

PROTECTING SIRHAN SIRHAN, Robert Kennedy's Killer

Part I

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Senator Robert "Bobby" Frances Kennedy was the brother of assassinated President John F. Kennedy. Even though his brother had been assassinated, Bobby Kennedy, having no fear of being killed, decided to run for president.

On Tuesday, June 4, 1968, the California presidential primary elections were held. The polls in California closed at 8 p.m., and four hours later Robert Kennedy stood in front of a crowd at the Ambassador Hotel and claimed victory in the State's Democratic presidential primary.

At the same time, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Academy Class #124 was stationed at the Sheriff's Academy in East L.A. on standby, ready to respond if the crowd at the Ambassador Hotel grew too large and additional crowd control was needed. Two Sheriff's Transportation buses were loaded with 104 cadets, along with five staff instructors. The hours passed by as they sat in the buses in full uniform, wearing their helmets and anxiously awaiting the call to respond.

During that time, Secret Service protection was only provided for incumbent presidents, not for presidential candidates. Kennedy's only security was provided by former FBI agent William Barry and two unofficial bodyguards who were former professional athletes. During his campaign for president, Kennedy welcomed contact with the public, and people often reached out to touch him in their excitement.

Kennedy refused police protection during all of his personal appearances. He didn't want the police around, because he feared they would inhibit his personal contacts with the public and he would be resented by the cop-hating young people who he was trying to attract. Unfortunately, he had no police accompanying him the night he was killed. It is a shame that Robert Kennedy was assassinated. It may not have happened if he would have been more accepting of LAPD's willingness to provide him security. After all, police officers have more training and are able to observe threats much sooner than the professional sports figures that Kennedy relied on.

On May 28, 1968, LAPD was advised that a motorcade was planned the next day for Robert Kennedy, but no security had been requested. Even though they weren't requested, LAPD felt a responsibility to observe the motorcade route to ensure the flow of traffic. At Ninth and Santee streets, the vehicles stopped and Senator Kennedy was pulled from his vehicle by a large,



*The Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard in 2004
(the hotel was demolished in 2009)*

enthusiastic crowd. An LAPD sergeant tried to assist Kennedy to his vehicle when it appeared that he needed help. The senator and his aides berated the sergeant and told him they had not asked for the assistance of the police. Later, as officers attempted to keep the crowd from spilling into the street, a Kennedy aide shouted obscenities at them.

ASSASSINATION

Ten minutes after midnight on June 5, Kennedy addressed his campaign supporters in the Ambassador Hotel's Embassy Room ballroom in Los Angeles. When he was done,

Kennedy was supposed to speak to another group of supporters who were gathered in another part of the hotel. Due to time constraints, Kennedy campaign aide Fred Dutton decided that Kennedy should skip speaking to the second gathering. Reporters wanted a press conference, so when Kennedy finished speaking, he was directed by William Barry to follow him through the kitchen to the press area. Kennedy was blocked in by the crowd, so he was unable to follow Barry. Instead, he followed hotel maitre d' Karl Uecker through a back exit. Uecker held Kennedy's right wrist as he led him through the kitchen. When Kennedy stopped to shake hands with people he encountered, Uecker released his hold. Uecker led Kennedy through a narrow passageway between an ice machine on the right and a steam table on the left. As Kennedy turned to his left to shake hands with busboy Juan Romero, Sirhan Sirhan stepped down from a low tray-stacker next to the ice machine. He rushed past Uecker and fired a .22-caliber Iver-Johnson Cadet revolver at Kennedy.

Three shots struck Kennedy. One entered behind his right ear, dispersing fragments throughout his brain. The other two entered at the rear of his armpit; one exited his chest and the other lodged in the back of his neck. After Kennedy had fallen to the floor, former FBI agent Barry saw Sirhan holding a gun and hit him twice in the face. A group composed of maitre d' Uecker and Edward Minasian, writer George Plimpton, Olympic gold medal decathlete Rafer Johnson and professional football player Rosey Grier forced Sirhan against the steam table as he continued firing his gun in random directions. Five members of the crowd were also wounded by the random gunfire. Sirhan was able to wrestle free and grab the revolver again. He attempted to shoot it, but all of the bullets had been fired.



The assassin of Robert Kennedy, Sirhan Sirhan, in custody

LASD RESPONDS

Suddenly, the long hours of waiting were over for the cadets and their staff. Over the bus radio came a broadcast that Bobby Kennedy had been shot and the buses were to respond Code 3 (lights and siren) to the Ambassador Hotel. There was no further information on the incident. As the bus drivers started their engines, the staff instructors stood in the doorway leading into the back of the bus. They told the bus filled with cadets that Kennedy had been shot and that they didn't have any additional information on the incident. As the bus drivers turned on their lights and sirens and began responding to the Ambassador Hotel, the staff instructors provided direction to the cadets on what to expect. They told the cadets that the crowds of people were probably going to keep growing, and that many of them would be very upset and emotionally charged, so they were going to have to keep their composure and remain calm. After the staff instructors sat down, no one talked; the cadets just sat in silence as they stared off into the distance, trying to anticipate what to expect when they arrived. On one of the buses was Cadet Paul Harman. Harman sat there along with other cadets contemplating what was going to occur. Were people going to be unruly? Would they try to rush past them? What about the news media? How can we keep them back? Harman didn't realize that his involvement with Kennedy's killer was just beginning, and would continue after he graduated from the Sheriff's Academy in one month and was assigned to the Hall of Justice Jail.

It was election night, and during an election the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is responsible for the transportation and security of ballots in Los Angeles County. The Sheriff's command post and the tally center for the election were located in the IBM building across the street from the Ambassador Hotel. On duty that night were Lieutenant Beto Kienast and Sergeants Robert Lindblom, Dave Hagthorp and John Barber, along with several other SEB deputies. Hagthorp heard Kennedy's victory speech as it was broadcast over the radio. A short time later, the broadcast was interrupted to report that Kennedy had been shot in the kitchen pantry of the Ambassador Hotel.

Barber and his men heard sirens and screeching tires as vehicles approached the hotel to provide assistance. Hagthorp and other SEB deputies hurried to the hotel lobby, where they were met with a hysterical crowd. Women were fainting and reporters were frantically trying to obtain information from law enforcement officers.

Very few LAPD officers had arrived yet, so Hagthorp assigned deputies to direct traffic and contain the area. They cleared the way for the arriving ambulance and patrol cars. Kienast assigned Lindblom to take command of the SEB personnel. Lindblom saw crowds of people walking around, destroying the crime scene. He offered assistance to an LAPD sergeant to clear people out of the crime scene. The LAPD sergeant gratefully accepted the offer. Deputies cleared the crime scene in about 15 minutes. Once the crime scene was cleared, deputies moved the crowd out of the main ballroom, into the lobby and out of the hotel.

As the Sheriff's buses arrived at the Ambassador, the cadets stared wild-eyed at the large crowd of people gathered in front of the brightly lit hotel. The buses drove past the crowd of people along Wilshire Boulevard and stopped along the curb. As the Sheriff's cadets exited the buses in a single-file line, they were led by their staff instructors. They continued in single file around the building and were placed in strategic positions. They were stationed at all building entrances and along the driveways to keep the crowd back. Crowds of people continually showed up, and everyone kept asking the cadets for details on what had occurred. The cadets didn't know any more details, but they remained calm and polite while they were asked the same questions over and over again as new people showed up to see what had occurred. In addition to answering questions, the cadets had to keep unauthorized people from entering the hotel. Several FBI agents showed up and displayed their badges and IDs as they rushed past to enter the building. The media kept pressing for information and wanted to get inside the building but were kept back by the cadets. What started as crowd control for a major political event turned into crowd control for an assassination that was broadcast on the news around the world.

This story will be continued in the June issue. ☆



Robert Kennedy speaking before a crowd on June 14, 1963



Robert F. Kennedy in the Cabinet Room at the White House in Washington, D.C.