

## The Gunfight

September 29, 2008

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People of a certain age can tell you where they were, and frequently who told them, when they learned of the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. But few remember, except for perhaps some in this room, what happened on a very hot day in Washington, D.C. on November 1, 1950. On February 7, 2008, the New York Times carried the obituary of Floyd M. Boring, 92, “Agent Who Guarded 5 Presidents” including JFK. President Harry S. Truman called him “the man who saved my life twice”, once by throwing him a life ring and pulling him aboard the Presidential yacht Williamsburg after he suddenly began struggling while swimming in the Potomac, and the other at 2:20 PM on that bright 85 degree Wednesday afternoon in Washington, D.C.

Two Puerto Rican Nationalists, 36 year old Oscar Collazo and 25 year old Griselio Torresola, armed with World War II German automatic pistols, attempted to storm the Blair House at 1621 Pennsylvania Avenue at 2:20 PM that day. Harry Truman was taking his usual afternoon nap in the second floor front bedroom in his underwear. How did they get there and why?

1950 was a pivotal year for the United States. On February 12<sup>th</sup> the junior senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy gave a speech waving in his hand “a list of known Communists” in the government. June 25<sup>th</sup> the North Korean Army invaded South Korea. In September the McCarran Act, significantly limiting civil liberties was passed, over Truman’s veto; and on that very day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, Truman was advised by the new head of the CIA General Walter Bedell Smith that hordes of Chinese Communist troops were flowing into North Korea to aid their failing ally. Last but not least, two days earlier on October 30<sup>th</sup> fighting broke out in several locations in Puerto Rico after five Nationalists attempted to storm the Governor’s Mansion, to assassinate the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico, Luis Munoz Marin.

The leader of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, part of Puerto Rican politics since the mid 1800’s, was 57 year old Pedro Albizu Campos, a Harvard law school graduate, who had already served 6 years in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary following a conviction for inciting rebellion and conspiring to overthrow the government of the United States. Again challenging United States rule over Puerto Rico he called for

immediate Revolution on September 23, 1950 with his Proclamation of the Free Republic of Puerto Rico. It was he who recruited Torresola, at age nineteen, and later, as the New York representative of his party, gave him orders to carry out the assassination as part of the October fighting, thus calling world wide attention to their cause. Torresola recruited his friend and fellow party member Collazo.

The facts of that Wednesday's events are stark. It was brief, between 38.5 and 40 seconds. Between 29 and 31 shots were fired in an area 20 by 90 feet. There were two separate actions taking place simultaneously at either end of the property with very short pistol ranges, and the event is forgotten often being confused with the 1954 attack by 4 Puerto Rican Nationalists who shot up Congress. At the end of the day there was one dead, one dying, and two very seriously wounded.

The press of the day created a stereotype of two hot tempered Latin revolutionaries who were undisciplined, crazy, chasing a dream that made no sense whatsoever --- Puerto Rican Independence. Radio, the infant Television, and the print media said that they were dumb, that the Secret Service and White House Police officers brushed them aside like flies, that Truman was never in mortal danger, the two never came close to entering Blair House, and if they did there was an agent with a Tommy gun waiting for them. It was a joke, a farce, low opera. One problem with these statements of that blistering 38.5 seconds is that they are all wrong.

The opposing Secret Service team, so to speak, lead by Special Agent Floyd M. Boring, age 38, consisted of Special Agents Vincent P. Mroz, Stewart G. Stout, and White House Police Officers Leslie W. Coffelt, Joseph O. Davidson, Joseph H. Downs, and Donald T. Birdzell. They were armed with either a Colt .38 Special, a snub nosed weapon, also known as a Detective Special, firing a 158 grain Winchester cartridge or the standard Colt Official Police 6 shot revolver. On the first floor of the Blair House, in the Secret Service office at the east end of the building was a locked gun cabinet holding several short barreled pump shot guns (Riot Guns) and a Thompson submachine with additional magazines and ammunition. This was down a 30 foot hall from the main entrance and up a flight of stairs from one of the basement entrances to the building.

The Blair House is technically two houses, the Lee House and the Blair House. Facing them, the Lee House is to the left or western end, and the Blair House is to the

right or eastern end of the property. Blair House was built in 1824 by a prominent physician, Joseph Lovell, the first Surgeon General of the United States who also founded the Army Corps of Engineers. Sadly, in 1836 both Lovell and his wife died within weeks of each other leaving 11 children orphaned and the house on the market. Francis Preston Blair, Sr., a Frankfort Kentucky newspaper publisher, Jacksonian Democrat and a member of Jackson's "kitchen cabinet" bought the property, and in 1858 built the second house, abutting his, as a wedding gift to his only daughter Elizabeth Blair and her husband Commander Samuel Phillips Lee, USN soon to distinguish himself in the Civil War.

By 1950, internally the houses were one. Abutting small rooms had been formed into larger ones, and passageways connected east and west. The main entrance was a canopied 10 step stairway into Blair House, with a smaller canopied stairway into the Lee extension. At either end of the 130 foot property were two wooden guard houses tall enough for a man to stand but with a wooden chair for sitting. Small windows cut into the sides allowed a limited field of vision. Directly behind the eastern guard house on the first floor was the Secret Service office with a window facing Pennsylvania Avenue, but the line of sight was partially obstructed by the guard house peaked roof and to the west the green canopy of the Blair House entrance. Harry Truman's bedroom was on the second floor of Blair House one window to the west of the canopy.

According to protocol, the Secret Service agents and White House police officers rotated their positions every 30 minutes "to keep their eyes fresh" and constantly alert. Two were assigned to the first floor east end office, one each to the east and west guard shacks, one at the foot of the Blair House steps, and one at the back alley entrance, which was in reality the main entrance for staff, Truman, and his family. The Pennsylvania Avenue entrance was for visitors and the exit/entrance for Truman's 6:30 AM walks. Special Agent Boring was in charge, and freely floated, checking all stations throughout the 8 hour shift. White House officer Leslie Coffelt was not supposed to be working that day, but was filling in for another officer.

Griselio Torresola was a professional political representative and organizer for the Nationalists as their New York agent. He and his family were personally very close to Campos, his sister being Campos's personal assistant; and they came from the same small

mountain village. Torresola, in his early role as a Nationalist Cadet, became very proficient in the use of all types of firearms and was a crack shot. His friend Collazo, older and more mature, had been active in the party but was employed as a metal finisher in a woman's hand bag manufacturer in New York. He too was a marksman having taught hundreds of young cadets on pistol ranges in Puerto Rico. However, his expertise was rifles and revolvers; he had never fired an automatic weapon.

The planning of the assassination remains partially shrouded in the mists of history, and the reports are contradictory about whether or not it was spontaneous or carefully laid out. There is no question the order was given, but the details were apparently left to Torresola. The guns, a Luger, manufactured in 1939 at the Mauser plant in Wurttemberg carried by Torresola, and a P38 Walther automatic, made in 1941 at the Walther factory in Zella-Mehlis carried by Collazo were excellent choices for close in action. Both were highly efficient lethal military automatics. Each man carried three 9 mm magazines and assorted loose cartridges.

The actual attack plan was brilliant, given the time line and resources. Torresola and Collazo would approach from different directions on Pennsylvania Avenue. Torresola from the west and Collazo from the east. Oscar would walk past the east guard house and eliminate the officer at the bottom of the steps. If not hit by then, he was to dash up the 10 steps and crash through the screen door which was the only barrier to entry and race up the steps looking for Truman. At the same time, Griselio would eliminate the western guard and immediately provide covering fire for Oscar, since Torresola was the better shot. If Oscar was down, then Griselio would make the charge up the steps.

Their aim, with sheer bravado, was to overwhelm the defense with a stunning blast of firepower, disorienting and dis-coordinating any response. The well know battle plan of "shock and awe" - the fire and rapid movement that is a fundamental small-unit fighting theory of most professional armies. The amazing thing was --- they thought this up on the spot.

Griselio and Oscar arrived in D.C. by train on the 31<sup>st</sup>. At a seedy hotel near Union Station, Griselio instructed Oscar in the use of the Walther automatic. Anyone familiar with an automatic pistol knows that unless you are extremely proficient you

cannot learn to fire the weapon without actually firing it. The complex mechanism of loading the magazine, removing the safety, chambering a round, knowing the trigger pull, and firing the weapon can only be fully understood by actually firing the weapon. In today's Northeast Washington firing off a few rounds with an automatic weapon would hardly raise an eyebrow, but in 1950 that would have brought the cops running.

The next morning in their new suits, shirts, and fedoras, they toured the Capitol grounds a few blocks from their hotel, and then took a cab to the White House. It was there that the helpful cabbie informed them that Truman didn't live in the White House, that for the past 2 years he had lived in Blair House across the street. From the south side of the avenue, in front of the gutted White House, they surveyed the Blair House and the guard routine. That's when they began developing their plan. Back at the hotel they finalized the procedure and picked up the guns.

Arising at 5:30 AM Harry Truman worked on a stack of papers and then polished off 4 newspapers. At 6:40 AM he left the front door for one of his famous fast moving Army 120 steps per minute walks covering 2 miles in 30 minutes. He pretty much took the same route every morning at the same time. The Puerto Ricans apparently were unaware of this. Returning for breakfast, he began his busy morning schedule that included separate meetings with young Nelson Rockefeller, Head of the International Development Advisory Board, the CIA director General Smith, a Medal of Honor presentation in the Rose Garden to the much decorated Marine Justice Marion Chambers for his valor on Iwo Jima, Sir Anthony Eden and the British ambassador regarding Truman's 3 PM ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery honoring a British General, followed by the final appointment before lunch with the young W. Stuart Symington, chair of the National Security Resources Board and later Senator from Missouri. These meetings were held in the West Wing of the White House that was not involved in reconstruction. Back across the street for lunch at 1 PM, he then went to his bedroom for his standard 2 to 2:30 PM nap.

With perfect timing, at exactly 2:20 PM the two well dressed apparent business men arrived at their appointed targets. Floyd Boring was standing in front of the east guard house joking with the uniformed Joe Davidson. Don Birdzell, also uniformed, had momentarily turned toward the steps with his back to the street. Les Coffelt was sitting in

his west guard house sweating profusely in his winter weight wool uniform. Vince Mroz and Stew Stout were seated in the first floor office reading. Joe Downs, the day's designated grocery man and in civilian dress, had just returned from a nearby store with the night's dinner, and after briefly chatting with Coffelt, had stepped into a narrow walkway by the west guard house to enter a side basement door.

Passing Boring and Davidson, Oscar pulled his automatic, pointed it directly at Don Birdzell's back and fired. There was no explosion, just a very loud CLICK. But a click instantaneously recognized by any police officer or ex-combat soldier which most of them were. Birdzell instantaneously saw the shocked Oscar staring at his gun. Boring turned and saw Oscar holding the gun on Birdzell and for an instant thought he must be an ex-Army buddy showing him a weapon. Then the chaotic, fluid, dynamic, movie like action began. There are three primary physiologic effects that occur with the immense burst of adrenalin in high stress - Loss of fine motor skills, tunnel vision, and auditory exclusion - Fumbling with cartridges, not appreciating peripheral action, and as most of the participants later said they did not hear the fusillade that followed.

Oscar frantically began working the action on the weapon, actually putting the safety back on, beating the gun on his chest and finally accidentally removing the safety. He had apparently not chambered the first round, but the gun was now loaded and went off much to his amazement. Un-aimed that bullet penetrated Birdzell's left knee and he went down. Boring and Davidson sought cover by the guard house and began firing at Oscar at a difficult angle. They fired as they had been taught, one handed using the sight on the end of the barrel, a technique that blurs the target. Having used lower power wad cutters for all their qualifications, they were not used to firing 158 grain bullets that gave a stronger recoil and moved the barrel ever so slightly up before the bullet left the barrel. Their shots were going about an inch too high. One of Boring's head shots actually creased Oscar's scalp but did not disable him.

Oscar was now returning their fire with a very functioning automatic weapon, but the gun was "bucking" and the bullets were going wild. Actually before Boring or Davidson could open up, Birdzell had crawled away into Pennsylvania Avenue, gotten up and crabbed walked a few feet to get his gun out and fire at Oscar. He was truly the first to return fire, preventing Oscar's full attention being directed against the eastern officers.

There were ricochets flying everywhere, clinking off the wrought iron railing that was actually protecting Oscar at the corner of the steps. Vince and Stu heard the firing and looked out the window seeing men bobbing and weaving – moving. Vince ran down stairs, out the side basement door and joined the other two at the east end firing at Oscar. There was a blur behind the iron fence. He saw Oscar, fired and Oscar disappeared. Did he hit him? In tandem with Vince, Stout ran down the hall to the main Blair House entrance but could see nothing, no men, no bodies; but heard rapid gunfire. He ran back to the office that held the locked Thompson, and there began a keystone cop routine as, under great pressure, he struggled to take the key and open the god damn lock. Finally, getting the gun, loading it, and running back to the door, he arrived after the fight was over.

The second gun fight at the west end began as Oscar started firing. Les Coffelt saw a shadow in front of him, as the tiny 5 foot 5 inch, 112 pound Puerto Rican, with the sun at his back, stood in front of him. He could not see that Griselio was positioned like a professional – legs spread, bending slightly and holding the Luger with two hands. Moving from his left to right, Griselio pumped 4 rounds into the sitting officer. The first into his chest, causing him to stand, so that the next two hit him in the left lower abdomen. The fourth grazed his left sleeve. He collapsed back onto the chair. Torresola then turned and seeing Joe Downs coming towards him in the small walkway next to the guard house shot him 3 times and pirouetting in the same position fired at Birdzell, hitting him in the right knee causing him to fall. He was unconscious before he hit the ground – 8 shots, 8 hits.

Oscar was down, but not because of a lethal wound. He was out of ammunition and literally sat down on the steps to reload. As he frantically tried to reload, he noticed blood on the front of his new blue shirt, felt some soreness in his chest (a hit by a low power ricochet off the fence from Davidson's gun), and became faint like a groom at a wedding and simply passed out, falling at the foot of the steps. The steps were clear. Only a screen door blocked Torresola's path as he moved forward. Could he see Harry Truman looking out the raised second floor bedroom window, and hear an agent yell "get back"? Another loud shot rang out and Torresola disappeared over the small boxwood hedge. Les Coffelt, pale, in shock, stood holding his .38 caliber police special. His last shot

caught Torresola just above his right ear, killing him instantly. He collapsed back into the guard house. The gunfight was over. However, if you look closely at the action, Harry Truman came within seconds of dying at the hands of an assassin.

Several hundred pedestrians were hugging the ground on both sides of the street. A trolley had stopped suddenly right in front of the White House. A 25 year old passenger climbed off, but hearing the gunfire hit the cobblestones with his nose on the trolley rail. In front of him was an unconscious police officer bleeding from both knees. When the shooting stopped he got up, interviewed a White House police officer whose uniform had been grazed by an errant shot, and as a young Washington Post reporter and first news man on the scene, filed his first front page story. His name – Benjamin Bradlee, future editor.

Les Coffelt died in surgery at Washington Emergency Hospital a few hours later. He was buried in Arlington Cemetery on November 4, 1950. Oscar Collazo survived with minor wounds, hit by Floyd Boring and a ricochet off the fence, actually playing dead on the Blair House steps so he wouldn't get shot. He was condemned to death, but his sentence was commuted to life by Truman in 1952, and pardoned by Jimmy Carter in 1979. He returned to Puerto Rico a hero and died in 1994. The last surviving officer of the team, Vince Mroz, died July 22<sup>nd</sup> of this year. He spent 26 years in the Secret Service, ending his career as Assistant Deputy Director. In August of 1951, my father, who had a great interest in history, showed a 9 year old boy, me, the ricochet marks on the wrought iron fence in front of Blair House. Those marks are still there.

### Epilogue

**Floyd Boring:** Boring retired from the Secret Service in 1967. Although he was part of Kennedy's detail, he was not in Dallas in 1963. However, he was part of the Secret Service detail that inspected Kennedy's vehicle on its return to Washington on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. He later worked for United Nations Security for several years. He died February 1, 2008 at the age of 92.

**Donald Birdzell:** Birdzell returned to duty on January 15, 1951, but on that very day slipped on wet leaves on the pavement re-injuring his knee requiring another year of disability. He retired from the White House Police Force in 1959 and died in November 1991.

**Ben Bradlee:** Bradlee's remembrance of the event is actually incorrect. He describes crawling on Pennsylvania Avenue with Coffelt's body lying near the steps and the body of Torresola in front of him. As a matter of record, Coffelt collapsed back into the guard house, and Bradley could not see Torresola's body behind the hedge. Bradlee lives with his wife reporter and commentator Sally Quinn in Washington, D.C. and New York.

**Pedro Albizu Campos:** Campos was jailed for his participation in the 1950 rebellion, but never charged as an accessory in the assassination attempt. Released, he was jailed again in 1954 but later released as a sick and dying old man. He died in 1965

**Oscar Collazo:** Tried and convicted, he was sentenced to death; but that was commuted to life by Truman in 1952. After serving 29 years, he was pardoned by Jimmy Carter in 1979 and died in bed in 1994.

**Leslie Coffelt:** Coffelt died 4 hours later during surgery at Washington Emergency Hospital now razed. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery Section 17 Site 17719-59 on November 4, 1950 with full military honors. President Truman was in attendance.

**Joseph Davidson:** Davidson retired from the White House Police Force in 1960 following a heart attack. A second attack in 1965 killed him.

**Joseph Downs:** Joe Downs recovered from his wounds. He retired from the White House Police Force in 1956. He went to Miami and later Baltimore working for the US Customs Service until 1973. He died in July 1978.

**Vince Mroz:** Vince Mroz retired as Assistant Deputy Director of the Secret Service in 1974. He was the last surviving member of the team and died on July 22, 2008 at the age of 86.

**Stewart Stout:** Stout was promoted to Special Agent in Charge of the White House detail in 1954 and was with John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963. As White House Detail Shift Leader 4 PM to Midnight, he and his shift were waiting for Kennedy at the Trade Mart. Immediately after the assassination, he was at Parkland Hospital, and accompanied Kennedy's body in the hearse to Love Field. He retired in 1965 and died of a heart attack in December 1974.

**Harry S. Truman:** President Truman was deeply affected by the events of November 1, 1950. He decided not to run again in 1952 allowing Dwight D. Eisenhower to enter the White House. After a happy and quiet retirement at his home in Independence, Missouri he died in 1972.

**November 1, 1950** was the beginning of the era of high security for US presidents. Access was no longer casual, and details were beefed up with more men. However, it took almost 20 years to develop today's protection based on fast motion, high stress,

professional shooting, moving targets, and cross training in a variety of weapons. Currently, the Secret Services use the SIG-Sauer automatic, firing a .357 cartridge. The shock of the bullet will usually put someone down even if it is not a lethal wound. Unfortunately, for a determined individual or individuals death from close up or afar is only seconds away from the man or woman in the Oval Office.

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The Literary Club of Cincinnati  
September 29, 2008

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