By CRAIG COLGAN

John Stringer sat at a table on the deck next to the backyard pool at his Vero Beach home and looked stunned.

"I'm very surprised," he said. "I have no explanation for this. It's just wrong."

What caused this reaction was his hearing what Stringer identified as his own voice, played back to him in a tape recording from Aug. 25, 1972. On the tape, Stringer, the medical photographer at the autopsy of President John F. Kennedy, was describing to researcher David Lifton in a phone interview what the president's head wound looked like that night.

LIFTON: When you lifted him out, was the main damage to the skull on the top or in the back? STRINGER: In the back.

LIFTON: In other words, the main part of his head that was blasted away was in the occipital part of the skull?

STRINGER: Yes, in the back part.

As the 21-year-old phone interview progressed, it was Lifton's turn to be stunned. As a researcher studying the medical evidence in the case of the assassinated 35th president, he knew that a large hole in the back—the occipital bone—of the president's head meant a bullet exited there, meaning a shot from the front. Several others in the autopsy room at Bethesda Naval Hospital that night, Nov. 22, 1963, told Lifton the same thing. They were Navy corpsmen, assistants and technicians who had been made to sign orders preventing them from speaking to anyone about what they saw.

In Lifton's interviews—including the 1972 phone interview with Stringer—and in searching the medical school's chief of photography until he retired in 1974 when he and his wife Janet moved to Vero Beach. Mrs. Stringer died in July of this year of cancer. Following the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Secret Service agents at Bethesda told Stringer to be the location for what would turn out to be one of the most controversial autopsies in history.

Kennedy was a Navy veteran, so during the return flight Jacqueline Kennedy chose Bethesda to be the location for what would turn out to be one of the most controversial autopsies in history. That evening, Dr. James J. Humes, director of laboratories at Bethesda, told Stringer to "stand by for a call at home." Stringer said he thought the president's body was coming to Bethesda.

"As I went home and I was getting ready to sit down to dinner and Dr. Humes called and said to come back, we need you."
Several books, most recently "Case Closed" by Gerald Posner (pictured right), have delved into the JFK controversy. Some build cases for conspiracy while others, like Posner's current best-seller, defend the official government findings in the assassination.

"One Of The Best Medical Photographers In The World"

Stringer was called "... in my opinion, one of the best medical photographers in the world" by Dr. James J. Humes, director of laboratories at Bethesda Medical Center and one of the autopsy surgeons, in a 1992 article on the assassination in The Journal of the American Medical Association. Humes and two other doctors performed the autopsy that Friday evening, Nov. 22, 1963. Stringer, at the time, was the oldest member of the autopsy team that also included several young Naval corpsmen.

Stringer said he, along with a Navy assistant, Floyd Riebe, assembled their equipment, which included a four-by-five camera on a large tripod and two speedlight flashes on rollers, and rolled everything through the corridors from their photo lab to the morgue, "which was maybe three blocks away," through the large complex's basement.

Stringer said the casket upon arrival was opened immediately to reveal the body wrapped in X-ray machine, he said.

"Then they took the films up to the X-ray department on the fourth floor and they processed them and brought them back and put them up on the view boxes in the morgue so (the autopsy doctors) could see them," Stringer said. During this time the body was weighed and measured.

The autopsy room began to fill up with all sorts of people, he said. "Some admirals, people who had been on the plane, Secret Service people, White House staff, what did the head wound look like when you first saw it? (It looked like it had been hacked open," he said.

Please See STRINGER/3C
A Critic's View

A statement is interesting since Llfton found in the FBI report of the autopsy a statement that the surgeon found, "surgery of the head area, namely in the top of the skull," when no surgery was done in Dallas. Llfton said he thinks the body was interrupted somehow before the autopsy and altered to appear as if shots came from the back.

"The key to this whole thing is the report because it's the autopsy that's the diagram of the shooting - it's the body that's the diagram of the shooting," Llfton said.

As you either have to have in the autopsy room someone who is willing to lie to the investigators or the body has to lie to the doctors, and I think this is a situation where the body was made to lie to the doctors.

As to how Llfton said the "plotter" achieved alteration of Kennedy's body to falsify the autopsy record, reading his very detailed book is advised.

Llfton documents that, for the most part, doctors in Dallas as well as several members of the autopsy support team at Bethesda saw evidence of a frontal shot, and did not report existing wounds as documented in the official autopsy report and in the photographs themselves. Llfton suggests there must have been "recollection" before photographs were taken that night.

A writer for Texas Monthly in a 1960 story described the problem: "and now, a quarter of a century later, official photographs showed the back of the head so pristine that the president might have been in a barber chair waiting for a trim."

But Stringer agreeing with Llfton in 1972 when Llfton said "the main part that was blasted away was in the occipital part of the skull" is important to Llfton.

"I have an unimpeachable interview with him," Llfton said. "Stringer thinks you can just go back on it and erase the past. Well, you can't erase the past. Now, Stringer is not involved in a plot to kill President Kennedy, but he is monkeying around with the historical record, or he's trying to.

"ultimately, it's not going to matter. The truth will come out with these pictures, whether they are incorrect because the yeses not authentic or because there was a reconstruction done.

"It's just like the Dallas doctors, some of them who were witness to his initial view in "Case Closed".

"It's too late, I'm sorry folks, you're reading too late. Your first hat is if you were witness to history, the second hat is you can be a reader in your living room of these stories years later.

"Stringer I believe has gotten into this mode."

Other Witnesses

Others in the autopsy room that night might say things they saw contrary to the official version, including two interviewed by the Press Journal and agreed with Stringer's 1972 version.

With the photographs that night, in a phone interview from his home in Oklahoma, Riebe said he did not describe a tiny bullet entrance wound as one of the photos show.

"It was a hole you could put your hand in," he said. "Now does he explain photos that show otherwise?

"I can't," he said.

Riebe said he also cannot explain why in the National Archives inventory of the photos signed by the autopsy doctors and Stringer, five rolls of 35-millimeter film Riebe said he exposed of the overall scene in the morgue that night are not included.

He asked, "What happened to them?"

Paul O'Connor was an autopsy technician that night, and now lives in North Florida. "I don't want to talk to anybody a damn liar, but something is wrong," he said.

"Remember thinking to myself, a bomb went off in his head," O'Connor said of his initial reaction to seeing the president's head wound. "The hole was gigantic, 3-by-4 inches at least."

He possesses prints of several autopsy photos and he is skeptical about their origin.

"When one picture shows the head all torn apart and other shows it all put back nice and neat, somebody has messed with these pictures. Something is wrong.

"O'Connor also reported the body arrived in a body bag and in a plane gray shipping casket, when the official version is that it arrived wrapped in a sheet, a plastic lining, in an elaborate bronze case.

The Dallas doctors said they observed a head wound in the rear that was only 1% inch at its widest, and that they could see the cerebellum, which is the bottom rear portion of the brain, through the wound. The official autopsy report lists a wound 9-by-12 inches wide.

In a Scriveri Howard News Service story in 1982, autopsy X-ray technician Jerrol Custer of Pittsburgh said he saw a gaping hole at the back of the head, and believes the X-rays in the collection at the National Archives are not what he took.

"Two Dallas doctors, Dr. Charles Crenshaw and Dr. Robert McClelland, still insist the back of the head was where the obvious blown-out exit wound had been, and believe the X-rays came from the front."

Stringer's account in a recent 1988 interview is supported by what the photos show and what the autopsy doctors reported: a small entry wound in the back of the head and a large exit wound on the side, unseen in the photo. But Llfton said that in 1972 Stringer got the morgue room so closed to Figure 1 or 2.

A 1988 Documentary


In an interview from her office in New York, Hal-Kallas said the reason she decided to send a crew to Verona Beach was the idea that a woman would happen after speaking with photographers and asking him to participate. It was conversation Stringer agreed to an on-camera interview.

When the camera crew arrived Stringer's story had changed said Stanhope Gould, a producer who also is currently at ABC and who conducted the 1988 on-camera
“Memory And History

The medical evidence is the most convoluted and complicated aspect of the case,” said Posner, author of the anti-conspiracy book "Case Closed.

Posner wrote a letter to Stringer in February 1992 seeking his participation in Posner's research for his book, but the two never hooked up. Stringer said the reason may have been he was busy attending his wife Janet, who was ill at the time with cancer. Janet died in July.

When told of Liltton's belief that Stringer changed his story, Posner suggested that Liltton's views might be taken in the context that he is a "conspiracy theorist."

"Very interesting that with conspiracy theorists, I think there is a double standard here," Posner said.

"Liltton said to me in a debate recently similar to the Stringer situation, referring to the Parkland doctors (who reversed their stories in "Case Closed"); I didn't care what they said to you today, I've got em on tape and on film. They can't go back on their statements because they made them."

Posner said that when a witness changes his or her story or comes out after years of silence and announces a version to conform to a conspiracy theory, a conspiracy writer revises and welcomes him or her into the fold. Reverse the process, and the conspiracy zealots cry foul.

Dr. Charles Crenshaw, a doctor who had minor duties attending President Kennedy at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, wrote a book entitled "JFK: Conspiracy of Silence" in 1992 that conforms to the view that Kennedy was hit from the rear. Crenshaw became the darling of the conspiracy set, though his book was roundly denounced by several of the other Dallas doctors.

If you change it to conspiracy, people view it as though you're coming out with the truth." Posner said. "You must be afraid of telling the truth in the past. And now you are telling your story. If you change it to go back to support the view that there really is one shooter, they say no, not allowed. Sorry, you must be under pressure."

In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations after criticizing the autopsy, nonetheless confirmed the findings of the Warren Commission. Two shots and only two shots, struck the president from the rear.

The point is, people who say President Kennedy was shot from the front say there was a gigantic hole at the back of the president's head," said Andrew Purdy, lawyer for the Select Committee in charge of the medical evidence, speaking in the KRON documentary. "If there was a gigantic hole at the back of the president's head, there must have been a tremendous conspiracy of massive proportion, to alter the body, the autopsy photographs and X-rays, to change all that evidence. Our experts say there was no such conspiracy."

But Liltton counters, "Purdy would like to think none of this could have happened, because it was his responsibility to find out if it did. Purdy tries to deflect the discussion away from the evidence -- and the job he failed to do properly -- to the issue of conspiracy. Regardless of how the evidence was phoned. I believe the ultimate verdict of history will be that it was."

Understanding memory itself may be key.

Posner pointed out an Emory University study on memory where researchers asked a large sample of undergraduates to recall, in detail, how they felt after the original interview with Stringer. Ultimately, Stringer's interview never made it into the completed version, narrated by Sylvia Chase.

"We wouldn't have sent a camera crew all the country on our budget if we thought he would reverse himself," Gould said.

"(In the telephone pre-interview) he corroborated what he told David Liltton, that the wounds were not on the official version said they were," Hall-Kallas said. "If his interview on camera would have been as strong as he was on the phone, we would have used it."

Stringer does not remember it that way. He said he remembers Hall-Kallas calling, but does not remember discussing at that point any version of the wounds. He agreed that during the videotaped interview, his interviewer was not getting what he wanted. He agrees with Hope and Hall-Kallas that the version of the head wound he gave on camera was the shot-from-behind version.

"She called and said they were going to have a crew in the area, and could they interview me, and I said that was fine," Stringer told the Press-Journal. "If I had told her what the wounds looked like (on the phone), I would have told her what I told you, and what I told the Press-Journal in 1974."

Stringer pulls out a yellowed copy of the Aug. 8, 1974 Press-Journal, and sure enough, there is the version he said he has always wanted.

In that story, he is quoted by reporter Sally Wheels: "The wound entered the right lower rear of his head and came out in the hair on the upper right side, taking with it a large chunk of his skull."

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