY didn't mention the fact that a tracheotomy had been performed. He said that Dr. BURKLEY was very upset and this might have explained his failure to mention this important fact. Dr. BOSWELL said (without indicating that he was being inconsistent with his previous statement), the doctors felt anterior neck damage was caused by a tracheotomy wound and in the later courses of the autopsy thought it may have included the exist wound of a bullet. He said the x-rays were examined during the autopsy in trying to accomplish what they saw as their main purpose, namely to look for a bullet. Dr. BOSWELL is a little vague as to when the doctors felt that a bullet may have fallen out the neck wound, but seemed to indicate it occurred around the time they learned the bullet had been discovered in Parkland and prior to the time when they began to feel there was a very real possibility of an exit wound in the anterior neck.

Dr. BOSWELL indicated that he believed the professional photographer may have had a black and white in addition to a color camera in the room, most probably a 35mm type. He said that he helped the artist make the schematic drawings of the missile paths through the President at a time subsequent to the autopsy. He noted that the drawings were "...very accurate, remarkably so."

Dr. BOSWELL recalled very minute metal fragments being removed from the President's skull but couldn't recall specifically whether such fragments were taken from the brain (he indicated that they "probably" had been removed from the

brain). He said that subsequent to the examination of the brain, two or three days after the autopsy, the brain and other tissue materials were put in a locked closet in STOVER'S office without benefit of a guard. He indicated that it was possible that he had reviewed the microscopic slides some years later during a subsequent examination of the materials in the Archives ("...possibly...when the CLARK Panel review occurred"). Dr. BOSWELL said he is certain that the brain and other materials are not at the Naval Medical Center and are not at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. The latter information he has gleaned from the frequent requests for information from AFIP about the whereabouts of that material. He recalls that Mrs. EVELYN LINCOLN(?) gave these materials to someone and that possibly BURT MARSHALL ended up with it.

Dr. BOSWELL indicated that he felt that Commission Exhibit 399 had passed through both men and that it was "...more likely than not..." that this is the way the wounds occurred.

We indicated to Dr. BOSWELL that we might like him to review the materials in the Archives at some future date. He indicated that he was more than willing to cooperate with us in any way and then stated that he would really not review the materials unless he had to. He also indicated that, Dr. HUMES told him that he would prefer not to have to come to Washington to answer questions or to review the materials.

\*\*\*\*\*