

Autopsy / Embalming

INTERVIEW, January 12, 1977, THOMAS EVAN ROBINSON

Interviewed by Andy Purdy and Jim Conzelman

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Purdy: Please state your name and occupation and home address.

Robinson: My name is Thomas Evan Robinson. I live at 1320 Ballencray Lane, Virginia. I've been a funeral director most of my life. (McLean)

Purdy: And you are aware that the tape recorder is running and we're with the Select Committee on Assassinations staff and it's with your permission that we are taping you now?

Robinson: Yes.

Purdy: We've just gone through the backgrounds of when you were present at the autopsy prior to beginning your work. Could you please detail for us your recollection of events and what you saw once you began your work.

Robinson: Once I began the work? I remember the tracheotomy; I remember the bones of the skull and face badly shattered.

Purdy: Where on the face were they shattered, which of the bones?

Robinson: You cannot see that from the outside. This is looking through the opening that the physicians had made at the back of the skull.

Purdy: How big was that opening? Was it an official opening?

Robinson: Well, there, of course, was an opening from the bullets, but then they had enlarged that. The brain had been removed, and you could see it.

Purdy: Could you tell how large the opening had been caused by the bullets.

Robinson: Not really, well, I guess I can because a good bit of the bone had been blown away. There was nothing there to piece together, so I would say probably about (the size of) a small orange.

Purdy: Could you give us an estimate of inches and the nature of the shape?

Robinson: Three.

Purdy: And the shape?

Robinson: Circular.

Purdy: Was it fairly smooth or fairly ragged?

Robinson: Ragged.

Purdy: Approximately where was this wound located?

Robinson: Directly behind the back of his head.

Purdy: Approximately between the ears or higher up?

Robinson: No, I would say pretty much between them.

Purdy: You saw the head wounds. Could you describe the nature of the throat wound, you just said you saw the tracheotomy.

Robinson: Well, it was a tracheotomy, it was sort of nasty-looking.

Purdy: Was it approximately in the center of the neck, or was it to either side?

Robinson: No, it was right in the middle.

Purdy: Was it an unusual shape for a tracheotomy or did it look to you like a normal tracheotomy?

Robinson: Well, it was sort of angular on one side, I remember that.

Purdy: Do you know which side?

Robinson: No, I don't.

Purdy: Did you notice anything else unusual about the body which may have been artificially caused, that is, caused by something other than the autopsy?

Robinson: Probably, a little mark at the temples in the hairline. As I recall, it was so small, it could be hidden by the hair. It didn't have to be covered with make-up. I thought it probably a piece of bone or a piece of the bullet that caused it.

Purdy: In other words, there was a little wound.

Robinson: Yes.

Purdy: Approximately where, which side of the forehead or part of the head was it on.

Robinson: I believe it was on the right side.

Purdy: On his right side?

Robinson: That's an anatomical right, yes.

Purdy: You say it was in the forehead region up near the hair line?

Robinson: Yes.

Purdy: Would you say it was closer to the top of the hair?

Robinson: Somewhere around the temples.

Purdy: Approximately what size.

Robinson: Very small, a quarter of an inch.

Purdy: Quarter of an inch is all the damage. Had it been closed up by the doctors?

Robinson: No, he didn't have to close it. If anything I just would have probably put a little wax on it.

Purdy: Were you the one that was responsible for closing these wounds in the head?

Robinson: Well, we all worked on it. Once the body was embalmed arterially and they brought a piece of heavy duty rubber, again to fill this area (area in the back of the head) I remember treating the . . . organs, like I said, we all tried to help one another.

Purdy: O.K., you had to close the wound in the back of the head using the rubber, what other work had to be done on the head?

Robinson: It had to be all dried out, packed and the rubber placed in the hair and the skin pulled back over it as much as possible and stitched into that piece of rubber. They were afraid again of leaks, once the body is moved or shaken in the casket and carried up the Capitol steps and opened again, we had to be very careful, there would have been blood on the pillow.

Purdy: Was there any other work that you had to do on the head?

Robinson: I did the make up, cosmetic.

Purdy: Were there any other wounds on the head other than the little one in the right temple area, and the big one in the back?

Robinson: That's all.

000860

Purdy: Did you have to shave the head so you could tell if there were other wounds?

Robinson: No. In fact, we wanted the hair there to hide as much as possible. Putting the head into the pillow of the casket would have hidden everything.

Purdy: Do you think it was possible that there was some other wound under the hair? Did you look for other wounds.

Robinson: Oh, yes we would have found that.

Purdy: So you are satisfied in your professional experience that there were no other significant wound of the head?

Robinson: I stayed on the left side of the body throughout the whole thing.

Purdy: Did you get a good look at that wound on the right temple area?

Robinson: Oh yes, I worked right over for some time.

Purdy: What did you feel caused that wound.

Robinson: I think either a piece of bone or a piece of the bullet. Or a very small piece of shrapnel.

Conzelman: Did it pierce the entire skull, could you see from the inside that it was evident from the inside skull as well as outside?

Robinson: The inside of the skull was badly smashed, it could have well been a piece of bone that passed through there or

Conzelman: Were the facial bones smashed too?

Robinson: Behind, yes, that bullet must have hit him, one of those bullets hit him terribly, it hit him just right.

Purdy: What is your understanding of how the bullets went through the head? And where it went, did it stop in the head?

Robinson: I don't think so.

Purdy: Where did it exit?

Robinson: Well it exited in many pieces. They were literally picked out, little pieces of this bullet from all over his head.

Purdy: In other words, where do you feel the bullet entered and in that back major wound. What would have caused a three inch hole.

Robinson: I think when that bullet hit that bone, it just shattered.

Purdy: Do you feel that any significant portion of the bullet after it hit the head, exited from the head, not just being picked up by the doctors? Do you feel that possibly exited, where could some it exited from the head? If any. You mentioned one possibly was that right temple.

Robinson: Yes, that did go through my mind. Well they had the little pieces, They picked them out.

Purdy: So you feel that's the only place that the significant size of the bullet could have exited.

Robinson: It was no bullet, it was a fragment or a piece of the bone.

Purdy: You would say that there is no other part of the head where that bullet would exited or a part of the bullet? Were there other little holes anywhere?

Robinson: No.

Purdy: What is your understanding of what happened to the bullet once it hit the head? You say the bullet went into pieces.

Robinson: That's what I would say.

Purdy: You mentioned earlier that the FBI agents said something to you about the bullets shattering.

Robinson: Yes, I was watching all this and I asked him about it. After he discussed with me the reason why all those people had to be there, I had questions for, I wanted to know.

Purdy: What did he say about the bullets shattering?

Robinson: He just explained to me that on occasion that happens. The bullet will smash into a great many pieces.

Purdy: You gathered from what he said that it was his impression that that is in fact what happened in this case? That the bullet did shatter/

Robinson: Yes.

Purdy: From your examination, that is what you have concluded as well.

Robinson: Yes, I watched them pick the little pieces out. They had something like a test tube or a little vile or something that they put the pieces in.

Purdy: You think they pulled out a fairly many pieces of it?

Robinson: I think so.

Purdy: Do you know that this man was an FBI agent, or. .

Robinson: He showed me some credentials, I don't know whether it was Secret Service or, to me they all belong to the same. No he was not military. There were military people there.

Purdy: So he was either FBI or Secret Service or some other plain clothes type, but he show you some credentials.

Robinson: Yes. I'm pretty sure he told me that was his field.

Purdy: Bullistics? About the thorax area, you said that there was some irregular look . . .

Robinson: I said it was nasty looking.

Purdy: Tracheotomy. Did you ever hear any discussions that would have indicated why that was the case or what might have caused that, caused obviously the tracheotomy occurred prior to the time the body came there?

Robinson: Yes, those things are done very quickly. By nature of the situation, but it was examined very carefully. The throat was. All that was removed.

Purdy: Was it your understanding that that was just a tracheotomy. Or was there some other cause that may have made it ragged or something else?

Robinson: There is something about the bullet exiting from there. A bullet exiting from there. I don't know whether I heard the physicians talking about it or whether I read it now.

Purdy: What was your impression at the time or now thinking about it as to, if you assume a bullet or part of a bullet exited there, or something exited there. Where did that something come from? Where would it have entered from the other side? From the your examination of the body, where could it have come from?

Robinson: You mean you're looking for another hole?

Purdy: Another hole or some other place, either coming from the head down and out or from the back.

Robinson: It might have been coming from the head and down. These are all in straight lines here coming down like that.

Purdy: Was there any other mark, hole or wound in body?

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Robinson: I saw the body turned over, it was turned over and examined on its side, rolled from each side. I saw nothing down below where the doctors had been working on the head.

Purdy: Did you see anything between the head wounds and the . . . on the back that could have been a wound?

Robinson: No.

Conzelman: Was there any discussion that the lungs had collapsed?

Robinson: The lungs were examined very carefully by the physicians. I remember that.

Conzelman: Did they say anything about that?

Robinson: They had lots to say about everything they did.

Conzelman: Am I correct that you say all this area was exposed?

Robinson: Yes, this was all raised and this all examined, all cut open.

Purdy: Specifically, when you say the body, you saw the back, I want to know specifically if either you know there was not a wound from the head down to the waist anywhere on the back, neck or whatever, or that the autopsy work may have either obliterated it or made it not evident to you that there was such a wound?

Robinson: It might have done that, there was . . . but the back itself, there was no wound there, no.

Purdy: Were there any wounds in the neck, the back.?

Robinson: Now this is where I'm hazy. I can remember the probe. The probe of all this whole area. It was about an 18 piece of metal that we used.

Purdy: Do you feel they probed the head or they probed the neck?

Robinson: It was at the base of the head where most of the damage was done, the things that we had to worry about. So it all runs together in my mind.

Purdy: Did they probe with anything other than the 18 probe, either prior to or after the use of that probe?

Robinson: Did they use a shorter probe

Robinson: I don't remember, I remember them probing.

Purdy: What is your impression as to either how far or in what direction they probed with that probe?

000864

Purdy: Or any discussion about the actual probing to indicate either the direction or the depth?

Robinson: I remember they talked about it.
They took notes, made notes.

Conzelman: At this time, did you take any notes?

Robinson: No.

Purdy: Did you take any notes afterwards?

Robinson: No.

Purdy: Did you draw any autopsy face sheets, sketches or anything like that?

Robinson: NO, which is something we always did.

Purdy: Why didn't you this time?

Robinson: I never saw the file, like I said everything was done to protect the family as far as we were concerned.

Purdy: On this probe, do you remember if the probe went all the way through wherever they probed, do you remember . . .

Robinson: I don't recall.

Purdy: Do you remember any discussion, you said you remember them talking about the probe, any discussion at all about whether there was any transcending of the body, maybe wounds transit (?) the body? Do you remember, for example, if they said that it was a bullet where a bone exited in the temple? Or at the throat?

Robinson: No, but I'm sure he had it in his notes.

Purdy: Colonel Hughes?

Robinson: Was he the pathologist?

Purdy: He was one of them, yes.

Robinson: Well, maybe.

Purdy: Do you remember if they took any large fragments of metal out of the body at any point?

Robinson: They were all small that could be picked up with forceps

Purdy: Was there anything that looked like a piece of a bullet, were they that large?

Robinson: No.

000865

Purdy: Approximately how large would you say the largest piece was that you saw?

Robinson: Maybe a quarter of an inch. You see they were working around the table, and when I would get a glance as one would come by, someone would step aside.

Conzelman: But most of the work was done to the right of the body from behind?

Robinson: Because like I said it was an . . .

Purdy: Did you close up the head, did you help close up other parts of the body as well?

Robinson: Yes I did.

Purdy: The back and the front?

Robinson: I did the front, yes.

Purdy: Was there much that had to be closed up in the back?

Robinson: I don't remember that. I don't remember anything happened to really be done when I say in the back where the body had to be turned over.

Purdy: When they do the autopsy, they basically open the front up all the way and just look around and they don't have to open the back.

Robinson: . . .open him up in the back.

Conzelman: In the region of the throat, when you were putting him back together, did you notice that any large holes other than what could have been through the autopsy?

Robinson: The tracheotomy.

Conzelman: Besides that?

Robinson: And if it was, a bullet wound.

Purdy: Could you tell any kind of a path that the wound had taken from looking in there?

Robinson: No, not really. All that had been removed.

Purdy: Did you notice any pieces of bone or marrow in there?

Robinson: No.

Purdy: In the front of the body, the whole front was open, did you notice any pieces of bone or any pieces of metal in any part of the body below the head?

Robinson: No. If we had found something like that , we would have given it to them.

Purdy: In your impression, where is the lowest point on the body that any metal fragments were found?

Robinson: Somehow I feel like there was something found in the thorax.

Purdy: Is that what I normally call the chest?

Robinson: Yes.

Purdy: You remember it to be metallic or a piece of bone?

Robinson: I think that they found a piece of metal, a piece of bullet.

Purdy: Do you remember there being anything unusual or any larger pieces of metal turned over to anyone or turned over to the President's doctor or to the FBI agents?

Robinson: No, he had his function there, but it was the pathologist who did the work.

Purdy: You said that later, when you read some things about the assassination or the autopsy, you heard or read somethings which struck you as incorrect. What would those things be?

Robinson: The time the people moved (autopsy). The body was taken and the body never came lots of little things like that

Purdy: Can I ask you what your impression is of (from your work on the body) the nature of the wounds or bullet which would supplement what you've already said or which would contradict what some other people might have felt? You said a bullet came at the back of the head shattered the bone.

Robinson: Yes, I remember that big wound so well. and it caused us the most concern, that's why I remembered it.

Purdy: So you were not surprised that such a large piece of bone would have been shattered at the point of entrance of the bullet. That did not surprise you or did that impress you your experience? Is that normal?

Robinson: No, I don't know. I have seen them so many ways, but he was obviously hit there and that I remember thinking my God, "how could he have lived" any time at all with a wound like that.

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Purdy: And your feeling about the forehead, you felt then and you feel now that was caused by what?

Robinson: A piece of the bone or metal exiting.

Purdy: Let me just clear one thing about the back. To what extent if any was that back area opened up? Or was that just all in tact?

Robinson: No, it was opened up. The brain had to come out

Purdy: I mean below that wound? In other words the neck and back.

Robinson: It was well examined I recall.

Purdy: In the sense of being cut open or being looked at closely?

Robinson: Yes, I mean looked at and cut.

Purdy: How big a cut, Where would the cut have gone from and to?

Robinson: I don't remember if it went off in many angles. It was not a nice clean cut.

Purdy: So there was a cut open in the neck to look in there.

Robinson: They had this all cut.

Purdy: How far down on the back of the neck did they cut open?

Robinson: That's what's bothering me, I can't recall whether you would say they went into the back or not. I remember seeing the back.

Purdy: So you had to close up the work they did on the neck. You had to close that up?

Robinson: Yes, it seems to me that Ed did that.

Purdy: So you don't recall anything

Robinson: You can't have three needles in the same area, somebody is going to get it.

Purdy: So you don't recall anything unusual about the closing up, you don't personally or having talked to Mr. Strogle about it?

Robinson: No.

Purdy: Do you remember any discussion of the possibility that there was a wound in that area?
Is it your impression now that there was a wound in that area, or was the only wound present on the back of the President was in the back of his head?

Robinson: No, I wouldn't say that.

Purdy: What is your sense of that? Is it your impression now that there was a wound in the back of the neck or in the upper back?

Robinson: I don't remember. Vaguely in my mind that there is. I mean I have not bothered to think about. I haven't bothered to read most of the junk that has come out on it. Some of it was not in good taste and I thought that they should wait a little bit longer. I remember something about it. My God isn't that awful. I just put it out of my mind as much as possible. The press was not kind. Undertakers are Texans at the time.

Purdy: We can appreciate how hard it is to remember all these details. We feel that you've done very well to remember as much as you have and if there is anything you remember in the future, you can always contact us. I think that for now this is about all we need.

Interview notes - Tom Robinson
McLean, Virginia

1/12/77

by: Jim Conzelman and Andy Purdy

Re: autopsy and embalming

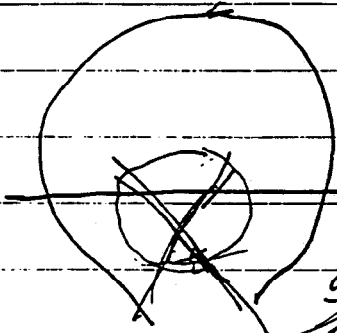
Said he was seated right next to the table, about shoulder high. Was very upset by the size and noise of the crowd during the autopsy, fearing it might affect his work subsequently. He said an F.B.I. agent came up to calm him down (offered coffee but then never brought it). The agent explained the work of the doctors carefully removing many bullet fragments from the head.

The agent said the bullet had exploded upon impact with the head, into countless fragments, the largest seen by Robinson being about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. The agent said he knew this to be the case (and not an unusual phenomena) because his field was ballistics. Robinson said he does not know who the agent was, nor even if he was, in fact, an F.B.I. agent. Robinson is certain that the man was not military and is sure he was F.B.I. or Secret Service. He said the man showed him credentials but he can't recall which agency he was working for.

Robinson recalls discussion during the autopsy of "shrapnel" when the head was worked on and when the thorax was worked on. He recalls the doctors using an eighteen inch probe and significant discussion regarding same, but cannot remember the substance of the conversations or the results of the probing.

Robinson said the doctors worked carefully and thoroughly. He said during the autopsy the doctors discussed the various medical problems or illnesses which were apparent from their work. Specifically, he recalls significant discussion regarding the President's back problems.

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Jan 12, 1977

James Earl Ray

Received by — D.A. Lundy, Jr.
Jim Conzelmann

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