

“A FINAL MEMORIAL”

SPECIAL FORCES HONORS JFK

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President John F. Kennedy (JFK) was a staunch advocate of U.S. Army Special Warfare, as highlighted in previous articles about his 12 October 1961 [visit to Fort Bragg, North Carolina](#) (Fort Liberty since 2023) and his [remarks to the U.S. Military Academy's graduating class](#) on 6 June 1962. He viewed Special Forces (SF) in particular as being a critical component of his “flexible response” strategy to address the challenges of Communist-inspired “wars of national liberation.” In April 1962, the President famously described the green beret as “a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction on the fight for freedom.”¹ The name of JFK thenceforth became irrevocably linked with Special Forces.

President John F. Kennedy



(Image credit: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum [JFKPLM])

LEFT: JFK speaks with Brigadier General William P. Yarborough, Commanding General, U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School, during his visit to Fort Bragg, NC, in October 1961. **ABOVE:** JFK presents his remarks to the West Point Class of 1962, in which he specifically mentioned U.S. Army Special Forces.

Unfortunately, Kennedy's life was tragically cut short by his assassination in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963. The President's widow, Jacqueline Kennedy, and brother, U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, insisted on an SF presence at his memorial services in the ensuing days. The 60th anniversary of Kennedy's death inspired this article detailing how SF soldiers honored their fallen commander-in-chief, initiating a longstanding tradition of memorialization. What follows is a daily recounting of events in late November 1963 as they unfolded. It will then summarize the many ways in which Army Special Forces have honored JFK in the decades since.



(Image credit: JFKPLM)

Friday, 22 November 1963

Having arrived at nearby Love Field in Dallas aboard Air Force One an hour earlier, the President and Texas Governor John Connally were shot while riding in an open limousine in Dealey Plaza at 1230 hours local time. Kennedy was driven immediately about four miles away to Parkland Memorial Hospital for lifesaving aid. While Connally would survive, Kennedy's wounds were too severe, and he was pronounced deceased at 1300 hours (the formal White House announcement being made about 35 minutes later). Shortly thereafter, CBS news anchor

Walter Cronkite famously became emotional as he informed the nation of JFK's passing.²

Kennedy's body was transported to Love Field and placed on Air Force One. Onboard, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) took the oath of office from U.S. District Court Judge Sarah Hughes at 1438 hours. The plane soon began a roughly three-hour flight to the capital, arriving at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, around 1900 hours local. Kennedy was transported to Bethesda Naval Hospital, where an autopsy was conducted overnight.³

LEFT: JFK and the First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, arrive at Love Field around 1130 hours, 22 November 1963. **BOTTOM LEFT:** With Texas Governor John Connally seated directly in front of him, President Kennedy smiles at an adoring crowd just minutes before his assassination in Dealey Plaza. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Police and onlookers outside of Parkland Memorial Hospital, shortly after the arrival of the mortally wounded JFK. He was pronounced deceased at 1300 hours local, with the nation getting the news about a half hour later.



(Image credit: Wiki/pedia [public domain])



(Image credit: JFKPLM)



TOP: JFK's casket is loaded onto Air Force One at Love Field, for transport back to the capital. **BOTTOM:** With a visibly shaken Jacqueline Kennedy at his side, Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the oath of office onboard Air Force One at 1438 hours local, shortly before takeoff. **RIGHT:** JFK's casket arrives at the East Room of the White House in the early morning hours of Saturday, 23 November 1963.





Saturday, 23 November 1963

Around 0400 hours on Saturday, JFK's casket arrived at the White House and was greeted by a U.S. Marine Corps Honor Guard. A six-man joint casket team then transported it into the East Room. A private religious ceremony was held there at 1000 hours.⁴ An hour later, the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS) at Fort Bragg received notification of Mrs. Kennedy's and Attorney General Kennedy's desire for an SF contingent in Washington. The Center scurried to publish and distribute temporary duty orders for 46 soldiers from 5th SF Group (SFG), 6th SFG, 7th SFG, and HQ, SWCS. The largest group (21) came from 7th SFG (mostly from Company C), followed by 5th SFG with fourteen, 6th SFG with eight, and HQ, SWCS with three. Ranks ranged from private first class (PFC) to colonel (COL), with the most represented rank (13) being sergeant first class (SFC). The head of the contingent was Deputy Commanding Officer, SWCS, Colonel (COL) William P. Grieves, accompanied by the SWCS Sergeant Major (SGM), Francis J. Ruddy.⁵

TOP LEFT: SWCS Deputy Commanding Officer, COL William P. Grieves, inspects soldiers from the SF contingent prior to their departure for the capital.

TOP RIGHT: SF soldiers board a military aircraft bound for the nation's capital, 23 November 1963. **BOTTOM:** Special Forces soldiers selected for the honor of participating in JFK's memorial activities, 23-25 November 1963.



Moving out on extremely short notice, the contingent left by air from Pope Air Force Base, arriving in Washington at around 1600 hours. Upon arrival, three SF soldiers immediately reported to the White House and stood by the casket in the East Room. For the remainder of the memorial activities, at least one SF soldier accompanied the slain President around the clock. According to a *Veritas* article at the time, “Because of the hurried manner in which they were rushed to the capital, the Special Forces soldiers had little time to practice and many of their actions were without rehearsal.”⁶ Their prompt and dedicated support were indicative of the adaptive spirit of Army Special Forces that had been so prized by the former President.

Immediately upon their arrival in DC at 1600 hours local on 23 November, three SF soldiers reported to the White House, where the deceased President lay in repose. One SF soldier can be seen in the background.



SF soldiers accompany the caisson during the two-mile procession from the White House to the Capital Building in the early afternoon of Sunday, 24 November.

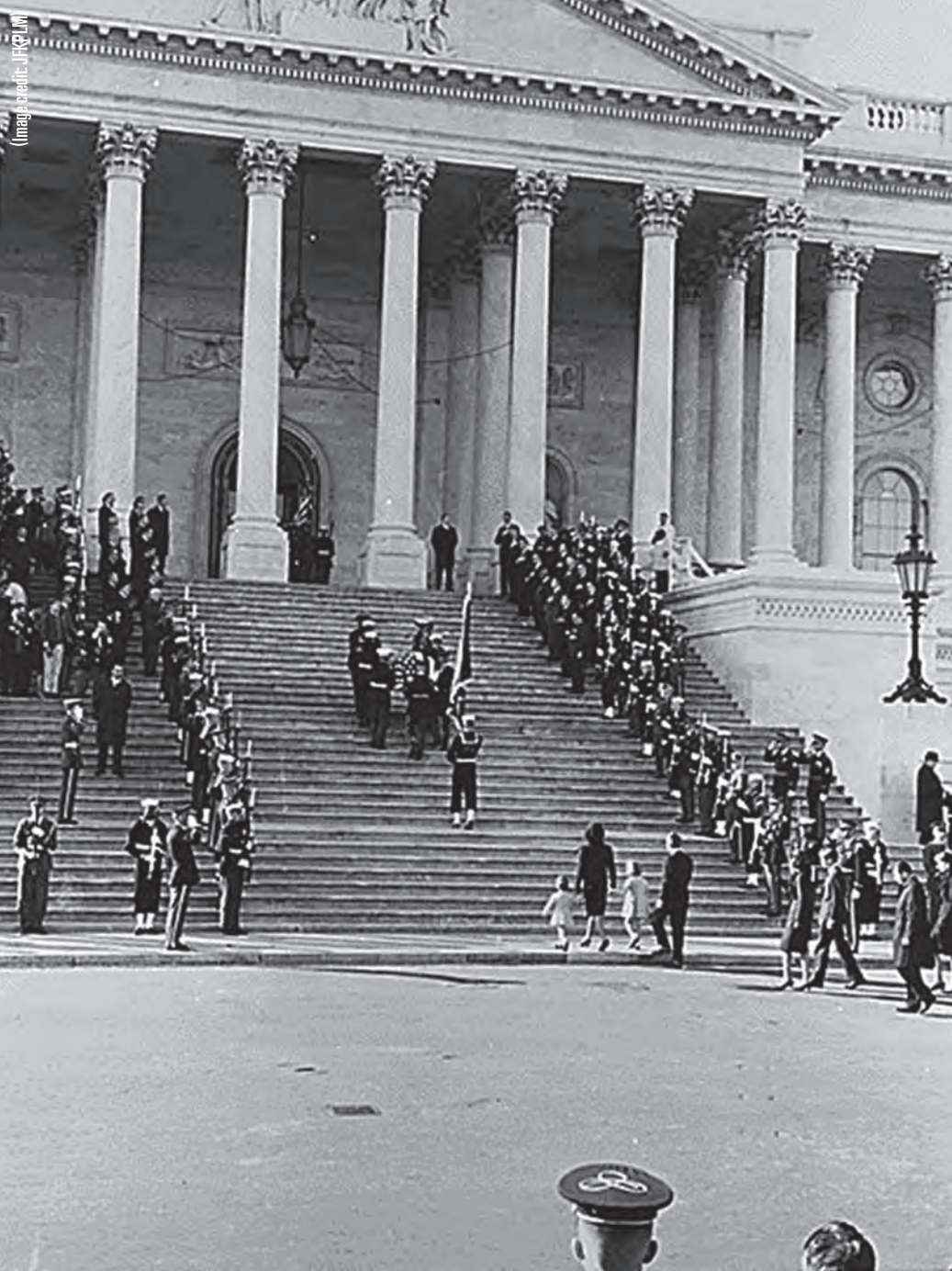
Sunday, 24 November 1963

At 1308 hours on Sunday, a caisson bearing the President’s coffin, drawn by six grey horses and followed by one riderless black horse, departed the White House for the U.S. Capitol. Special Forces soldiers were among those in the two-mile procession, with mourning crowds lining both sides of Pennsylvania Avenue. One of the four SF escorts, SFC Robert C. Rumrill, Company C, 7th SFG, later remarked, “It is the greatest honor I have ever had as an individual . . . There could be no greater honor, especially for the professional soldier, than to serve at such a time. I was very proud to be on [the SF escort detail].”⁷

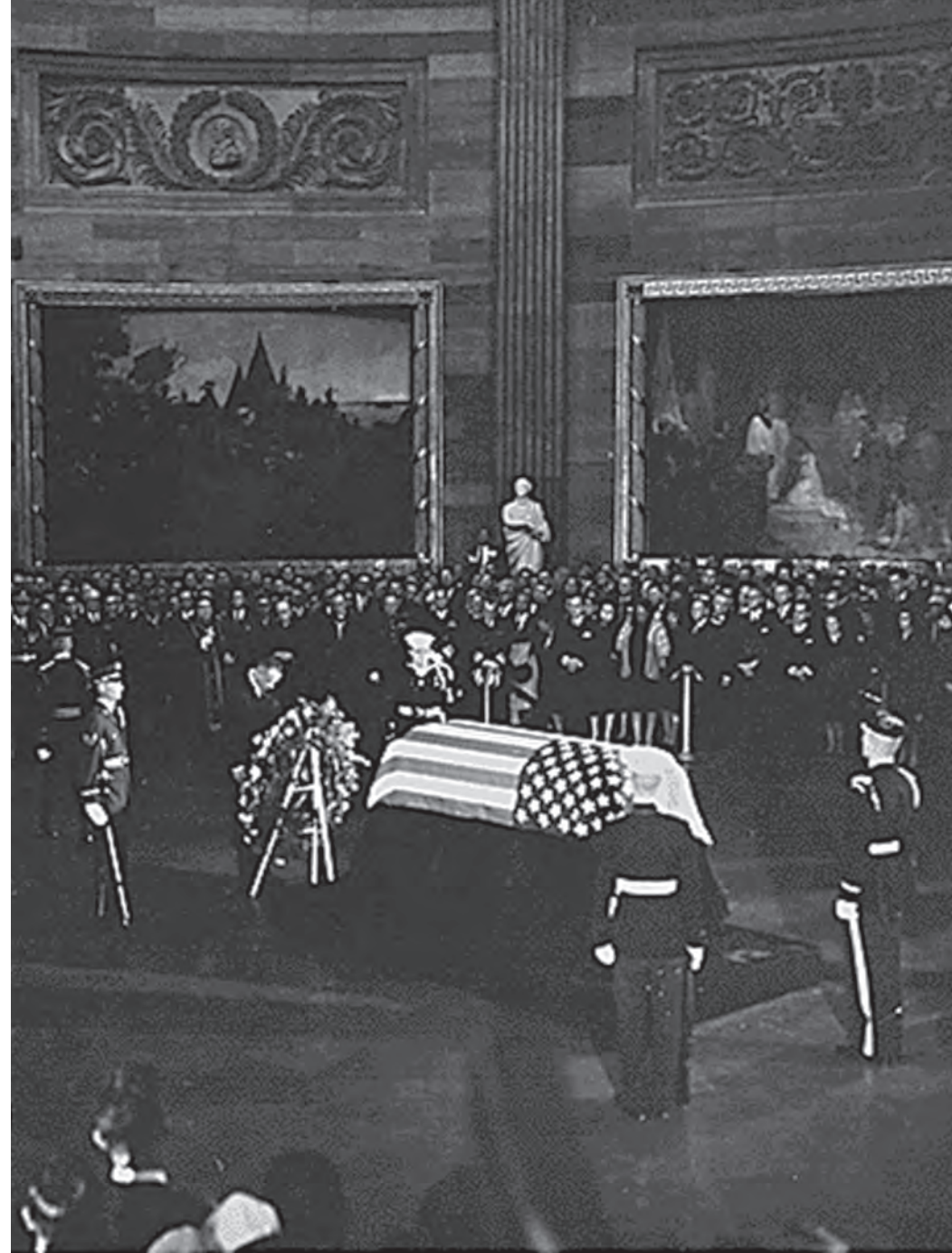
Forty minutes later, the President’s casket had arrived at the Capitol and was placed in the Rotunda on a platform that had been constructed to hold President Abraham Lincoln’s casket nearly one hundred years prior. There, he would lay in state for the next 18 hours, to be visited by roughly a quarter million people, some of them waiting for

up to twelve hours. Master Sergeant (MSG) William E. Heintzleman, Company C, 7th SFG, “couldn’t believe that so many people would stay out all night in the cold without being compelled to pay their respects . . . It was very impressive.”⁸

At 2100 hours, MSG Thomas F. Gaffney, Company B, 7th SFG, arrived with and assumed command of the SF relief element in the Rotunda. During their watch, the former First Lady made an unexpected visit to the casket.⁹ “She came with Robert Kennedy,” Gaffney recalled, “approached the casket, crossed herself, knelt and kissed the coffin.”¹⁰ Staff Sergeant (SSG) William H. Fuller, Company D, 5th SFG, was one of the SF team members on duty in the Capitol, and recalled the presence of such notables as Chief Justice Earl Warren, Senate Majority Leader Michael J. Mansfield, and Speaker of the House John W. McCormack who, like the general public, were visibly grieved. Fuller noted how so many people “looked as though he (the President) was a personal friend; as though they had lost someone in the family.”¹¹



LEFT: JFK's casket arrives at the Capitol Building close to 1400 hours on 24 November. **RIGHT:** The deceased President lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda for 18 hours on 24-25 November 1963. Some 250,000 people would view the casket and pay their respects.





Monday, 25 November 1963

The 25th of November marked the culmination of memorialization activities for the fallen President. At 0900, the doors to the Capitol Rotunda were closed to the public. The caisson left Capitol Hill nearly two hours later at 1059 hours. Pausing briefly at the White House, the caisson and procession, among them marching SF soldiers, moved to St. Matthew's Cathedral at 1140 hours. At about a quarter after noon, the President's coffin entered St. Matthew's Cathedral for a religious service, which was attended by more than a thousand people representing nearly 100 countries.¹²

TOP: Dignitaries representing nearly 100 countries stand outside the White House, where the caisson made a brief stop en route from the Capitol Building to St. Matthew's Cathedral around noon on Monday, 25 November. **BOTTOM:** Drawn by six gray horses, the caisson moves from the White House to St. Matthew's Cathedral, 25 November.

TOP LEFT: The casket arrives at St. Matthew's Cathedral, shortly after noon on 25 November.

BOTTOM LEFT: A view of the interior of St. Matthew's Cathedral during the service for JFK, which was attended by more than a thousand people.

RIGHT: After the conclusion of the service at St. Matthew's Cathedral, the caisson is readied for the three-mile procession to Arlington National Cemetery.



At 1330 hours, the funeral procession began making the roughly three-mile trek to Arlington National Cemetery, with an estimated million people lining the route. Several SF soldiers noted the overwhelmingly somber mood of the occasion. According to Specialist 4th Class George M. Thompson, Company A, 6th SFG, "We had gone about halfway along the route . . . when suddenly I realized that all you could hear was the sound of the drums. Nobody was talking, just some people crying."¹³ One sergeant from 7th SFG recounted how some of his friends who had seen him in the procession on television had accused him of chewing gum. In reality, "I was having great difficulty keeping my face straight and restraining my emotions. A number of big, tough, airborne soldiers were having the same problem."¹⁴



(Image credit: JFKPLM)



(Image credit: JFKPLM)



LEFT: Special Forces line the path between the road and the gravesite at Arlington as JFK's casket passes by. Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy follow behind, towards the right side of the photo. **RIGHT:** Fifty USAF and U.S. Navy aircraft, followed by Air Force One, conducted a flyover shortly after the arrival of the casket at the gravesite.

Upon arrival of the procession at Arlington shortly before 1500 hours, the National Anthem was played, followed by a marching U.S. Air Force (USAF) bagpipe troupe. As they played, eight military pallbearers removed the casket from the caisson and made their way to the gravesite, with SF soldiers lining the pathway. According to Major James C. Hefti, Company A, 7th SFG, responsibility for this cordon would have normally fallen to a joint service detail, but Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara directed that it be solely SF soldiers. One of those along the walkway, SFC Robert G. Daniel, Company C, 7th SFG, recalled Prince Philip of the United Kingdom conducting impromptu inspections as he passed by the SF soldiers, "paying close attention to their medals and ribbons."¹⁵

At 1454 hours, just as the casket arrived at the gravesite, fifty fighter aircraft (thirty F-105



Thunderchiefs from the USAF 4th Tactical Fighter Wing and twenty Navy F-4B Phantoms), followed by Air Force One, conducted a flyover.¹⁶ The service continued as the casket team held the flag taut over the coffin. Among the dignitaries graveside were Kennedy's immediate family, President Johnson, French President Charles de Gaulle, Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie, and the West German President and Chancellor, Heinrich Lübke and Ludwig Erhard, respectively. SF soldiers maintained their bearing and composure during their solemn duties but passively observed the demeanor of those around them. SFC Daniel viewed Johnson as "well in command. He had a good bearing and showed great authority." He also noted that De Gaulle "demanded respect" just by his general appearance.¹⁷

Interspersed with the ensuing religious proceedings were a 21-gun salute and three rifle volleys. Taps was played at 1507 hours, followed by the folding of the flag. At 1515 hours, Jacqueline Kennedy, accompanied by Robert and Edward ("Ted") Kennedy, lit the eternal flame.¹⁸ The lighting of the eternal flame essentially concluded the graveside service, with the departure of the official party soon after. Following the services, with four SF soldiers standing guard, SWCS SGM Francis J. Ruddy placed a green beret, crest forward, at the foot of JFK's grave. In words that have since become

TOP: The graveside service takes place as the flag is held taut over JFK's casket. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The American flag is folded near the end of the graveside service. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The Green Beret placed on Kennedy's grave by SGM Ruddy, bearing the SWCS insignia and flash. It is now held by the JFK Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.





Ernest Hayward

Tragically, just less than two years after JFK's assassination, on 25 October 1965, the SF contingent would lose one of its own, then-MSG Ernest Hayward, who was killed in action while serving with 5th SFG in Minh Thanh, Republic of Vietnam. He would likewise be buried at Arlington National Cemetery, in Section 43, roughly a quarter mile from JFK's grave.²¹

immortalized, Ruddy explained, "He gave the beret to us and we considered it appropriate that it be given back to him. It was a final memorial from the Special Forces to the President."¹⁹ This beret is today held by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts.

By the end of Monday, 25 November 1963, the 46 members of the SF group were back at Fort Bragg. The team had felt a tremendous sense of pride in having been selected for the honor of participating in this solemn event. However, they likely agreed with the sentiments of SSG Ronald P. Morris, Company E, 7th SFG, who said, "I hope to God that it never happens again."²⁰ Thankfully, Morris's fears have not been realized, though an attempt was made against President Ronald Reagan's life seventeen years later on 30 March 1981.

Continuing to Honor JFK

The symbolic laying of the green beret at Kennedy's grave marked the end of the SF contingent's role in JFK's memorial activities but the beginning of SF's longstanding tradition of honoring their

late President. Within days of Kennedy's death, the Commanding General (CG), SWCS, Major General (MG) William P. Yarborough, read a note signed by Secretary McNamara which read, in part: "This world has lost a gallant spirit whose championship of freedom and opportunity will be recognized by history. All members of the Armed Forces whose welfare was his concern can pay no better tribute to his memory than to carry on in the tradition which he shared and or which he was so proud."²² These words set the tone not only for continued service on behalf of the nation, but for decades of remembrance and commemoration of JFK.

For starters, less than one year after Kennedy's death, on 1 June 1964, SWCS was re-designated as the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS). To this day, this designation serves as a daily reminder of the historic connection between JFK and Army Special Forces. Further, one building in the USAJFKSWCS campus is aptly named Kennedy Hall, which has on display in its lobby a bust of the late President and the lectern that Kennedy used during his October 1961 visit to Fort Bragg.



(Image credit: U.S. Army)



(Image credit: USAJFKSWCS)

(Image credit: USAJFKSWCS)

TOP: This statue commemorating JFK's visit to Fort Bragg in October 1961 stands outside of Kennedy Hall, located on the campus of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

BOTTOM: A bust of JFK and the lectern that the President used during his 1961 visit to Fort Bragg are on permanent display in the lobby of Kennedy Hall.



Image credit: Arlington National Cemetery

Modern view of Kennedy's gravesite and the eternal flame that was lit on 25 November 1963.



In addition, SF soldiers visited JFK's grave each year for a wreath-laying ceremony, a practice that continued until the late-1980s. This tradition recommenced in November 2011, in an event attended by Secretary of the Army John McHugh, U.S. Army Special Forces Command CG Brigadier General Edward M. Reeder, Jr., JFK's great nephew, Second Lieutenant Christopher Kennedy McKelvy, and soldiers from all seven current SFGs. According to Reeder, "Our purpose today was to reestablish the tradition that began when a very special contingent of Green Berets was requested from the Kennedy family to perform the honor guard for President Kennedy's funeral . . . Our intent is to honor Kennedy's unparalleled advocacy of the Green Berets," a custom that has continued through the present year for the 60th anniversary.²³

As a final example, the Special Forces Soldier statue that was completed in 1969 and today overlooks the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) Memorial Plaza stands on a pedestal containing several pieces of historic memorabilia placed inside as a sort of time capsule. Among these items are a bust of President Kennedy, a copy of JFK's remarks about the green beret, and quotations from some of his other speeches. Kennedy's advocacy for Special Forces is thus highlighted to all distinguished visitors to the command when showcasing the statue and its symbolism. Sixty years after the President's death and subsequent memorial services attended by dozens of Green Berets, the bond between JFK and Army Special Forces remains strong.



TOP: Secretary of the Army John McHugh, BG Edward M. Reeder, Jr., and 2LT Christopher Kennedy McKelvy place a Green Beret-shaped wreath at JFK's grave in November 2011, reviving an annual tradition that had stopped in the late 1980s. **BOTTOM:** On 22 November 1969, exactly six years after JFK's assassination, MG Edward M. Flanagan, Jr. placed a bust of Kennedy and other items as a time capsule inside the base of the Special Forces Soldier statue, which today stands guard in the USASOC Memorial Plaza.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Letter from The White House to the United States Army, 11 April 1962, in Headquarters, Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Special Warfare* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), 3.
- 2 Alan Yuhas, "JFK assassination – timeline," *The Guardian*, 22 November 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/22/jfk-assassination-timeline>; John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "November 22, 1963: Death of the President," n.d., <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/november-22-1963-death-of-the-president>; John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers," n.d., <https://www.jfklibrary.org/visit-museum/exhibits/past-exhibits/a-nation-remembers>.
- 3 Yuhas, "JFK assassination – timeline"; JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "November 22, 1963: Death of the President"; JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers."
- 4 Yuhas, "JFK assassination – timeline"; JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers."
- 5 SWCS, "SF Soldier Places Beret on Grave of President," *Veritas*, 29 November 1963, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC; HQ, SWCS, "SUBJECT: Temporary Duty," 23 November 1963, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC.
- 6 SWCS, "SF Soldier Places Beret on Grave of President."
- 7 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC," *Veritas*, 29 November 1963, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Liberty, NC.
- 8 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 9 JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "November 22, 1963: Death of the President"; JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers"; SWCS, "SF Soldier Places Beret on Grave of President."
- 10 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 11 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 12 JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers."
- 13 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 14 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC." **Not all SF soldiers were on duty at all times, so some were able to stand along the route of the procession as bystanders. Four 7th SFG soldiers along the road were able to act quickly when a 23-year-old pregnant woman from Massachusetts fainted. They were able to lower her safely to the ground and move her to a nearby Red Cross ambulance.**
- 15 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 16 JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers"; SWCS, "SF Soldier Places Beret on Grave of President"; Ross Tweten, "Remembering Seymour Johnson's participation in JFK's funeral flyover," 27 November 2013, <https://www.acc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/661518/remembering-seymour-johnsons-participation-in-jfks-funeral-flyover#:~:text=Of%20those%2050%20fighter%20aircraft%2C%2030%20F-105s%20from,Force%20One%20followed%20the%20fighters%2C%20concluding%20the%20flyover>.
- 17 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 18 JFK Presidential Library and Museum, "A Nation Remembers."
- 19 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 20 SWCS, "Troopers Called to DC."
- 21 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), "Access to Archival Databases," n.d., <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/record-detail.jsp?dt=2513&mtch=2&tf=F&q=hayward+ernest&bc=sl.f&rpp=10&pg=1&id=22235&rlst=22235,22236>.
- 22 SWCS, "SWC Pays Tribute," *Veritas*, 29 November 1963, copy in USASOC History Office, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 23 **For more on SF annual tributes to JFK, see, for example,** SFC Jeremy D. Crisp, "Green Berets honor President Kennedy in ceremony," 18 November 2011, https://www.army.mil/article/69566/green_berets_honor_president_kennedy_in_ceremony#:~:text=Soldiers%20from%20each%20of%20the%20Army%27s%20seven%20Special,fallen%20president%27s%20commitment%20to%20the%20Special%20Forces%20Soldier; J.D. Leipold, "Green Berets pay tribute to JFK at Arlington National Cemetery," 22 October 2012, https://www.army.mil/article/89523/Green_Berets_pay_tribute_to_JFK_at_Arlington_National_Cemetery/; John W. Strickland, "The Green Berets and Kennedy: Two legacies forever united," 21 November 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/229902/the_green_berets_and_kennedy_two_legacies_forever_united; and Jonathan Lehrfeld, "Green Berets honor JFK in ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery," 28 September 2022, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/09/28/green-berets-honor-jfk-in-ceremony-at-arlington-national-cemetery/>.

