



Interview with Clinton J. Hill

Retired Assistant Director of Protective Forces

Question: Can you give me a brief rundown of your career with the Secret Service?

Clinton Hill: I entered the Secret Service in 1958 in Denver, Colorado. Previously I was a special agent in counterintelligence for the U.S. Army.

Q: Explain to me what it means that an agent needs to be ready to take a hit.

CH: Well, one of the responsibilities that we have is to provide the protection. And in that capacity, one of your mental processes has to be that you are willing to give your life. And if you don't have that outlook, you will never make it as an agent in the Secret Service.

Q: Most people's instincts are to avoid danger. You are kind of like a firefighter that runs into a building when everybody else is running out, aren't you?

CH: Well, yes we are—that is based on the training that you receive within the Service. You are trained to do whatever you can to provide protection.

Q: Do agents, in essence, have one family, the service, and one family at home?

CH: Definitely. The Service itself is one large family; that includes the wives and children of the agents, too. But there is a certain amount of dedication you have to have as an agent assigned to a protective detail, whether it's with a president or vice president or with a foreign dignitary that takes you away from your other family. You have to have a very understanding wife and family.



Q: How does it affect your family life?

CH: In the '60s there were a number of divorces because the agents were gone so much of the time. But that was partly because there was not enough manpower within the Service.

In 1963 at the time of [President John F. Kennedy's] assassination there were fewer than 300 agents in the Secret Service worldwide. And yet they continued to add new responsibilities to the agency and it meant that people had to work longer hours, and stay away from home longer periods of time. It was very, very stressful on the families. But they have corrected that situation, and I understand that it is much better today.

Q: What is the Secret Service culture like?

CH: Well it is like a brotherhood, or a large family. It's a "one for all and all for one" kind of situation. You are placed in some very difficult situations and you are placed in some very amusing situations, but you work very closely to one another, you live together, and you eat together.

Q: Is it a stressful job?

CH: Can be very stressful. You have to be completely dedicated to what you are doing and that means that you can't be distracted by other things. It takes a great deal of concentration to continue to do what you have to do. You never know what is around the corner.

Q: How would you describe that bubble that the president and his family live inside?

CH: From the Secret Service point of view, it should be more dense, more impenetrable. From a political point of view they would like that bubble to be wide open, so that they could reach out and touch anyone they want to and have the people be able to touch them.

Q: Do you have to negotiate with the president and the first lady if they are going to go out for a walk and if they want to be alone? Do you force yourself on them?

CH: I wouldn't say "force ourselves on them." We certainly have to confront them and/or explain the situation to them as to why we think things should be done in a certain manner. And they come right back and tell you why they think it should be done in a manner in which they want it to be done. And usually you can work out something so that it is in everybody's best interest.

Q: Who wins in the end?

CH: Hopefully it is a mutual joint operation so that both of us win. Occasionally we win, occasionally they win.

Q: Did agents have a more challenging job with President Kennedy because of his style and wanting to be around people?

CH: Yes, because we had gone from President Eisenhower who was a retired general, and used to that type of discipline, to a now a former senator who was very free and wanted to do things that we were not used to having him do.

Q: Did Mrs. [Jacqueline] Kennedy have a hard time? Was she resistant at all to 24/7 protection?

CH: Well, it was something she was not used to at all. She had never been in that situation before, and so it took a lot of adjusting on her part.

Q: Did you have to deal with maids or nannies?

CH: Yes. Mrs. Kennedy had a nanny named Maude Shaw. She was from England and she was really devoted to the children. And we had the agents that dealt with the children.

Q: Take me back to November 22, 1963, and tell me the story of what happened in Dallas.

CH: We awoke in Ft. Worth, Texas, and flew from Ft. Worth to Dallas in Air Force One. There was a large crowd at the airport in Dallas. Governor and Mrs. Connally were there, and Vice President and Mrs. Johnson were also there. We entered vehicles at

Love Field in Dallas and began a motorcade into the city. Along the way there were large crowds here and there. We stopped a couple of times to permit the people to come up to the car and shake hands with the president.

We traveled along this open area which was on my left and then made a left turn, but it wasn't a 90° left turn, it was like 120° left turn. The open area was still on my left, and shortly after we got into that turn and started on that street, I heard a sound—which I wasn't sure what it was—whether it was a gunshot or a firecracker.

I turned to see what was happening, and as I did I saw President Kennedy grab at his throat and lurch forward. Before I could get to the presidential limousine, another shot had been fired and hit President Kennedy in the head. About that time I reached the back of the presidential limousine and tried to get on. I was trying to get my foot up on the back of the car. And I slipped. I had to run three or four more steps before I could get up.

By that time Mrs. Kennedy had come out on to the trunk and appeared to be searching for something or trying to retrieve something. But I got up on the back of the car and placed her back in the seat. The president at that time, he slipped down into her lap. And I could see the back of his head, and there was a gaping hole above his right ear, about the size of my palm. Then the car jolted forward and we sped off to Parkland Hospital. On the way I noticed that Governor Connally—who was in front of the president—that the front of his shirt was all red with blood, and I realized he had also been shot.

When we got to the hospital, they got the governor out and Mrs. Connally out. And then we began to get the president out, but Mrs. Kennedy didn't want us to move him. And I realized what she was doing, because his head had just been blown open, so I took off my coat and threw it over the top of him. And then she let go, and we put him on a stretcher and rushed him into the hospital emergency room. Took him right into the emergency room, the doctors began to work on him. The agent in charge, Mr. Callerman, asked me to open a line to the White House, and there was a White House switchboard that had been set up in Dallas.

And then we found out that the president was, in fact, dead. I was asked by a member of the president's staff to locate a casket. And so a member of the hospital administration staff took me to one of their offices and gave me the name of the local mortuary that they dealt with most of the time.

Called them, requested that they bring their best casket to the emergency room at Parkland Hospital. The president was placed in the casket, and Mrs. Kennedy got in the

back of the ambulance with the casket. I got in the back of the ambulance with the casket. The agents got in the front and we left the Parkland and drove to Love Field, and the agents placed the casket aboard Air Force One. And shortly thereafter President Johnson was sworn in on board the aircraft. I was there while that happened.

We then flew to Washington, and took the president's body to Bethesda Naval Hospital for an autopsy. And the autopsy took quite a number of hours. At the end of the autopsy I was requested to view the body so that I would be able to answer any questions for Mrs. Kennedy. I went to the hospital mortuary and viewed the president's body and went back and stayed with Mrs. Kennedy.

We then brought the president's body to the White House where it was laid in state.

Q: Did you become a confidante to Mrs. Kennedy at this time? You were the person with her through all of this.

CH: I wouldn't say I was a confidante. We certainly talked, but she confided in her brother-in-law, Robert Kennedy, probably more so than anyone.

Q: It has been 40 years since this incident, and it still seems very fresh to you.

CH: It will always be that way. It is something that will never go away. I still have nightmares about it. Not as frequent as they used to be, but they are still there.

Q: Did you go back to the site?

CH: In 1990 I went back and walked through the area. And I spent a couple of hours there. I went into the building in which the shooter was located and I finally came to the conclusion nothing that I could have done would have made any difference.

Q: Why did you feel the need to go back?

CH: I had to convince myself I did everything I could do.

Q: Did the nightmares subside somewhat?

CH: It became better, much better. I began to accept the fact that what happened was not something I could have prevented.

Q: Do you look at this day as a defining moment in your career with the Secret Service?

CH: Oh, certainly it was. No question about that. It bothered me from that point on and it got progressively worse. Eventually that's the reason I retired—the doctors finally told me that you just can't go on, you have been through enough, you are going to retire.

Q: Did President Kennedy's assassination mark a change in the Secret Service?

CH: It completely reorganized the Secret Service. Because they realized that they needed more personnel to provide the protection that was deemed appropriate. They began to give new assignments, providing full-time protection to members of the families of the president and the vice president. So it has changed considerably from the time in 1963.

Q: Do you think the president's style played a big part in that day?

CH: I think it may have played a part in the sense that the agents were not permitted to be up in the back of the car. The previous Monday, President Kennedy told the supervisor that he did not want the agents up there because they were a kind of a block between himself and the people. That made it look like he didn't want to have the people that close to him.

Q: Agents still talk about that moment when you ran to the limo and jumped on the back, and they speak of it in a sort of selfless sense. You didn't know what was going on, but your goal was to protect the president and first lady—even so much as throwing yourself on them. Can you help us understand that?

CH: Well, that was my job. My job was to provide protection for whoever it might be—whether it be the president and first lady, whoever. And if it means that you have to throw your body on them and become a statistic, so be it. You just have to be willing to do it.

Q: Given a choice, would you be a Secret Service agent again?

CH: Yes, I would.

Q: No regrets?

CH: The only regret I have is what happened in Dallas. Other than that no, I have no regrets. I enjoyed the time that I was in the Secret Service. I have some wonderful friends who are still in the Secret Service and wonderful friends who are retired, and we get together as frequently as possible and tell lies to each other.