

## PEOPLE



# Body Of Evidence

## Local Photographer Recalls JFK Autopsy

### Assassination Still Shrouded In Controversy

By CRAIG COLGAN  
Press-Journal Staff Writer

John Stringer sat at a table on the deck next to the backyard pool at his Vero Beach home and looked stunned.

"I'm very surprised," he said. "I have no explanation for this. It's just wrong."

What caused this reaction was his hearing what Stringer identified as his own voice, played back to him in a tape recording from Aug. 25, 1972. On the tape, Stringer, the medical photographer at the autopsy of President John F. Kennedy, was describing to researcher David Lifton in a phone interview what the president's head wound looked like that night:

**LIFTON:** When you lifted him out, was the main damage to the skull on the top or in the back?

**STRINGER:** In the back.

**LIFTON:** In the back? In the back. High in the back or lower in the back?

**STRINGER:** In the occipital part, in the back there, up above the neck.

**LIFTON:** In other words, the main part of his head that was blasted away was in the occipital part of the skull?

**STRINGER:** Yes, in the back part.

As the 21-year-old phone interview progressed, it was Lifton's turn to be stunned. As a researcher studying the medical evidence in the case of the assassinated 35th president, he knew that a large hole in the back — the occipital bone — of the president's head meant a bullet exited there, meaning a shot from the front.

Several others in the autopsy room at Bethesda Naval Hospital that night, Nov. 22, 1963, told Lifton the same thing. They were Navy corpsmen, assistants and technicians the Warren Commission simply did not interview, who had been made to sign orders preventing them from speaking to anyone about what they saw.

In Lifton's interviews — including the 1972 phone interview with Stringer — and in searching



Press-Journal staff photo by Cliff Parlow

John Stringer served as the medical photographer at the autopsy of President John F. Kennedy, and 30 years later he finds himself defending his version of what he saw that night.

"It is truly unfortunate that the

### John Stringer Top Naval Photographer

John Stringer's father was a doctor, and Stringer grew up interested in medical art and photography.

He graduated from the University of Maryland in 1940, and went to Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee where he started a medical photo lab.

When World War II came along, Stringer applied to the Navy for a commission and was assigned to the National Navy Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

Following the war, Stringer taught photography and "had charge of all the (Naval) photo labs in the field," he said, including those overseas and on ships.

He got out of the Navy in 1950, but stayed on at Bethesda as a civilian as the medical school's chief of photography until he retired in 1974, when he and his wife Janet moved to Vero Beach. Mrs. Stringer died in July of this year of cancer.

Following the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Secret Service agents and the Kennedy entourage would not allow the autopsy to be performed on the slain president in Dallas, and insisted that the body be flown back to Washington immediately.

Kennedy was a Navy veteran, so during the return flight Jacqueline Kennedy chose Bethesda to be the location for what would turn out to be one of the most controversial autopsies in history.

That evening, Dr. James J. Humes, director of laboratories at Bethesda, told Stringer "to stand by for a call at home," Stringer said. "We think the president's body is coming into Bethesda."

"So I went home and I was getting ready to sit down to dinner and Dr. Humes called me and said to come back, we need you."

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(a)

through what the Dallas doctors who attended the president initially reported as well as in reading an FBI report of the autopsy, Lifton found a version in the record of what the wounds looked like that would indicate evidence of a shot from the president's front, as well as a slew of other irregularities. The Warren Commission in its September 1964 report had concluded that Kennedy had died as a result of two shots from behind.

Accepted wisdom in gunshot ballistics is that bullets "go in little" and "come out big." The report of the autopsy doctors described a small entrance wound in the back of the president's head and a large exit hole in the side of the head.

That is what autopsy photos leaked several years ago show, photos Stringer identifies as the ones he took. In fact, Stringer said that's what he has always claimed the wounds looked like.

"There was just one little hole in the back of the head," Stringer said in a recent interview. "Immediately above the (right) ear (was a wound) you could almost say was the size of your hand."

And regarding his 1972 interview with Lifton, the contents of which Stringer said he had forgotten, (though he did remember speaking to Lifton) and recorded in Lifton's 1981 best-seller "Best Evidence," Stringer said, "If I gave that version, then it's wrong."

In a phone interview from his Los Angeles office, Lifton said Stringer switched his version of what the wounds looked like during the preparation of a Sylvia Chase-narrated TV documentary on the case produced in 1988.

(b)

passage of time has caused Stringer, instead of becoming reflective and thinking about the record he will leave to history, to apparently think he can change his story to conform with some official version," Lifton said.

"And that's the real story of Stringer, not what he told me then — which is just about what everybody else saw, based on what he told me in 1972 — but this business of changing his story, and the fact that it is so easy to prove he's doing just that."

Or is it?

And Stringer is not alone.

### Wading Into The JFK Morass

"Welcome to the world of assassination witnesses," said Gerald Posner, author of the recent highly acclaimed bestselling book on the JFK assassination, "Case Closed," in a phone interview from his New York office.

"One of the great problems in this case is the very well-intentioned statements of witnesses who I believe are really telling the truth as they see it in a given time, but their recollections are not accurate. And the problem is finding out what is real and what is not real."

Lifton supports the theory that the murder of the president was part of a conspiracy. In "Case Closed," Posner wrote that Lee Harvey Oswald did all the shooting. But Posner said he understands Lifton's reaction to hearing of Stringer's "new" version of the wound, because in "Case Closed" the same phenomenon occurs, except it works in Posner's favor.

A key element in Posner's book

Several books, most recently "Case Closed" by Gerald Posner (pictured right), have delved into the JFK controversy. Some build cases for conspiracy while others, like Posner's current best-seller, defend the official government findings in the assassination.



is his re-interviewing the doctors who tried to save Kennedy's life in Dallas, several of whom recant their initial statements that the wounds appeared to show a shot from the front, and now say they believe he was shot from behind.

Lifton, though, has a special interest in Stringer. Lifton was the first to include an extensive interview with Stringer in print, so Stringer's statements today that are opposite of that 1972 interview raise all sorts of questions, but point to a growing problem realized by JFK assassination researchers. It's a problem all historians must come to terms with: the reliability of memory.

### 'One Of The Best Medical Photographers In The World'

Stringer was called "... in my opinion, one of the best medical photographers in the world" by Dr. James J. Humes, director of laboratories at Bethesda Medical Center and one of the autopsy surgeons, in a 1992 article on the assassination in The Journal of the

American Medical Association.

Humes and two other doctors performed the autopsy that Friday evening, Nov. 22, 1963. Stringer, 45 at the time, was the oldest member of the autopsy team that also included several young Naval corpsmen.

Stringer said he, along with a Navy assistant, Floyd Riebe, assembled their equipment, which included a four-by-five camera on a large tripod and two speedlight flashes on rollers, and rolled everything through the corridors from their photo lab to the morgue, "which was maybe three blocks away," through the large complex's basement.

Stringer said the casket upon arrival was opened immediately to reveal the body wrapped in sheets. It was then unwrapped, and Stringer said he assisted several others in lifting the body by grasping it "up near the shoulders" and placing it on an autopsy table.

Stringer said the president was not in a body bag, as several members of the autopsy team have since reported. But he does

not remember a plastic sheet

ing the bottom of the casket as reported by those who placed Kennedy in a casket in Dallas. The body was X-rayed by a portable X-ray machine, he said.

"Then they took the films up to the X-ray department on the fourth floor and they processed them and brought them back and put them up on the view boxes in the morgue so (the autopsy doctors) could see them," Stringer said. During this time the body was weighed and measured.

The autopsy room began to fill up with all sorts of people, he said.

"Some admirals, people who had been on the plane, Secret Service people, White House staff, military aides, the presidential doctor, Dr. (George) Burkley," Stringer said.

As their work progressed, the surgeons would continually call over Stringer and his assistant requesting photos of the wounds. Stringer said Riebe would hand him a two-sided film-holder, Stringer would shoot both sides of it, then hand it over to a Secret Service agent. The Secret Service processed the film, and Stringer did not see the autopsy photos until Nov. 1, 1966.

That day Stringer, two autopsy doctors and the radiologist were called to the National Archives to authenticate the photos and X-rays, on the occasion of the Kennedy family donating the material, along with other evidence in their possession.

What did the head wound look like when you first saw it? Stringer is asked.

"It looked like it had been hacked open," he said.

Please See STRINGER/3C

# Stringer

## A Critic's View

That statement is interesting since Lifton found in the FBI report of the autopsy a statement that the surgeons found, "... surgery of the head area, namely in the top of the skull," when no surgery was done in Dallas. Lifton said he thinks the body was intercepted somehow before the autopsy and altered to appear as if shots came from the back.

"The key to this whole thing is the autopsy because it's the autopsy that's the diagram of the shooting — it's the body that's the diagram of the shooting," Lifton said.

"So you either have to have in the autopsy room someone who is willing to lie to the investigators or the body has to lie to the doctors, and I think this is a situation where the body was made to lie to the doctors."

As to how Lifton said the "plot-ers" achieved this alteration of Kennedy's body to falsify the autopsy record, reading his very detailed book is advised.

Lifton documents that, for the most part, doctors in Dallas as well as several members of the autopsy support team at Bethesda saw evidence of a frontal shot, and did not report seeing the wounds as documented in the official autopsy report and in the photographs themselves. Lifton suggests there must have been "reconstruction" before photographs were taken that night.

A writer for *Texas Monthly* in a 1990 story described the problem: "... and now, a quarter of a century later, official photographs showed the back of the head so pristine that the president might have been in a barber chair waiting for a trim."

But Stringer agreeing with Lifton in 1972 when Lifton said "the main part that was blasted away was in the occipital part of the skull" is important to Lifton.

"I have an unimpeachable interview with him," Lifton said. "Stringer thinks you can just go back on it and erase the past. Well, you can't erase the past. Now, Stringer is not involved in a plot to kill President Kennedy, but he is monkeying around with the historical record, or he's trying to."

"Ultimately, it's not going to matter. The truth will come out with these pictures, whether they are incorrect because they were not authentic or because there was a reconstruction done."

"It's just like the Dallas doctors, some of them (who recant much of their initial views in "Case Closed")."

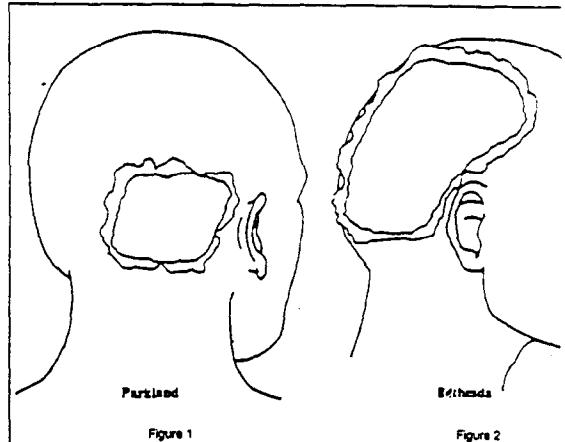
"It's too late. I'm sorry folks, you're wearing two hats. Your first hat is you were witness to history, the second hat is you can be a reader in your living room of these books years later."

"Stringer I believe has gotten into this mode."

## Other Witnesses

Others in the autopsy room that night say what they saw contradicts the official version, including two interviewed by the *Press-Journal*, and agree with Stringer's 1972 version:

● "The wound was in the occipital area, in the back of the head, and off slightly to the right, towards the top," said Floyd Riebe, a student at the time in the medical photography program run by Stringer. He assisted Stringer



Researcher David Lifton has compiled evidence of three different versions of what head wounds looked like, based on official reports and his interviews. Figure 1 is Lifton's drawing of the head wound based on what was seen at the autopsy by several not interviewed by the Warren Commission. The size of the wound, listed in the report, is at this point much larger. Figure 3 is a drawing used by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978 of one of the official autopsy photos, which shows the back undamaged except for a small entrance wound at the top. Official investigators use these differences by considering the X-rays and photographs the "best evidence" body had been mortally injured. But some autopsy witnesses and some critics question their authenticity. John Stringer says Figure 3 is what the wounds looked like that night, an exit wound on the side, unseen in the photo. But Lifton said that in 1972 Stringer gave the wounds that was closer to Figure 1 or 2.

with the photographs that night. In a phone interview from his home in Oklahoma, Riebe said he is not describing a tiny bullet-entrance wound as one of the photos show.

"It was a hole you could put your hand in," he said.

So how does he explain photos that show otherwise?

"I can't," he said.

Riebe said he also cannot explain why, in the National Archives inventory of the photos signed by the autopsy doctors and Stringer, five rolls of 35-millimeter film Riebe said he exposed of the overall scene in the morgue that night are not included.

He asked, "What happened to them?"

● Paul O'Connor was an autopsy technician that night, and now lives in North Florida.

"I don't want to call anybody a damn liar, but something is wrong," he said.

"I remember thinking to myself, a bomb went off in his head," O'Connor said of his initial reaction to seeing the president's head wound. "The hole was gigantic, 3-by-6 inches at least." He possesses prints of several autopsy photos, and he is skeptical about their origin.

"When one picture shows the head all torn apart and the other shows it all put back nice and neat, somebody has messed with these pictures. Something is wrong."

O'Connor also reported the body arrived in a body bag and in a plain gray shipping casket, when the official version is that it arrived wrapped only in sheets over a plastic lining, in an elaborate bronze casket.

The Dallas doctors said they observed a head wound in the rear that was only 2½ inches at its widest point, and that they could see the cerebellum, which is the bottom rear portion of the brain, through the wound. The official autopsy report lists a wound 5½

inches wide.

● In a Scripps Howard News Service story in 1982, autopsy X-ray technician Jerrol Custer of Pittsburgh said he saw a gaping hole at the back of the head, and believes the X-rays in the collection at the National Archives are not what he took.

● Two Dallas doctors, Dr. Charles Crenshaw and Dr. Robert McClelland, still insist the back of the head was where the obvious blown-out exit wound was, and believe the shot came from the front.

Stringer's account in a recent interview with the *Press-Journal* is supported by what the photos show and what the autopsy doctors reported: a small entry wound in the back of the head and a large exit wound on the side.

But Lifton said Stringer is on the record with conflicting versions.

"In law and in history, the earliest recorded recollection is the best recollection," Lifton said.

## A 1988 Documentary

Jacqueline Hall-Kallas, now an associate producer for ABC's "Prime Time Live," recalls preparing to interview Stringer in preparation for a 1988 documentary at KRON-TV in San Francisco.

In an interview from her office in New York, Hall-Kallas said the reason she decided to send a crew to Vero Beach to get Stringer on videotape was she believed he would provide on camera the same description of the wound: he gave Lifton in 1972.

She was convinced that is what would happen after speaking with Stringer a couple of days before and asking him to participate. In that conversation Stringer agreed to an on-camera interview.

When the camera crew arrived Stringer's story had changed said Stanhope Gould, a producer who also is currently at ABC and who conducted the 1988 on-cam

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From Page 1C



Figure 3

Drawings reprinted with the permission of David Lifton.

Kennedy's drawing of his initial autopsy is Lifton's initial autopsy committee on the head resolved how the their au- the large a version

era interview with Stringer. Ultimately, Stringer's interview never made it into the completed version, narrated by Sylvia Chase.

"We wouldn't have sent a camera crew all the way across the country on our budget if we thought he would reverse himself," Gould said.

"(In the telephone pre-interview) he corroborated what he told David Lifton, that the wounds were not as the official version said they were," Hall-Kallas said. "If his interview on camera would have been as strong as he was on the phone, we would have used it."

Stringer does not remember it that way. He said he remembers Hall-Kallas calling, but does not remember discussing at that point any version of the wounds. He agreed that during the videotaped interview, his interviewer was not getting what he wanted. He agrees with Hope and Hall-Kallas that the version of the head wound he gave on camera was the shot-from-behind version.

"She called and said they were going to have a crew in the area, and could they interview me, and I said that was fine," Stringer told the *Press-Journal*. "If I had told her what the wounds looked like (on the phone), I would have told her what I told you, and what I told the *Press-Journal* in 1974."

Stringer pulls out a yellowed copy of the Aug. 8, 1974 *Press-Journal*, and sure enough, there is the version he said he has always stuck to.

In that story, he is quoted by reporter Sally Wheelus: "The wound entered the right lower rear of his head and came out in the hair on the upper right side, taking with it a large chunk of his skull."

### Memory And History

"The medical evidence is the most convoluted and complicated aspect of the case," said Posner, author of the anti-conspiracy "Case Closed."

Posner wrote a letter to Stringer in February 1992 seeking his participation in Posner's research for his book, but the two never hooked up. Stringer said the reason may have been he was busy attending his wife Janet, who was ill at the time with cancer. Janet died in July.

When told of Lifton's belief that Stringer changed his story, Posner suggested that Lifton's views must be taken in the context that he is a "conspiracy theorist."

"Very interesting that with conspiracy theorists, I think there is a double standard here," Posner said.

"Lifton said to me in a debate recently similar to the Stringer situation, referring to the Parkland doctors (who reversed their stories in "Case Closed"): 'I don't care what they said to you today, I've got 'em on tape and on film. They can't go back on their statements because they made them.'"

Posner said that when a witness changes his or her story or comes out after years of silence and announces a version to conform to a conspiracy theory, conspiracy writers rejoice and welcome him or her into the fold. Reverse the process, and the conspiracy zealots cry foul.

Dr. Charles Crenshaw, a doctor who had minor duties attending Kennedy at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, wrote a book entitled "JFK: Conspiracy of Silence" in 1982 that conforms to the view that Kennedy was hit from the front. Crenshaw became the darling of the conspiracy set, though his book was roundly denounced by several of the other Dallas doctors.

"If you change it to conspiracy, people view it as though you're coming out with the truth," Posner said. "You must have been afraid of telling the truth in the past. And now you are telling your story. If you change it to go back to support the view that there really is one shooter, they say no, not allowed. Sorry, you must be under pressure."

In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, after criticizing the autopsy, nonetheless confirmed the findings of the Warren Commission: Two shots, and only two shots, struck the president from the rear.

"The point is, people who say President Kennedy was shot from the front say there was a gigantic hole at the back of the president's head," said Andrew Purdy, lawyer for the Select Committee in charge of the medical evidence, speaking in the KRON documentary. "If there was a gigantic hole at the back of the president's head, there must have been a tremendous conspiracy of massive proportion, to alter the body, the autopsy photographs and X-rays, to change all that evidence. Our experts say there was no such conspiracy."

But Lifton counters, "Purdy would like to think none of this could have happened, because it was his responsibility to find out if it did. Purdy tries to deflect the discussion away from the evidence — and the job he failed to do properly — to the issue of conspiracy. Regardless of how the evidence was phoned, I believe the ultimate verdict of history will be that it was."

Understanding memory itself may be key.

Posner pointed out an Emory University study on memory where researchers asked a large sample of undergraduates to record, in detail, how they felt after they had heard the news of the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle. Two-and-a-half years later, those respondents who could still be reached were asked to answer a questionnaire about the event and six months later they were interviewed.

More than a third of the students' recollections about time, place, who told them, etc. were dead wrong, as judged by their 1986 reports, and nearly a quarter were partly wrong.

When the subjects were shown their original statements, the researchers reported, "Many were quite upset by the discrepancies with their present memories. Interestingly, they continue to prefer their 1989 recall to the version in the original 1986 record."

The explanation? "Narrative reconstruction," simply, the mind cannot always be trusted.

But Stringer is not concerned with those who suggest he changed his story, those who agree with his story or those who ignore him.

He said his memory is just fine, thank you. As he sat watching a videotape of the KRON documentary ("JFK: An Unsolved Murder") for the first time — the one he was interviewed for and then cut from — he chuckled several times as witnesses told of body bags and an altered body and conspiracies and wounds that in Stringer's mind simply did not exist.

"Unbelievable," he said.