

Presidential Shell Game

by Frederick Wickert



The President arriving at Air Force One on Marine One, preparing to depart on a trip



Aircraft #26000 parked in the hangar



One of the three "B" models in the hangar



The hangar at night with doors opened on both ends, #26000 and one of the other three parked inside



58971 and #58972 parked on the flight line at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland

Sometimes extreme measures are taken to protect the President of the United States. This is a true story of some “shell game” measures once taken to protect the life of the President.

During the final months of President Eisenhower’s term in office, the presidential aircraft fleet obtained three new Boeing 707 jet liners. The Air Force designated them VC-137’s, meaning VIP cargo as opposed to regular cargo, for which the aircraft are designated with a “C” before the number.

The three aircraft were 1958 models. Their tail numbers were 58970, 58971 and 58972. President Eisenhower had a super constellation assigned to him. The plane was known as the Columbine. Before leaving office, he did fly once or twice on 58970.

The three Boeing aircraft were equipped with water injection engines. In 1962, the three were sent to the factory to have the new fan jet engines installed on them. In 1962, aircraft 26000 was delivered. President Kennedy had taken office and the new Boeing 707 was assigned to the President. Aircraft 26000 had the presidential seal applied to it. It was a “C” model, giving it a wider wing span, slightly longer fuselage and more fuel capacity, giving it a greater distance range without refueling than the other three. It also had some improved communications equipment and technology.

President Kennedy wanted the plane to be distinctive and different from all others and he had a particular paint job designed, and had the plane painted in that design. The design is in use today.

These aircraft were assigned to the U.S. Air Force 1254th Military Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force base, Md. The wing name was later changed from 1254th to the 89th MAW, (SAM) meaning Special Air Missions.

I was assigned to that wing in the Security Police Squadron, which was responsible for the security of the White House Fleet, which included those four planes.

On November 22, 1963 President Kennedy was shot in Dallas, Texas. Before leaving Dallas, Vice President Lyndon Johnson was sworn in to the office of President, on board aircraft #26000.

In the beginning, President Johnson was much too busy to go anywhere and remained in Washington. In March of 1964, he planned to make a trip to Miami, and perhaps to the Keys. President Kennedy had spent many weekends in the Keys while President.

I was working on the midnight shift the night before the trip to Florida was to take place. I was assigned to guard the tail of aircraft #26000 in the hangar. At around 2:00 A.M. the door behind me began to open. Aircraft #58972 was towed into the hangar and parked in the opposite corner on the same end of the hangar. In a few minutes the door on the other end of the hangar opened and Aircraft #58971 was towed in on the other end of the hangar. Then the doors were closed. Painters began removing the tail numbers of the aircraft, and where the tail numbers had been, plain white paint appeared without being numbered for identification. In the adjacent hangar, the same thing was being done on Aircraft #58970.

The next day when preparing for the departure of the President for Florida, Aircraft #26000 remained in its berth in the hangar. The other three planes were parked side by side in front of the air terminal. No numbers appeared on them and it was impossible to tell them apart from each other.

When the President arrived on Marine One, the White House helicopter, he boarded the first plane. All three planes started their engines and taxied out at the same time. While taxiing to the end of the runway, they changed positions. They took off one behind the other and they changed position several times while flying to Florida. It was impossible to know which aircraft the President was on. All three aircraft landed together in Florida.

Intelligence had obtained information that two aircraft, one F-86 and one unidentified, planned to crash into Air Force One in the air as it neared Florida. It was to be a suicide mission, presumably from Cuba, to assassinate the President.

The shell game was an extreme measure to protect the life of the President, and it was a great success. No plane made any attempt to come near and the President completed his trip and returned safely to Washington without incident.

As far as I know, this was never reported on in the news media and I doubt the news media were ever aware of what was taking place.