

A pallbearer for President John F. Kennedy

A pallbearer for President John F. Kennedy as told to Patchwork by Richard Gaudreau. Interviewed by Nichole Hutnick and Ashlee Gustafson in the spring of 2001

Sergeant Richard Gaudreau is a link to the historic assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Then head of the Air Force casket members, he was chosen to be a pallbearer by a young Army lieutenant. He was among two Army men, one Coast Guard member, two Marines, and two Naval officers. When asked how he was chosen he simply replied, "I was at the right place at the right time."

In Dallas, Texas, on Nov. 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy and his wife were on their way to a luncheon in an open convertible when shots were fired. One of the bullets passed thorough the president's neck and into the back of Texas Governor John B. Connally. The second shot struck the president's head, and he never regained consciousness. At 1 o'clock p.m. the 35th president of the United States was pronounced dead at Parkland Hospital. When the body of the president was sent from Texas to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, six men were chosen to transport the president's body, but because of the weight of the casket two men were added to accompany the original six. Among the original six pallbearers was Sergeant Richard Gaudreau, now a resident of Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania.

PATCHWORK: How did you get in the military?

GAUDREAU: Coming from a small hometown in Massachusetts and seeing what they had to offer in jobs, the military was the best offer. I went down to join the Air Force and I graduated on, let's say the 17th of June, and by the 29th I was in the Air Force, about twelve days after I graduated from high school.

PATCHWORK: So, how old were you when it all happened?

GAUDREAU: Kennedy?

PATCHWORK: Yes.

GAUDREAU: I was twenty-seven.

PATCHWORK: And how old were you when you got into the military?

GAUDREAU: Eighteen.

PATCHWORK: How long after...

GAUDREAU: Well, let me see, 1963 and I joined in '54 so it's nine years and I got out in 1979 so it was '63, 16 years later after Kennedy. I spent 24 years, seven months, and three days in the military, but it was called twenty-five years for pay purposes.

PATCHWORK: What went on at the funeral service?

GAUDREAU: From beginning to end? You have to understand, when we found out that he had been assassinated and when we went out to Andrews, I think I talked to you before about how I got selected out at Andrews to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for the autopsy and we stayed there until around 4:30 in the morning, then at 4:30 we transported his body to the White House and then carried it inside to the East Room, where they put it on a catafalque and it laid there all day Saturday and into Sunday morning, and then Sunday morning we put him back on the caisson and he was brought by horse drawn carriage to the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. There we brought him into the Rotunda of the Capitol and there he lay in state all day Sunday, Sunday evening and then Monday morning we went back to pick him up and bring him to Arlington National Cemetery. Well, first of all I'm trying to remember the cathedral ... I can't remember the name, I can find it, it's in the book. There they had the Catholic Mass, with Cardinal Cushing, from there to Arlington National Cemetery.

PATCHWORK: Who's Cardinal Cushing

GAUDREAU: He was the Catholic Cardinal who was quote unquote "a Kennedy" because he was from Massachusetts, so that's why they had him presiding over the Mass.

PATCHWORK: Going from the White House to the Capitol, what did the parade entail

GAUDREAU: There were two parades really, one from the White House to the U.S. Capitol and that was Saturday morning. Then we carried him upstairs into the Rotunda of the Capitol and put him on the catafalque and that was Lincoln's original catafalque, and there he lay in state until Sunday morning. That was a long parade. Then we took him Monday morning over to St. Matthew's Cathedral and there they had the Catholic Mass and then from there we put him back on the horse-drawn carriage and took him to Arlington National Cemetery. And that was a long walk. Yeah, that was quite a bit of time.

PATCHWORK: Where were you when Kennedy died?

GAUDREAU: I was in my office. At that time I was an E5 Staff Sergeant and my title was Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge of Ceremonial Coordination. When Arlington National Cemetery would call for a funeral, it was my job to say okay there's going to be a full honor funeral, we need a band, we need a bugler, we need a flight of men, we need

colors, we need an officer, we need an NCO, we need guide on bearer, we need another flight, and I would have to write all that down and figure out what the times were and get the necessary transportation and if it was later then what we call the chow hall, the dining hall, if that closed and the troops were coming back, I had to make sure that they stayed open so the people get fed. I was in the office listening to the radio and that's when the bulletin came over and I think it was like 2:30 in the afternoon. We listened to it and I told my boss, Master Sergeant Hunnicutt, and he Okayed a recall. We did a recall of all personnel, and that's how we got out to Andrews. And I was in charge of it.

PATCHWORK: So you took people out there and you where in charge of it?

GAUDREAU: Yeah, just the Air Force Casket Team. I had eight members and we were standing by waiting for the aircraft to come when an army lieutenant came up and asked who was in charge and I said I was and he said follow me and that's how I ended up getting into it.

PATCHWORK: Now how come, since the eight guys who were with you were the casket members, why weren't they the pallbearers?

GAUDREAU: Now that's a good question because instead of saying I need one of your people, he came up and asked who's in charge? And of course I said that I was because I was, I was responsible for those eight men. And he said, "Well follow me." So I just turned over those eight guys to somebody else and I went with him.

PATCHWORK: So you didn't really know?

GAUDREAU: No, I didn't know what was going on. Right, and then all of a sudden we formed up six casket members and then off loaded the casket off of the truck and into an ambulance, which went up to Bethesda Naval Hospital. We took a helicopter up and then we landed there and we off loaded his casket to the autopsy room and that's where they performed an autopsy on the body. The casket was badly damaged and they replaced it during the early hours of the morning and I can remember them bringing in his suit and his white shirt and his tie and socks and that's what happened. We guarded the door that led into the autopsy room.

PATCHWORK: So they had just put him in a casket to transport him.

GAUDREAU: Yeah, they went out in the early hours and bought a new casket. The one we had was, say, a bronze, and they went out and bought a mahogany; the bronze casket had a broken handle and some deep scars from rough handling on the plane.

PATCHWORK: How did you all learn to walk in-sync?

GAUDREAU: Well, that's part of the military. Anytime you're in the military, they teach you to march. Doesn't make any difference whether you're an Army man, a Marine, a Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard they teach you to march. You always lead off with your left foot, and it's left, right, left, right. There's a certain cadence to it and even though you're supposed to be looking straight ahead, you can always look down at the guy in front of you to see what steps he's walking at, and you would change accordingly. If he's with his right foot and you're with your left, you do a change step; it's a skip.

PATCHWORK: So, basically when you carried it, you did the military march?

GAUDREAU: Going up the stairs to the Rotunda to the Capitol, that was terrible. The stairs are only this wide and they wanted the casket to go up level. In other words they didn't want it tilted coming down or going up, so we practiced carrying the casket, we went to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. We carried a dummy casket.

PATCHWORK: Is it the same type?

GAUDREAU: It's similar that what you're looking for, you need something to guide you for going up and down the stairs. We practiced there for, oh, it must have been six or seven hours, but we had a dummy casket and the dummy casket only weighed about four hundred pounds. And the Kennedy casket weighed in excess of seven hundred. So what we did was we took the tomb guard and put him in the casket and carried him up and down the stairs.

PATCHWORK: Is that how you learned to practice?

GAUDREAU: Well that's how we learned how to get the empty weight in the casket. Cause if you're the back person, the front person is way down here and the back person's way up here. You're carrying it level.

PATCHWORK: So you carried it like this?

GAUDREAU: You carry it depending on how you're going. You either put your hands underneath or you put your hands on top and hold it. Now going to put it on the back of the caisson, you would hold it this way and you'd lift it up and then you'd do a side step and then it slides on and then they strap it down and there was commands, "face away," "face me," "ready face," all this stuff. There are no commands given at all, it's done silently. Let's say we went back to the White House when we placed it on the catafalque in the White House in the East Room. Deathwatch is the term for five guys that come in and relieve us. One officer and four enlisted men were on each corner of the casket. We leave and we went back and practiced and they took over for us, that's how that evolves. So like lying in state we were at Fort Myers practicing, either folding the flag, carrying the casket, or something similar to that while Deathwatch was watching the casket, and watching the people grieve.

PATCHWORK: What times did you practice?

GAUDREAU: Whatever free time we had was practicing, either carrying the casket, folding the flag.

PATCHWORK: How many of you did it take to fold the flag? Did it take all eight?

GAUDREAU: Oh yeah, all eight are holding it and then you get a tug of the thumb. Then you fold it over, you take your hands back cause you crease the flag and then it's folded again and then you're holding it. It starts down at this end and when it gets down here there's no red showing or no white showing, all you have is blue and white stars. They crease it on both sides and make sure that it's very snug. Then they pass it across. First the Marine on this side holds it and he does the same thing and then I got it and the things that are going through your mind is please don't let me drop this flag. If you drop it, you're gone. So anyway then it goes down the line and the last person gets it and turns around and gives it to the Arlington National Cemetery Representative. We call him "Digger" because he was at most of the funerals that we've seen and he gives it to Mrs. Kennedy. Then on behalf of a grateful nation we present this flag and so forth and so on. And that's how the flag is passed on.

PATCHWORK: So did you practice carrying the casket early in the morning or during the night?

GAUDREAU: Well, when we got back from the White House Saturday morning it must have been around 4:30 when leaving Bethesda Naval Hospital. And got to the White House around 5:30- 5:45 and we were out of there at 6:30- 7 and we got over to Ft. Myers. We had been up going on 24 hours from Friday morning to Saturday morning and we were told to go home and get a couple hours of sleep and be back at Ft. Myers at 10. By the time you get your car and drive all the way home, actually drove back to the office, change clothes, then drive home, and tell the wife, I had been tied up. Well of course she knew that cause I'd tell her, then get whatever sleep you can get, back to Ft. Myers and then start practicing carrying the casket.

PATCHWORK: But you never went at like 2:00 in the morning.

GAUDREAU: Well, you practiced as long as the young lieutenant wanted you to practice. You didn't look at your watch and say, "Come on, it's 4 in the afternoon, I get off at 4, let me go." No, you just stayed until he felt that it was necessary, well you practiced until he felt that you did everything great. You folded the flag, if you folded it once, you folded it a hundred times and then it's "let's do it again." And then that's what you had to do.

PATCHWORK: So would people see you practicing?

GAUDREAU: No, just like carrying the dummy casket, the Arlington Cemetery closed in the evening hours, and let's say at five o'clock in the evening, we were there from let's say 6:30 to 10:00 and the tomb has lights and that's all that you were doing, nobody was around. And then folding the flag, we would go in the gymnasium or a hanger, or fold the flag, and that's where you practiced. There wasn't anyone around asking "What are you doing, what are you trying to accomplish?" That's visible when you're in the Rotunda of the Capitol, the White House, and Arlington National Cemetery.

PATCHWORK: Were you really, really nervous?

GAUDREAU: I don't think I was nervous until it was all over. Some of things you remember; you remember the long parade from the cathedral to Arlington National Cemetery, the people that had lined the street, talking, you could hear them yelling, of course, all of the soldiers and people that lined the streets, you could see those, but it was a long parade all the way to Arlington Cemetery.

PATCHWORK: And you just didn't really pay attention to all the people?

GAUDREAU: You were concentrating, and see, again, being in the military if you're walking with a casket, you can't just turn your head and say, "Hey I know that person." No everything is straight. You have to look straight ahead and you're focusing on what you have to do, just like standing at graveside holding the flag, you're there and you're hoping that you don't want to lock your knees. If you lock your knees, your feet fall asleep, and what happens is you're either going to keel over and you don't want to embarrass the Air Force so you flex your knees and you flex your toes.

PATCHWORK: Do you keep your knees bent a little bit?

GAUDREAU: When you're standing at attention, you're wiggling your toes and every once in a while, you would pop a leg and just to make sure that your knees wouldn't lock. That's what you would do and it was self-evident in your mind that, "Hey, if anyone else was going to pass out, it wasn't going to be me."

PATCHWORK: Over how many days was it?

GAUDREAU: Well when he came in Friday evening, Saturday, Sunday and then we buried him Monday morning at Arlington Cemetery.

PATCHWORK: So the whole time that's what was on your mind; you weren't doing other stuff?

GAUDREAU: I wasn't doing anything else but carrying the casket from Andrews to Bethesda, from Bethesda to the White House, from the White House to the U.S. Capitol, up to the cathedral, from the cathedral to Arlington National Cemetery.

PATCHWORK: And you guarded it too?

GAUDREAU: No, we did not guard it, that was Deathwatch, they had that responsibility.

PATCHWORK: So all you had to do was move it from place to place?

GAUDREAU: Correct.

PATCHWORK: And then when you weren't doing that, you were practicing?

GAUDREAU: Yeah, either carrying the casket up and down to make sure we had it level or folding the flag. Now again I told you, anytime we did something, like for example we moved the casket from the White House to the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol; we put it on the catafalque. And once you put it down, you're standing at attention. Now Deathwatch comes in, and they form up. If this is the casket there are four people on each corner of the casket and then the officer at the head of the casket. We were all lined up on either side, there's four on this side and four on this side, well the officer doesn't turn around and say, "Okay you guys are dismissed, you can leave," it's not like that. Everything is done and all of a sudden you hear (noise made by Mr. Gaudreau) and then starts a count. Everybody comes up with a salute and you're counting in your head and everybody goes down.

PATCHWORK: All on a count?

GAUDREAU: That's all on a count.

PATCHWORK: It's all-together?

GAUDREAU: Yes, and then the casket people take a step to the rear and Deathwatch takes a step up. Then you see your NCO was over here he takes his head and he nods his head and then we do a facing move and he nods his head again and we just march off, and then we just disappear into the darkness and that basically how we do. The same thing coming back to relieving Deathwatch. Everything is done military.

PATCHWORK: You do that in the morning or before they had to move?

GAUDREAU: Well, they did that about a half an hour before the casket was moved. We relieved Deathwatch and then we would stand by and everything was done time wise. Typical military. You know it has to be done, it wasn't done at 6:59 or 7:01, it was done right at 7:00 and again that's how the military is. Now that meant you were there at 5:00 in the morning two hours before it was supposed to move. There is an old term when doing ceremonies or doing joint services you know "hurry up and wait." You would get there two hours before the ceremony was supposed to start.

PATCHWORK: So you practiced before...

GAUDREAU: No, not on the funeral, that's like joint service ceremonies where they brought a head of state in, and this is some of the duties I had like on the White House lawn when they had a full honor arrival ceremony when you had all the services lined up. Well if the arrival ceremony started at 11:00 in the morning, you were there at nine and you practiced trooping the colors and there's a whole bunch of stuff to it, it's all a part of what the Army does and the Air Force and the Marines and the Navy. You learned to live with it.

PATCHWORK: Is there anything else that you think would be vital information?

GAUDREAU: No, except for there was a lot of controversy on the Kennedy assassination, controversy on why we had to have two caskets. There was a lot of controversy on why they did not perform the autopsy in Dallas.

PATCHWORK: Why?

GAUDREAU: Because the U.S. Secret Service said, "There's no way you're doing it here; we're taking the body back to Washington, D.C."

PATCHWORK: They wanted everyone done in Washington?

GAUDREAU: Yeah, but if you look at the state laws, because of the fact that he was killed in Dallas, it should be performed in Texas, according to the Texas laws. But it wasn't. They transported him back. The one thing that stands out in my mind is Mrs. Kennedy, when she was on the back of the truck when we reached up to grab the casket, she was standing right here. You could see all of that ...

PATCHWORK: She was on the back of the truck?

GAUDREAU: Yes, and I believe that Robert Kennedy was there too. In fact one of the pictures shows him on the back of the truck. And then we found out years later that the first casket they took it out about ten miles into the ocean and dumped it and that took place and I didn't know about that till a couple of years ago and so there was a lot of controversy. I got a lot of flack when I got back since "hey, you weren't supposed to do this" cause those eight guys that I brought out there, they wouldn't talk to me cause each one of those guys wanted to be there, too, they wanted to represent the Air Force.

PATCHWORK: So you were the only one representing the Air Force?

GAUDREAU: On the casket team. Deathwatch had Air Force people; one of the flag bearers was an Air Force person. So you know there was a lot of Air Force people

involved, but I had to stand out cause I was the only one that went where the casket moved. Now Deathwatch was on for a half hour and off for an hour and a half.

PATCHWORK: Deathwatch switched?

GAUDREAU: Yes, they switched with another Deathwatch. Daylight hours you had an officer and four enlisted men. Evening hours, you have a non-commissioned officer and four enlisted men. Over in the corner they had a stand-by in case one of your people got sick or they passed out and that one that's over in the corner would come over to relieve and again they all go to parade rest together. It's not individual; it's all done with a signal from the officer.

PATCHWORK: So there's no command? It was all silent so you had to know everything when you started out? Were there commands?

GAUDREAU: This is practice. You practice what they call a CPX exercise and we practiced these things once a year so you have a basic knowledge and by practicing they refine it some more. Once you get to know what to do, it all comes natural; it's repetitive. We do it over and over and over. You think you are getting out of here. You practice until he feels it's correct.

PATCHWORK: So when you're practicing does anything ever go wrong?

GAUDREAU: Oh sure, there's things that went wrong. You know little things, nothing major.

PATCHWORK: Did anything every go wrong when you were carrying it in the parade?

GAUDREAU: Nope, nope, nothing, no, everything went well except when we came out of the cathedral and the cardinal wanted to bless the casket. Well, we come down a set of stairs and then you stand and now you're carrying about 800 pounds. And if you've ever carried dead weight when you're standing still, it starts getting heavier and under your breath you're telling the cardinal, come on, just get it over with and you have to pull the flag back and he takes the holy water and he says in Latin and crosses it and you're saying, "come on."

PATCHWORK: And you were holding it the whole time?

GAUDREAU: Oh, of course you're holding it. Now when he's finished, after 6 or 7 minutes, it doesn't sound like a long time, but now you've got to go back out in the middle of the street and raise the casket up and do side steps so you draw from within and say, "We'll get through it" and we did.

PATCHWORK: So in the parades when you were coming out of the cathedral, once you put the casket on the horse drawn carriage, where did you go?

GAUDREAU: We walked right along side of it. In one of the pictures from the White House to the Capitol we walked behind the caisson because they used other military personnel along side, but when we picked it up at the cathedral to Arlington National Cemetery we walked along side of it. They didn't have anybody, well I shouldn't say they didn't have anyone else but we were the main casket team.

PATCHWORK: Now on your casket team, I know you told us this before when we had asked you, it was you from the Air Force...

GAUDREAU: No, let's go through it: two Army, two Marines, two Navy, one Air Force and one Coast Guard. Army senior cause the two Army you had to have a senior, it's an order of precedence. Army comes first, Marine goes second, Navy goes third, Air Force comes fourth, and then the Coast Guard. That's the order of precedence. Every parade you ever watch, you see the Army first, then the Marines, then Navy, the Air Force...

PATCHWORK: So that's how it was lined up along the casket?

GAUDREAU: That is correct.

PATCHWORK: So you were lined up along the back?

GAUDREAU: No, what happens is the man in charge is Army, Marine, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and then it reverses itself Navy, Marine, Army...

PATCHWORK: So you were about in the middle?

GAUDREAU: I was about the second one in from the corner (points out photos).

PATCHWORK: So, you say that that the Army mans the one in charge. You don't have an officer?

GAUDREAU: First lieutenant Bird, he was the OIC.

PATCHWORK: So you had an officer and then the next person would be the Army?

GAUDREAU: That is correct and that was Staff Sergeant Felter. (points at picture)

PATCHWORK: Now did you have to do the whole thing that they usually do like getting it into the ground?

GAUDREAU: Now what happens if you can see these straps right here (pointing to picture) the casket sits on that so when we're done and out of the way and all of the civilians are gone, that's when the casket is lowered into the ground. And then they put a cap on it and you know, you don't see them shoveling dirt on it. Course you don't see any mound of dirt, this is all carpet here that they used.

PATCHWORK: (Talking to wife) Now did you get to see any of this?

MRS. GAUDREAU: I was pregnant, home, watching it on TV. It was bad enough everyone was crying.

PATCHWORK: Was the funeral service really long?

GAUDREAU: Well put it this way, you're Catholic?

PATCHWORK: I am.

GAUDREAU: You ever been to a High Mass?

PATCHWORK: Ahuh...

GAUDREAU: At least an hour, if not longer.

PATCHWORK: And their family was strong Catholic

GAUDREAU: And then of course Cardinal Cushing was their family member and he was very slow, methodical, very Irish. Everything is done and you're thinking, "come on come on." It was nice.

PATCHWORK: Now when they flew him back, did they fly him on Air Force One?

GAUDREAU: Yes, he was in what they call the tail section and President Johnson and Lady Bird they were in the front. The Kennedy family were all in the back. (Now referring to the funeral in the cathedral) When we went up to the front of the altar, they wanted us to carry the casket. Well he said no there's no way, so they got a dolly and we put it on the dolly and drug it up the aisle and that's when it dawns on you, "Wow, look at all the people here." I mean it was crowded, you go down the aisle and then you peel off and go back up the aisles and then we waited outside, and when Mass was over, we came back down the aisle, turned the casket around and then go back out again.

PATCHWORK: Did they have the casket facing a certain way, like the head going a certain way?

GAUDREAU: The feet go forward. The only one that goes headfirst is the priest and the chaplain goes headfirst, everyone else goes feet first. There's a reason for it.