

The private thoughts of an ex-Secret Service agent

By Mark Herron
Battalion Reporter

As he travels around the state talking to civic clubs and organizations about his days as a Secret Service agent, Mike Howard says one of the most frequent questions he hears is: "Was there a conspiracy to kill the President (Kennedy)?"

"Fifteen million tax-paid dollars were appropriated this year for further investigation," Howard said, "because nobody wants to accept the fact that Oswald, a mentally deranged little punk, killed the president, and was all by his lonesome when he did it." Howard looked frustrated as he explained his opinions.

"Oswald was trying to make a name for himself," he said. "He was thrown out of every subversive organization he tried to join."

"A month before the assassination, Oswald was rejected by the Freedom for Cuba organization," Howard said, "and that's when he bought his rifle."

Howard said even though there was no conspiracy to kill the president, he feels Dallas politicians should share the blame for Kennedy's death.

"Some local politicians told Kennedy he was not liked in Dallas, and needed to ride in an open car so he could wave at the people. When that motorcade came down the street," he said, "Kennedy was an open target."

Leaning forward in his chair, Howard said, "But maybe Oswald shot the president by accident, because I don't think he was aiming for Kennedy."

Howard said Oswald had written in his diary, "I'm going to kill John Connally, that S.O.B."

The reason for Oswald's hostility, Howard said, was that Connally, in his days as Secretary of the Navy, had refused to rescind Oswald's dishonorable discharge from the Marines. Howard said Oswald would have known Connally would be in the motorcade because local newspapers reported that Connally would be rid-

ing in the same car with the President.

Howard said a short time before the Kennedy assassination, Oswald had tried to shoot Gen. Edwin Walker (who was opposed to Kennedy) but missed his head by an inch to the left.

After the assassination, he said, "We took Oswald's rifle to Washington where it was test fired over and over, and each time it shot one inch to the left, when fired from 200 yards." That was the distance from which Oswald had shot Kennedy.

"If Oswald had've been aiming at Kennedy's head, he would have missed him at that distance."

"On the first shot," Howard said, "Oswald was aiming at Connally's head but hit Kennedy's shoulder. That same bullet went through Kennedy, grazed Connally's wrist, and landed in his knee."

"When Oswald fired the second shot," Howard continued, "Kennedy was almost directly between Oswald and Connally, and the bullet struck the right side of Kennedy's head."

After the assassination, Howard was assigned to protect President Johnson and his family at the White House.

In the spring of 1965, Howard said he and three other agents, all native Texans, were sent to protect the president's daughter, Lynda Bird, while she attended the University of Texas.

"Lynda Bird was assigned to a dorm with 900 other girls," he said. "The dorm residents were in a state of shock at first. We put electric alarms and locks on all the doors, in the dorm, and on all the windows in her wing."

A Secret Service agent was on duty at all times, Howard said. The agents sat in a glass booth in the lobby, and watched a television that monitored the hall outside Lynda Bird's room.

"I went to classes with her, and usually drove the car when she went on dates," Howard said. "She went to dances and pizza parlors just like other college stu-

dents, but one of us (agents) was always there."

When Lynda Bird graduated from UT in 1966, Howard said he walked across the stage right behind her, and received a fake diploma.

After graduation, Howard said, Lynda Bird wanted to travel. "We were in the jet set, going to New York, Hollywood, Acapulco, Europe, South America, -- all over."

When Howard accompanied Lynda Bird to Buckingham Palace to a party given by the Queen of England, he was told he wouldn't be able to bring his gun.

"Since I had to wear a tuxedo," Howard said, "I just hid my pistol in my top hat."

Howard has a photo album full of pictures from his travels. "Lynda Bird gave me this album after she was married," he said. The inscription on the album cover reads, "To the other man in my life."

Howard said one reason they became such close friends was "we were both big history buffs, so we always had a lot to talk about."

Howard said he went on the honeymoon in the Virgin Islands, when Lynda Bird married Charles Robb. Before their honeymoon, Howard made decoy reservations in Canada, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, he said, to throw reporters off the track.

Howard said he still feels close to Lynda Bird, who now lives in Virginia. "We see each other about four or five times a year."

During the interview, a package was delivered to Howard. In the box was a pottery coffee cup with "Happy Birthday Uncle Mike" painted on the side. The cup was from Lynda Bird's daughter, Lucinda, Howard's goddaughter.

Howard said during the time he was protecting Lynda Bird, he also became good friends with President Johnson.

"LBJ would call me from time

to time and ask how Lynda Bird was doing, who she was dating, or how her grades were," he said. "When LBJ left the White House in 1968, he asked me to go with him to his ranch in Johnson City, Texas."

Howard said he hated to leave the glitter and prestige of Washington D.C., but he received a pay raise for moving back to Texas.

Howard explained that when a president leaves office, he is given Secret Service protection for the rest of his life.

"There were several threats on LBJ's life after he retired to the ranch," Howard said.

"An uncle of a boy killed in Vietnam came to Texas to kill LBJ," he said, "but fortunately we caught him at a bus station near Johnson City."

Johnson was often difficult to work with, Howard said. "He would just walk into a crowd and there was no way I could give him adequate protection."

Howard said he often took the blame for something the ranch foreman, the mechanic, or the pilot might have done wrong. "He chewed me out a few times, but I could take it."

"Some of the agents took the rough treatment personally, and some couldn't accept the problems he created," he said.

Despite the difficulties, Howard said, "I liked him a lot."

Pointing to a beagle lying in his backyard, Howard said, "That's Crasher. LBJ gave him to me as a pup."

"At the ranch, I was his favorite," Howard said. "I lost a lot of friends in the Secret Service because I was able to work with him."

Howard explained, "LBJ didn't like to trust a lot of people -- just me."

"When he got on his radio," he continued, "he always asked for me."

"In fact," Howard said, "LBJ was calling for me when he died."

LBJ had a heart attack while taking a nap, Howard said. "In the middle of the attack, he grabbed his radio and called for me."

Johnson was known as "One" around the ranch. Howard said his last words were "One to Mike."

Those words provide the title for a book Howard has written. *One to Mike* is a book full of stories about Howard's life as a Secret Service agent, and will be published soon, he said.

Howard said he remained on the ranch exactly one year after the former president died. "I had been with the Secret Service for 14 years," he continued, "I was exhausted and just needed a change."

Unemployment was no problem for Howard. "The day I retired, I was hired by John Hill as a body guard, and I've been with him since then (1974)."

Hill is a Dallas oil millionaire whose 17 year old son lives on a ranch north of Dallas. Howard and his wife live on the ranch and "protect" the younger Hill.

Howard said he thought Hill's son was in no great danger, but "wealthy people are often insecure."

Howard said he and his wife always had trouble being accepted into a community because of the nature of his work. "My job doesn't identify with anything in this community," he said. "I'm not a farmer, or a carpenter, or a salesman."

"There aren't many bodyguards around Prosper," he added. Prosper is a nearby town with a population of 600.

"But the folks around here are great," he said. "Prosper is the first community I've lived in where I felt free to talk about my job."

Reflecting on his life, Howard said, "I achieved my goal (protecting the President)," he said. "I made it to the top, and saw most of the world while I was doing it."

Smiling, he said, "Now I'm happy right where I'm at."

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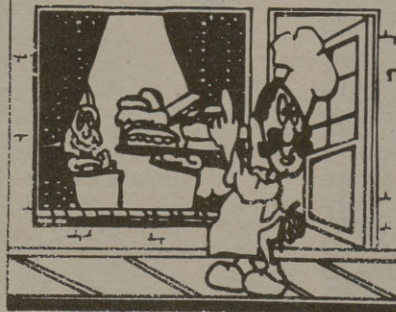
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