

**Remembrances of a Young AG**  
**The Day President Kennedy Died**  
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Early Friday afternoon, 22 November, 1963. It was one of those days/events that everybody remembers exactly where they were.

Our AG "A" school class had just returned from chow around 1330 local, and we were in "Surface Obs" (Surface Observations) class. Suddenly, the command's senior Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant came through the door and he proceeded directly to the instructor's podium disrupting him right in the middle of his lecture. Before he said anything, you could tell that "something was up" by his more than normal stern military, all business look and demeanor. (As a side note, under ordinary circumstances this very military sergeant would never break military protocol and be so discourteous to another instructor.) Knowing his reputation, this got my immediate attention; and he announced in a very serious manner (paraphrasing from memory), "President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas. Nothing more is known at this time. We will provide more information when we have more details. Standby." Then he walked out of the room.

To say we were shocked would be an understatement. Our instructor told everyone to stand down from instruction for the time being while awaiting more info. We all milled around and went into a "What the ....?" discussion mode. As I remember it, we all started coming up with theories of what was going on. The most dominate theory was that "the Russians" had something do with it and does this mean we may be going to war? A short time later, the Master Gunny returned and announced that the president was dead. Classes were dismissed through the weekend at that point, and then later suspended until sometime after the president's burial. We all went back to our respective barracks rooms and continued speculating upon who, what, how, and why.

Several of my classmates/friends and I were listening to TV and radio taking in all the information that was now flowing in and continued to speculate on what had happened. (Unfortunately, at this point in my life, I can't remember any of their names.) Things moved pretty fast from there. It was announced to the public that the president's body was being moved back to D.C. and would lay in state in the White House and then be moved to the Capitol rotunda for viewing. At some point in our discussions someone said (again, paraphrasing), "Why don't we go to D.C. and see what we can see?" At first, this just seemed like idle talk, but one person in our group actually had a car there at Lakehurst. It was almost unheard of in those days for an A school student to have their own personal car while attending training, but he did. He volunteered his car for the trip. Long story short, late Sunday night, four of us jumped into his car and made the spontaneous four hour drive to D.C. with just enough money for gas and food, no hotel arrangements, no change of clothes, just wearing our dress blues on our backs. No plan other than to "see what we could see", and participate in history however we could.

We arrived in D.C. about 0400 Monday morning. By this time we knew that the president's body had been moved to the Capitol rotunda for viewing. Thinking that there wouldn't be very much of a line at this time of day, if any at all, we drove into the area of the Capitol with the intent to participate in the viewing. Wow! Wrong answer! When we got there, the line was already 15-20 feet across and many, many blocks long! We became somewhat discouraged at that point. Since it was 0400 Monday and we had not had any sleep for approximately 24 hours, we determined we needed to get some shut-eye. However, we had no hotel and not much money (E-2 post-tax pay in those days was \$32/every two weeks), so we parked on Pennsylvania Avenue and crashed in the car.

When we were awakened by the sun later that morning we determined that we'd check the viewing line again. Of course, the line had only grown exponentially. It also seemed as though the population of Washington, D.C. had also doubled while we slept. So, we gave up on the idea of viewing the president's body and determined to hang around the "Mall" with everyone else that had come to town for the viewing, ceremonies, and funeral procession. An historical event.

After a while we had the thought of going to the Capitol building anyway, even though we had given up on actually being able view the president's casket, and just hang out, to take in what all was going on. We wound up in area off to the side of the viewing line entrance, by an unused side door, with no expectation of getting in, just to take in an awe invoking experience that everyone understood to be a significant historical event and to, at some level, experience and participate in history ourselves.

Shortly after our arrival, that side entrance door opened, and out came a sailor (E-3, Seaman) in full dress blues (like us) with leggings and, I think, a white ascot (not like us). It was fairly obvious that he was part of the Capitol military ceremonial guard. He had come outside to take a smoke break and engaged us in conversation, wanted to know what we doing there. We explained that we had come from Lakehurst to view the president's body in the rotunda but had given up on the idea because of the line size and it was useless to try anyway because the president's body was to be moved soon. He put out his cigarette and said, "Come with me." He took us into the rotunda and put us at the head of the viewing line! We couldn't believe our luck. At the right place, at the right time. A shining example of sailors looking after sailors.

Meanwhile, back in Texas, at that same moment, my parents, who knew nothing of where I was at that point in time, were watching the live nationwide TV transmission of the president's body lying in state in the rotunda. My mother took notice of a young sailor going by the president's casket and said to my father, "That young sailor looks just like Robert." But they were sure that it was just their imaginations because Robert was not in D.C., "he's stationed in New Jersey." Little did they know, but in a subsequent conversation later that day, I related that I had been there that day and we were able to coordinate the timing of events and determined that my parents had actually seen me on TV that day.

Not long after our departing the Capitol building, the president's body was removed from the rotunda for the funeral mass and final procession. While the funeral was ongoing, our group returned to the mall to await the processional parade along the route to Arlington. I've never seen so many dignitaries and senior military personnel in one place at one time, and haven't since. There were so many that they even had O-4's (pretty junior for that day) on crowd control!

Then finally, we experienced the funeral procession to Arlington. The visuals, the millions along the route to Arlington, the Washington Monument, the Marine Band, Jackie, the Kennedy's, Lyndon Johnson and Ladybird, the many world leaders and dignitaries, the caisson pulled by six grey horses, the rider less horse, the marching bands, the military units, the long line of black limo's, etc. The feelings and emotions of national political uncertainty, potential for military conflict, solemnity, sorrow and loss. These and all the events of the day combined to create for this 17 year old Texan, one heck of an historical life event.

Shortly thereafter we returned to Lakehurst....and a new world.

Submitted by AGC Robert Davis, USN (Ret)