

**CONTACT PROFILE****Document's Author:** Douglas Home/ARRB**Date Created:** 01/29/97**Contact Description**

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**Contact Name:** Joe O'Donnell**Company:****Title:****Category:** Witnesses/Consultants**Street Address:****Phone Number:****FAX Number:****E-mail Address:**

HSCA Letter Sent: 12/31/96

**Additional Information**

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The Joe O'Donnell lead was passed to ARRB staff by Randy Robertson, Kathleen Cunningham, and Gary Aguilar. We were informed that Mr. O'Donnell was a government photographer who had known Robert L. Knudsen (White House photographer) in 1963, and who had been shown JFK autopsy photographs by Robert Knudsen shortly after the assassination.

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# CALL REPORT: PUBLIC



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB Date Created: 01/29/97

## The Players

**Who called whom?** Jeremy Gunn and Douglas Home called Joe O'Donnell of Witnesses/Consultants

## Description of the Call

**Date:** 01/29/97

**Subject:** ARRB Called Joe O'Donnell (Revised 1/31/97)

### **Summary of the Call:**

Jeremy Gunn and Doug Home called Joe O'Donnell this date, following up on the most recent Joe O'Donnell lead from Dr. Gary Aguilar. He confirmed that he did know Robert Knudsen in 1963, and that he was shown autopsy photographs of President Kennedy by Robert Knudsen.

The following is a summary of information provided by Mr. O'Donnell in response to questions asked by Mr. Gunn:

-Mr. O'Donnell was a government photographer, employed by USIA in 1963, who was frequently detailed to the White House to perform various photographic tasks during the Kennedy administration.

-He knew Mr. Robert L. Knudsen quite well, and had a close professional association with him circa 1963. He said that he always called Knudsen "Knutie," but had never met his family.

-Within the week after President Kennedy's assassination, on two occasions Robert Knudsen showed him autopsy photographs of President Kennedy.

-On the first occasion, he was shown approximately 12 ea 5" X 7" B & W photos. The views included the President lying on his back, on his stomach, and closeups of the back of the head. He said that the back-of-the-head photograph(s) showed a hole in the back of the head, about 2" above the hairline, about the size of a grapefruit; the hole clearly penetrated the skull and was very deep. Another one of the photographs showed a hole in the forehead above the right eye which was a round wound about 3/8" in diameter which he interpreted as a gunshot wound.

-The second occasion occurred a few days later, when Knudsen showed him a second set of photographs, once again about 12 ea 5" X 7" B & W prints. On this second occasion, the back-of-the-head photograph(s) was intact, and showed no hole in the back of the head. Instead of a hole, he remembers seeing neatly combed hair which looked slightly wet, or damp in appearance. Another photograph he remembers showed President Kennedy lying on his back, with an aluminum probe emerging from his stomach or right side (details were vague).

-He said it was his impression that Knudsen had taken the photographs himself, but that he had never specifically asked him that question. He said he never discussed with Knudsen the apparent discrepancy between the two back-of-the-head photos.

-He said Jacqueline Kennedy told him, in response to his questions about her apparent attempt to "escape" from the limousine in Dallas during the assassination, that she was not trying to escape, but rather was trying to retrieve a part of President Kennedy's head from the back of the limousine (i.e., the

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trunk lid).

Jeremy Gunn told Mr. O'Donnell at the conclusion of this first interview that ARRB would be contacting him soon to engage in further discussions on this matter, and Mr. O'Donnell said that was agreeable with him. END

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# CALL REPORT: PUBLIC



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB      Date Created: 02/28/97

## The Players

**Who called whom?**      Jeremy Gunn called Joe O'Donnell of Witnesses/Consultants, Douglas Home called Joe O'Donnell of Witnesses/Consultants, Dave Montague called Joe O'Donnell of Witnesses/Consultants, David Marwell called Joe O'Donnell of Witnesses/Consultants

## Description of the Call

**Date:**                    02/28/97  
**Subject:**                ARRB Interviewed Joe O'Donnell (Revised 3/03/97)

### **Summary of the Call:**

ARRB staff called Joe O'Donnell for the second time today to conduct a more in-depth interview on audiotape; our initial interview of Mr. O'Donnell was on January 29, 1997. The interview, conducted by Jeremy Gunn, lasted approximately 44 minutes.

We began by asking Mr. O'Donnell to describe to the best of his recollection his professional training in photography, and his photographic experience. He indicated he attended college at MIT in Boston, and at another institution in Oregon, but did not specify whether the training was in photography, and was unclear about whether or not he had received degrees from these institutions. He joined the Marine Corps in 1941 after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and ended up being assigned duties as a combat photographer for the Marine Corps during World War II. Although he received some training in aerial photography in PB4Y aircraft, he said that most of the photography he shot was on the ground. He said he photographed men in combat, and in the course of his duties he did have occasion to photograph wounded men, and to observe gunshot wounds. He said that he photographed both Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the ground following their destruction by atomic bombs, and that as a result (of radiation-induced physiological damage) he had a damaged spine, had to walk with two canes, and could no longer stand up straight. He mentioned with some bitterness that the government could locate neither his combat photographs from World War II, nor his Hiroshima and Nagasaki photographs, and said he felt this was a cover-up of some kind.

Following World War II, Mr. O'Donnell said he worked at a variety of commercial photographic endeavors, including, for a short time, a business started by his brother-in-law and him called Pictures, Inc. His memory of the timeframes for these various photographic endeavors was admittedly uncertain. At some point (circa 1948, as he recalled), he went to work for the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), and said he was often detailed to perform White House photography. He relayed to us various anecdotal recollections of photographic jobs he performed for the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations; he seemed unsure of exactly when he retired but seemed to remember doing so during the Johnson administration. He remembered that at one point during his employment, Edward R. Murrow was the director of USIA.

When asked to remember the names of other Federal photographers working at the White House (either from USIA, or from other agencies or arms of the Government), he remembered Oliver Pfeiffer, Frank Warner, and Joe Pinto from USIA, and "Knut" Knudsen and a motion picture man named Atkins from the Navy.

Mr. O'Donnell relayed, in some detail, the fact that he photographed President Kennedy's 1963 Veteran's Day (November 11) visit to Arlington Cemetery, in which, while viewing the city of Washington DC from the site of the Lee Mansion following his ceremonial duties, President Kennedy remarked, within earshot of Mr. O'Donnell, "I could live up here forever." Mr. O'Donnell stated that this event had a

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connection to the events of 11/22/63, to wit: he was responsible for setting up lighting for photographers at Andrews AFB while Air Force One was enroute from Love Field with the body of the slain President onboard, and said that after the plane landed ("about 4:00 A.M.," he said), he successfully demanded to briefly speak to Jacqueline B. Kennedy after she had gotten into the Navy ambulance, and that when he relayed to her the story about JFK saying he could "live up here forever (near the Lee Mansion)," she reportedly said to him, "then that is where we will put him," thus providing an explanation for how the idea of an Arlington burial site first came to the President's widow.

He confirmed that "Knut" Knudsen showed him post mortem photographs of the President on two separate occasions, sometime within a month after the assassination. Each time, he said Mr. Knudsen produced the photographs from, and returned them to, a manila envelope, and that he had no idea where Knudsen subsequently placed them. A summary of his recollections regarding the two separate events (at which he was shown post mortem photographs of President Kennedy by Knudsen) is provided below:

-First Viewing: He said Knudsen showed him about 12 each B & W glossy prints, about 5" X 7" in size, which were post mortem images of the President. He said the images were quite clear and that he assumed they were first generation prints. He said some images were close-ups of the head, some were close-ups of the shoulders, and that some were views of the entire body. He said that in some images the President was lying on his back, and in some images he was lying on his stomach. He said he remembers a photograph of a gaping wound in the back of the head which was big enough to put a fist through, in which the image clearly showed a total absence of hair and bone, and a cavity which was the result of a lot of interior matter missing from inside the cranium. He said that another image showed a small round hole above the President's right eye, which he interpreted as an entry wound made by the same bullet which exited from the large wound in the back of the head.

-Second Viewing: At a subsequent private viewing, he said Knudsen showed him approximately 6 to 8 (and no more than 10) additional glossy B & W prints of post mortem photographs of President Kennedy, in which the small round hole above the right eye was no longer visible, and in which the back of the head now looked completely intact. He said that the appearance of the hair in the "intact back of the head" photograph(s) was wet, clean, and freshly combed. His interpretation of the differences in the photographs of the President's head was to attribute the differences to the restorative work of the embalmers.

Mr. O'Donnell was asked whether he ever discussed the photographs with Mr. Knudsen, either during the viewings, or afterwards, and he said no--he felt privileged just to be able to see them, but that they were so disturbing that he didn't want to see them or think about them anymore.

Mr. O'Donnell further volunteered that he was asked to show Jacqueline Kennedy the Zapruder film in a private screening within a few weeks of the assassination; his recollection of the timing was uncertain. He said no one was present except Jacqueline Kennedy and him, and that the screening was held at the USIA screening room at the USIA building at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue. He said that when he asked her why she tried to escape from the limousine, she told him she was not trying to escape, but rather was trying to pick up pieces of the President's head from the top of the car's trunk lid, so that his head could be put back together. He said that following her viewing of the head shot sequence in the film, Jacqueline Kennedy told him in a very forceful way, "I don't ever want to see that again," which he said that he interpreted as an order to alter the film so as to remove the offending images of the head shot--namely, a halo of debris around the President's head. He told us he knows it was wrong, but that he removed about 10 feet of film from the Zapruder film. After Mr. O'Donnell was asked what format the film was, he stated it was 16 mm film; when asked if he was sure that it was 16 mm film, he said that yes, it was 16 mm film. When asked to estimate how many frames he removed, he simply repeated that he removed "about 10 feet of film." He said he has not seen the Zapruder film since that time. When he was asked whether he altered a copy of the film or the original, he said, "I had the original."

Mr. O'Donnell's memory was uneven. He sometimes had trouble remembering the names of Presidents. He also gave a different timing on his viewing of the two different showings of post-mortem photographs (i.e., both events within a month or so of the assassination) from his first interview (in which he said both viewings occurred within a week or so of the assassination). On the other hand, he appeared to remember with apparent precision some events from the 1940s through the 1960s. END

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