

MEMORANDUM

December 19, 1996

To: T. Jeremy Gunn
From: Joseph Masih
Subject: Palmprint on the Mannlicher-Carcano Rifle

As part of the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination, forensic evidence played an important role in linking the alleged assassination weapon, a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle found on the Sixth Floor of the Texas School Book Depository, to Lee Harvey Oswald.

According to the Warren Commission Final Report (pages 122-124), Lt. J.C. Day of the Dallas Police Department discovered a palmprint on the barrel of the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle. The Report found that the FBI confirmed that the print was that of Lee Harvey Oswald, and that this discovery was sufficient proof linking the alleged assassin to the alleged assassination weapon.

However, Lt. Day's alleged discovery of the palmprint on the underside of the rifle barrel, which was covered by the wooden stock, on the evening of November 22, was not corroborated by the FBI fingerprint expert, Sebastian Latona.

Lt. Day in his testimony before the Warren Commission (4 WH pages 260-262) said that he had photographed two prints near the magazine of the weapon, but that he did not attempt to lift them. He believed that those prints were not sufficient to make a proper identification. He then noticed, he told the Commission, a print originating on the underside of the barrel just below the wooden stock. He disassembled the rifle and found a palmprint which he subsequently lifted. He did not photograph the palmprint. Lt. Day testified that the print remained on the barrel, even after his copy had been lifted, and said it was the FBI's "best bet" for linking the weapon to Oswald. He turned the weapon over to Special Agent Vincent Drain of the FBI at 11:45 pm on November 22. Drain forwarded the rifle to the FBI laboratory in Washington.

There is no contemporaneous evidence, however, that Lt. Day informed anyone, including the FBI, of the existence of any palmprint. The FBI's laboratory expert, Sebastian Latona, who examined the Mannlicher-Carcano for prints, stated in his testimony before the Warren Commission (4 WH pages 20-24) that he received the rifle on November 23. Accompanying the rifle were photographs of the two prints near the trigger guard/magazine area. These two prints were covered with cellophane for protection, as was proper practice to ensure that they subsequently could be read. During his examination of the rifle on November 23, Latona discovered no palmprint nor any evidence that one had been lifted.

The FBI returned the weapon to the Dallas Police on November 24. Two days later, on November 26, the FBI requested the rifle again along with all of the accompanying material. On November 29, in response to the FBI's request, Sebastian Latona received, for the first time, a palmprint that the Dallas Police Department alleged had been lifted from the rifle. The FBI subsequently identified it as the right palmprint of Lee Harvey Oswald.

There is no contemporaneous evidence (circa November 22-24) of any palmprint, photograph, or written record documenting a discovery by Lt. Day. Furthermore, the FBI found no print on the weapon nor any evidence that one had been lifted on its examination of the weapon. Day photographed the other prints and protected them with cellophane yet did not do the same for the palmprint.

Lt. Day was never questioned under oath about the circumstances surrounding his discovery of the palmprint and the lifting of this print. Should he now be questioned?