

*Without Smoking Gun:
Was the Death of Lt. Cmdr. William Pitzer Part of the JFK
Assassination Cover-Up Conspiracy?*

Kent Heiner

Trine Day, 2004, p/b, £16 (approximation from current dollar
value)

A catchy title for a book this is not, although given that Lt. Cmdr. Pitzer is such an obscure figure you can hardly fault the author's publisher for setting out his wares. It was published in 2004 and hasn't set the world on fire. This is a shame, because it's a great book, far removed from the all-too-recognised 'X knew Y who hated Z who was friends with A' school of JFK thinking. I picked up Mr Heiner's book because I was interested in the complex enigma of JFK's autopsy and recognised Pitzer's name from one of those 'mysterious deaths' lists. Reading it, it became clear that this book deserved a review to alert others.

First of all, the 'pitch': Pitzer's death – an apparent suicide by gunshot. Is it suspicious? Well, yes, certainly. Heiner does a good job of picking apart the scene of death, with not too much of the ballistics-wrangling you might expect in connection with JFK's death.

The truly suspicious aspect is that prior to his death, Pitzer – who lived near Walter Reed Hospital where JFK's body was originally meant to be taken – was seen leaving his home, carrying a movie camera, after receiving a phone call on the day of the assassination; and later actually showed what appeared to be film of JFK's autopsy to a friend. The film, of course, disappeared. But eyewitness testimony is not unimportant; and Pitzer's actual death is just one tableau in a positive panorama.

Take, for example, the autopsy (singular, in the official version). Mr Heiner deconstructs the official story of the handling and transport of JFK's corpse very well. It's a minor triumph in its own right to put the pieces back together again in a way that (a) makes sense and (b) makes things simpler. Mr Heiner's reconstruction is cohesive and convincing. And,

much to my surprise, David Lifton's 'bodysnatchers' theory from his book *Best Evidence* comes out of it rather well (not the first time this outcome has surprised me. I can see I'm going to have to read *Best Evidence* again).

As for unpicking the riddle of the infamous autopsy photographs, I will not spoil the reader's enjoyment. I shall however offer this enlightening titbit: the notorious black and white 'Stare of Death' photo is from JFK's first autopsy, not the second. The reason this is clear is that the checkered tiles of the mortuary floor, visible in the frame, belong to a different hospital to the one where the autopsy officially took place. Reflecting on this minor bombshell, it finally dawned on me that something really obvious had always bothered me about the autopsy photographs – JFK's eyes are open in the 'stare' picture but closed or semi-closed in the others, which is sort of circumstantial evidence of 'stage management'; and since there was obviously never going to be an open-casket viewing there was no innocent excuse for it. This was a clue I only recognised after reading Mr Heiner's partial solution, and a minor example of how stimulating and rewarding it is.

The bulk of the book (it's not actually bulky, but a slim volume) consists of an exploration of the claim of Lt. Col. Dan Marvin that he was 'sounded out' by a CIA officer as Pitzer's assassin. Lt. Col. Marvin didn't go through with it, but clearly even a failed attempt to recruit a murderer counts as evidence connected with a disputed death.¹ Lt. Col. Marvin's fascinating story is examined this way and that, and its faults and failings assessed impartially. And it survives this scrutiny more or less intact. There are some military paper-trails unearthed, which go a long way toward helping the reader get his/her bearings and corroborate Lt. Col. Marvin's recollections; however most of the evidence consists of independent eyewitnesses whose accounts interlock and overlap at critical junctures. The forensically-minded might dismiss this as a 'spider-webs and

¹ Lt. Col. Marvin has submitted his own review of Heiner's book to amazon.com, which can be read here:
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A2Q1NRGZD7FO6A/ref=pdp_new_read_full_review_link?ie=UTF8&page=2&sort_by=MostRecentReview#R1GBFO69OXILBS>.

sealing-wax' way to construct a case, but we should remember that eyewitness testimony can overrule forensics in court. The witness has traditionally had primacy (and one day, this primacy might be properly reasserted if digital video, audio and photography remain dominant, with all their possibilities for tampering and doctoring).

Mr Heiner weaves a fascinating, convincing and unpredictable tale, told well in a sober and impressive style, and it will not spoil it to reveal that by the end of the book the titular question has not been answered. In that way, it is unlike the book that it reminded me of most in its style and approach, William Pepper's magisterial solution to the murder of Martin Luther King. However, what is clear from Mr Heiner's work is that there is definitely a strong case to be made for Pitzer's death being a murder. No smoking gun, perhaps, but there's certainly smoke and it's a fair bet that there were genuine flames behind it.

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