

## 22 November: a black day in history

Almost five decades ago today, on 22 November 1963, US president John Kennedy was assassinated in Texas and, even in those days, the global media network could react quickly - given a bit of luck here and there.

 By Chris Mberdyk: [@chrismoerdyk](#) 21 Nov 2011

As the fatal shot echoed through Dallas, a United Press International reporter happened to be in a telephone booth on a hill overlooking the cavalcade. He was relaying a story to his headquarters in New York and said "A shot has been fired, Kennedy has been hit." He then churlishly ripped the telephone wire out of the box to prevent his competitors beating him to the scoop of the century.

In New York, the UPI telex line just happened to be open to London for the noon news feed and, in London the line just happened to be open to Johannesburg for the evening news feed. I was standing in front of the telex machine in the UPI Johannesburg bureau, idly reading the news, when I saw the brief message: "Shot fired at Kennedy motorcade."

The time on the message showed me that I had received the news four minutes and 35 seconds after the shot had been fired. For those days, that was exceedingly quick.

### Surprises galore

Three years later, when the refreshingly reactionary National Union of South African Students invited, his brother, US senator Robert F Kennedy to South Africa, just as apartheid was getting into its iniquitous stride little did they know what sort of Pandora's box of surprises and coincidences they would be opening.

For the media contingent, emotions ran the entire gamut of funereal to Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The biggest surprise of all was that the SA government allowed Kennedy to visit at all. But, arrive he did as he and his wife Ethel took their first steps on our soil at Jan Smuts airport to the cheers of a huge crowd of students, Bobby ignored the reception committee and set off purposefully and at a complete tangent, across the tarmac.

He had noticed that there was not a single black face among the crowds of media and student leaders at the bottom of the aircraft steps and decided that simply wouldn't do. So, when he spotted a group of black luggage porters lounging around their trolleys way off in the distance, he headed off towards them with a determined smile on his face and his right hand outstretched, just the way his father and brother had taught him to do at election time. Dale Carnegie would have wept for joy at the sight of it all.

Unfortunately, however, in those days, black porters were completely unused to white men wanting to shake hands with them and quite obviously did not know who Kennedy was. They completely misinterpreted his intentions and in spite of his hand being quite clearly empty of anything even vaguely representing a sjambok or shotgun, they went with their instincts and scattered, running away as though the biggest tokoloshe in town was after their souls.

### Stranger and stranger

The next strange thing that happened was that the students had not really given too much thought to how the senator and his entourage were going to travel around SA and stay in the media limelight at the same time. So, a group of foreign press representatives in SA offered to charter an aircraft and offer places on board. Kennedy and his team, along with some of the student organisers.

As the youngest of this group, I was elected to co-ordinate the charter and travel arrangements of this on top of covering the event for my company, United Press International Newsfilm.

And, just to make things a little more complicated for me, Kennedy's visit was coincidentally to be the very first assignment for the newly formed SABC Television News Unit, which I had been tasked to train. While the Government was still strongly against establishing a TV service in South Africa, the SABC set up the unit to sell local news footage worldwide. Ironically for years, none of this was ever censored.

Bobby and Ethel were extremely gracious and accommodating to the media on the trip, allowing each one of us to spend time sitting with them in the plane and chatting. Bobby even had the good grace to allow a SA government special branch policeman, who was posing as a journalist, to spend a bit of time with him on one of the flights.

### **Bogus journo**

When this bogus journalist first wormed his way into our group, we told Kennedy that he was obviously a special branch because, first of all, we didn't know him from a bar of soap and, secondly, no self-respecting foreign correspondent would ever wear such a stupid little hat. But, the senator told us to let him come along and I still wonder to this day whether Kennedy managed to convert that dimwit. I still have a photograph of him and his silly hat.

Kennedy was equally gracious when I told him what aircraft he was flying in. After a visit to the cockpit to brief the crew about departure times, I'd noticed a peculiar identity plaque above the instrument console and, when I asked the pilot about it, he told me that the aircraft had been bought second hand by SAA from a broker in Europe but that its original owner was none other than Fidel Castro. When I told him, I'm not sure whether Kennedy was smiling at the irony of this or at the thought of how close his brother had come to nuking Cuba four years earlier.

The plane was a turbo-prop Viscount called the Rietbok and, nine months after the Kennedy visit, South Africans woke to the news that it had disappeared in bad weather off Kayser's Beach near East London. On the same route we had flown with Kennedy between Cape Town to Durban.

All these years later, the Rietbok crash remains a mystery, with witnesses having been silenced in what must surely be one of the biggest coverups in local aviation history.

Officially, the Rietbok disappeared without trace. But a navy diver has sworn he saw the wreck with bodies still strapped to their seats, but was told by his commanding officer not to say a word.

### **My moment**

When we landed in Cape Town in the early evening darkness, Kennedy said he wanted a few minutes to compose himself and asked the media group to leave the plane first. I led the way and, as I left the aircraft at a murky twilight, the large crowd of students gave a huge cheer thinking I was Kennedy, which got press

photographers firing off flash salvos that scared me witless.

My first and only taste of what it felt like to be a celebrity was short-lived when one of the press photographers gave me a smack on the back of the head as my feet touched the tarmac and said, "Bugge you, Moerdyk, that was my last bladdy flashbulb, you pr\*ck..."

In his speech to students in Jamieson Hall at the University of Cape Town, Kennedy made two remarkable and memorable statements. During question time, a right-wing student tried to convince him that apartheid was a moral and workable solution. To which Kennedy simply replied, "Well, if ever you get to heaven and Peter turns out to be black, you will sure as hell be in a lot of trouble..."

This was also where he came up with his famous quote: "There is a Chinese curse which says, 'May he live in interesting times.' Like it or not, we live in interesting times..." Journalists picked up the phrase and it has now become an historic gem among political bon mots.

### **Chinese all Greek to him**

But, this "Chinese curse" continues to puzzle the Chinese, who claim the only time they've ever heard it used is by Americans. Given president John F Kennedy's penchant for getting things wrong in the translation, for instance when he called himself a doughnut in Berlin, perhaps Bobby had also gotten something wrong. Maybe he was actually referring to the Chinese proverb, "It's better to be a dog in a peaceful time than be a man in a chaotic period."

Nonetheless, Kennedy was a remarkable and charismatic man. And behind him was not only a supportive wife but a woman of quite exceptional strength of character.

Her instincts as a mother - she had 11 children - came to the fore when I caught my finger in the revolving door of the Mount Nelson Hotel and had a sleepless night from the pain. When she saw me the next morning, her maternal instincts noticed immediately that something was wrong and insisted on taking me to a nearby pharmacy, where she pierced my bruised and blackened fingernail to relieve the pressure and then gave the pharmacist a tongue-lashing when he didn't have precisely the medication she wanted.

Just before we arrived back in Johannesburg aboard the ill-fated Rietbok, Robert Kennedy gave me a very special present. It was a gilt tiepin in the shape of the PT boat his brother JFK commanded during World War 2. I still have it in my little cardboard box of treasures, where I keep things such as the pen with which I wrote matric, a box of matches from the Moulin Rouge in Paris, a quartz replica of the Cullinan diamond and a little pointy thing with a spring, the use for which I have no idea but I know that it has some sort of sentimental value.

Exactly two years to the day that he set foot on South African soil, Robert Kennedy lay dead - another victim of a political assassination.

### **ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK: @CHRISMOERDYK**

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