



In 1963 the 37th Cadet Class stood at the foot of the grave of the most famous Irish-American US President ever. SIGNAL speaks with some of the cadets who provided the Guard of Honour for JFK's funeral, 40 years later.

The Assassination

Major General Jim Sreenan, who was in the 37th Cadet Class, remembers the days leading up to the funeral. "My first recollection is the Friday evening. We were all busily preparing for the School Commandant's Saturday morning inspection. We were busy cleaning the lines – the rooms and the passages. And somebody shouted out, 'President Kennedy has been killed'. So the 10 or 12 of us gathered around a transistor, listening to the news updates and feeling deeply shocked by the news. After about 10 or 15 minutes of the same snippets coming through, somebody said, 'That's all very fine but we still have to get this place polished up for tomorrow morning'. So it was back to normal routine and Saturday passed off as a routine day.

"It was sometime Saturday night, about eight or nine o'clock, when word started to filter through that the question of a Cadet Guard of Honour was being raised. We were

assembled about 11.00pm in Pearse Hall and briefed. We then had to draw the rifles from stores and start rehearsals," he says.

At 2.30am on Sunday 24th November the cadets gathered for a one-hour drill under Sergeant Major Michael Dwyer. That was the only time that could be spared.

Upon arriving at Collinstown Airport, the group was greeted by a crowd of over 15,000, all present to participate in some way in the last tribute to a man who had appealed to the Homeric in the Irish psyche. The cadets were hurriedly drawn up on the tarmac at the airport and introduced individually to President de Valera, who graciously shook hands with each cadet.

After a short sojourn in New York, the entourage made its way to Washington DC. Colonel Mattimoe (Cadet School Commandant at the time) wrote of this journey in the September 1979 issue of An Cosantóir. "At Washington after the Presidential Party had embarked, a small

man entered the aircraft and said tersely: 'Would you wait here for a moment, the Secretary wants to meet you'. The small man disappeared – he proved to be the Irish Ambassador in Washington. Almost immediately the United States Secretary of State, Mr Dean Rusk, came on board. After shaking hands with General MacEoin (COS at the time) he addressed a few brief but very warm words of welcome and thanks to us for coming and departed. He later shook hands with a number of cadets as they emerged from the rear door of the plane. At that moment Mr Dean Rusk must have been the busiest man in America as planes carrying Heads of States from all over the world were stacked over New York and landing every two minutes. We did appreciate his words."

Pride of Place

The following morning the party was in attendance at Arlington Cemetery. Col



President Kennedy at Arbour Hill.

Mattimoe describes the moment: "They shook hands and again we were thanked for coming. I asked what their wishes were and with sadness in his voice the General replied: 'Just what you did at Arbour Hill'. He had been there. 'Where do we take up position?' I enquired expecting it to be some way off. 'Oh,' he replied with some surprise, 'at the foot of the grave.' No higher compliment could be paid to our participation."

Maj Gen Sreenan remembers how taken aback he and the other cadets were at this news: "We were given pride of place right at the gravesite. Even though we had seen where we would be at the rehearsal, we were still surprised on the day to be placed at the foot of the grave."

At the appointed time the Guard of Honour took up position and remained motionless for almost two hours, with the eyes of the world watching through the press and TV cameras strewn across the hillside. To the right, representative detachments of the US Armed Forces were drawn up parallel to the line of the grave. Behind the cadets and some distance away, Senators and Congressmen assembled.

The cortege arrived and what happened from there on is now part of history. Col Mattimoe described the scene as "uncannily still". "The family moved to the graveside where there were chairs which no one used," he said. "Cardinal Cushing said the

prayers. After a brief pause a flight of aircraft flew past in salute. As their sound died away Lt Colclough's commands in Irish really reverberated through the terrible silence and the Guard of Honour commenced their ceremonial tribute to the dead President...the cadets then withdrew and took up position on the left of the representative detachments where they

Another member of the 37th Cadet Class, Brigadier General Dan Rea, has a lingering memory of the event that has stuck with him for over 40 years. "My abiding memory is that we were in position a long time before our drill, waiting. Eventually things began to happen. The one thing that still to this day sticks in my mind is the Black Watch Pipe band slowly marching

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acted afterwards on the orders of the overall Parade Commander."

Then came the tributes of the US Armed Forces – 'Flowers of the Forest' played by a pipe band as it emerged from behind the crest and slowly moved down the hillside; the three volleys, fired at a very rapid rate; the Present Arms and the Last Post. Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy lit the Eternal Flame and, again, all was quiet. "John F Kennedy had gone home," said Col Mattimoe.

across our field of vision. Shortly after that the coffin arrived. It was a very solemn occasion. At the 40-year class reunion we had last year we watched some video footage of the day, it was a nostalgic way to relive the memories.

Col Billy Knott says that the most profound moment in his memory was the army's gun salute to the President. "It was immediately after we did our arms drill the volley of shots was fired from above Arlington by the US Army. They did this in a

a slightly different manner than we would have done it. Using the US equivalent of our weapons, which was a type of wooden-stock rifle, they fired in different arcs over the cemetery. That moment really brought it home, as he was Commander in Chief of the US Forces as well as President," he says.

afternoon against St Patrick's Teacher Training College. So there was not much time for rest and recovery. I don't recall if I stayed awake for the entire match or not. "I suppose the effect of it all was to very much put the Cadet School on the map, globally and nationally. After the funeral we

and we were very well received when we returned home. I recall that we were all very quickly given a weekend pass to go home on the proviso that we would travel in uniform," says Maj Gen Sreenan.

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Back Home

Maj Gen Sreenan reflects on the aftermath of the funeral: "We were very well looked after by the US military. It was very limited what they could do, as Washington was more or less shut down. But we were taken on the standard tour, shown the Washington Monument, Capitol Hill, Lincoln Memorial and other Washington sites.

"It was a very short visit, though. That was Tuesday and on Wednesday it was back to Ireland. We came back on the Presidential flight, hit the Curragh around lunchtime and I recall a number of us were detailed to play a game of football that

had a procession of media coming to do features on the cadet school and the class became the celebrity class, which suited us just fine. You had newspapers, magazines and radio stations all coming down to do features on cadet life. It was extremely good public relations for the cadet school and the Defence Forces," he says.

This favourable PR aspect was reflected throughout the nation, as the class comprised of cadets from all corners of Ireland. "I think each of us had the same reaction, especially those who came from small towns - I'm from Ballymote, Co Sligo. We became celebrities in those small towns

Maj Gen Sreenan was commissioned in 1964. He has had an illustrious career in the Defence Forces, serving in a number of positions at home and abroad, including Company Commander, Battalion Commander and Deputy Force Commander in the Lebanon and in Cyprus as a Staff Officer in the Headquarters. He is a graduate of History and Politics in UCD and Maynooth University Adult Education. He attended Command and Staff course in Camberley in the UK and also took a course in Laws of Armed Conflict at San Remo in Italy. He is currently the Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff designate.

Brig Gen Dan Rea was commissioned in 1964. He initially served in Southern Command. In the 1970s he was an Instructor in the Military College. Formerly Officer Commander of the 3rd Battalion in the Curragh, he is currently the Assistant Chief of Staff (Support).

Col Billy K nott was commissioned in 1964 and spent eight years in the artillery corps. He studied Law in UCD and was called to the bar in 1969. He joined the Legal Service in 1970 and has been a Legal officer ever since. After serving overseas on eight separate occasions and serving 17 years as a Court Marshal Judge Advocate, he became Director of Legal Services in 1999, a post he currently retains.



John F. Kennedy's coffin (right foreground) is borne to his grave.