

JUNE 1981

THE SPOTLIGHT

NEWSMAGAZINE OF TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Alumni inform, protect, travel with V-P Bush

The scenario could have been lifted out of a best-selling political thriller: There is an attempt on the President's life. His condition is uncertain. The Vice President is half a continent away. Initially the information to him is scant. At once, plans are made to return to Washington, and Air Force II streaks to the nation's capital.

It isn't fiction. The Reagan assassination attempt of March 30, 1981, was very real. The nation looked to the media to provide those first fragments of news, and it breathed a collective sigh of relief when the crisis had passed.

For Air Force Lt. Col. John Matheny '63, the events of March 30 were far more real than a newscast. He was with Bush in Fort Worth on the day of the assassination attempt. As Military Aide to the Vice-President, Matheny often travels as part of Vice President Bush's staff.

"At first, no one seemed to know exactly what happened," Matheny recalls. "But as information came in we got a better picture of the situation. All in all, everything worked very well. The Vice President was very cool. He knew what his options were and was very precise. He knew exactly what to do."

Although March 30 was "not your typical day" for Matheny, another TCU graduate on the Vice President's staff — Gary Wistrand '63, Assistant Special Agent in charge, Vice President Protective Division, U.S. Secret Service — found his day to be predictable.

"Had I been on duty that day, I would have been in Fort Worth with (Vice President) Bush. However, it was my day off, and I was mowing my lawn," he said.

Matheny and Wistrand have served together on the Vice President's staff for a year and a half. They were at TCU at the same time but did not know each other then. Now they work only offices apart in the Old Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House.

Their jobs often require them to travel with the Vice President, and the two often end up together on good-will and diplomatic missions to places as far-flung as Yugoslavia.

Traveling is only one part of Matheny's job. "As military aide to the Vice President, I have two sets of responsibilities.

One is protocol and administrative, which is travel and paperwork. The other is substantive work which entails briefing the Vice President and his immediate staff on issues relating to military and foreign affairs." To accomplish this, he often puts in 10-12 hour days and works weekends.

At the beginning of his White House career, Matheny's responsibilities were "purely substantive." Then, in July 1975, he became military assistant to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. He worked directly under Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, handling information relating to the intelligence community. A specialist in this area, he served as a liaison between National Security Council and the Congress.

"It was a very testing time," said Matheny. House committees were holding hearings on the SALT agreement and intelligence operations. "It was in the aftermath of Watergate, and there was a lot of congressional mistrust of the executive branch. There was definitely an adversary relationship between the two bodies," he continued.

Matheny's protocol and administrative responsibilities began when he took his present job in the Vice President's Military Affairs office in April 1977, first serving under Vice President Walter Mondale. The job, he said, "is similar to an aide to the President in his role as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces." In the event anything happened to the President, "my job is to help the Vice President step into the commander-in-chief role."

This responsibility means that Matheny travels constantly with the Vice President. He estimates that he has logged over 700,000 miles travelling all over the United States and to 36 foreign countries on six continents.

One of his most thrilling events was substituting for the Vice President during a goodwill mission to Yugoslavia. The Vice President, scheduled to lay a wreath on a World War II monument honoring German resisters, became ill briefly after the airplane landed. Rather than cancel the event, Matheny took the Vice President's place. He laid the wreath, signed his own name in the register, and reviewed the

troops.

Interestingly enough, Yugoslavian television broadcasts of the ceremony made no mention of Mondale's illness; the filmclips showed only the wreath and the crowds.

Gary Wistrand was also on the Yugoslavia trip. He was part of the secret service detail protecting the Vice President.

The agents that make up this detail provide the Vice President with constant protection. Wistrand is one of five supervisors who always accompany the Vice President.

"The day is split into two shifts," he explains. "The early supervisor brings the Vice President in from his official residence at the Naval Observatory and stays with him through his daytime functions. Then an evening supervisor is with him for all evening events."

"Because the Vice President does so much traveling, he has a higher visibility than the President both in Washington, D.C. and out of town." Wistrand has been assigned to the Vice President since 1979. He accompanied Mondale to Panama when the Canal treaty was signed.

Although he spends much of his time with the Vice President, he is very careful to maintain the "professional distance" that is needed between an agent and his protegee. "Vice President Bush is a fine person, but getting to know him beyond a professional sense would be inhibiting and detrimental," he said. "The Secret Service rotates agents to a new assignment every

three years, partially to help prevent close friendships from forming."

Wistrand began with the Secret Service in 1964, in one of the hiring sprees initiated in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination. Because of his BFA degree in commercial art from TCU, he developed a specialty in recognizing counterfeit U.S. Treasury bills. He worked in the Dallas headquarters for three years and then moved to Washington, D.C. to work in the counterfeit division there. Part of his responsibilities included traveling around the country to testify in various counterfeiting trials.

In 1971, he returned to Fort Worth as the resident agent in charge of the Fort Worth agency. Subsequent promotions took him to the Los Angeles office and then to the Jackson, Miss. office.

Wistrand has not always done the investigative side or "street work." During presidential elections, he has often worked in a protection capacity. In 1968, he was briefly assigned to protect Tricia Nixon as she campaigned for her father. "We traveled over 200,000 miles to nearly all 50 states," he said. "The hours and the pace were very hard."

For the 1976 election, he was in Los Angeles and Jackson. "In Los Angeles, (when the campaign began), I left intelligence and ran the protective squad. We did advance work for all visiting dignitaries which includes setting up all security precautions, working with other protection agencies," and coordinating all

logistical arrangements, he said. Wistrand did advance work for such dignitaries as Emperor Hirohito of Japan, Elizabeth II of England, and the Kings of Sweden and Norway.

Wistrand said that in a presidential election the Secret Service "can accommodate most requests (from political campaigns) with a little bit of advance planning, but there are circumstances which even the Secret Service cannot honor." He was head of the Jackson office when the Ford for President advance team wanted to arrange for two full-grown elephants, the Republican party symbol, to be on the airport runway to greet President Gerald Ford when his plane arrived.

"The security dangers were astronomically high. Needless to say, we found that request completely unacceptable," he said.

Neither of the two TCU alumni see their present jobs as the pinnacle of their careers or ambitions. Matheny plans to attend the Senior Service College at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., and he will continue his Air Force career. Wistrand is interested in staying in the Washington area for three more years so that his daughter can finish her high school there. "Then I'll look around. I would not mind going back to the Dallas/Fort Worth area," he said.

Wistrand met his wife, Janet Oliver '62 at TCU. Both are members of the LINKS program. — Rosanne Messineo



Matheny, left, and Wistrand flank Vice President George Bush