

My Two Days with JFK

Early PA Leader, John Braun's recollections of JFK

My first day with Senator John F. Kennedy was October 18, 1960. I was a senior at Miami Jackson High and was standing on the curb of 36th Street waiting for the bus that I routinely would ride to my part time after-school job. Looking to the west, I saw an oncoming motorcade of flashing lights, police motorcycles, and a Lincoln Continental convertible with a man sitting on the top of the back seat. The motorcade slowed down to a near crawl as it approached the block where I stood at the curb with several other students just across from the school. Senator Kennedy was waving and smiling. As he got closer, our eyes locked (or at least I thought so) and I felt an instant connection with someone of whom I had only slightly ever heard his name. In retrospect, he seemed to have the ability to communicate with his eyes and with his smile conveying a sense of caring, interest and confidence. I was impressed and still am to this day. We never met or had a hand shake as was my experience with another presidential candidate years later in 1971 on the campus of the University of North Carolina – Richard Nixon, Kennedy's opponent in 1960.



I enlisted in the Navy after high school, had nine months of duty on the USS Strong DD 758, went to Hospital Corps School in 1962 and received orders to report to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for enrollment in the Heart/Lung Bypass Technician curriculum. The class was filled upon my arrival and I was assigned to work in the Newborn Nursery which was located on the fifth floor of the hospital's eighteen story tower. My stint in the nursery was a great experience with many fond memories. I particularly recall those mornings at the end of the night shift when the morning sun would usher in another day. We were rocking and feeding babies, looking out over the front lawn of the hospital viewing Old Glory waving in the breeze and the NIH campus across Wisconsin Avenue. I often thought how fortunate we are to have such a great country and to be part of it. Little did I know at that time that I would be working on that NIH campus as Chief of the Physician Assistant Staff in 1972. And little would it have been imaginable that a tragedy would create such a scene on this same vista as it did in just a few months.



OR Tech School Graduation, 1963
Braun 3rd Row far Right

In July, 1963 I had surgery for appendicitis and shared a hospital room for a couple of weeks in isolation with a Whitehouse cook. He was a Philippine national serving as a steward in the Navy and his specialty was cooking steaks. He was often assigned to cook on the Honey Fitz when the Kennedy's entertained on the presidential yacht. He shared several insights about the Kennedy family and it was clear that they had a joy for living life to the fullest. Shortly after that surgery, I elected to enroll in the Operating Room Technician curriculum because the wait for the Heart Lung gig was going to be several more months.

The morning of November 22, 1963 was clear and not particularly cold. I put on my winter blues and walked eagerly to the OR looking forward to whatever the day there was to offer. Each day was an adventure in that program as our educational process was considerably influenced by whatever surgical cases were on the schedule. I do not remember anything about the educational thing that day but vividly recall the incoming announcements on the squawk box about the president being “injured” in Texas.

The first announcements were in the early hours of the afternoon as we were finishing up the day’s work and clean-up. Around mid afternoon I was the only technician still working along with the senior enlisted instructor, Petty Officer George Swales and the Chief Nurse Instructor, Commander Ellis - both wonderful instructors and individuals. At some point in time the tragic news was announced overhead that the president was dead! Shock does not begin to describe the emotional responses the three of us experienced. Shortly after that, Commander Ellis received a call from Pathology requesting some instruments from the OR. She asked me to gather silver probes, and to take them to the autopsy suite. I did. Things were frenetic down there.



I went back to the OR; we closed it up for the day and headed our separate ways. On my way back to the barracks, my mind was rushing with so many wild thoughts and I was anxious to get into my cubicle and be with my friends. As I entered the barracks there was an unusually loud and urgent announcement on the squawk box. **“ALL HANDS LAY OUT TO THE HELIPORT IN UNIFORM!!!”** It was repeated several times. There was a flood of guys already in uniform rushing out to the heliport. I panicked! I may have been guilty of a serious act of desertion. My immediate reaction to the announcement was that we were at war (The Russians) and Washington was being evacuated. I was concerned that I would not have an opportunity to say goodbye to my family. I quickly changed into civilian garb and climbed out the back window fire escape.

I quickly made my way to the town of Bethesda which was just a few blocks away and found a pay phone. I placed a collect call home and my mother answered. We had our talk in a state of confusion and emotions. As we were on the phone, the afternoon was fading into nightfall. As I looked down Wisconsin Avenue, crowds were gathering and I saw “that other motorcade,” very similar to the one in 1960. This time it was the hearse! It passed right in front of the phone booth, with the interior lights brightly shining on the flag draped casket and a clear view of the First Lady and Attorney General, Jackie and Bobby sitting next to it. I described it to Mom, we said our goodbyes and I hurried back to the hospital campus.

The hospital compound did not have any security gates in those days. It was a zoo! Helicopters were circling overhead, landing and taking off. Huge crowds were gathering at the entrances to the hospital. The hearse had driven up the steep steps to the front entrance allowing passengers to disembark and go inside. As I approached the scene the hearse was eking its way back down the long course of steps through the packed crowds that were making way for the vehicle to slowly move toward the main drive with the slain president’s body. Then, it went slowly on its way to the back side of the complex where the morgue was located. And I immediately had thoughts of those silver probes that I had delivered earlier and for the first time realized what purpose they would serve. A slight shudder went through me.

I headed past the heliport to the barracks, changed back into uniform and headed for the south entrance of the hospital. I was allowed entrance with no questions asked. I approached the rotunda at the main

entrance. The second floor balcony was secured by Secret Service agents. There were very few people in the area when I arrived and there was a sense of calm.



**JFK Meets with Defense Secretary
Robert McNamara, June 1962**

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was standing at the elevator entrance with my long time friend, a civilian employee who was the tower elevator operator. I went over to speak with my old friend. He was a very pleasant elderly black gentleman with a sharp recall of people's names and where they worked. He and the Secretary were shuttling dignitaries to visit the grieving family who were in the Presidential Suite on the eighteenth floor. There was a lull of visitors and we chatted. Mr. McNamara, not knowing who I was and never inquiring, asked me to stand by to greet arriving visitors when he was upstairs. I suppose he saw that I was able to socialize and speak reasonably well. And I always had a sense of self confidence that probably showed. I would simply let arriving dignitaries know that the Secretary would return shortly, not knowing who they may have been, whether to salute or bow!

Somehow, I was relieved to observe the calm in the rotunda as I was still not sure if we were going to war, or what might be happening. But Mr. McNamara's composure was sending me a signal that things were not at DEFCON 4. The night was long, the rotunda cleared out, the visitors left, and Mrs. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy departed by way of the basement level to avoid the crowds that were still outside.

I later learned that the directive to report to the heliport was to assist the helicopters and their passengers. I attended the ceremonial transfer of the president's remains from the White House to the U.S. Capitol Rotunda but did not attend the funeral. I felt honored for my slight involvement in such a tragic event. It was very special to me as this turning point in history was, and is, to every American and many others across the globe.

Thomas Paine had it right when he penned "The American Crisis", published December 23, 1776:

"These are the times that try men's souls...."

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