

United States and Japan were not easy reading. I looked around the plane and found that most of my colleagues were involved in the same task.

I was immersed in my reading sometime later when I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up. It was Robert Manning, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. "The Secretary wants to see you up forward," he said. Up forward was the private cabin reserved for the President, but used on this trip by the Secretary of State as the senior officer aboard.

I found the Secretary, grave-faced, holding a yellow piece of paper in his hand. I recognized it instantly as coming from the plane's teletype machine. Because this plane was used a great deal by the President, it carried sophisticated communications equipment not usually carried on commercial airliners. One of these extra communications items was a newspaper teletype. The other members of the Cabinet on the trip were already in the cabin. There was Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall, Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, and Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz.

As we waited for Myer Feldman of the White House staff and Walter Heller, the chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, I looked over Secretary Rusk's shoulder.

The words on the page were badly scrambled—but what I managed to read was unbelievable.

UPI-207

HANNOVER, GERMANY NOV. WW (UPI)—THE STATE
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BULLET NSSS

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I kept reading it over and over again as Feldman and Heller pushed their way into the cabin. The words stayed on the paper. They would not go away.

Secretary Rusk read us the last brief bulletin.

"My God!" gasped Orville Freeman. Luther Hodges started to sag toward the floor; he gripped a table with his hands and several of us eased him into one of the chairs.

Then there was an interminable silence as each man became lost in his private sorrow.

"We've got to turn back right now," I said to Secretary Rusk.

"That's right, but we have to verify this somehow. Get us in communication with the White House and see if you can get Admiral Felt at CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific]."

I pushed my way through the forward door of the cabin into the communications section of the plane. "Get the White House and Admiral Felt," I ordered the communicators, Sergeants Walter C. Baughman and Darrel Skinner.

In less than a minute, from almost 6000 miles away, I was talking to the White House Situation Room, the operating nerve center of the nation.

"Situation Room, this is Wayside [my code name]. Can you give me latest situation on Lancer [the President's code name]?"

The answer came right back: "He and Governor Connally have been hit in car in which they were riding."

I replied: "Please keep us advised. Secretary Rusk is on this plane headed for Japan. We are returning to Honolulu. Will be there in about two hours. We will need to be advised to determine whether some members should go direct to Dallas."

I put the microphone down and told Sergeant Baughman to keep the

line open and working on our call to Admiral Felt and stepped back into the cabin to report to Secretary Rusk. He promptly ordered the plane turned around.

The radio operator called me forward almost immediately to take a call from the Situation Room:

"AP bulletin is just coming out. President hit in the head. That just came in."

"Understand. President hit in the head," I replied, heading back to Secretary Rusk's cabin.

We were then 1200 miles from Wake Island and 800 miles from Hawaii.

Secretary Rusk had swiftly taken control of the situation. If the President lived, he felt it was essential that certain members of the party on the plane go immediately to Dallas, to his side. Others should get back to Washington as soon as possible. The Secretary decided that he, Bob Manning, and I should go to Dallas, and that the others on the plane should go back to the Capital.

Communications were established with Admiral Harry D. Felt. His information on the President's condition was the same we had received from the White House. The Secretary instructed him to have a fully fueled Boeing 707 standing by on the runway at Honolulu to take Manning, himself, and me to Dallas. The plane we were on was to refuel in Hawaii as quickly as possible and head back to Washington.

And then the radio was crackling again.

Situation Room: ". . . where are you, sir?"

Radio operator: "Wayside has gone in the back. We are two hours out of Honolulu."

Situation Room: ". . . hold Wayside on the line. More information coming up . . . I read from AP bulletin: 'Kennedy apparently shot in the head, fell face down, blood on his head, Mrs. Kennedy cried out . . . Connally half-seated slumped to the left, blood on face and forehead.'—Nothing further." Then a pause. "President and Governor Connally were rushed to Parkland Hospital near Dallas Trademart . . . will contact you if we get more."

The radio operator brought the report back to the private cabin and read it in clipped tones to the hushed room. Secretary Dillon just shook his head back and forth in disbelief.

In the front cabin there was more radio traffic.

Andrews Air Force Base tower: "869.72 [the number of our plane]. Mr. Murray Jackson [special assistant to Secretary of State Rusk] would like to talk to Colonel [Lieutenant Colonel James] Toomey [the pilot], and Colonel [Clare T.] Ireland [the co-pilot]."

Mr. Jackson: "Colonel Toomey, the President of the United States has been shot and seriously wounded in Dallas, Texas. Also, Governor Connally was shot at the same time."

Colonel Toomey: "We have already received that information on the UPI ticker, have turned around, and are one hour twenty minutes out of Honolulu."

The plane roared through the early morning skies. We were informed that a jet had been set up for a trip to Dallas, if necessary. I got two more messages.

The first was from "Stranger." He said our plane was to turn around and go back to Washington. I informed him we were already on our way back to Honolulu.

The second was from Mac Kilduff. "Wayside, Kilduff requests all Cabinet members to return to Washington immediately. We do not have any further word . . . stand by for Situation Room."

Situation Room: "Latest bulletin: 'President Kennedy has been given blood transfusions in efforts to save his life after being shot . . . President is still in emergency room, Connally moved to operating room.' Are you getting press coverage or do you want us to relay? We will have information on whether to proceed to Dallas upon your arrival in Honolulu."

My report of these messages seriously troubled Secretary Rusk. He wanted to know who Stranger was.

Aboard every presidential jet there is usually a White House codebook. We searched for it for about five minutes, but there was none aboard this plane.

"We have to know who Stranger is," Secretary Rusk said. "We don't know what is happening in Dallas. Who is the government now?"

And certainly this was a question running through everybody's mind. We had no further word on President Kennedy. Was his shooting an isolated event or part of a national or international conspiracy? Certainly, if the latter were true, our own plane was not immune to attack because any foreign power which had planned the shooting of the President would certainly not be unaware of the fact that six of his ten Cabinet members were in an airplane high over the Pacific.

The decision was made that I was to break the code and find out the identity of Stranger.

In a minute, I got the answer back. Stranger was Major Harold R. Patterson, a high-ranking officer in the White House Communications Agency. He was, at the time of his transmission to our plane, in Washington, D.C. I knew Patterson well. He was one of the most trusted members of the White House staff and he would not have sent us the message without very clear instructions.

I was just going back to the cabin to give Secretary Rusk this information when the Situation Room called again.

"Stand by for a moment. Waiting for confirmation of something . . . Hear you loud and clear . . . nothing further for you."

I stood by the radio. Thirty seconds passed. A minute. Then again:

"Wayside, this is Situation Room. We have conflicting reports now, getting no confirmation, will call you again. Your office has the information. We'll call you again when we get confirmation."

It was an agonizing message. I hoped for the best, but I suspected the worst. The next message did nothing to alleviate my fears.

"This is Murray Jackson. Can we get Secretary Rusk again. We want to tell the plane that Acting Secretary Ball wants all to return to Washington instead of going to Dallas. Have Secretary call Mr. Ball when he gets on the ground in Honolulu."

It was only seconds to the next message.

"Situation Room relays following to Wayside. Have report quoting Kilduff in Dallas that the President is dead. That he died about thirty-five minutes ago. New subject. Front office desires plane return to Washington with no stop in Dallas."

The President is dead. The words were unreal. The microphone dropped out of my hands.

I walked slowly back to Rusk's cabin. Tears were already streaking down my face.

"The President is dead," I told the Cabinet officers. Without another word being said, everyone bent his head and said his private prayer.

Secretary Rusk then walked to the microphone in the front of the plane and announced the President's death to the twenty-eight passengers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the Secretary of State speaking. We have received official confirmation that President Kennedy is dead. I am saddened to have to tell you this grievous news. We have a new President. May God bless our new President and our nation."

There was a cumulative cry of anguish from the passengers. I was standing at the front of the aisle, sobbing. My wife, Nancy, came up and held me, tears rushing down her face. Other wives reached for their husbands and the aisle was clogged.

Slowly the sobbing subsided, and those aboard returned to their seats and sat in stunned silence.

One thought kept going through my mind. I had been everywhere in the world with the President, from the small towns of America to Paris, and Rome, and Caracas, and Bogotá. I had been with him in the difficult campaign days when we were lucky to get twenty people in one group, to the tumultuous welcome he had received from two million in Mexico City. I wished I had been with him in Dallas.

In the forward cabin, Secretary Rusk took out a yellow pad of paper and slowly started to write out a joint statement from the Cabinet to be issued when we landed in Hawaii. He drafted a message of condolence to Mrs. Kennedy and a message of hope and support to the new President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson.

We kept our radio channels open to both Washington and Hawaii. It

soon became apparent that the new President was flying back to Washington from Dallas immediately, and we eliminated the requirement for the extra jet to go to Dallas. Instead, arrangements were made for the speediest possible refueling of the presidential jet and then a non-stop dash from Hawaii to Washington. The Cabinet delegation and their wives were ordered to stay on the plane in Honolulu when the plane landed so that there would be no impediment to speedy refueling.

We touched down at Hickam Field, one hour and fifty-five minutes after the original bulletin. Secretary Rusk and I hurried off the plane to contact Washington, and Bob Manning got off to give the press the Cabinet statement. There was a large crowd of press at the airport, but the Secretary and I walked by them without a word to a waiting car, and sped to the headquarters of the Pacific Command of the U. S. Air Force. There on different phones, I contacted the White House and the Secretary called the State Department.

I talked to Bromley Smith, the executive secretary of the National Security Council. His information matched that which we had already received. The new President was on his way to Washington. The same plane bore the President's casket and his widow.

We were to come to Washington immediately. It was possible President Johnson would call a Cabinet meeting as soon as we landed—if not then, at ten o'clock the next morning.

Secretary Rusk talked to Under Secretary of State George W. Ball. He ordered an immediate study, country by country, to see what foreign policy problems might be triggered by the assassination of the President.

Our work was over in less than ten minutes and we raced back to the plane.

The refueling took only fourteen minutes and we were airborne again in twenty-two minutes. Now a fitful silence developed. Occasionally, someone would start to cry again.

Somebody, I don't know who, suggested we have a poker game to pass the time. It was certainly the most bizarre poker game I have ever been in. We played for table stakes. People threw money around as if it were worth nothing. There was none of the joking and asides that one usually finds in a poker game. There was only dead-serious betting in hushed voices.

It seems now, looking back, almost sacrilegious to have played poker at such a time. But if there had not been that game, it is hard to tell what would have happened on that plane, so high were the emotions.

After a while, however, the poker game could not keep our attention, and some of us slowly drifted forward to Secretary Rusk's cabin.

There, the topic of conversation was what kind of a man would kill President Kennedy. I remember now that there was almost unanimous

opinion at the time that it would have to be a militant right-winger from the lunatic fringe of Dallas.

The messages kept coming off the wire service machine and finally one started grinding out the story of Lee Harvey Oswald and his previous life in Russia and his membership in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

This went against all the preconceived theories we had established.

"If this is true," Secretary Rusk said, "this is going to have repercussions around the world for years to come." His words were prophetic because even today, only in the United States is the report of the Warren Commission, fixing the sole responsibility on Oswald, widely believed.

It took us only eight hours and thirty-one minutes to make the non-stop flight from Honolulu to Andrews Air Force Base. We arrived there at 12:31 A.M., Washington time, and stepped out of the plane into a barrage of lights from television cameras.

Secretary Rusk made a brief statement on behalf of the Cabinet. Then I started wandering out of the lights and into the darkness of the airfield. I heard my White House driver calling, "Mr. Salinger," and I tumbled into the car for the drive back to the White House.

The lobby was crowded with reporters, the way it had been during the Cuban missile crisis and at the time of the release of Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot shot down over Russia in 1960.

I avoided the newsmen by coming in the west basement entrance of the White House and slipping in the back door of my office. My two principal secretaries, Chris Camp and Sue Mortensen Vogelsinger, were sitting in the office, weeping. Andy Hatcher and Mac Kilduff were there awaiting my arrival, and Paul Southwick, another member of the staff, was at Bethesda Naval Hospital with Mrs. Kennedy.

Thought of rest was impossible. Weariness was replaced by numbness, and I plunged into work, almost like a sleepwalker. I talked to Ken O'Donnell and Dave Powers at the hospital, and learned that the President's body would be brought back to the White House sometime after 4 A.M. I walked over to the East Room of the White House where the body was to lie in state to check the arrangements and then out to the north driveway, where a military honor guard was already forming.

At four twenty-five in the morning, a black hearse drove through the northwest gate and past the squad of Marines standing at attention.

Another honor guard stood at attention inside the north portico of the White House and lined the corridors to the East Room. The casket of President Kennedy was carried by a group of men representing all of our military services.

Following the casket came Mrs. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, other members of the family, and some of the President's

close associates—Ken O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

The casket was placed on a black-draped catafalque in the center of the room while four guards took their places at the corners.

Mrs. Kennedy walked forward slowly and knelt by the casket in silent prayer. She then leaned forward and kissed the casket and slowly walked out of the door of the East Room.

Our chief was home. And for the first time since I had stared incredulously at the piece of yellow paper in the hands of the Secretary of State, I began to believe he was really dead.

The rest of the night is a blur. I went back to my office for several hours. Mrs. Kennedy had invited O'Brien, O'Donnell, and me to spend the night sleeping at the White House in the quarters on the third floor, over the rooms where she and the President had lived.

We sat on the edge of the bed talking for a half hour or so, trying to piece together and relive the events of the day—as if our sharing them might make them more bearable.

George Thomas was there, too. George had been the President's butler for almost twenty years. He had laid out the President's clothes, drawn his baths, fixed him a highball before supper. He had traveled throughout the world with him. And now here he was with no President, with no one to take care of. In that moment, when the major human bond he had known in his life had been torn from him, he needed someone to take care of. He occupied himself by making drinks for Ken, Larry, and me, by turning down our beds, and by laying out our clothes for the following morning.

Finally, about 7 A.M., we went to sleep.

At 8 A.M., the phone by my bed rang. I picked it up.

The operator said, "Mr. Salinger, the President is calling." And for that instantaneous second, I thought to myself, it was all a dream, he wasn't really dead.

And then another voice came on the phone. "Pierre, this is Lyndon Johnson."