

CONTACT PROFILE



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB Date Created: 04/16/96

Contact Description

Contact Name: Mr. Joseph E. Hagan

Company: Joseph Gawler's Sons, Inc.

Title:

Category: [REDACTED]

Street Address:

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

FAX Number:

E-mail Address:

HSCA Letter Sent:

Additional Information

Gawler's handled the embalming services for President Kennedy at Bethesda on 11/22/63.

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MEETING REPORT



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB

Date Created: 05/17/96

Meeting Logistics

Date: 05/17/96
Agency Name: Witnesses/Consultants
Attendees: Joseph E. Hagan, David Marwell, Tom Samoluk, Jeremy Gunn, Tim Wray, Doug Home
Topic: ARRB Interviewed Joe Hagan of Gawler's (Writeup Expanded on 3/05/97)

Summary of the Meeting

Mr. Hagan, in response to a subpoena he requested from the ARRB, brought the Gawler's document file on President Kennedy's preparation for burial with him, and submitted to a lengthy ARRB interview of approximately 2.5 hours, which was audiotaped on two 90-minute cassettes. Following the interview, Mr. Hagan was sent a copy of the audiotape, in lieu of a transcript (which was not created). Tim Wray conducted the majority of the interview.

This is a summary of the principal points covered in this lengthy interview. All events described are as they were represented by Mr. Hagan during the interview; i.e., represent his opinions and recollections, without any emendations.

(Today Mr. Hagan is President of Gawler's; in 1963 he said he was an "Operations Manager," a person who had a supervisory role in regard to the duties of all funeral home employees involved in preparation for burial.)

Notification of Gawler's Involvement in President Kennedy's Funeral Arrangements

Gawler's was called at about 4:25 P.M. on 11/22/63 by Colonel Paul Miller, Chief of Ceremonies and Special Events for MDW, and asked to prepare President Kennedy for burial. Immediately after receiving this call, Gawler's independently called back Colonel Miller at MDW to confirm the authenticity of this tasking. Gawler's was told 3 things during this second telephone call:

- Provide Funeral Services for President Kennedy;
- Have a hearse at Andrews AFB for "wheels down" of Air Force One about 6 P.M.; and
- That the body of the President would be driven in their hearse directly to Gawler's.

Orders then began changing--after the fact, Colonel Miller told Hagan this was due to orders received from Sergeant Shriver, who had taken charge of funeral arrangements at the White House on behalf of the Kennedy family. Miller told Hagan later that there was great uncertainty the evening of 11/22/63 over where the President was to be buried, the type of ceremony to be arranged, etc--that the situation was very fluid.

A "death watch," i.e., Honor Guard troops (Branch of Service not specified), arrived at Gawler's and set up a "command post" prior to the arrival of Air Force One at Andrews.

At the "last minute," Gawler's received a call from someone (probably Colonel Miller again, or possibly Jack Metzler, Superintendent of Arlington Cemetery) who directed Gawler's NOT to send the hearse to Andrews AFB, since a Navy Ambulance would be used instead to transport the President's body. (At this time the destination of the body in the Navy ambulance was not specified.) [At a later date Colonel Miller

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told Hagan that at one point on 11/22/63, there had been a plan for a helicopter to take the President's body from Andrews to the Naval Hospital at Bethesda, but that the helicopter transportation plan had been cancelled.]

Finally, Gawler's was instructed to send their embalming team to the Naval Hospital. He specified that they never drove to Andrews.

Embalming Team to Bethesda

The embalming team consisted of Joe Hagan (Operations Manager and Supervisor), and the following three "hands on" working personnel: Tom Robinson, John Van Hoesen (pronounced "Van Heusen"), and Edward Stroble. [Ed Stroble is now deceased.]

Hagan first said the embalming team went out to Bethesda (on 11/22/63) "around 11:00 P.M.," and said that the autopsy on President Kennedy was still in progress when they all arrived, recalling that the body was still on the table being examined.

He then said that some members of the team (not including himself) may have gone out to Bethesda earlier in the evening in a private automobile, vice the hearse.

He then made a further correction, recalling that the other members of the embalming team had gone to Bethesda about 11:00 P.M., ahead of John Gawler and him, because he and Mr. Gawler had met with Kennedy aides at the funeral home and assisted them with the selection of a solid plank Mahogany casket for the state funeral. He then, along with John Gawler, drove the casket out to Bethesda in the hearse, arriving sometime near midnight, but no later than 12:30 A.M. on 11/23/63.

He said that the Gawler's hearse (with the Mahogany casket inside) arrived at the loading dock behind the morgue, and was directed to park there by Secret Service personnel. He said Roy Kellerman was present that night at the autopsy, and that Kellerman controlled the entrance of personnel into the morgue during the autopsy. [He explained that he knew Roy Kellerman from previous professional association, without providing the details.]

At a later point in the interview, while reviewing Gawler's own document called a "first call sheet," Hagan was asked about a "2 A.M." notation made in the section which refers to the Mahogany casket's delivery to Bethesda. Upon review of this Gawler's document, he felt obliged to agree that this 2 A.M. entry must be the accurate time of the mahogany casket's delivery.

Ultimately, his own response as he considered all of these inconsistencies in his recollections of the timing of various events surrounding the transportation of personnel, and the mahogany casket, was to say, "I can't put it all together."

Events Observed at the Autopsy on President Kennedy

Hagan said the embalming team waited in the morgue, in the bleachers, while the autopsy was still in progress. He said that about 25 people were in the morgue. Roy Kellerman was controlling entrance into the morgue. The atmosphere in the morgue was tense, and there was a sense of panic in the air--by this he explained people were acting "touchy." (When asked to elaborate upon these remarks, he said he could remember no specifics, and simply spoke of the general situation; i.e., a young President had been assassinated, and the facts were unknown.)

Hagan said that when he arrived with the mahogany casket, the autopsy was almost over; he only had to wait in the gallery about 20 minutes before the autopsy was concluded. The body of the President was being "cleaned up." Hagan said photos were being taken, but could remember no details--he could not remember which views were shot, how many photographers there were, or any details about their equipment. He can recall no specific remarks, conversation, or conclusions by the doctors. It was obvious a "full post" had been done, since the thoracic and abdominal cavities on the President's body were open. The brain was not in the cranium when he arrived. He cannot remember whether he saw the brain that night or not. The head of the President was supported on a block. Hagan said he did not recall whether or not there was a wound on the back (posterior thorax) of the President--he simply said there "could have been," and then explained that the Gawler's team, in the course of their work, left the body

supine, and did not turn the body over. He said he did see the autopsy prosectors turn the President's body over so that it was lying face-down, but that he simply did not remember details about what he observed during that event. He said his vantage point in the gallery during the autopsy was perhaps 12-15 feet away from the President, but that it was sometimes difficult to see the President's body because of the people working around the morgue table. He said he did not recall seeing any probes used.

Head wound: ARRB staff asked several times for Mr. Hagan to describe the condition of the head as he saw it at the autopsy. Hagan stated many times that he was not qualified to state how much of the damage he observed had resulted from gunshot injury, and how much had been caused by the autopsy prosectors in the course of their work. He declined to draw his recollections of damage to the head on either anatomical skull diagrams reproduced from a medical textbook, or on a model of a human skull. However, he did state that "all of this was open in the back," while holding his two hands about 6 inches away from his upper posterior skull, gesturing to the area between both of his own ears on the back of his head. On another occasion, when discussing the head wound as it appeared during reconstruction of the head by Gawler's, he said that the hole in the President's head which he observed was in the upper left posterior skull.

The Work of Gawler's Personnel to Embalm and Reconstruct the President's Body

Embalming: Hagan said that the embalming team conducted a standard arterial embalming, and that no problems were presented in the course of this standard procedure (which involves injecting formaldehyde into major arteries of the deceased, until such point that the blood in the body is replaced by formaldehyde). Embalming began shortly after midnight, and concluded about 3 A.M.

Reconstruction: Reconstruction was not commenced until embalming was completed. He said Plaster-of-Paris was used to fill the empty cranium and provide the support necessary to reconstruct the head after autopsy. After the hardening agent dried the plaster in the cranium, he said that the scalp was pulled together and sutured into place. (A primary concern was avoidance of leakage.) He said he does not recall very much bone missing from the cranium, and said he does not recall that any scalp was totally missing. The hole in the cranium was noticed during reconstruction to be in the upper left posterior portion of the head. Gawler's closed the tracheotomy wound by "suturing it up." A small amount of dermal wax was used to seal the anterior throat wound after it was sutured. He does not recall whether the tracheotomy wound was above, or below, the collar line on a buttoned dress shirt. Restorative cosmetics were used by Gawler's to prepare the President for a possible open-casket funeral; they were cream-based, and were used to hide some bruising and discoloration on the face. The President was dressed in a blue pin-stripe suit, and a white shirt; the clothing had been brought from the White House. He said Tom Robinson performed most of the repairs to the head, and said he would try to locate both Tom Robinson and John Van Hoesen on our behalf so that we could conduct interviews. He said that as a supervisor, he was in-and-out of the morgue during the embalming and reconstruction process, discussing various arrangements with John Gawler and Navy personnel, and was not privy to every step of the work taken by his people. He said that the Gawler's team completed the reconstruction work no later than 4:00 A.M., and that the new Mahogany casket was then loaded into a Navy ambulance by the Secret Service, i.e., "Kellerman and others," as a last act of respect for the fallen Commander-in-Chief. At that point, he said there was nothing to do but pack up the equipment and head back to Gawler's.

In response to follow-on questioning about reconstruction, he said he could not recall any rubber or plastic sheet used to cover an open defect in the head. He said there was no visible damage to the head or scalp following reconstruction which would in any way have been indicative of the nature of the head wound(s). He does not recall, one way or another, whether any photographs were taken during Gawler's work on the President's body. He said that he personally closed the casket at Bethesda, and said the President was ready for an open-casket funeral, if one had been desired. He was asked whether there was any wrapping or bandage around the head after work was completed, and he said no.

Casket Issues

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Mr. Hagan said that he never saw any casket on the evening of November 22-23 other than the mahogany casket which Gawler's brought to the morgue in their own hearse.

He did, however, indicate certain knowledge that the bronze Dallas casket was damaged. We asked him how he knew this, if the only casket he saw the night of the autopsy was the one Gawler's delivered. He responded by saying that some time after the autopsy (he was unsure exactly when), someone delivered the bronze Dallas casket to Gawler's funeral home; it was observed by him to have a damaged handle, and some scratches on the exterior surface. He was told GSA would pick it up later, and in fact said that GSA had done just that, during the spring of 1964, taking it away in a government truck.

Hagan concluded by saying "none of our people were at the Naval Hospital early that evening, so I can't account for what happened to the casket or how it was damaged."

Gawler's Documents

Mr. Hagan provided, in response to the subpoena he requested from the ARRB, a photocopy of the Gawler's document file on the services provided by them to the late President Kennedy. Much of the file consisted of newspaper and magazine clippings, and photocopies of book excerpts which some researchers had mailed to Mr. Hagan and asked him to comment on. He stressed that while he had spoken to groups over the years, when requested to, about the funeral arrangements for President Kennedy, he had only done so in a general way, and had never discussed the President's wounds with anyone, and that he had not responded to various researcher requests for his comments on the apparent Parkland vs. Bethesda wound controversy about which some independent researchers have written. He indicated an unwillingness to get involved in any controversy over how many caskets were at Bethesda Naval Hospital the night of the autopsy, and said he had no recollections which could bear on the matter.

Summarized below are the essential business documents he gave us, and answers to ARRB's questions about those documents:

-Chronology of Events of November 22-25, 1963 entitled "Funeral Arrangements for John Fitzgerald Kennedy": Mr. Hagan did not think that he had prepared this summary of events himself, and said that John Gawler had probably prepared this document.

-"Arrangements File": The reproduction of this multi-folding business document (the original was one long sheet of stiff paper or cardboard, with two vertical folds in it dividing it into 6 panels) consists of 6 photocopied pages. It contains basic descriptions of funeral arrangements, a page titled "Forwarding Directions," a page titled "Embalmer's Report," another titled "Personal Remarks," and one titled "Remarks." Re: the "Personal Remarks" page, Hagan said that the times "11:45" and "3:30" were his handwriting, and when asked to interpret the meaning of these entries, he said that 11:45 could refer to Gawler's start time (a little earlier than he had estimated earlier in the interview), and that 3:30 could refer to the time all of their work was concluded (also a little earlier than he had earlier recalled). He said the names listed on the "Remarks" page (O'Brien, O'Donnell, Powers, and O'Leary) are those Kennedy aides who visited Gawler's to select the mahogany casket about 11:00 P.M. on 11/22/63. On the "Personal Remarks" page, the entry which reads "Wilbert Triune, 3000 lbs. with top, top only 900-1000" refers to the vault into which the casket was placed at burial in Arlington Cemetery; the entry which reads "Marsellus 710, 255 lbs" refers to the casket selected by the Kennedy family retainers who visited Gawlers late on 11/22/63. On the page titled "Embalmer's Report," he said he made the decision at the time not to annotate or draw the President's wounds on the body chart, since a formal U.S. Navy post mortem examination was in progress, and he knew they would formally be documenting that information in much more detail.

-Telephone Call Report dated 4-16-64, indicating that Bill Manchester has the O.K. of Jacqueline Kennedy to write a book, and passing along the message to "Joe" (Hagan) that he should give Manchester any help possible.

-Wilbert Triune Burial Vault Brochure.

-Billing Invoice dated November 25, 1963 which lists the total billed costs for Services for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy as \$3, 160.00.

Summarized below are three business documents ARRB gave to Joe Hagan, all of which he said had

been lost from Gawler's files, presumably due to some "inside job" (in which a Gawler's employee was suspected of having passed the originals to Kennedy assassination researchers)--Mr. Hagan was most happy to receive copies of these documents (which the ARRB had received from a member of the assassination research community), since he said they were no longer in Gawler's files:

- "First Call Sheet": He recognized this one-page document, and said he saw his handwriting on several parts of it. He said it was his feeling that not all of the entries were made as events occurred, but rather, that some portions may have been completed 3 or 4 days after the fact. In the portion of the document titled "Casket Order," the handwritten entry found on the Remarks line which reads: "Body removed from metal shipping casket at USNH at Bethesda" was indeed his handwriting, but explained that he never did himself sight the object described here--he said he wrote this down simply because he was told the President's body had arrived in a metal casket, and did not know at the time that it was a bronze ceremonial casket, so simply described it as a shipping casket without having seen it because he was told it was "metal." In the section of this document called "Casket Delivery Details," he was surprised and at a loss for words when he sighted the "2 A.M." entry, because the entry led him to believe that his memory must have been incorrect about arriving with the Marsellus casket between 11:00 and midnight--ultimately, after considering this "2 A.M." entry, he said, "I can't put it all together."

- March 19, 1964 Memo for the Record signed (and presumably written) by John Gawler, which documents that the bronze Dallas casket was turned over to GSA by Gawler's on March 19, 1964.

- "Coffin Card" made out by the Texas Coffin Company, dated 2-18-63: Mr. Hagan said this manufacturer's information card had been found inside the bronze Dallas casket when the casket was received at Gawler's after the autopsy.

During the latter stages of the interview, it became apparent that Mr. Hagan was somewhat familiar with the assassination literature on the Kennedy assassination.

END

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CALL REPORT: PUBLIC



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB **Date Created:** 06/11/96

The Players

Who called whom? Douglas Home called Mr. Joseph E. Hagan of Witnesses/Consultants

Description of the Call

Date: 06/11/96
Subject: Return of Hagan call of June 5

Summary of the Call:

In response to Mr. Hagan's call of June 5, I called him at Gawler's. He told me that he had contacted John Van Hoesen by phone to let him know that we may be in touch with him, but wanted to warn me that Mr. Van Hoesen was very hard of hearing and that we would have to be very patient. He also told me that he was unsuccessful in contacting Tom Robinson, who had apparently moved.

I asked him for Tom Robinson's most recent address and for John Van Hoesen's current address, and he said he would have to get those items from home and bring them in to the office and call me back.

In response to his question regarding where we got the 3 business documents, I responded that we obtained them in unsolicited mail from David Lifton, but that I did not know where Lifton got them from. He asked me whether Russo had worked with Lifton, and I said I did not know.

He thanked the Review Board staff again for their courtesy during his interview, and for mailing him the audiotapes so quickly.

As a final aside, he made one clarification of a statement he made during his interview with the ARRB staff. After talking with John Van Hoesen recently (whom he says lives on Cobb Island, Maryland), he now believes, as does John Van Hoesen, that the embalming team of Robinson, Stroble, and Van Hoesen arrived at the Bethesda morgue at about 8 P.M., vice midnight, and says that Van Hoesen remembers having had to wait a very long time in the Bethesda morgue gallery before beginning embalming work. Hagan was still sure, however, that he was present at about 11 P.M. when the Kennedy aides came to Gawler's to select a casket, and is still sure that he personally delivered the mahogany casket to Bethesda, and that he joined his team for a short while in the gallery after he arrived before they began their work.

I asked him if he had any better recollection of who had drafted the 3-page summary Gawler's document called "Funeral Arrangements for John Fitzgerald Kennedy." He said that he definitely did not draft it himself, and that he was of the opinion that Joe Gawler himself probably wrote the document, since Joe Gawler, as undertaker, was personally involved in all funeral arrangements the weekend following the President's death. END

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CALL REPORT: PUBLIC



Document's Author: Douglas Home/ARRB

Date Created: 06/18/96

The Players

Who called whom? Mr. Joseph E. Hagan of Witnesses/Consultants called Douglas Home

Description of the Call

Date: 06/18/96

Subject: Location of Tom Robinson

Summary of the Call:

Joe Hagan called me A.M. today and told me he had just located Tom Robinson, the embalmer who reconstructed President Kennedy's head following JFK's autopsy. He told me that Mr. Robinson had relocated away from Kentucky, and was currently staying with some friends in Maryland. Mr. Robinson gave me the name of the family and their phone number.

He said he had just contacted Tom Robinson this morning previous to calling me, and said he thought Tom Robinson would be amenable to speaking with us. He said that Robinson had just told him that there was both bone and scalp missing from President Kennedy's head following completion of reconstruction, and that there were some small holes in his face caused by shrapnel, which he had plugged.

Hagan also said that Robinson recalled going out to Bethesda with Hagan and the mahogany casket, well before the end of the autopsy, and that Robinson recalled sitting in the gallery for a considerable period of time and watching the autopsy in progress, prior to beginning the autopsy. Hagan quoted Robinson as saying that Ed Stroble and John Van Hoesen had come to Bethesda later in the evening with the portable embalming equipment.

Mr. Hagan brought up the subject of the shipping casket statement in his business document, and reminded me that that statement on the Gawler's "first call" sheet did not reflect any observation personally made by anyone at Gawler's. I then asked him if the term "shipping casket" had a specific meaning within the funeral trade, and he confirmed that it did: namely, that the terms "accommodation case, shipping case, airtray, and/or shipping casket" were interchangeably used to refer to cheap, unadorned lightweight metal containers which were used to ship cadavers from one location to another by air (or sometimes by train). END

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