

The purpose of the Callaway police radio call at the Tippit crime scene: solution to a minor puzzle

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Among the puzzles surrounding the murder of Dallas Police Officer J. D. Tippit on November 22, 1963, one concerns witness Ted Callaway and his use of Tippit's patrol car radio. Callaway, a former Marine and manager of a used car lot on Patton around the corner from the murder scene, after hearing the shots, saw the fleeing gunman on Patton, shouted at him, then ran around the corner on E. 10th where Tippit was dead. Callaway was there as the ambulance arrived, took the body of Tippit and raced to the emergency room of Methodist Hospital where Tippit would be declared dead on arrival. Following the ambulance leaving, Callaway picked up the service revolver of the slain officer Tippit from the front seat of the Tippit patrol car and commandeered a nearby taxi to give pursuit of the gunman. The pursuit was unsuccessful. Callaway and cabbie William Scoggins could not find the gunman fleeing on foot, and they returned to the scene.

In his Warren Commission testimony Callaway stated that he used Tippit's patrol car radio to report the shooting to police, and that he did so before the ambulance arrived. But the police radio transcript presents a different picture, in which it was a different citizen, T. F. Bowley, who had seen the fallen Tippit in the street and stopped to help, who got through to the dispatcher using Tippit's patrol car radio to report the officer shot. That was followed by the arrival of the ambulance from nearby Dudley Hughes Funeral Home within a minute. The police tape then shows a second citizen—Callaway—using the same Tippit patrol car radio *after* the ambulance had left. In this *second* citizen call, *after* the ambulance had left, Callaway seemingly bizarrely radios in to newly report Tippit had been shot and appeared to be dead.

Yet, bizarre as that timing seems to be, the timing was real. The police tape has that Callaway radio call at 1:19, or at 1:19:59 according to the linear regression analysis of Myers, after the ambulance had left. It shows an unidentified citizen's voice saying "Hello, hello, hello," followed by ambulance 602, then the citizen voice saying he is at "Tenth Street, 500 block", and

that an officer has been shot and appears dead. The dispatcher acknowledges Callaway with, “10-4, we have that information”, and instructs “the citizen using the radio” to remain off the radio (<https://www.jfk-assassination.net/dpdtapes/tapes2.htm>). Myers in *With Malice: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Murder of Officer J. D. Tippit* (2013 edition) reflects this transcript, with both Callaway and ambulance driver J. C. Butler transmitting in close sequence two distinct voices, one identified in the police radio transcript as 602 (the ambulance) and the other as an unidentified citizen (Callaway). Below are the two radio transmissions. The first one (the citizen is Bowley), before the ambulance’s arrival, is at 1:18. The lower one, which occurred after the ambulance has left, is a little over a minute later at 1:19 (the citizen is Callaway).

Citizen	Hello, police operator?
Dispatcher	Go ahead. Go ahead, citizen using the police radio.
Citizen	There’s been a shooting out here.
Dispatcher	Where’s it at?
Dispatcher	The citizen using the police radio . . .
Citizen	Tenth Street.
Dispatcher	What location on Tenth Street?
Citizen	Between Marsalis and Beckley. It’s a police officer. Somebody shot him. What -- what’s . . . 404 Tenth Street.
Dispatcher	Can you hear me?
	(Man and woman’s voices in background)
Dispatcher	78.
Citizen	It’s in a police car, number 10.
Dispatcher	78.
Dispatcher (?)	78.
Citizen	Got that?
Citizen	Hello, police operator. Did you get that?
Dispatcher	Attention. Signal 19, police officer, 510 E. Jefferson.
Citizen	Thank you.
35 (Ptm. J.M. Lewis)	35.
259 (unknown)	259.
Dispatcher	The citizen using the police radio: Remain off the radio now.

(...)

Citizen	Hello, hello, hello.
602 (ambulance)	602.
Citizen	Pardon, from out here on Tenth Street, 500 block. This officer just shot. I think he's dead.
Dispatcher	10-4. We have that information. The citizen using the radio: Remain off the radio now.

In the second transcript excerpt, the citizen's voice and the 602 voice are separate transmissions from separate radios—Butler calling in on the ambulance radio while en route to Methodist Hospital, and the civilian on Tippit's patrol car radio. The dispatcher hears both in close succession and responds to each, which is why the exchange reads as slightly tangled in the transcript.

But the contradiction in timing with Callaway's own account is stark. Callaway told the Warren Commission he called *before* the ambulance. Myers acknowledges Callaway's testimony has him making that call before the ambulance, but resolves the conflict by privileging the radio tape, without addressing the logical absurdity this appears to create: a witness calling police to newly report a shooting of an officer after the witness had just seen an ambulance leaving with the body. In an endnote Myers acknowledges the contradiction without attempt at explanation.

“Callaway explained to the Warren Commission that he called the police dispatcher before the ambulance arrived at the Tippit scene; however, a review of the Dallas police tapes shows that Callaway made the call to police at 1:19:59 p.m., as the ambulance was leaving the scene.” (Myers, p. 728 of 2013 edn)

It makes no sense that someone at the scene would use the Tippit patrol car radio after the ambulance had left to inform the police that an officer had been shot. Yet the police radio tape is clear that Callaway *did* make the call saying that after the ambulance had left. There is a solution to the paradox, but first, here is Callaway's Warren Commission testimony which requires close reading:

“I saw a squad car, and by that time there was four or five people that had gathered, a couple of cars had stopped. Then I saw—I went on up to the squad car and saw the police officer lying in the street. I see he had been shot in the head. So the first thing I did, I ran over to the squad car. I didn't know whether anybody reported it or not. So I got on the police radio and called them, and told them a man had been shot, told them the location, I thought the officer was dead. They said we know about it, stay off the air, so I went back. By this time an ambulance was coming. The officer was laying on his left side, his pistol

was underneath him. I kind of rolled him over and took his gun out from under him ... I picked the gun up and laid it on the hood of the squad car, and then someone put it in the front seat of the squad car. Then after I helped load Officer Tippit in the ambulance, I got the gun out of the car and told this cabdriver ... the ambulance already left before I ever left with the cabdriver.”

As Callaway tells it, he placed his radio call before the ambulance arrived. Note that the content of the radio call as he describes it—an officer shot, the location, then told the dispatcher knew and to stay off the air—matches the content of the Bowley transmission making the original report to the police using the Tippit patrol car radio. Note Callaway says he helped load Tippit into the ambulance, establishing his continuous presence throughout the sequence. Note the ambulance has left when Callaway departs with the cabdriver.

The apparent irrationality of the later actual Callaway transmission at 1:19 is difficult to explain, until the premise of the purpose of the 1:19 call is questioned.

Domingo Benavides’ Warren Commission testimony illuminates. Benavides, who was in the cab of a pickup truck on 10th, a few feet away from Tippit when he was killed, describes the following sequence of events before the ambulance arrived: Benavides first tried himself but failed to work Tippit’s police radio. Then T. F. Bowley, who knew how to operate it, took over and got through. Bowley also said in an affidavit that he moved Tippit’s service revolver from the hood of the patrol car to the front seat inside the patrol car.

But Benavides also tells of Callaway opening the door of the patrol car, picking up the microphone, and calling in. Benavides said the dispatcher’s response to Callaway was to tell him to hang up and keep the lines clear, which agrees with the police radio transcript of the Callaway call. Then according to Benavides, Callaway jumped out, asked Benavides whether he had seen what happened, proposed giving chase to the gunman, reached down and picked up Tippit’s revolver from the patrol car seat, and went to commandeer Scoggins’ cab.

Mr. BELIN - You talked to Ted Callaway, did you?

Mr. BENAVIDES - No; afterward. You know, I told your—I told him, he asked me when we went, when Ted Callaway got around there, he opened the car door and picked up the phone and called in and told them there was an officer that had been killed. But the officer on the other side of the radio told him to hang up the phone to keep the lines clear, or something of that sort. Then he jumped out and ran around and he asked me did I see what happened, and I said yes. And he said lets chase him, and I said no.

Mr. BELIN - Why did you say “No”?

Mr. BENAVIDES - Well, he was reaching down and getting the gun out of the policeman’s hand, and I didn’t think he should bother to go like that. So he then turned around and went to the cab that was sitting on the corner.

Here is T. F. Bowley’s affidavit of December 2, 1963 (CE 2003):

“Several people were at the scene. When I got there the first thing I did was try to help the officer. He appeared beyond help to me. Another man [Benavides] was trying to use the radio in the squad car but stated he didn’t know how to operate it. I knew how and took the radio from him. I said, ‘Hello, operator. A police officer has been shot here.’ The dispatcher asked for the location. I found out the location and told the dispatcher what it was. A few minutes later an ambulance came to the scene. I helped load the officer onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. As we picked the officer up, I noticed his pistol laying on the ground under him. Someone [Callaway, according to Callaway] picked the pistol up and laid it on the hood of the squad car. When the ambulance left, I took the gun and put it inside the squad car. A man [Callaway] took the pistol out and said, ‘Let’s catch him.’ He opened the cylinder, and I saw that no rounds in it had been fired. This man [Callaway] then took the pistol with him and got into a cab [with Scoggins] and drove off. The police arrived...”

Here is Benavides telling of that same call of Bowley in Benavides’ Warren Commission testimony:

Mr. BENAVIDES - I got out of the truck and walked over to the Policeman, and he was lying there and he had, looked like a big clot of blood coming out of his head, and his eyes were sunk back in his head, and just kind of made me feel real funny. I guess I was really scared.

Mr. BELIN - Did the Policeman say anything?

Mr. BENAVIDES - The Policeman, I believe was dead when he hit the ground, because he didn’t put his hand out or nothing.

Mr. BELIN - Where was the Policeman as he fell, as you saw him?

Mr. BENAVIDES - I saw him as he was falling. The door was about half way open, and he was right in front of the door, and just about in front of the fender. I would say he was between the door and the front headlight, about midway when he started to fall.

Mr. BELIN - Did you notice where the gun of the policeman was?

Mr. BENAVIDES - The gun was in his hand and he was partially lying on his gun in his right hand. He was partially lying on his gun and on his hand, too.

Mr. BELIN - Then what did you do?

Mr. BENAVIDES - Then I don’t know if I opened the car door back further than what it was or not, but anyway, I went in and pulled the radio and I mashed the button and told them that an officer had been shot, and I didn’t get an answer, so I said it again, and this guy asked me whereabouts all of a sudden, and I said, on 10th Street. I couldn’t remember where it was at the time. So I looked up and I seen this number and I said 410 East 10th Street.

Mr. BELIN - You saw a number on the house then?

Mr. BENAVIDES - Yes.

Mr. BELIN - All right.

Mr. BENAVIDES - Then he started to—then I don’t know what he said; but I put the radio back. I mean, the microphone back up, and this other guy was standing there, so I got up out of the car, and I don’t know, I wasn’t sure if he heard me, and the other guy sat down in the car.

Mr. BELIN - There was another passerby that stopped?

Mr. BENAVIDES - Yes, sir.

Mr. BELIN - Who was he, do you know?

Mr. BENAVIDES - I couldn't tell you. I don't know who he was.

Mr. BELIN - Was he driving a car or walking?

Mr. BENAVIDES - I don't know. He was just standing there whenever I looked up. He was standing at the door of the car, and I don't know what he said to the officer or the phone, but the officer told him to keep the line clear, or something, and stay off the phone, or something like that. That he already knew about it.

The Benavides and Bowley statements, when matched to the police radio tape, tell the story of what happened. Note the detail that Tippit's revolver was on the patrol car seat when Callaway physically leaned inside the patrol car, right at the microphone. That is when Callaway picked up the gun.

Callaway's radio call and his arming for pursuit of the killer were part of a single continuous action at the patrol car, preparatory to the pursuit, rather than his purpose being to report that Tippit had been shot which served no point at that point.

Callaway presented the dispatcher's response as confirmation that police already had the information, framing his call as a legitimate if redundant report. Benavides renders it simply as the dispatcher instructing Callaway to clear the line, consistent with a dispatcher shutting down an unauthorized civilian voice on a busy emergency frequency without particular regard for what that civilian was trying to say. On the police tape the dispatcher, though polite and professional, is curt with a hint of mild exasperation: the information already was known, and the interrupting voice was occupying valuable bandwidth during a major ongoing emergency.

Significantly, the gun retrieval in Benavides' account comes after the radio call and after Callaway's proposal to pursue. When Callaway got on the radio he had not yet armed himself for the pursuit. This is the sequence of working through a rapid decision-making process under stress: get on the radio to communicate with authorities, get cut off before delivering the message, turn to the nearest witness to confirm what happened, propose pursuit, arm himself, go. This is someone with military training moving through a mental checklist, and the radio call was the first item on it.

What Callaway was most plausibly attempting to communicate before being cut off was his intention to pursue the gunman, perhaps to seek some form of authorization, perhaps simply to inform the police that a civilian with the officer's weapon was going in pursuit so as not to be mistaken for the perpetrator himself.

Such an instinct, given Callaway's Marine background, makes complete sense. He was about to do something dangerous, and his training is to communicate through proper channels before acting. But he was shut down by the irritated dispatcher and told to get off the air before he could say what he meant to say.

Callaway reframed this episode in his testimony in accord with self-image and self-respect, consistent with a pattern otherwise known for Callaway that day. Myers, drawing on interviews, reports that during the cab pursuit Callaway and Scoggins were stopped by an armed civilian named Kenneth Holmes, Sr., and his companion Bill Wheless. They had mistakenly suspected Callaway and Scoggins of being the fleeing perpetrators (*With Malice*, pp. 169, 731 of 2013 edn). Callaway's innocence was soon established by Dallas Police back at the crime scene, but not before a few tense moments. According to Holmes' son, his father at gunpoint relieved Callaway of Tippit's revolver, before the situation was clarified back at the crime scene with the police.

But in Callaway's telling that tense episode became a narrative in which Callaway had willingly cooperated in bringing back and handing back the Tippit revolver to police—the indignity of being held at gunpoint and surrendering an important item of physical evidence to a non-police stranger was dropped in Callaway's version of the incident. Myers:

“Scoggins described the encounter with ‘police officers’ in a 1964 FBI interview, ‘While they were looking for Oswald, they met some officers in the area, not at the scene, told them what they had seen and that they had the officer’s gun. They were returned to the scene by those officers’ (CD630b). Scoggins later told the Warren Commission, ‘We cruised around several blocks looking for him, and we—one of those police cars [*sic*] came by and this fellow who was with me [Callaway] stopped it, and we got back in the car and went back up to the scene, and he gave them the pistol, and that time is when I found out he (Callaway) wasn’t an officer’ (3H333). Callaway never mentioned the encounter in his statements to investigators in 1962-64, or in interviews with this author [Myers] in 1986 and 1996. Callaway told the Warren Commission in 1964, ‘...we circled around several blocks, and ended up coming back to where it happened...’ (3H354) suggesting they returned of their own volition. Callaway also suggested that he retained possession of Tippit’s pistol until he returned to the scene telling HSCA investigators in 1978, ‘I was a little leery about carrying that pistol around with all those cops around, so I found the first cop I knew I thought was an officer and gave him the pistol’ (HSCA RIF 180-10091-10128, HSCA interview of Ted Callaway, July 26, 1978, p. 11). However, given Holmes’ account, it is far more likely that the private security officer [Holmes] would have taken possession of the revolver immediately rather than allow Callaway to keep it and turn it over to officers at the scene ... It should be noted that according to Callaway the officer he gave the pistol to was wearing plainclothes and a hat—a description that fit Kenneth M. Holmes, Sr.” (Myers, *With Malice*, p. 731 of 2013 edn)

A researcher, Greg Lowrey, who interviewed Callaway and other Tippit crime scene witnesses, spoke of a “heated confrontation” that had occurred between Callaway and Holmes Sr., that Holmes Sr. had “disarmed” Callaway, and that even years later Callaway was sensitive about the incident. “When Lowrey interviewed Callaway on the phone many years later, and brought up Holmes after they had been talking for half an hour, Callaway ‘got real obstinate’ and hung up on him” (Joseph McBride, *Into the Nightmare* [2013], 470).

The radio call episode follows in this same pattern in the way Callaway told it. In both cases Callaway's action was well-intentioned, but the surface appearance was awkward and unflattering. In the one case Callaway had himself been suspected and embarrassingly disarmed by a total stranger at gunpoint; in the other Callaway had been dismissed and shut down by a dispatcher before getting a word in edgewise. In both cases Callaway's retelling presents a more personally favorable version. The aborted and purposeless-seeming post-ambulance radio call becomes, in Callaway's telling, a timely and purposeful report made before the ambulance arrived—its shape and details and timing in Callaway's telling taking over the Benavides/Bowley transmission such that Callaway presents it as if his radio call had been *that* one—the one actually made by Bowley. Callaway probably was present as part of the small crowd gathered around the patrol car when Bowley was making that call. Background voices can be heard on the tape at that earlier point, consistent with several people clustered around the car, and Callaway's presence as among them fits the timeline. (Compare Myers: "Callaway was at the Tippit scene at 1:17:41 p.m. when T.F. Bowley called the dispatcher with the initial report of the shooting" [*With Malice*, p. 728 of 2013 edn].)

Callaway's self-image was he responded to the murder of Tippit with decisiveness, courage, and competence. As he told it, he took the lead in reporting the shooting promptly on the patrol car's radio, then went after the killer himself. Callaway's self-portrait of a courageous, decisive response is not fundamentally false. He was courageous, decisive, and his instincts were attempting to do the right thing even at risk of personal danger. But his telling of the radio call, on the best reading of all available evidence, involved an element of personal mythologizing in the way he told it. It was human and understandable, but Callaway "improved" the story the way he told it to be in agreement with self-image.

Callaway remains a valuable witness to the events at the Tippit crime scene. But on the specific question of the radio call, the evidence—the police transcript, the testimony of Benavides, the gun's location on the patrol car seat, the Holmes parallel, and a close reading of Callaway's testimony—converges on a conclusion that is as close to definitive as the available record permits: the only call Callaway *did make* was *after* the ambulance had been there and left and it was *not* for the purpose of reporting the shooting. It *was* an interrupted attempt to communicate his pursuit intention which did not go well—he was cut off and told to get off the air by an irritated dispatcher before he could deliver his message. The narrative Callaway testified to the Warren Commission reflected a bit of personal mythologizing on the part of a proud man.