



Jack McGee (AGR 10, 1962-1964)

The USS Outpost, AGR 10 would not be home for Thanksgiving in 1963; we had pulled picket duty and would be setting sea & anchor detail early Monday morning. What was worse, I had the 8 to 12 quarterdeck watch, so going home to Pennsylvania on the holiday weekend was getting distinctly less likely. I polled my shipmates for a replacement, and Eddie Evans QMSM from Gary, Indiana came to my rescue. For the obligatory fee, he would take my duties beginning after the quarterdeck watch on Friday morning.

I started the morning watch by posting colors on the fantail then took up my position at the brow. At 11:45, immediately upon being relieved, I scooted below, grabbed my ditty bag, climbed the ladder topside, scooted across the quarter deck, saluted the OOD who gave me permission to go ashore and after saluting the Ensign I quickly made my way down to the pier, joining the liberty party of Ron Ruffin, BMSM and Frank Higgins QMSM, both of the New York City area, and together we hustled to catch the Davisville base bus. At the gate, we sullenly greeted the marines, passed through and ran across the highway to where Al Kane of Allentown, PA waited in his car. He was our ride to freedom that weekend. Al was the sort of driver who, given the choice between driving slow or slower, always drove fast and faster; he was the perfect chauffeur for a band of sailors on weekend pass.

As we got into the car, jabbering away, Kane said, "Shut the hell up. Something happened to the president." As Kane fired up the engine and headed out of Davisville past Quonset Point, we listened to Walter Cronkite, "... the President was shot today in Dallas ... "and then shortly after that: "From Dallas, Texas, ...President Kennedy died at 1:00 P.M. Central Standard Time, 2:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time."

Probably stunned, Al pulled over to the shoulder of the road and someone said, "Should we go back to the ship?" We decided

we could go on, and should listen to see if they called all military personnel back to their duty stations. They did not. For miles, not a word was spoken and we rode all the way into Connecticut almost completely silent. Finally, I remember a sort of sniffing from the giant next to me. Ron Ruffin, six-foot, five inches and 320 pounds was crying, grieving for his Commander in Chief; the President of the United States. The tableau memories of that weekend are burned forever into the psyches of every American who witnessed it on television.

Monday morning, back aboard the Outpost, we executed the casting off of lines, drifted into the channel with the aid of a tug, and very quietly and very sadly put out to sea. We were all business. Sometime that morning after Sea and Anchor detail had secured and we all went back to our regular duties, Chief Quartermaster Franklin, my division head, growled behind me, "McGee. You were on quarterdeck watch Friday morning weren't you?"

"Yes, chief, I was."

"You flew the colors upside down on the fantail. Did you know that?" His tone was accusatory. Franklin was the most professional sailor I ever met, so I felt very stupid and defensive. I never realized the more profound irony of my mistake at that time, and I'm not sure if Franklin did either. It seemed to me he was just exasperated with my incompetence.

A ship of the United States or any military station that flies the colors upside down is broadcasting a distress call for aid. Certainly, our nation and all our stations were under great distress that previous Friday. The message of the inverted colors flapping off the fantail of the USS Outpost AGR-10, a careless error by a careless sailor, could not have been more profoundly appropriate on November 22, 1963, when our President was murdered and in the following days when our country grieved.