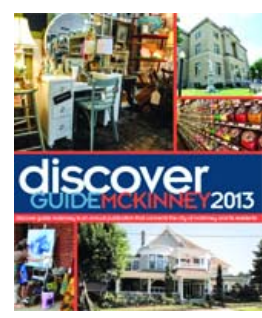


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Surgeon recounts JFK operation



Chris Beattie/Staff Photo - Dr. Robert McClelland recounts to the Rotary Club of McKinney what happened Nov. 22, 1963 in the Parkland Memorial Hospital operating room where former President John F. Kennedy took his final breaths.

By Chris Beattie, cbeattie@acnpapers.com Published: Saturday, January 28, 2012 4:25 PM CST

Almost 39 years later, mystery still surrounds the assassination of former President John F. Kennedy.

Was Lee Harvey Oswald the real shooter? If so, was he the only one? There is someone who knows the truth about what happened on that November day in Dallas -- at least part of it.

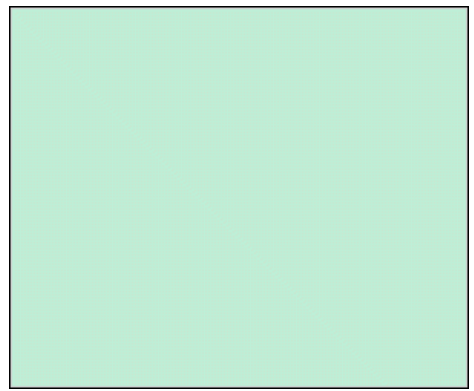
"It was not just a single shooter," said Dr. Robert McClelland, one of the surgeons who operated on Kennedy at Parkland Memorial Hospital. "It wasn't just some crazy young man who wasn't connected to anything."

Such a conclusion, shared by millions across America, came to McClelland long before Friday, when he recapped his experience to the Rotary Club of McKinney. Though he admittedly "kept a distance from all of it," McClelland's personal connection to the

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▶ event was hard for anyone else to ignore.

Just moments after Kennedy slunk to his left, sending horror through thousands of spectators, he was fighting for every breath inside a Parkland operating room, his head inches away from McClelland.

"He was in terrible shape; the right side of his brain had been blown out," McClelland said. "We worked on him for only eight or 10 minutes, from the time they made the incision to the time he lost all of his cardiac activity.

"There was no chance of saving him."

But memories of the futile operation, and the surrounding chaos, were never lost. McClelland spoke to Rotarians the past two Fridays about his recollections. His story dropped jaws and drew curious silence.

He reignited the wonder of any listeners who'd pushed the conspiracy theories away, out of mind. That's what McClelland said he tried to do, but the mysterious pieces always found him.

Some pieces seemingly fell from the gun -- or guns -- of Kennedy's killer.

"My supposition, and that of a lot of people, is that the first shot probably was fired from the sixth floor of the [Texas School Book Depository]...whether by Oswald or someone else, I don't know," McClelland told Rotarians. "The next shot apparently came from behind the picket fence by the grassy knoll -- all kinds of things indicate that is indeed what happened."

▶ One glaring indicator, to which McClelland was uniquely close, was Kennedy's neck wound. Dr. Malcolm Perry, the chief surgeon for Kennedy and Oswald, cut an incision into Kennedy's neck to explore the wound.

Perry told reporters minutes later that it looked like an entrance wound -- meaning the shot had come from somewhere other than the sixth floor of the Depository. Referencing a recently published book about the assassination, McClelland said Secret Service agents allegedly accosted Perry after his statement and told him never to say it again.

"After the assassination, if you ever mentioned anything about it to Dr. Perry, he would tell you, 'I don't want to talk about it,' and he would really get angry if you pressed him about it," McClelland said. "We always wondered why that was."

Perry took his reluctance to the grave, dying from lung cancer two years ago in Tyler. McClelland, the only surviving member of the historic surgical team, stayed clear of the chaos as long as he could. He and Perry were two of four doctors who tried to save the president Nov. 22, 1963.

"People always ask if he was dead, and he wasn't," McClelland said. "He was making attempts to breath. But we didn't stand around and ask questions, we just started acting."

The team, which also included Drs. Charles J. Carrico and Charles Baxter, afterward sat, dazed, in a nearby nurse's station. Secret Service agents gave them note pads and asked each to write his impressions of the president's wounds.

Their notes later became evidence in the Warren Commission's investigation of the assassination. Perry eventually changed his initial story and said the bullet hole near Kennedy's Adam's apple was an exit wound.

But the Warren Commission's report has since been directly refuted by numerous eyewitness accounts, one of whom McClelland met a

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few years ago in Dallas.

Ed Hoffman, who is deaf, had his daughter tell McClelland what he saw near the grassy knoll, behind the picket fence, when Kennedy went down.

Hoffman, 27 at the time, had left work around the time of the president's arrival in Dallas to get a toothache inspected at the dentist. The presidential motorcade forced Hoffman to pull off on the edge of Stemmons Freeway, about 700 feet away from the knoll, Hoffman told McClelland.

He said he saw one suited man pull out a rifle, place it on top of the fence and fire at Kennedy, then toss the gun to another man dressed in work clothes. That man disassembled the gun, put it in his tool bag and disappeared into the crowd, Hoffman said.

Moments later, Hoffman saw a policeman question the suited man, then walk into the crowd with him following a short glimpse of the man's identification.

Two high school history teachers came to Dallas several years ago to study Hoffman's story, and wrote, "From Behind the Picket Fence," a book that McClelland said is "very well-detailed in establishing what Mr. Hoffman saw."

Just as in Perry's case, though, Hoffman was quickly shut out, McClelland said. Hoffman told his father and his uncle -- a Dallas police officer at the time -- days after the shooting, and both told him he better keep his mouth shut.

After recounting his conversation with Hoffman and his daughter, the Rotarians focused on his every word, McClelland summarized other prominent theories surrounding Kennedy's death. He answered questions about the "magic bullet" and the assassination's potential connection to Kennedy's involvement in the Cold War.

Dr. Jerry Sims, the Rotarian who invited McClelland to speak in McKinney, was a young intern at Parkland on that day. He recalled how the First Lady asked him outside the operating room if she could smoke a cigarette -- a habit that few knew she had, Sims said.

McClelland, who still spends time in hospitals teaching young doctors, packed up his notes to standing applause. One by one, Rotarians came to him with more questions.

He was the closest most of them would ever come to knowing what happened the day JFK was killed.

But, even for McClelland, the mystery remains.

"It was the most memorable thing of my life," he said. "Yet, we may never know the exact truth."

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