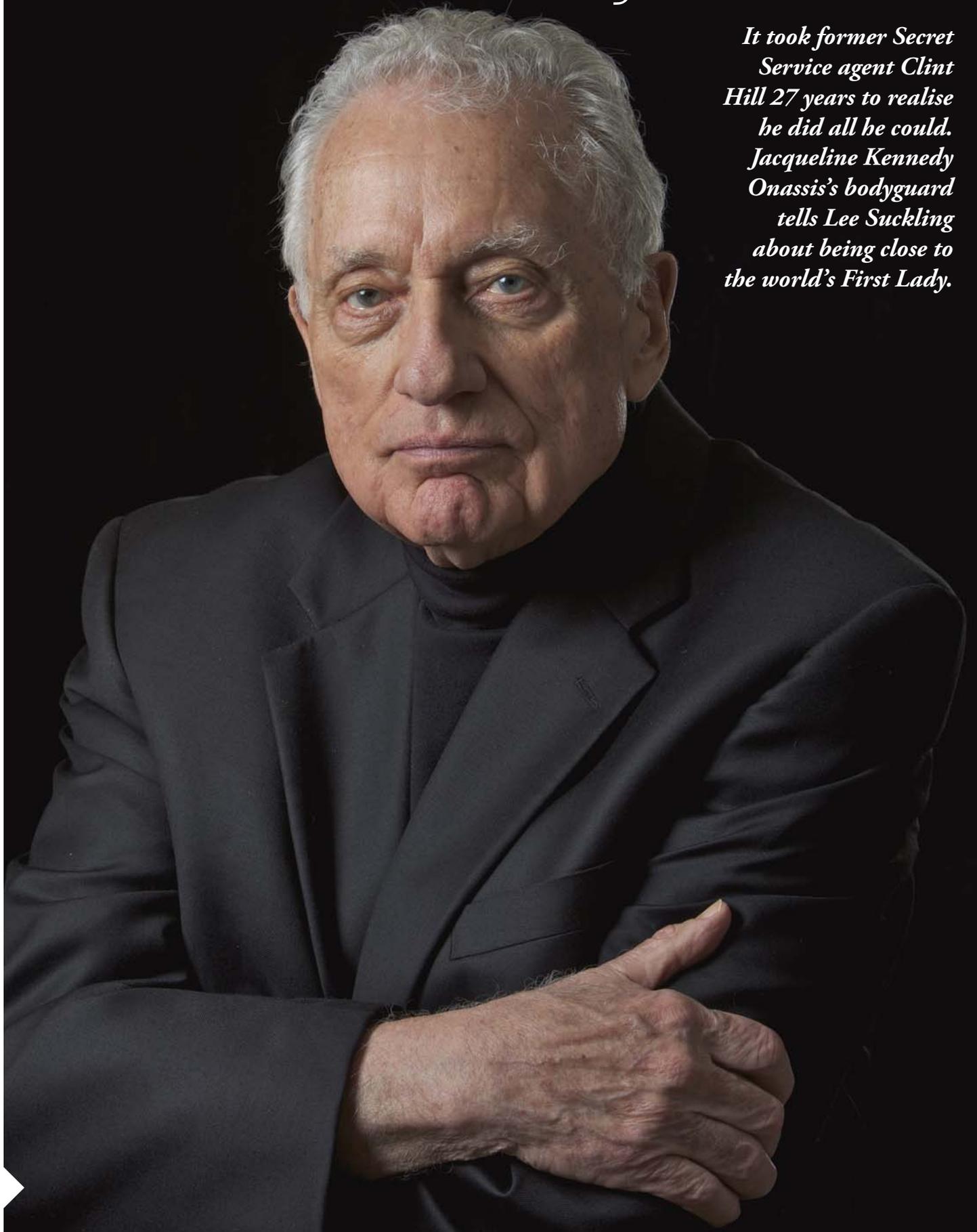


The Kennedy Years

It took former Secret Service agent Clint Hill 27 years to realise he did all he could. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's bodyguard tells Lee Suckling about being close to the world's First Lady.



The defining moment of Clint Hill's life was 12.30pm on November 22, 1963. Video footage seen by the world a thousand times over shows Hill jump over the back of the car to Jacqueline Kennedy's aid as her husband, John F. Kennedy, was shot three times. "Of course I blamed myself," says the 81-year old Hill. "I was the only agent within reach of President Kennedy – the only agent that had a chance."

In a 1975 interview with Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes*, Hill admitted his regret in not getting on top of the presidential car a second earlier, between the second and third shots. During the interview, which was taken upon Hill's retirement from the Secret Service and before a six-year "dark period", Hill revealed he believed his body could have shielded John F. Kennedy from the fatal blow to the head, had he moved faster.

Fifteen years later, having recovered from "years hiding behind a bottle", Hill returned to Dallas, Texas - scene of the assassination - for the first time. "I surveyed the area and looked out the window at the assassination point," Hill recalls. "I realised we'd done everything we could have. [Lee Harvey Oswald] had all the advantages that day. We had none."

Born in North Dakota in 1932, Hill spent his early adulthood working in intelligence for the US Army, from 1954 until 1957. In 1958 he joined the Secret Service, completing investigative and protection work before being assigned to protect President Eisenhower in 1959. In 1960, after John F. Kennedy's win over Richard Nixon in the US presidential election, Hill was detailed to Mrs Kennedy. "I thought of it as a demotion at the time," Hill says, explaining his move from presidential protector to first lady bodyguard. "I never really got an answer as to why I was chosen to work for [Mrs Kennedy]."

Lisa McCubbin, renowned American journalist and co-writer of *Mrs Kennedy and Me*, Hill's memoirs of his Kennedy years, says, "I think they saw a personality match between Clint and Mrs Kennedy.

"Mrs Kennedy was a very spontaneous woman. Clint believed the person he was protecting should be able to do what they wanted, when they wanted, make impulsive decisions ... and it was his job to adjust, not theirs. He wasn't there to tell [Mrs Kennedy] what to do."

Hill was assigned to Jacqueline Kennedy for the three years prior and one year subsequent to her husband's death. "She was a lady of elegance and character. She was extremely intelligent, very athletic and a devoted mother and wife," he says. "She became a very good friend."

The only time Hill ever talked about the assassination was when he testified a week later in Washington D.C., on November 30, 1963. "I never spoke with other agents about it, or my family," he says, introducing his wife, and two young sons - who were of similar ages to the Kennedys' children. "There was no counselling or anything like that back then. I did a *60 Minutes* interview in 1975, but that was not in depth. It wasn't until I met Lisa [McCubbin] when I started talking.

In August of 2009, while interviewing for the book *The Kennedy Detail: JFK's Secret Service Agents Break Their Silence*, writer McCubbin was given two hours with Hill. She developed a friendship with him that spanned several months. "He'd said to me numerous times that he'd never write a book," she says. "One day, we got to talking about the concept of a tribute to Mrs Kennedy, not a tell-all. His eyes really lit up with that word 'tribute'."

The pair spent nine months writing the book together over 2011. "Once Clint started talking, I could tell that weight was being lifted off his shoulders," McCubbin says. "Even when he teared up."

Retrospective detail for the book was largely formed by memory, though Hill did go back and speak with other former agents for specific information on the assassination. He admits he did keep notes during his Kennedy years, but burned them in 2005. "I'd replayed that day hourly for many years," he says. "Everything is so deeply seared into my mind."

Almost fifty years on, Hill's recollection of the most influential day of his life – one of the most important days in world history - is affecting.

"I was immediately behind the [presidential] car with the Secret Service vehicle, just a few feet behind John and Mrs Kennedy. When I heard the first sound of explosion, my reaction was to get on the vehicle and form a shield, to prevent any further damage from being done.

"But I failed to get there fast enough. I failed to prevent the assassination."

On December 6, 1963, Jacqueline Kennedy moved out of the White House, fleeing to Georgetown to escape publicity. "Christmas that year was a very difficult time," Hill says. "Mrs Kennedy had gone to Palm Beach with her sister and sister's husband. It was really one of the saddest moments; being there and seeing this wife without her husband, and these children without their father."

Months later, "During the summer of '64 we got

word that I'd be transferred back to the White House," Hill says. "Mrs Kennedy threw a party for me before we said goodbye. We knew it would eventually happen, but we were both very sad at the time."

Mrs Kennedy and Me serves as a chronicle of Hill's work and friendship with Jacqueline Kennedy. "It covers the good times – the birth of John Jr., sailing throughout Europe... and the tragic times – the loss of her son Patrick at just two days old and the assassination," Hill says. "It's written because there are so many books out there with false information about her – books written by friends of friends of friends. I wanted to demonstrate who Mrs Kennedy was – she wasn't a Barbie doll, she was a wonderful, intelligent human being." McCubbin explains just how close Hill was to Mrs Kennedy, through stories told in the book. "He was the enabler of her secret smoking habit," she says, divulging a titbit. "He was the one in the back of the car, lighting her cigarette for her."

Hill downplays the importance of his life, McCubbin reveals. "He's a very humble man, a man who has worked for five presidents (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford)," she says. When prompted, Hill discloses his other professional experience. "I was one of the agents in charge of presidential protection when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King died," he says. "And when Watergate happened."

Hill's retirement at 43 came with the worst period of self-blame for John F. Kennedy's murder. He got himself back together throughout the 1980s, but later went through another period of realisation as to how absent a father he was to his children ("I was gone 90 percent of the time", he says). Collaborating with McCubbin has been his final therapy session. "Clint doesn't consider himself in the category of famous, he considers himself a man who was doing his job," she says.

"He's finally realised that his job that day was to protect Mrs Kennedy. And he did." ■

