21 JFK cops who heard a grassy knoll shot

August 15, 2014

Strange but true:

At least two dozen, and perhaps as many as four dozen, of the witnesses to the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963 thought at least one gunshot came from in front of the presidential motorcade, a claim rejected by the Warren Commission and most U.S. news organizations.

Richard Chamin has proposed a statistical proof of a shot from the front.

Another way to think about the matter is to review the eyewitness accounts, especially those of people with crime scene training.

Assessing earwitness testimony

Defenders of the U.S. government’s semi-official theory that the 35th president, a liberal Democrat, was shot from behind by a psychopathic leftist will dismiss the earwitness accounts. Earwitness testimony, say crime scene investigators, is notoriously unreliable.

But not always. After all, it is well-documented that some earwitnesses of JFK’s assassination proved to have good hearing that day. Several dozen people reported hearing gunshots from above and behind the presidential motorcade. Their perception was accurate.

President Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally were both wounded in the back. The location of their wounds proved that Oswald (or someone else) was firing from above and behind and had assaulted the motorcade. The earwitnesses in Dealey Plaza proved right.

So what about the several dozen people who said a shot also came from in front of JFK’s car? Were they mistaken? Or could they have been right too?

The issue is well documented. Stewart Galanor says 52 earwitnesses said they thought one or more shots came from front of the motorcade. Richard Chamin says 80 witnesses heard a knoll shot. Even John McCammon, a die-hard anti-conspiracy theorist, agrees that at least 30 witnesses spoke of hearing a gunshot from in front of the motorcade.

Railroad worker S.M. Holland, who was watching from the Triple Underpass, says he heard a rifle report and saw smoke from behind the stockade fence atop the grassy knoll. (Watch Holland tell his story here.)

The area was searched by police within minutes of JFK’s assassination. No gunman was found.

Corroborating earwitness testimony

Law enforcement and criminal justice professionals agree that photographic evidence is more reliable than earwitness testimony.

What about the infamous home movie of the assassination made by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder. What does it tell us about the source of the shots?

The film captures, in terrible detail, the six seconds in which the commander in chief lost his life. The film shows Kennedy jolted forward when he was struck in the back by a bullet. A few seconds later, the film shows JFK head snapping backwards and to the left from the fatal shot.

The Zapruder film lends credence to — some say corroborates — the earwitness testimony that the fatal shot came from the front and to the right.
Among the earwitnesses to JFK's murder were no less than 21 law enforcement officers.

While earwitness testimony is unreliable, these 21 cops were probably better earwitnesses than most. All of them were within 150 feet from JFK when the shots rang out. They were trained in the use of firearms and they were experienced in crime scene investigation.

Most importantly, they were dispersed at various around the park-like area of Dealey Plaza, which means they would have heard different echo patterns, a frequent source of faulty earwitness testimony.

What did these earwitnesses say about the origins of the gunshot that killed JFK?

21 cops

Twenty one officers said their reaction to the gunfire was to go search the area famously known as "the grassy knoll."

The unanimity of their reaction is striking. On November 22, after hearing gunfire near the presidential motorcade, they all converged on the parking lot and the railroad yard, lined by a stockade fence, on top of a grassy embankment overlooking the motorcade route.

The Warren Commission ignored all of this testimony, even from cops. The Warren Report said there was "no evidence" of a shot from the front.

That is the sort of misleading statement that prompted a majority of Americans to mistrust the Warren Commission's conclusions about the causes of JFK's assassination.

There was credible evidence, in the form of earwitness testimony, that JFK was killed by a shot from the front. Here's some of it.

What 21 cops said — and did — after JFK was shot

1) Secret Service man Paul E. Landis, Jr., was riding the rear right running board of the third car in the presidential motorcade. After JFK's assassination, he wrote:

"My immediate thought was that the President could not possibly be alive after being hit like he was. I still am not certain from which direction the second shot came, but my reaction at the time was the shot came from somewhere towards the front right-hand side of the road."

2) Secret Service man Forrest Sorrels was riding in the lead car of the motorcade when he heard the shots. He said he "turned around to look up on this terrace part there, because the sound sounded like it came from the back and up in that direction."

Like many other witnesses Sorrells used the term "terrace" to refer to the area famously known as "the grassy knoll." There is a monument structure in this part of Dealey Plaza overlooking the street where JFK's motorcade was passing. Adjacent to the structure is a parking lot and a railroad yard separated by a line of trees.

Sorrells repeated this observation to the Warren Commission:

"And, as I said, the noise from the shots sounded like they may have come back up or the terrace there...

But the reports seemed to be so loud that it sounded like to me — in other words, that my first thought, somebody up on the terrace, and that is the reason I looked there."

3) Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry was driving the lead car in the motorcade. In a deposition taken in April 1964, Curry said:

"I heard a sharp report. We were near the railroad yards at this time, and I didn't know — I didn't know exactly where this report came from, whether it was above us or where, but this followed by two more reports (Warren Commission, Vol. XII, 28)."

The week after this deposition, Curry was in Washington testifying at great length before the Commission — but he was not asked about where he thought the shots came. He did say where he ordered his men to search for the gunman.

"I said over the radio, I said: "Get someone up in the railroad yard and check." (IV. 161)

Curry's memory, though not his language, is confirmed by the audio recording of Dallas Police Department's radio communications that day. On recording Curry is heard to say, "Get a man on top of that triple underpass and see..."
what happened up there." He was referring to
the area in front of JFK's limousine.

4) Deputy sheriff Eugene Boone ran towards
the knoll and then the railroad yard as soon as
he heard the shots (XIX, 507, VII, 105-9).

5) Deputy constable Seymour Weitzman, like
most of the other deputies, was standing at the
corner of Main and Houston when he heard the
shots. He ran toward the President's car and
climbed over a wall in "the monument section,"
looking for the assassin (IV, 161).

6) Roger Craig, too, on hearing the first shot,
rushed to the railroad yard behind the
grassy knoll on Elm Street" and then the railroad yards (XIX, 524).

7) Harold Eikins was more explicit:

"I immediately ran to the area from which it sounded like the shots had
been fired. This is an area between the railroad and the Texas School
Book Depository which is east of the railroad. (XIX, 540)"

8) "Lummer" Lewis, 9) A. D. McCurley, 10) Luke Monney, and 11) W. W. Nabra all
heard the shots the same way and ran to search the grassy knoll and the freighthouse. (XIX,
526, 514, 541, 526).

12) The shots sent Deputy Sheriff J. L. Oxford running toward the triple underpass (XIX,
530).

13) L. C. Smith's reaction to the shots was to climb the fence behind the grassy knoll and
search the parking lot (XIX, 516).

14) Deputy I. C. Todd ran to the railroad tracks, as did 15) Ralph Walters and radio officer
16) Jack Watson (XIX, 543, 505-6, 522).

17) Harry Weatherford told much the same story about when he heard the sound of
gunfire. He knew what it was: (XIX, 502)

"I thought to myself that this was a rifle and I started towards the corner
when I heard the third report ... By this time I was running toward the
railroad yards where the sound seemed to come from."

18) Deputy sheriff Buddy Walthers (XIX, 502) was riding behind JFK's car in the
motorcade. He wrote a memo about what he did on November 22. He told much the same
story when he testified in Washington in July 1964.

Walthers heard three shots, ran across Dealey Plaza until he reached the parking area
behind the now-familiar "concrete structure on the knoll" (VII, 544-5). He recalled

"At the time there was something in my head that said that they probably
could have been coming from the railroad overpass, because I thought
since I had got splattered with blood – I was just a little back and left of –
a little back and left of Mrs. Kennedy but I didn't know."

His second choice for the source of the gunfire was the Texas School Book Depository. (VI,
294-5).

19) After the shots were fired, Clyde
Haygood tried to jump the north curb of Elm Street
with his motorcycle and, failing, parked it on the
street and ran to the knoll looking for any sign of
the assassin. (VI, 297-8).

20) Joe Marshall Smith had his back to the
Depository on Elm Street when the shots rang out.
"I didn't know where the shots came from," he said,
but ran "to an area immediately behind the
cement structure" and checked the bushes and all
the cars in the parking lot behind the knoll. (VII,
533-6).

21) Edgar Leon Smith, Jr., stood on the east curb
of Houston Street about 150 feet from the
Depository. He guessed the first two shots were
firecrackers but, after the third shot, he drew his
pistol and ran down Elm Street.

Wesley Liebeler, a Warren Commission attorney
asked him to clarify by referring to a map before
Given the unreliability of eyewitness testimony, such accounts cannot be dispositive in determining the source of the gunshot that killed JFK.

Some people say it is foolish to think that President Kennedy was killed in the crossfire of two assassins. Others will say it foolish to dismiss the testimony of 21 cops at the scene of a crime.

What do you think?

A note on sources:

This account is adapted from an essay "JFK Witnesses: The Grassy Knoll," written by Harold Feldman.

Stewart Galiner, a teacher and JFK researcher, did the most thorough accounting of eyewitness and eyewitness testimony from the crime scene. He compiled the statements of 216 witnesses and provides links to their statements.

Professor John McAdams, a defender of the lone nut theory, says that "only" 53 witnesses thought a shot came from in front of the presidential motorcade. His efforts to dismiss evidence that conflicts with his theory are more revealing than persuasive. You can read it here.

Tags: Buddy Walthers, Dallas Police Department, Forrest Sorrels, Jesse Curry

259 comments

JSA
September 24, 2013 at 8:13 am

Witness Gordon Arnold claimed that he had attempted, prior to the arrival of the presidential motorcade, to film from the railroad overpass, but was waived off by someone who presented a Secret Service badge to him. According to Arnold, he moved to a dirt mound in front of the picket fence on the "grassy knoll" where he filmed the motorcade as it moved down Elm Street. He described two shots as being fired over his head from behind, stating that he "hit the dirt" after feeling the first shot hit his left shoulder. Arnold indicated that he remained lying down for the duration of the shooting until he was confronted by two policemen who confiscated his film and ordered him to leave the area. He suggested that he had been afraid to report the incident due to claims of "peculiar" deaths of witnesses to the assassination.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon_Arnold

Also, at least one Dallas policeman said that someone flashed a Secret Service badge when he rushed up the hill and encountered this man (who flashed the badge) behind the fence. From everything I've read, there was NO Secret Service detail behind the fence, in the adjoining parking lot, or on the railroad overpass. If true, this indicates (to me) that either the Secret Service was INCREDIBLY negligent or they participated in keeping away from this insecure and vulnerable check point in the motorcade.

Reply

Phil Gurholt
September 24, 2013 at 5:45 pm

I think Arnold's claims are suspect because there is nothing that I am aware of corroborating him being in the plaza that day. I give more credibility to policeman Smith who reported encountering a man showing Secret Service credentials.

Reply

George Simmons
September 25, 2013 at 3:54 am

I have always found the testimony of Dallas Police Officer Joe Marshall Smith to be intriguing:

"I got to make this statement too. I felt awfully silly, but after the shot and this woman, I pulled my pistol from my holster and I thought this is silly, I don't know who I am looking for and I put it back. Just as I did he showed me that he was a secret service agent...he saw me coming with my pistol and right away showed me who he was."