

My mother had heard from one of her friends that a federal government agency with an office in Waltham was currently hiring young people to work on a short-term project. This lady didn't know any of the details about the job, but she gave my mother a telephone number she said I could call if I wanted to work for the last few weeks of the summer.

I thought that a Dartmouth freshman should have a little spending money when he arrived at college, and since I had finished with all of my other preparations, I picked up the telephone and dialed the number. A woman answered on the first ring, and as soon as she heard me utter the magical words "Dartmouth College Freshman" she told me that I was hired and that I should report for work at the Federal Records Center at eight o'clock the next morning.

The Federal Records Center was located on the other side of Waltham from where we lived; it was way out on Trapelo Road, about four miles from our three-decker on Brown Street. Getting there would have been easy if I had a bicycle, but because my parents thought bikes were too dangerous, I didn't own one or even know how to ride. I would have to take the bus to work.

So the next morning I rose at six-thirty, left the house at seven, and embarked on the relay of maroon-and-cream-colored buses of the Middlesex and Boston Street Railway that eventually deposited me in front of the Federal Records Center a little before eight.

I had previously glimpsed the nondescript exterior of the newish single-story building from the back seat of the family car as we drove by on errands, but I had never been inside until I walked through the aluminum and glass front entrance that morning.

The Federal Records Center was a vast, windowless warehouse with a gray concrete floor. Row upon row of towering steel industrial shelves stretched back into the cavernous interior, stacked high with white cardboard "banker's boxes" — tens of thousands of them, I guessed — that contained every kind of old document that the federal bureaucracy had ever generated.

Just inside the entrance a space the size of a school classroom had been left clear of shelving and was furnished instead with long gray metal work tables and gray metal government chairs; this area was brightly illuminated by fluorescent tubes mounted on the ceiling high overhead.

The lady who had hired me over the phone greeted me when I arrived; she was friendly and energetic and I estimated that she was in her late thirties. She found my name on the clipboard she held, made a checkmark next to it, and invited me to take a seat. She repeated this process with a dozen other high school and college-age kids who soon arrived and filled the chairs at the work tables. Once every name on her list had a check mark next to it, my new employer put down her clipboard and explained the job that she had hired us to do.

We were now all employees of the United States Internal Revenue Service. The lady explained that because of some ambiguous and confusing wording on the income tax instructions that had been sent out three years earlier, many good, honest American taxpayers had all made the same mistake on their tax returns and ended up overpaying the government. Our job was to go through all of the income tax returns stored here at the Records Center to find the ones with the mistake so the Internal Revenue could mail refund checks to all of the citizens who had paid too much tax.

After that introduction, the lady from the I.R.S. showed us how to spot the mistake on a tax return — it wasn't very difficult — and then I and the other kids all got to work.

We each started out with a white banker's box filled with income tax returns; you went through all of the returns in the box one by one, and if you found one that contained the mistake, you put it aside. Once you finished with all of the income tax returns in one banker's box, you were supposed to raise your hand and the Internal Revenue lady would bring you another box to work through.

The job was undemanding and the time went by quickly; the Federal Records Center was comfortably air conditioned, and I enjoyed chatting with the other kids around the work tables and daydreaming about soon being a freshman at Dartmouth College.

But after I had been working there for a couple of days, I became curious about one section of the big warehouse that seemed to have been set up as a high security zone. This special area was separated from the rest of the Records Center by a sturdy chain link fence that rose from the concrete floor and extended all the way up to the high ceiling; the only access was through a steel gate secured with a large padlock. I never saw anyone enter or depart through the steel gate, and I had never seen the fluorescent ceiling lights in that area turned on. I wondered what was so important about what was being stored there.

I found out on the Monday morning of my second week on the job.

The Internal Revenue lady came over to our long work tables and announced that everyone could take a break from what they were doing because we had a special visitor who wanted to meet us all and say hello.

And then she turned and introduced Mr. Dave Powers. Mr. Powers was a kindly-looking Irishman in his fifties who was dressed in a light gray suit. I already knew who he was, of course: Dave Powers was Jack Kennedy's best friend. He had been advisor, advance man and aide-de-camp to John F. Kennedy beginning with the first campaign for Congress in 1946, through Kennedy's years in the United States Senate, and then on to the White House. Dave Powers had been on hand for every significant event of Jack Kennedy's political career: the exciting Democratic convention in Los Angeles, the thrilling election night in 1960, and the stirring inauguration on that bright freezing morning in Washington. As Special Assistant to the President, Dave Powers had been riding in the car behind Kennedy's in the motorcade in Dallas and had heard the fatal shots that struck the President down.

Smiling pleasantly, Mr. Powers stepped forward and wished us all good morning. We all chorused "Good morning," in response.

Gesturing toward the closed-off area that I was so curious about, Dave Powers told us that the Federal Records Center in Waltham was serving as the temporary storage place for all of President Kennedy's documents, memorabilia, and personal belongings until a magnificent new John F. Kennedy Presidential Library was constructed at a site on the banks of the Charles River near Harvard.

Mr. Powers explained that he had been appointed the official curator of the entire Kennedy collection; he was currently in the process of cataloging everything and selecting some of the most interesting objects to be publicly displayed in a museum that would be a part of the Presidential Library. When Mr. Powers finished speaking, we spontaneously gave him a round of applause and then got back to work.

Every morning thereafter, Dave Powers walked right past my work table on his way to unlock and enter the secure area containing President Kennedy's effects.

One day when I saw him arrive, I put down the income tax return I was checking, stood up, took a deep breath, and then boldly strode over to Mr. Powers just as he was putting his key into the big padlock.

I said, "Mr. Powers, my name is Francis Archdeacon and I graduated from Waltham High in June. I admired President Kennedy very much, especially for his service in the Navy. His example is the main reason that I am going to Dartmouth College on a Naval ROTC scholarship at the end of the summer."

Mr. Powers smiled at this and he said, "That is great, Francis. President Kennedy would have been very pleased to know that he had influenced a young man from Waltham to follow his example and serve his country in the Navy."

Coming from Dave Powers, who had been so close to Jack Kennedy, these words made me feel very proud and happy.

Then Mr. Powers — who spoke with the same Boston Irish three-decker accent that I did — said, "Come on in here, Francis," and he unlocked the big padlock and pushed open the gate

in the chain link barrier that separated the Kennedy White House material from the rest of the records center.

Mr. Powers flipped a switch and the overhead fluorescent lights in the secure area came on. The very first thing I saw was a tall rocking chair made of dark wood. I knew immediately from all of pictures I had seen that it was President Kennedy's rocking chair from the White House.

"Go ahead, have a seat, Francis," Mr. Powers said as he motioned toward the most famous piece of furniture in the world. I carefully sat down and after a moment, I started to cautiously rock back and forth in President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's rocking chair, the very one that the great man had used in the White House. I knew that I would never forget this moment as long as I lived.

I ran my hands along the arms of the rocking chair and then gripped them firmly. I recalled all of the photographs I had seen of President Kennedy in momentous negotiation with the leaders of other nations, giving orders to the generals and admirals of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and formulating national policy with senators and cabinet secretaries — all while sitting in this rocking chair.

And I remembered also seeing this rocking chair in the background of the touching photographs of Jack Kennedy greeting his delightful children when they visited him in the Oval Office.

As I rocked in the chair I looked around the secure area that had once seemed so mysterious. Although the Federal Records Center in Waltham was supposed to provide only "temporary" storage for the Kennedy artifacts, it was likely that the Presidential Library and Museum would not be ready to receive and display these historic items for many more months; understandably, Dave Powers had fixed up a working area for himself that was an unusual hybrid of the temporary and the permanent. There were stacks of the ubiquitous white cardboard banker's boxes here, but there was also a gray steel government desk with a telephone and a desk lamp on top of it, a comfortable leather sofa, and a bank of tall steel filing cabinets. Mr. Powers used a small key to unlock one of these, pulled open the top drawer and took something out.

He returned to where I sat in the rocking chair and said, "You might find this interesting, Francis. President Kennedy always kept this on his desk in the White House." With that, Mr. Powers placed an object about the size of a baseball in my hands. I stopped rocking and looked down to see what it was.

It was the coconut shell!

I held in my hands the coconut shell bearing the message Lieutenant Kennedy had carved with his survival knife on that desperate day in 1943; this was the coconut shell of the Blackett Strait; the coconut shell of *PT-109*.

To preserve it, the shell had been encased in a kind of clear glass hemisphere like a glass paperweight, but the message that the exhausted young Navy lieutenant had carved on the shell was still clearly legible:

NAURO ISL COMMANDER...NATIVE KNOWS POSIT...HE CAN PILOT...11 ALIVE
NEED SMALL BOAT...KENNEDY

I was thrilled. Just as the Sword in the Stone had been the talisman of King Arthur's medieval Camelot, so was the coconut shell of *PT-109* the talisman of President Kennedy's twentieth-century Camelot, and now it was in my hands. I held the greatest relic of the greatest American warrior-saint; America's greatest war hero; America's greatest Catholic. It seemed entirely possible that once it was put on public display in the John F. Kennedy Library, the coconut shell of the Blackett Strait might become an object of devout pilgrimage, like Becket's bones in Canterbury Cathedral; but for the moment, it was entrusted to me.

Here was a physical object that once had been in my hero's hands and now was in mine; the coconut shell of the Blackett Strait connected me directly to Lieutenant Junior Grade Kennedy on the very eve of my departure to Dartmouth College where I would be enrolled into the United States Navy, issued a uniform, and become Midshipman Fourth Class Archdeacon. I recalled the words President Kennedy had spoken at his inauguration: "*Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans...*" Now the torch — the coconut shell — had been passed to me; I felt inspired to accomplish great things.

Mr. Powers took the time to show me many more of the President's personal items: there were framed photographs of famous people, oversized honorary keys to some of the great cities of the world, diplomas, model ships and other wonderful objects, but what I will always remember most vividly from that day is sitting in President Kennedy's rocking chair holding the coconut shell that brought rescue to the desperate crew of *PT-109*.

After a while I stopped rocking in the chair, and holding out the precious coconut shell reverently in both hands, I carefully gave it back to Mr. Powers and watched as he returned it to the filing cabinet that served as its temporary reliquary. Then I rose from the President's chair.

My action of standing up made the chair rock even though it was now empty. It moved the same way it would have done if it had been President Kennedy who had just stood up instead of a seventeen-year-old boy from Brown Street in Waltham. Mr. Powers was also watching the chair, but neither one of us said anything.

After a moment, I reached out and placed one of my hands gently on one arm of the chair to bring it to rest. Then I thanked Mr. Powers profusely for letting me see and touch these historical objects of such incalculable importance.

Then I went back out to my work table and tried to get my mind back on my summer job of going through other peoples' old income tax returns.

I didn't see Mr. Powers again after that day, and at the end of the week I politely quit my temporary job at the Federal Records Center, with handshakes all around, to go off to Dartmouth College.

But I took away with me a wonderful memory. The circumstances that had led to my temporary possession — in Waltham, Massachusetts of all places! — of the coconut shell of the Blackett Strait had been truly extraordinary. And the timing was just as miraculous: just as I was about to set off to Dartmouth College and the Navy; not a year earlier; not a week later, but just at the precise moment I was leaving my brown three-decker on Brown Street to begin my exciting new life.

It was a sign to me from God that I was on the right path. My destiny had been revealed by the Western Union Telegram that had been waiting for me on our kitchen table on that day in April: Dartmouth College and the United States Navy.

And now I had connected with the mythic power of the Kennedys of Massachusetts. Camelot's king may have fallen, but there were young men who were willing to take up the unfinished quest and I was one of them. I would be one of Camelot's young knights; I already knew by heart the precept of my knightly order:

"Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country."

God had favored me. He had looked down and decided that I should have some encouragement and inspiration and He sent it to me in the earthly form of the coconut shell of the Blackett Strait.

I was a boy marked for glory.