

# The last day

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The final 24 hours of J.F.K. Jr.'s life were a typical whirl for someone used to the limelight. But in that very ordinariness lay the seeds of disaster

By Jeffrey Kluger and Mark Thompson

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Most of the 49,087 people in Yankee Stadium that Thursday night were too busy watching pitcher Roger Clemens get shelled by the Atlanta Braves to notice the man in the box seat near the Yankee dugout. Eating a Lemon Chill, sipping a Deer Park water and looking casual in a white polo shirt, he might have been easy to overlook, except, as usual, at least a few people quickly noticed. There was the television crew that spotted him and flashed his face to New Yorkers watching the game at home. As always, he looked striking on camera. After the game, two securities traders from Staten Island summoned up the nerve to approach him. "I went down and said, 'John, if I don't get this autograph, my sister will kill me,'" one of them recalls. Without a handy piece of paper, Anthony Hahn offered Kennedy one of the pink printed menus distributed in the box-seat area; with an easy smile, he signed. It was an ordinary evening for John F. Kennedy Jr., and an equally ordinary one for the people who liked to watch him.



Yet Kennedy no doubt had a few things on his mind that night. He had gone straight to the stadium from his office at George magazine and was due back there the next day for another in a series of meetings with his publishing partners about the future of the young publication. And there was a big weekend ahead: after work on Friday, he planned to fly to Hyannis Port to attend the Saturday wedding of his cousin Rory. It was, of course, a wedding he would never make. About 9:40 the next night, J.F.K. Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette and her sister Lauren would lose their life in the waters off the southwest coast of Martha's Vineyard.

It has long been a credo of pilots that death in any airplane accident is rarely caused by a single, catastrophic failure. Rather, it's usually the result of a succession of small failures, each essentially harmless, but building a sort of disastrous momentum until the weight of the accumulated errors brings the plane down. Similarly, there was nothing especially portentous on the final day of Kennedy's life that led, ineluctably, to tragedy. It's only in hindsight that it becomes apparent how the random eddies of those last 24 hours carried Kennedy, his wife and sister-in-law to disaster. The awful thing about eddies, of course, is that if only one of them had flowed another way, that disaster might just as easily have been averted.

By any measure, John Kennedy's weekend was starting out to be a good one. Six weeks before, he'd broken his ankle in a paragliding accident, and on Thursday morning, before his trip to the Yankees game, he'd at last had the cast removed. On Thursday night he was still limping as he negotiated the steps at the stadium, but by Friday he was getting around the George offices with the help of nothing but a cane.

On Friday morning he met with Jack Klinger, the recently named president of Hachette Filipacchi, George's publishing partner, to discuss the magazine's financial state. Rumors were rife that the company had lost confidence in George and was ready to turn off the funding spigot. According to Klinger, however, no decision had been made, and the two were exploring how to revise the magazine's business strategy. "He and I agreed that there had not been a well-thought-out business plan," Klinger says. "So we said, 'Let's figure out how to go forward.'" Kennedy left the meeting, Klinger says, feeling "fairly positive" about the outlook for the magazine.

Kennedy spent the rest of his day tending to editorial business in George's midtown Manhattan offices and reportedly found time for an afternoon trip to a health club. And at 4:05 p.m., he sent a gentle e-mail to John Perry Barlow, a former lyricist for the Grateful Dead and a longtime friend. Barlow's mother had just died, and J.F.K. Jr., who knew something about that kind of loss, commended him for having been at her side at the end. "I will never forget when it happened to me," Kennedy wrote, "and it was not something that was all that macabre." Saturday was Barlow's mother's funeral, and Barlow did not have an opportunity to open the e-mail until later that afternoon, when its author was already gone. "It was like a voice from the grave," Barlow says. "He said, 'Let's spend some time together this summer and sort things out.'"

Kennedy's wife Carolyn spent part of that afternoon in midtown Manhattan as well. With Rory Kennedy's wedding only a day away, she needed a dress for the occasion, and late in the afternoon she went shopping for one at Saks Fifth Avenue, eyeing the designer lines in the boutiques on the third floor. She found an outfit that suited her famously uncluttered style: a short, \$1,640 black dress by Alber Elbaz, a designer working for Yves Saint Laurent.

Lauren Bessette, the third member of the trio that planned to fly together that evening, was, in the meantime, putting in an ordinary workday in the investment-banking division at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter. She intended to head over to the George offices, just a few blocks away, after work so she could drive with Kennedy to the Essex County Airport in Fairfield, N.J., in his white Hyundai convertible. Some reports have suggested that Lauren was late meeting Kennedy, a potentially crucial delay. But Lauren arrived at the office around 6:30, and staff members say there was no indication that either she or Kennedy was running late. When she had left her office for the trip to Kennedy's, some noticed she was carrying a black garment bag. Before the weekend was out, that same piece of luggage--wet, wilted, flecked with sand--would wash up on the beaches of Martha's Vineyard.

Driving from midtown Manhattan to Fairfield in normal traffic usually takes about 40 min. But after work on a summertime Friday, the route Kennedy probably took--muscling through traffic along one of several West Side avenues, crawling through the choke-point entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel--can take much longer. He and Lauren did not arrive in the neighborhood of the airport until after 8 p.m., as dusk was approaching.

## **COUNTDOWN TO TRAGEDY**

Aviation disaster isn't usually caused by a single, catastrophic failure. Rather, it's typically the result of a succession of small failures, building a sort of disastrous momentum. Such may have been the case in the hours leading to the fatal dive of Kennedy's plane, when random events conspired to leave no way out

### **THE NIGHT BEFORE**

--THURSDAY EVENING J.F.K. Jr. and a friend took in a Braves-Yankees game from field-level seats. Kennedy gave a fan what may have been a final autograph

### **AT THE OFFICE**

--FRIDAY MORNING In a tough market, Kennedy's fledgling magazine was fighting to stay afloat. On Friday he had a meeting with his publishing partner to hash out a new business plan. Later he worked on editorial matters

### **THE ESSEX COUNTY AIRPORT, N.J.**

-- FRIDAY EVENING Kennedy usually arrived at the airport by 7 p.m. On Friday, held up by traffic, he didn't get there until around 8. With haze descending, pilot Kyle Bailey, left, decided not to fly because he couldn't see a nearby mountain ridge. Kennedy flew anyway, piloting a Piper Saratoga with lots of amenities, including leather seats

### **THE SISTERS**

--FRIDAY AFTERNOON Lauren Bessette, left, ended her day at Morgan Stanley around 6 p.m. and met John for a ride to the airport. Carolyn went shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue, buying a little black dress for Rory Kennedy's wedding the next day, and rode to the airport separately

Around 8:10, Kennedy pulled into the West Essex Sunoco station just across the street from the airport. Jack Tabibian, who owns the station, was accustomed to seeing Kennedy stop in when he came out to fly, but never this late. "He usually showed up between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.," Tabibian says. If J.F.K. Jr. was concerned about the late hour and the fast-setting sun, he didn't show it. Walking unhurriedly into the store wearing a light gray T shirt, he made a bit of small talk with Mesfin Gebreegziabher, who was manning the cash register. Gebreegziabher asked after Kennedy's leg, and Kennedy reported it was feeling better. As was his custom, Kennedy bought a banana and a bottle of mineral water and this time threw in six AA batteries. On his way out, he briefly lingered by a magazine rack near the front door, scanning the day's headlines.

What Kennedy was thinking as he climbed back into his Hyundai and drove across the street to the airport is impossible to know, but as a pilot, he was clearly up against it. Night was falling, and he had two stops to make that evening: one in Martha's Vineyard to drop off Lauren, then on to Hyannis Port. Earlier, Kyle Bailey, a local pilot, had canceled a planned flight from Essex because of a troubling haze that had already reduced visibility. Bailey decided to ground himself when he looked off in the distance for a familiar mountain ridge but couldn't see it. "That is a test that most pilots use at the airport," he says.

Nonetheless, around 8:30 p.m., shortly after Carolyn arrived in a black radio car, she, Kennedy and Lauren climbed inside the plane and belted themselves into its plush leather seats. At 8:38 p.m., 12 min. after sundown, the Essex tower cleared them for takeoff, and the wheels of the red- and-white Piper Saratoga left the ground.

What happened over the next hour or so--between the time the plane last made contact with the runway and the time it first made contact with water--is, for now, a matter of conjecture. The take-off, to all appearances, was a smooth one, suggesting that Kennedy's still shaky ankle did not hamper his ability to operate the Piper's pedals. Much of the flight may have been similarly uneventful, if the sketchy radar record is any indication.

Inside the plane, things must have been comfortable, even cozy. Heading east, across the Hudson and in the direction of Long Island Sound, Kennedy climbed to 5,600 ft., the typical altitude for small planes traveling by visual flight rules. To the left, the light-flecked coast of southern Connecticut was probably visible through the haze, as first Bridgeport, then New Haven, then New London provided a sort of luminous archipelago pointing east. The noise of the engine and the wind would have made it difficult for the occupants to talk to one another, but the plane was equipped with headphones that would have made conversation easy. The position of the bodies at the crash site suggests that Carolyn and Lauren were sitting in the rear of the six-seat cabin, behind Kennedy. Overhead lights controlled by armrest switches would have allowed them to pass the time reading; a fold-down writing table gave them a place to rest a book.

Kennedy had to keep his attention elsewhere, and after a while, what he was seeing could not have pleased him. The haze that surrounded his plane as he first climbed into the sky did not disperse, largely obscuring the fingernail paring of a moon that was out that evening. Stars were probably erased completely. Up and down the New England coast, other pilots began flying into the same soup. A number of them radioed the FAA for permission to land at alternative, inland airports, where visibility was better. But Kennedy, who never made radio contact throughout the trip, pressed on. Below his right wing, he may have seen the eastern tip of Long Island slipping past.

At 9:26 p.m., 48 min. after takeoff, things got dicier. By this point in Kennedy's flight path, the lights of Westerly, R.I., would ordinarily have been visible to the left, and the porkchop-shaped outline of Block Island should have been off to the right. Kennedy banked the plane, quickly passed the island and found himself, at last, over utterly open ocean. It was at this moment, according to radar records, that the plane, which had been holding steady at 5,600 ft., suddenly began to descend at about 700 ft. per min. That's not emergency speed for this single-engine aircraft, but it is quicker than normal.

It's unclear why the plane was descending so quickly, but Kennedy may have been trying to drop below the haze. For nearly five minutes, the plane's descent continued at this relatively steep rate, losing about two-thirds of its altitude until it was just 2,300 ft. above the Atlantic wavetops. Martha's Vineyard was by now only 20 miles away, but if the Piper kept dropping at this rate, it would hit ocean well before it reached the landing strip. For a pilot flying in better conditions--even an inexperienced pilot--the next step would be obvious: look out your window, get your bearings and level out your plane. J.F.K. Jr. didn't have that option. No matter how low he flew, there was still haze.

Kennedy, who had earned his pilot's license only 15 months ago, now found himself flying a plane that might as well have had no windows at all. The first rule pilots are taught in a vertiginous situation like this is to ignore the signals your body is trying to send. The inner ear is equipped with an exquisitely well-tuned balance mechanism, but it's a mechanism that's meant to operate with the help of other cues, particularly visual ones. Without that, the balance system spins like an unmoored gyroscope.

According to radar records, an apparently flummoxed Kennedy now made a sudden bank to the right, away from his intended destination, and climbed briefly back up to 2,600 ft. Perhaps he was still searching for a break in the haze, or perhaps merely stumbling about. If he followed his flight training--and his reputation as a generally cautious pilot suggests he would have--he would now have performed what's known as "the scan," a quick survey of half-a-dozen key instruments that would reveal his plane's altitude, attitude and direction. But his brief experience with instrument piloting--he was certified to fly only under eyeball conditions--left him ill-equipped to handle a confusing situation. As the dials on the panel and the signals in his brain told him two different things, his eyes probably bounced back and forth between the instruments and the windows in a frantic attempt to reconcile the two. "He was like a blind man trying to find his way out of a room," a Piper Saratoga pilot surmises.

And like a blind man, he now completely lost his way. After holding altitude at 2,600 ft. for about a minute, the plane again turned right and began descending. Assuming Kennedy was still scanning his instruments, the dial that would probably have seized his attention was his rapidly unspooling altimeter. Inexperienced pilots often focus on this dial alone and do the logical thing to reverse its plunge: pull hard on the nose to try to level out the plane. But without a practiced ability to read all the instruments, Kennedy may unknowingly have been not only descending but also turning. Pulling up the nose without first leveling the wings and dampening the turn would only tighten the spin, putting the plane into a so-called graveyard spiral. Within seconds, the plane was plummeting toward the water at 5,000 ft. per min.

Trying to guess the atmosphere in the cockpit during the last 15 sec. or so before the plane hit the sea will always be speculation--and grim speculation at that. It was probably terrifying as the trajectory steepened. It was almost certainly quick--mercifully quick--when the last bit of sky ran out and the water met the plane like an asphalt runway. Death, at that speed, is instantaneous, and well before the wreckage of the Saratoga could descend the 116 ft. to the bottom of the darkened Atlantic, its three occupants were gone.

The Martha's Vineyard airport is a tiny place, a collection of modest buildings that are more bungalows than terminals. When the occasional military cargo plane has to land there, it looks almost comically whalelike sitting on the tiny ribbon of runway. If you were planning to meet someone arriving by private plane at a certain time on a Friday night, you'd know almost immediately if your party hadn't shown up. When a couple approached Adam Budd, a 21-year-old airport intern, and reported that they were there to meet a Lauren Bessette but that she hadn't arrived, there was thus little possibility that they had simply missed her at the gate. At 10:05, Budd phoned the FAA station in Bridgeport, Conn., and asked if someone could track Kennedy's plane. The FAA, unsure who Budd was, explained that this was not the kind of information given out over the phone.



In Kennedy's apartment in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood, the phone rang not long afterward. It was answered by a friend of John and Carolyn's whose air conditioning had broken down and who had been invited to stay at their apartment. The late-night caller was Senator Ted Kennedy, who had learned that his nephew's plane was overdue and was wondering if perhaps he had never left New York. The friend, alarms probably going off, informed him that he had.

It was not until 2:15 a.m. that a Kennedy-family friend made a call to the Coast Guard--a much more urgent call than Budd's--and the search for the lost plane at last got under way. Six days later, after the plane was found and the bodies were recovered, their ashes were committed, forever, to the deep.

--Reported by William Dowell, Jodie Morse and Elizabeth Rudolph/New York, Greg Fulton/Atlanta and Dick Thompson/Cape Cod

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