

REMEMBERING JFK.

Here I am, nearly twenty-seven years of age, sitting in the gutter of a street about one block from the White House. It is 8:30 A.M. on a cold November morning in 1963. No, this is not a down-and-out story. There were thousands of people lining the streets that morning. Estimates ran as high as one million persons. We were there for the funeral of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, made shortly after midnight on a Sunday evening. I was accustomed to the long drive to Washington, D.C. Three years earlier it was part of my regular route to and from the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Virginia. At that time, Route 40 was the principal highway. Now – just eleven days ago – President Kennedy opened the new interstate highway between Wilmington Delaware and Baltimore, Maryland. We could access that new interstate at Chester, Pennsylvania. Although the route was officially designated Interstate-95, state leaders in Maryland and Delaware were already talking about naming the highway in memory of President Kennedy. Driving on the limited access road was much easier than navigating the old Route 40, with its 120-mile string of traffic lights. Still, it was a long, dark drive. Dawn was breaking when we arrived at the Capitol grounds. Our first job was to find a parking space. Thanks to our 7:00 A.M. arrival time, parking was not a problem.

The radio announced that the funeral cortege would leave the Capitol Building at 8:30



A.M. Members of the public would be admitted to the rotunda until that time. We walked up to the Capitol. A line of people stretched out of the rotunda, down the steps, and across the plaza – and the line was getting longer by the minute. If we waited in that line, there was little chance that we would reach the rotunda by 8:30. Instead, we decided to stake out an observation point on the route of the procession to the Cathedral. The only problem with that plan was that we didn't know where the Cathedral was located, or what route the procession would take.

There were hundreds of people milling around: tourists like us, and policemen and members of the military

who were assisting with security. Everyone was helpful. We were told that the funeral procession would start at the White House and proceed north on 17th Street about four blocks to Connecticut Avenue, and then another block to St. Matthew's Cathedral. It was about a two-mile walk from the Capitol to 17th Street. We were among the first persons to take a vantage point at that location. Gradually, additional observers arrived and the site became quite crowded. The growing crowd ebbed and flowed like a tide. Pretty soon there were several people in front of me. Unless I was satisfied with photos of the backs of their heads, something had to be done to improve my vista. That was when I decided to take my place in the gutter.

I was concerned that the police and the secret service might tell me to put away my camera for fear that the small metallic object might be a pistol. Several policemen approached me but apparently I looked harmless; they walked away without saying anything. Then, a disturbing thought struck me. I did not know what to expect in the way of a funeral procession. It was just the third day after President Kennedy was murdered. Confusion reigned. Federal agents and Dallas police officials openly clashed over who was in control of the crime scene. The Dallas coroner ordered that Kennedy's body not be removed from Dallas until an autopsy was conducted. Kennedy's people disregarded that order. There was a great deal of speculation about the funeral. Only yesterday was it announced that the funeral Mass would be celebrated at St. Matthew's Cathedral and the burial would be at Arlington National Cemetery. There had not been much time to make elaborate arrangements. I expected that there would be a few military units on parade, but now I began to worry it might be just a line of black limousines with dark-tinted windows racing up the street to the Cathedral. That would hardly be memorable.

We heard it long before we saw anything: the tattoo of muffled drums in the distance, the plaintive wail of bagpipes, the creaking of wooden wagon wheels, their metal rims crushing the



stony street, and the clackety-clack-clack of steel horseshoes striking cobblestones. The sidewalks of 17th Street were jammed with people. It was a human canyon. Down that canyon came a swirl of color: the traditional red uniforms of the United States Marine Corps Band, "the President's Own," a 9-

man contingent from Scotland's Black Watch wearing green tunics and red tartan kilts with large, shaggy black bearskin headdress.

By 1963, most of the cobblestones on Seventeenth Street had been paved over with macadam.

cobblestones served as a cobblestone pulled by six sergeant on horseshoes stones.

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But the macadam did not cover the in the center of the street where they bed for trolley tracks. Down this path came a flag-draped caisson, white horses accompanied by a horseback. With every step, steel clattered sharply against the hard Adding to the cacophony of hoof prancing quarter-horse named Black saddle empty and two boots reversed

in the stirrups. He was an equine tap-dancer, and the cobblestones were his stage.

Behind Black Jack walked Jacqueline Kennedy, dressed in black and flanked by the president's two brothers. Behind the Kennedys marched Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson, and then many of the world's leaders. Charles de Gaulle, of France, and Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, stood out in the crowd. De Gaulle was the tallest in the group, and Selassie, although the smallest, was resplendent in his black and gold braided uniform. There were officials from all branches of government, including the members of the Supreme Court of the United States. At both sides of each row of dignitaries were two or three security personnel, each looking to the back of the crowd and overhead to the windows and roofs of nearby buildings.



And yes, the military services were there.

Soldiers, sailors, Coast Guard, Marines, Air Force, Special Forces, women's units, the military academies, bands and choirs were all in attendance. There was constant movement; and the creak of the caisson and the clatter of the horseshoes continued to resound up and down the length of that lonely street. It took about thirty minutes for the entire procession to pass by our

location. At that point, I pulled myself out of the gutter and we began our two-mile trek back to the place where we parked the car.

It was a quiet ride home. Nonetheless, we were glad that we made the effort to attend JFK's final ceremony.

However difficult it may be to paint a word picture that captures the intensity of emotion that gripped our country in 1963, I remember it. I can still see it clearly; I can still hear it. Dominating that memory is the sound of prancing steel horseshoes on the cobblestones, set against the creak and crunch of wooden wagon wheels and the clatter of the draught horses. I'll never forget that sound.



Sights and sounds are easy to remember; less so the unspoken thoughts that occur during the course of an historic event. Hardly had we reached our vantage point on 17th Street when my thoughts wandered back to a time in April 1945 – I was then eight years old. My father told me to get into the car, and he drove to 6th & Sedgley Avenue, where the overpass provided an excellent view of the railroad tracks below. Along with about one hundred other people, we watched a funeral train as it carried the body of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt north to his grave in Hyde Park, New York. At the time, I wondered whether there was some required ritual for those of us who watched the funeral train pass by. Some people waived; others saluted. Dad said that he just wanted to be there out of respect for the commander-in-chief whom he so greatly admired. I felt the same way about JFK. As the caisson rolled by, I half whispered, “Kennedy, I am here.”

