

# FOR THE SAKE OF HISTORICAL ACCURACY

**This is an updated version of an article which was first published in the**

**November 2002 edition of the Dealey Plaza Echo,**

**the journal of the British research group Dealey Plaza UK.**

**Barry Keane** is Vice-Chairman of Dealey Plaza UK and here he examines the work of ‘Skip’ Rydberg, the man described by Commander James J. Humes as “a hospital corpsman, second class, and a medical illustrator in our command at Naval Medical School” Rydberg was responsible for the schematic drawings of Kennedy’s head and upper back wounds which he reproduced from verbal information given to him by Commanders Humes and Boswell in March 1964

## **The Day of the Assassination.**

Petty Officer 2nd Class Harold Alfred Rydberg stood at parade rest, resplendent in his Dress Blue uniform on the large circular drive leading to the entrance to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

The time was about 7.00pm; the date was 22nd November 1963.

Several hours earlier, ‘Skip’ Rydberg had been teaching a class in medical illustration at The National Naval Medical Centre at Bethesda, Maryland, when the terrible news from Dallas came. He stopped the class, commenting that no one could learn under these dreadful circumstances.

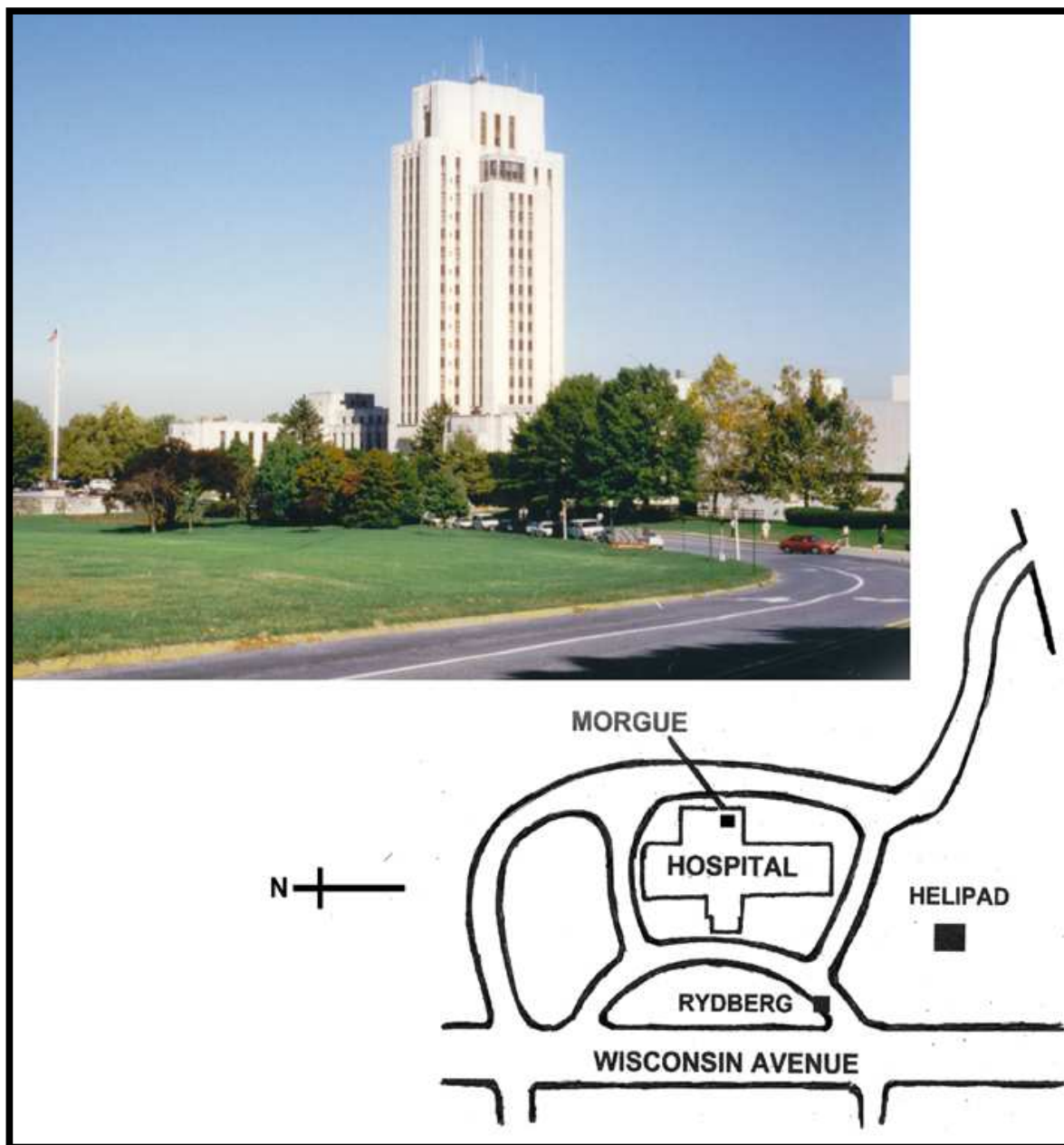
Together with his four students, Rydberg remained glued to the radio until Kennedy’s death was announced about an hour later. Plying themselves with coffee, they prepared for a long day. Although the hospital was/is not strictly speaking a military base, the rear gates were secured and everybody was put on alert.

The enlisted men were ordered to return to quarters to await orders.

Meanwhile, during the flight back to Washington, Admiral Burkley, JFK’s physician had advised Jacqueline Kennedy that an autopsy on the body of her husband would be required. She was told that for reasons of security, a military hospital would be preferred. The options given were Walter Reed, an Army hospital, or Bethesda Naval Hospital. Because the late President had served in the Navy during World War II, she chose Bethesda (William Manchester: Death of a President, published by Michael Joseph, 1967; p.405).

## JFK's body at Bethesda.

Because JFK was in the Navy, Rydberg expected the autopsy to be performed at Bethesda. It came as no surprise when at about 5pm, he and the other enlisted men were ordered to change into Dress Blues, their ceremonial uniform, and line up outside the hospital entrance off Wisconsin Avenue. President Kennedy's body was on its way.



At about 7.00pm, the motorcade arrived. He counted 30 pairs (thirty!) of motorcycle policemen. In retrospect, the question has to be asked where this level of security had been in Dallas.

A helicopter landed at the nearby helipad, disgorging military brass and taking off soon after.

In the grey Navy Ambulance Rydberg observed that Jacqueline Kennedy's hand was on the casket. He also noticed that after the entourage entered the hospital it was full 15 minutes before the ambulance was driven to the rear of the building where the morgue was situated.

After completing their duty of controlling the crowd of onlookers, Rydberg and the rest of the enlisted men were relieved of their station at 8.30pm.

Rydberg then changed into civilian clothes and went to a restaurant with some friends and talked about the events of the day, still not believing what he had witnessed.

After the funeral, three days later, he went back to his normal routine, little realising that he still had another part to play in this saga – an unwitting role in history he has since tried to correct.

## **Background and military career.**

I learnt the following personal details of Harold Rydberg's life and career from correspondence and a series of telephone conversations with him over several months.

Harold Rydberg was born in Chicago on 25th April 1940. He was raised in Sarasota, Florida, where he received his early education, drawing being a special talent he soon revealed. After graduating in 1958, the 18-year old Rydberg joined the United States Navy, receiving his initial training in San Diego, California, where he attended Hospital Corpsman School and completed a 26-week course to become the equivalent of what is now known as a paramedic. In 1959 he was posted to Parris Island, near Beaufort, South Carolina, to the Naval Hospital which took care of the Marines.

It was here that he gained the rank of Petty Officer 3rd Class, or E4.

In 1961, Rydberg's talent for drawing was officially recognised and he received orders to attend the Medical Illustration School at the National Naval Medical Centre, Bethesda, Maryland. He graduated in 1962 after completing a gruelling 26-week, 888-hour didactical course in advanced anatomy and physiology, surgical procedures and the multi-level disciplines of the medical arena.

He was then ordered to remain at Bethesda and take over the Medical Illustration Department.

## **Under secret orders.**

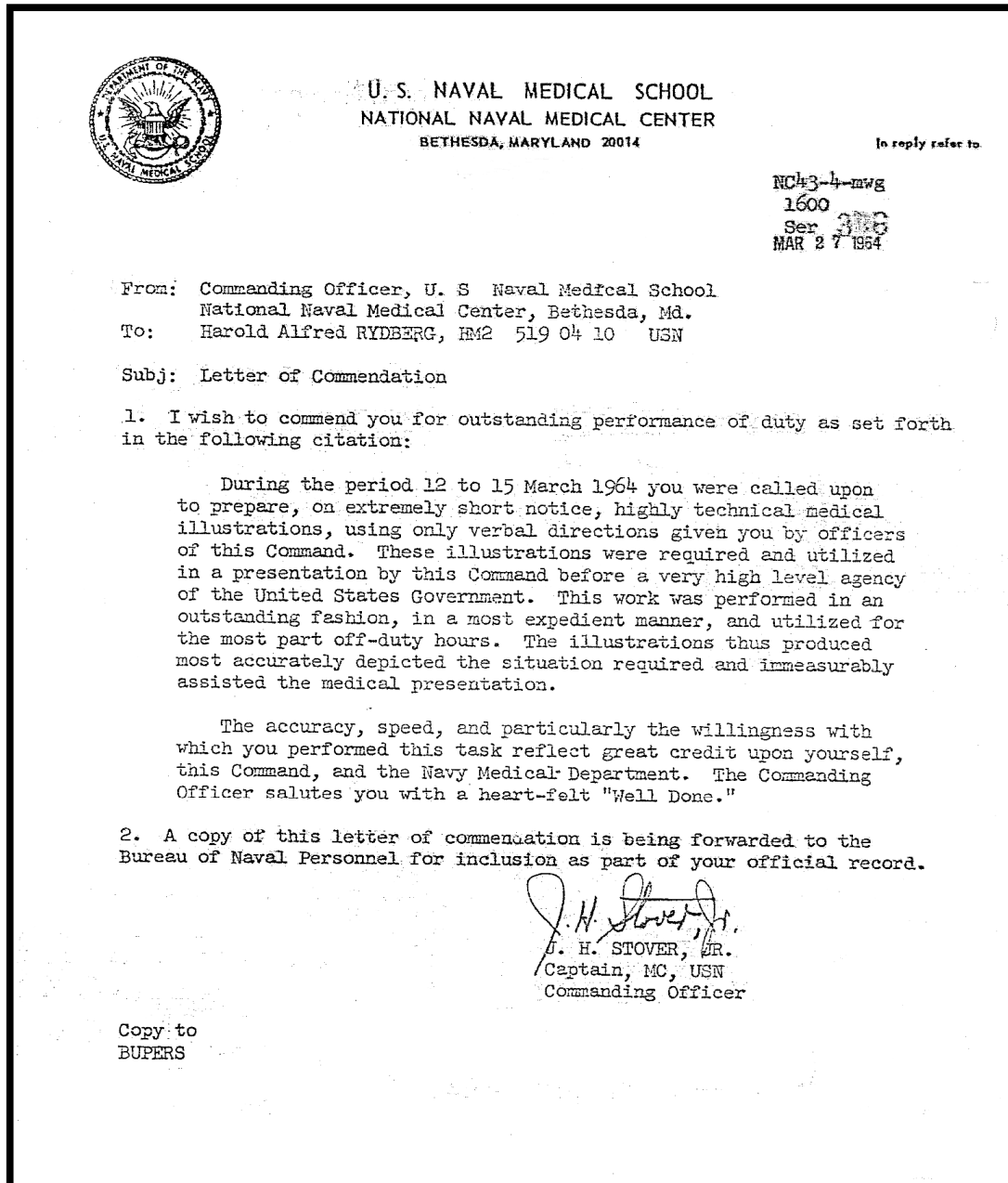
In March 1964, one hundred days after the assassination of President Kennedy, Rydberg was summoned to the office of Captain John Stover, the Commanding Officer of the Navy Medical School. It was explained to him that Commanders Humes and Boswell, two of President Kennedy's autopsy surgeons, were about to testify before the Warren Commission and they were in need of his special talents. He was put under secret orders to prepare medical illustrations of the wounds sustained by President Kennedy. When he later asked Humes why they were not using the photographs taken at the autopsy, Humes told him they were deemed too shocking, and out of deference to the Kennedy family they had been sealed by the FBI and the Secret Service and were not available for testimony.

Over the weekend of 14th/15th March 1964, with a Marine guard just outside the door, Rydberg worked in a small empty ground floor office at Bethesda. There was no artist's table on which to work so he had to use a flat desk and had nothing but verbal descriptions

from Humes and Boswell. He had to rely on his own memory of what Kennedy had looked like, and his expertise of anatomy.

The drawings were done life-size and in watercolour on separate 30"x 20" art boards. The two doctors were not present all the time and as Rydberg worked alone, he became increasingly sceptical of the methods and the accuracy and veracity of his efforts. Despite this growing sense of unease, however, he completed his work to the best of his ability.

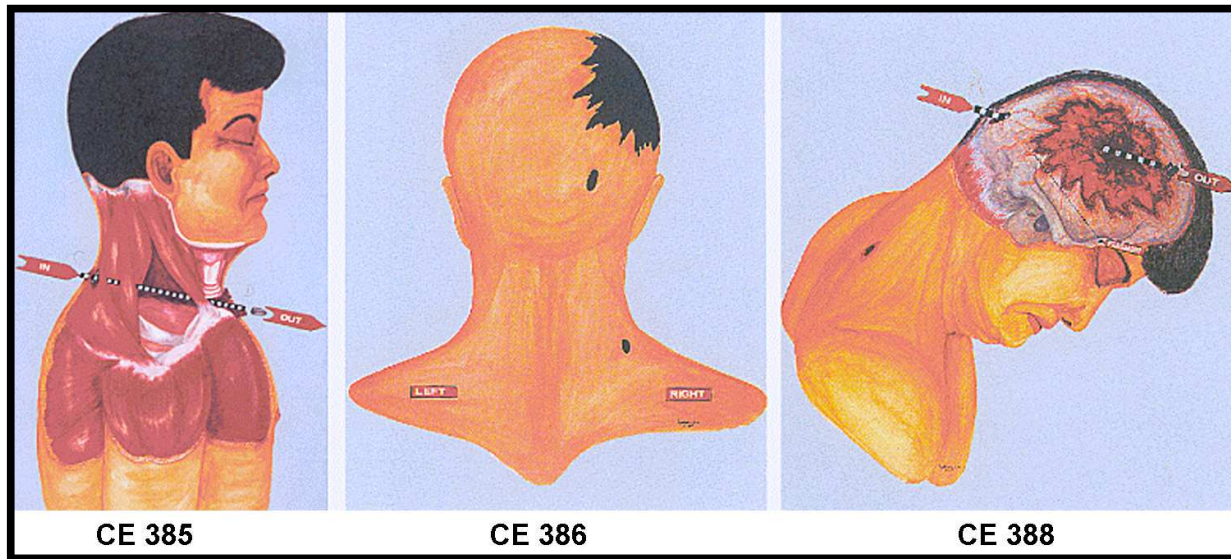
About two weeks later, he received a personal letter of commendation from Captain Stover.



The reader will note that there is no mention of the assassination of President Kennedy, no mention of Humes and Boswell by name, and the Warren Commission is referred to as " ... a very high level agency of the United States Government."

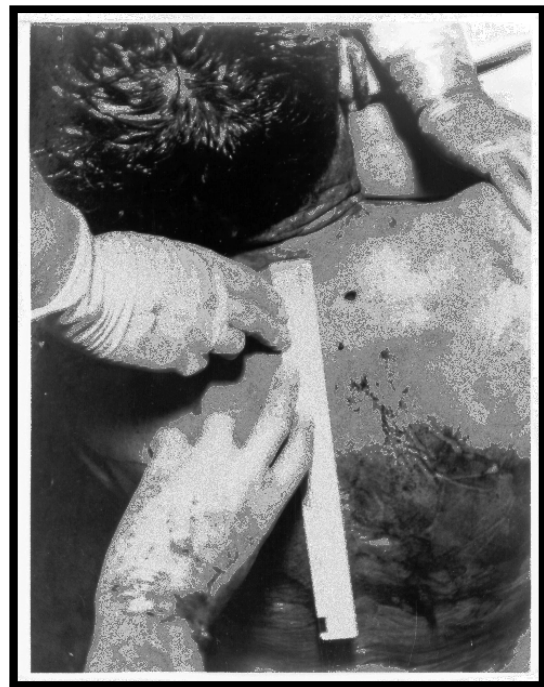
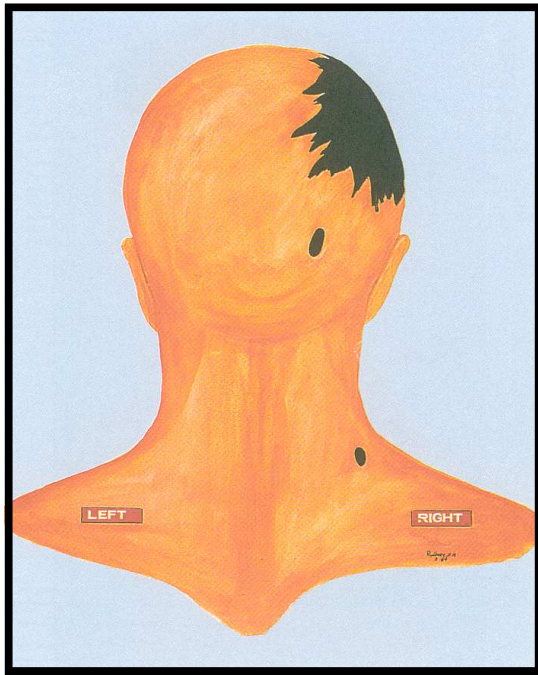
I find the following sentence from Stover's letter very revealing: "The.) illustrations thus produced most accurately depicted the situation required and immeasurably assisted the medical presentation." (My own underlining).

When I remarked on this to Rydberg during one of our many telephone conversations, he replied wryly: “Yes, I noticed that too.”



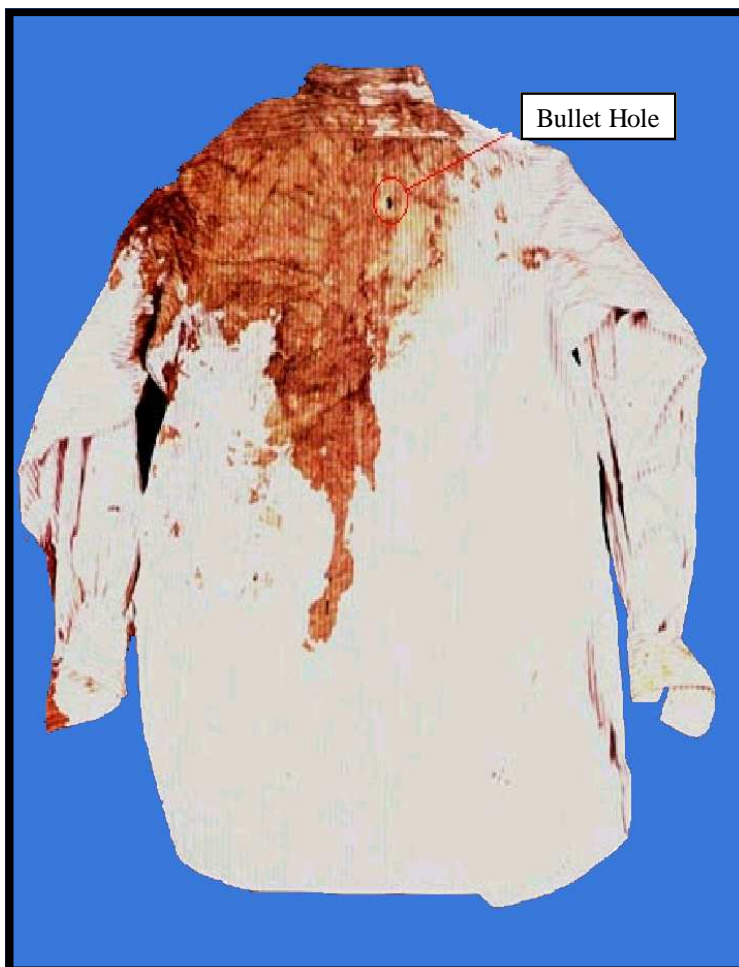
Illustrations from Stewart Galenor’s excellent book *Cover-Up* (published by Kestral Books, New York, 1998), documents 9, 10 and 11.

The illustrations produced by Rydberg were designated Commission Exhibits 385, 386 and 388 and can be found in the Warren Commission 26 Volumes at 16H 977 and 984. (CE 387 is the Autopsy Report, signed by Commanders James J. Humes, J.Thorton Boswell and Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Finck.



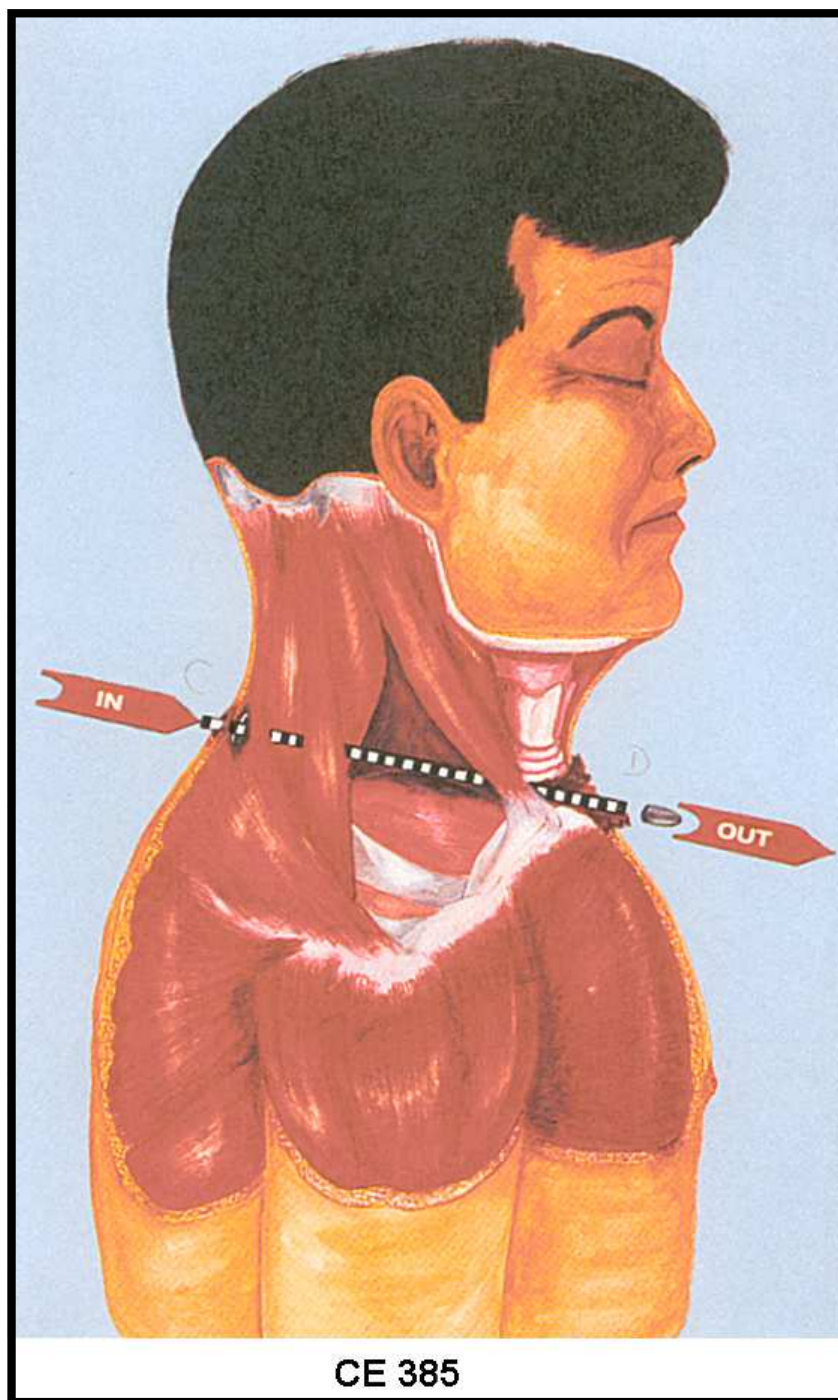
When Rydberg's drawing designated Commission Exhibit 386 is directly compared with an autopsy photograph an immediate discrepancy can be observed.

The location of the lower wound in the drawing is above the shoulder line, but the autopsy photograph clearly shows that it is in fact below.



When the shirt that Kennedy was wearing is studied the bullet hole again is well below the line of the shoulder.

The trajectory of the bullet as depicted in Rydberg's drawing. Commission Exhibit 385, is misleading because the actual entry wound is in fact several inches lower. It was raised to the neck position to fit in with the assumption that the wound in the front of the neck is a wound of exit.



To have Oswald fire from the sixth floor of the Book Depository and to support the Single Bullet Theory, the entry wound would have had to be in the neck.



Yet a comparison between Rydberg's drawing, Commission Exhibit 388 and Zapruder frame 312, the last frame before the headshot, it can be seen they were trying to reconcile a low entrance wound in the back of the head with Oswald's assumed position on the sixth floor of the Book Depository.

## **The record speaks for itself.**

The President's Commission met to hear the autopsy surgeon's testimony at 2 p.m. on March 16, 1964, at 200 Maryland Avenue NE. Washington, D.C.

Present were Chief Justice Earl Warren Chairman, Senator John Sherman Cooper, Representative Gerald R. Ford, John J. McCloy, and Allen W. Dulles, members.

Also present were J. Lee Rankin, general counsel; Francis W. H. Adams, assistant counsel; Norman Redlich, assistant counsel; Arlen Specter, assistant counsel; and Charles Murray, observer.

Commander Humes had the following exchange with assistant counsel Arlen Specter regarding the drawings. This was the day immediately following Rydberg's completion of his drawings (2H 349-350):

**HUMES:** "When appraised of the necessity for our appearance before this Commission, we did not know whether or not the photographs which we had made would be available to the Commission. So to assist in making our testimony more understandable to the Commission members, we decided to have made drawings, schematic drawings, of the situation as we saw it, as we recorded it and as we recall it. These drawings were made under my supervision and that of Dr. Boswell by Mr. Rydberg, whose initials are H.A. He is a hospital corpsman, second class, and a medical illustrator in our command at Naval Medical School."

**SPECTER:** "Did you provide him with the basic information from which these drawings



were made?”

**HUMES:** “Yes sir.”

**SPECTER:** “Distances, that sort of thing?”

**HUMES:** “Yes sir. We had made certain physical measurements of the wounds, and of their position on the body of the late President, and we provided these and supervised directly Mr. Rydberg in making these drawings.”

**SPECTER:** “Have you checked the drawings subsequent to their preparation to verify their accuracy?”

**HUMES:** “Yes sir.”

**SPECTER:** “And proportion?”

Here Humes starts to waiver on his reliance on the accuracy of the drawings.

**HUMES:** “I must state these drawings are in part schematic. The artist had but a brief period of some 2 days to prepare these. He had no photographs from which to work, and had to work under our description, verbal description, of what we had observed.”

This last statement confirms Rydberg’s account and underlines his sense of unease in preparing what were in fact only representations of the wounds and not a true illustration of what actually occurred.

The next Specter/Humes exchange I believe is even more pertinent:

**SPECTER:** “Would it be helpful to the artist, in redefining the drawings, if that should become necessary, to have available to him the photographs or X-rays of the President?”

**HUMES:** “If it were necessary to have them absolutely true to scale. (In my opinion it was crucial: Keane) I think it would be virtually impossible for him to do this without the photographs.”

**SPECTER:** “And what is the reason for the necessity for having the photographs?”

Humes now plainly admits the drawings are practically worthless as evidence.

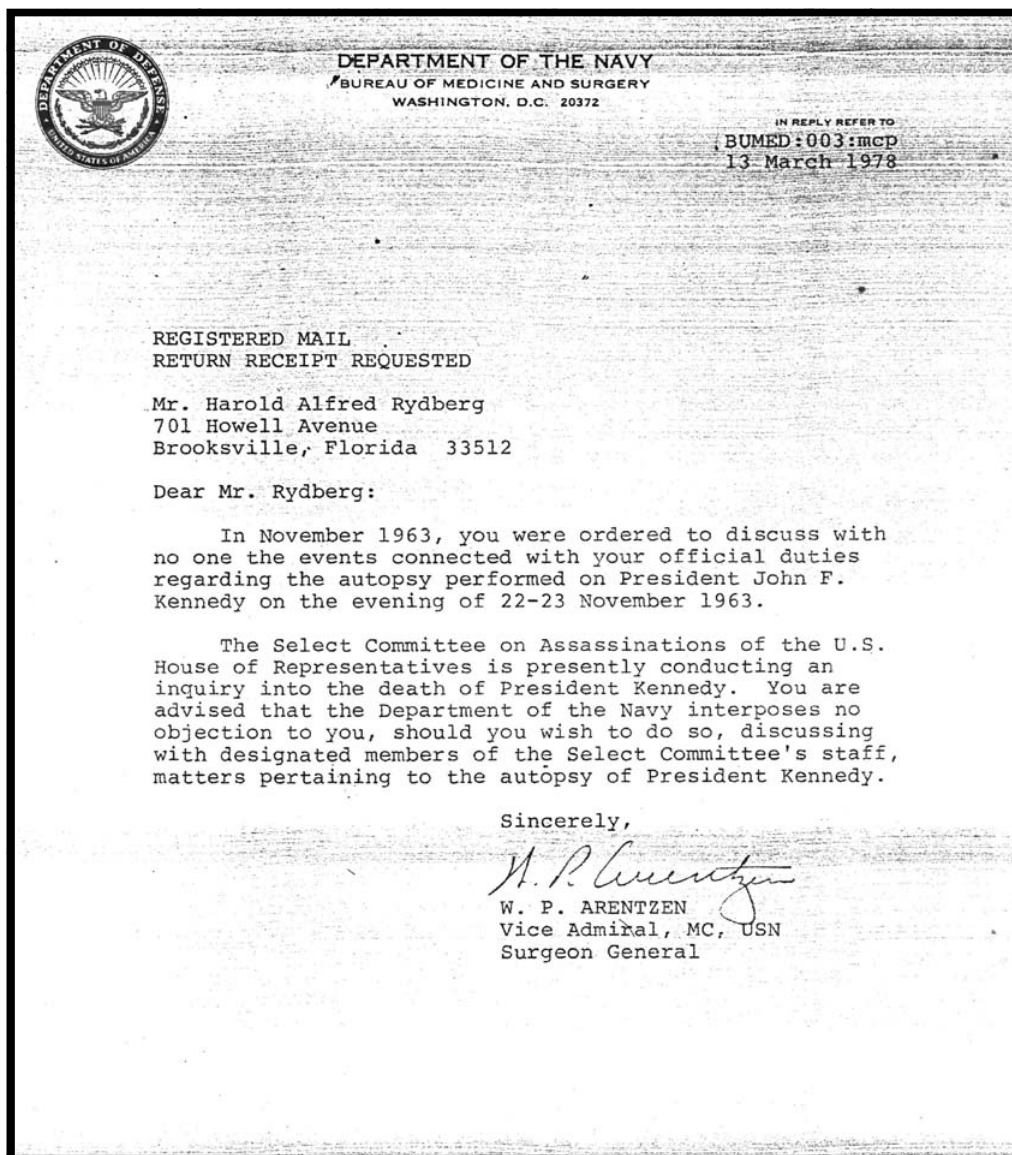
**HUMES:** “I think that it is most difficult to transmit into physical measurements the - by word the - exact situation as it was seen to the naked eye. The photographs were - there is no problem of scale there because the wounds, if they are changed in size or changed in size and proportion to the structures of the body and so forth, when we attempt to give a description of these findings, of the bony prominences, I cannot, which we used as points of references, I cannot, transmit completely to the illustrator where they were situated.” (2H 350)

The Commission was expected to draw its conclusions based on palpably unreliable information, when the most accurate images existed and should have been utilised. This failure to scrutinise the best evidence is a glaring example of the Commission's obviously preconceived agenda.

These drawings were for many years the only visual representations of Kennedy's wounds the public were allowed to see. They gave a misleading impression of the injuries sustained by Kennedy bolstering the Warren Commission's conclusion that Oswald was the sole assassin, if indeed he fired any shots at all

## Sworn to Silence.

Rydberg was under orders not to discuss his own part in the events under threat of Court-Martial, as were those who were present at the autopsy of President Kennedy. This order was not rescinded until the H.S.C.A. began its investigation in the late 70s. He received this standard letter from the Surgeon General of the Navy, Vice Admiral W.P. Arentzen in March 1978.





**Captain John Stover left, with Petty Officer 2nd class Harold A. Rydberg  
Photo taken in early 1964.**

In May 1968, two months before he was due to leave the Navy, Rydberg wrote to Humes and Boswell, requesting letters of recommendation. He asked them to include their comments on the illustrations that he had prepared for their appearance before the Warren Commission.

11908 Bluhill Road  
Wheaton, Maryland 20902  
3 May 1968

James J. Humes, M.D.  
1336 Lochmorr Boulevard  
Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan

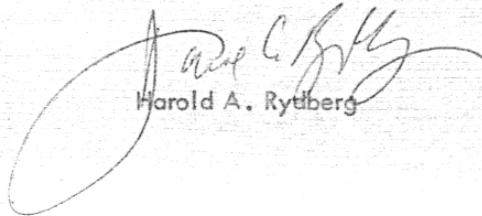
Dear Doctor Humes:

It has been some time since you left the Navy and I hope this letter finds you in good health and enjoying the civilian life.

I am writing to request a letter of recommendation from you which would include your comments on the Warren Commission Drawings numbered 385, 386, and 388. I am getting out of the Navy in July and think this would be helpful to me.

Thank you for your time and trouble.

Sincerely yours,



Harold A. Rytberg

Humes replied with a glowing appraisal of his work in the field of medical illustration, including the following comments:

“Through our period of association I was most favourably impressed with all of your artwork, which was of tremendous value to me. In particular the drawings which you prepared for me depicting the wounds of our late President John F. Kennedy were of the greatest assistance in my testimony before the Warren Commission.”

# Saint John Hospital

22101 MOROSS ROAD  
DETROIT, MICHIGAN 48236

881-8200

May 22, 1968

Mr. Harold A. Rydberg  
11908 Bluhill Road  
Wheaton, Maryland 20902

Dear Mr. Rydberg:

It is with great pleasure that I write to you to express my gratitude and appreciation for your excellent service to me and my associates in the field of Medical Illustration.

Throughout the period of our association I was most favorably impressed with all of your art work which was of tremendous value to me. In particular the drawings which you prepared for me depicting the wounds of our late President, John F. Kennedy, were of the greatest assistance in my testimony before the Warren Commission.

I trust that you will find a suitable position where your great talent in the field of Medical Art will be well utilized and appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

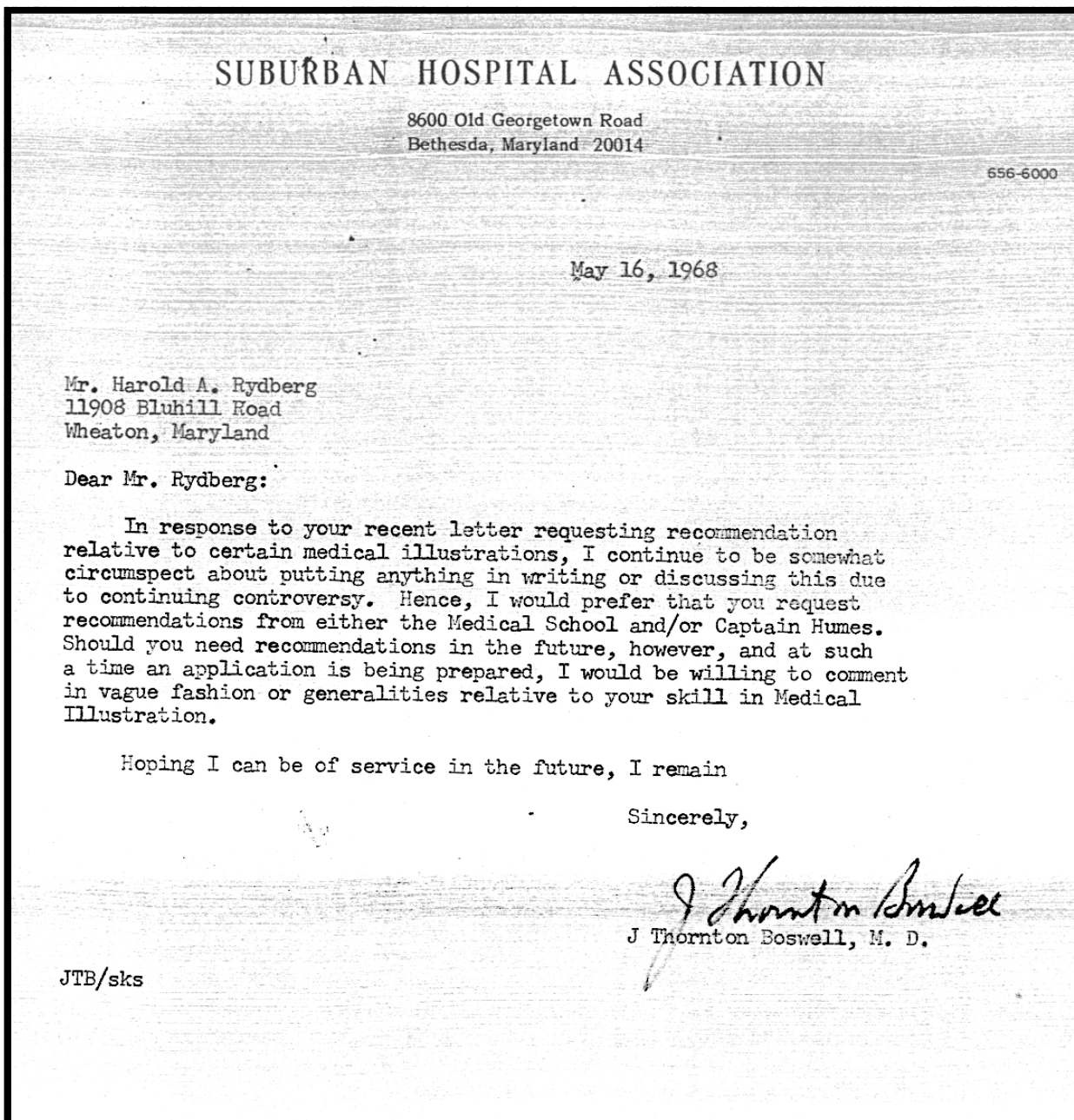


James J. Humes, M.D.  
Director of Laboratories

JJH/tv

Boswell's reply, however, was somewhat different in tone. He deferred Rydberg to Humes and the Medical School, but he did include these tortured comments.

"I continue to be somewhat circumspect about putting anything in writing or discussing this due to continuing controversy ... I would be willing to comment in vague fashion or generalities relative to your skill in medical illustration."



It is clear that Boswell was very unhappy about discussing what took place in the morgue at Bethesda on the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1963. Did he see something different to what was described in the autopsy report? Humes' testimony before the Warren Commission

takes up nineteen pages, including questions, over nineteen thousand words. Boswell's is one page and only five hundred words. He deferred the Commission to the answers Humes gave, saying very little directly himself.

Below is a section of a memo Assistant Counsel Arlen Specter wrote to the General Counsel of the Warren Commission J. Lee Rankin, on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1964, where he states his doubts about the reliability of the three drawings.

3. THE COMMISSION SHOULD DETERMINE WITH CERTAINTY THAT THERE ARE NO MAJOR VARIATIONS BETWEEN THE FILMS AND THE ARTIST'S DRAWINGS. Commission Exhibits Nos. 385, 386, and 388 were made from the recollections of the autopsy surgeons as told to the artist. Some day someone may compare the films with the artist's drawings and find a significant error which might substantially affect the essential testimony and the Commission's conclusions. In any event, the Commission should not rely on hazy recollections, especially in view of the statement in the autopsy report (Commission Exhibit #387) that:

"The complexity of those fractures and the fragments thus produced tax satisfactory verbal description and are better appreciated in the photographs and roentgenograms which are prepared."

He included this prophetic sentence. "Some day someone may compare the films with the artist's drawings and find a significant error which might substantially affect the essential testimony and the Commissions conclusions." Then he quotes directly from the autopsy report. "The complexity of those fractures and the fragments thus produced tax satisfactory verbal descriptions and are better appreciated in the photographs....."

Clearly even Specter was concerned that future historians would realise that as far as this aspect of the investigation went, there were serious flaws.

In my opinion, the Rydberg drawings were a deliberate attempt to cover up the true nature of Kennedy's wounds and therefore mislead the public into believing the Warren Commission's lone assassin theory.

## **Vain Attempts.**

Over the years, Harold Rydberg has made repeated attempts to gain access to the autopsy photographs of Kennedy with the object of creating more accurate medical illustrations. He wrote several letters to Burke Marshall, the Kennedy's lawyer, who had power of attorney over the photographs. After explaining his role in the Warren Commission and his reasons for requesting access to them, he received this response from Marshall (Jan. 1979):

“Before deciding on your request, I will have to have your assurance that, if the request is granted, you would nevertheless comply with the restrictions in the deed of gift that prohibits reproduction of the autopsy materials, whether by drawings or otherwise.”

Rydberg replied:

“If I were unable to draw what was found in these materials, the concept of inaccuracy due to ‘verbal description’ becomes perpetual. I do not plan to reproduce the x-rays or photographs as such, but would use them to check the accuracy of the existing drawings.

Of course if any discrepancies are found, I would want to be assured that I would have the right to correct any errors. Not to have this right, means to me, that an important historical document is being misrepresented.”

Rydberg's request was not granted.

He had to wait until the photographs entered the public domain as a result of the efforts of others. Historical accuracy was not paramount in this case as is evident from not only Rydberg's experience but also those of the many others who have tried over the years to find the truth.

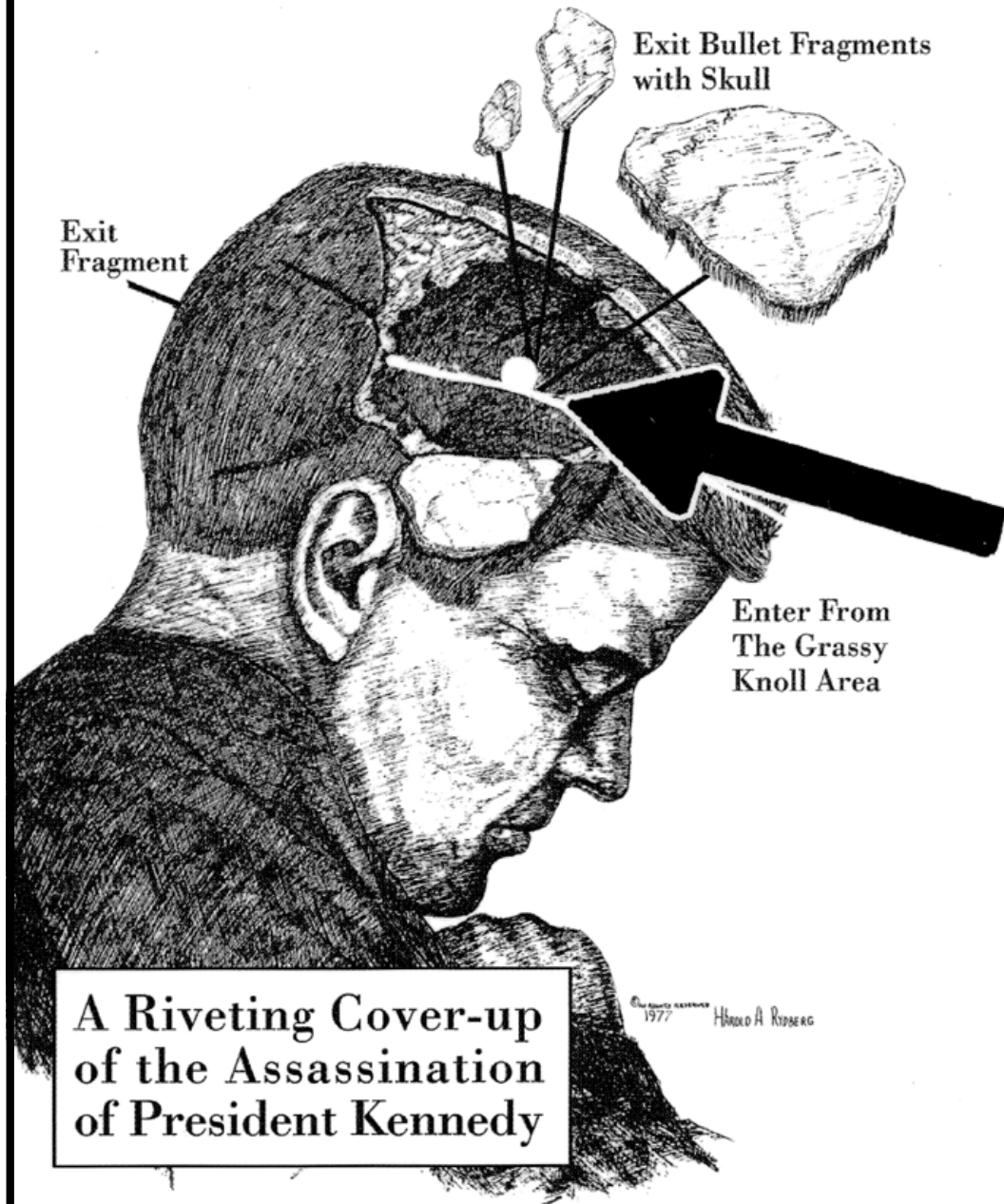
Rydberg was never called to testify before any of the investigations into the assassination. For many years he was unable to talk about his role and his unease in being an unwitting participant in what is clearly a cover-up of the truth.

Part of his efforts to set the record straight was to write a book entitled *The Head of the Dog*. This was published by 1st Book Library in 2001. He describes it as a “factionalised” account of the conspiracy to murder the President. He believes Ninety percent of his book is true.

Rydberg has never wavered in his desire to correct an historical error in which he feels he was used to further the aims of the conspiracy. The cover of his book, in his opinion, more accurately depicts the head wounds.



# THE HEAD OF THE DOG



A Riveting Cover-up  
of the Assassination  
of President Kennedy

**By Harold A. Rydberg**  
Warren Commission, Medical Illustrator

Rydberg now retired from the military has been in recent years an adjunct faculty member at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. His duties encompassed medical illustration/forensic illustration while teaching courses in human anatomy, design, draped figure, watercolor, and color application, the mechanics of the human body, rendering life-like movements, techniques in pen and ink, water colour, perspective, carbon brush drawing, and stippling. He also taught the use of art in multi-media application, such as sculpting, computer applications and design concepts.

He recently completed a Masters Degree on Criminology, which includes his critique of the Warren Commission's investigation. He will now go on to the Ph.D. level as a Forensic Psychologist, enhancing the community law-enforcement arena by including his medical/forensic illustration experience to enhance the depiction and profiling of criminal behavior from crime-scene and victimology.

Skip Rydberg presented at the 2003 JFK Lancer Conference on his experience in producing the Illustrations for the Warren Commission. He emphasised his unease at having his name on an historical document which is inaccurate .

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Ian Griggs and Mark Bridger for their encouragement and advice. In particular I want to thank Harold 'Skip' Rydberg for his unfailing courtesy and patience during many fascinating hours of discussion on the telephone and at our meetings in Dallas in November 2003.

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Skip Rydberg (left)  
with Barry Keane  
at the  
JFK Lancer Conference in  
Dallas November 2003

