The Callaway Police Radio Call: A Vexing Problem in the Tippit Murder Case and Its Solution

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Among the evidentiary puzzles surrounding the murder of Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit on November 22, 1963, one concerns witness Ted Callaway and his claimed use of Tippit's patrol car radio to report the shooting to police. Analysis of the police radio transcript, the leading scholarly account of the Tippit case of Myers, and the Warren Commission testimonies of key witnesses reveal a puzzle and resolution to that puzzle that is both evidentially grounded and psychologically coherent.

Callaway, a former Marine and manager of a used car lot near the murder scene, was one of the most engaged civilian witnesses that day. He ran toward the fleeing gunman, shouted at him, and subsequently commandeered a nearby taxi to give pursuit. In his Warren Commission testimony he states that he used Tippit's patrol car radio to report the shooting to police, and that he did so before the ambulance arrived. The arrival of an ambulance—with flashing lights, attendants, and the unmistakable physical loading of a body—is not the kind of event a present and attentive witness misremembers in terms of before-or-after.

The police radio transcript and Myers' interpretation thereof, however, presents a very different picture, in which Callaway seemingly bizarrely radios

in to newly report Tippit had been shot and appeared to be dead, after the ambulance had already been been there and left the scene.

The relevant passage at 1:19—placed at 1:19:59 according to Myers' linear regression analysis—shows ambulance 602 calling in, followed by an unidentified citizen voice saying "Hello, hello, hello," then 602 again, then the citizen voice reporting from "Tenth Street, 500 block" that an officer has been shot and appears dead. The dispatcher acknowledges—"10-4, we have that information"—and then instructs "the citizen using the radio" to remain off the radio. Myers in *With Malice: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Murder of Officer J.D. Tippit* (2013 edition) reflects this transcript faithfully, presenting both Callaway and ambulance driver J.C. Butler as transmitting in close sequence, with the transcript showing two distinct voices, one identified as 602 and one as an unidentified citizen (https://www.jfk-assassination.net/dpdtapes/tapes2.htm).

The dispatcher's use of the word "citizen" designates a non-law-enforcement member of the public using a police frequency without authorization. The dispatcher had just acknowledged ambulance 602 twice. He knew perfectly well who 602 was. He would not have addressed an ambulance crew member as a "citizen." The citizen voice and the 602 voice are therefore two separate transmissions from two separate radios—Butler calling in on the ambulance radio while en route to Methodist Hospital, and an unidentified civilian on Tippit's patrol car radio. The dispatcher is hearing both in close succession and responding to each, which is why the exchange reads as slightly tangled in the transcript. Butler's call was made after the ambulance had left the scene—the ambulance had already departed by the time the citizen transmission was made from Tippit's patrol car.

The problem is stark. Myers acknowledges Callaway's own testimony places him there before the ambulance, but resolves the conflict by privileging the radio tape, without addressing the logical absurdity this creates: 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 much further comment or attempt at explanation. Myers: "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" [emphasis Myers', p. 728 of 2013 edn].)

It makes *no sense whatever* that *anyone* at the scene would try to use the Tippit patrol car radio at that point in time to inform the police that an officer had been shot. With the ambulance already gone and police already notified, radioing in to report that an officer appeared dead served no informational purpose.

To understand the full depth of the problem, Callaway's own Warren Commission testimony deserves close reading. He told the Commission:

> "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."

Several things are immediately striking about this account. First, Callaway explicitly and unambiguously places the radio call before the ambulance arrived—"by this time an ambulance was coming" follows directly after

describing the radio call and the dispatcher's response. Second, the content of his radio call as he describes it—reporting a man shot, giving the location, saying he thought the officer was dead, being told they knew and to stay off the air—matches the content of the known Bowley transmission with remarkable closeness. Third, he confirms he helped load Tippit into the ambulance, establishing his continuous presence at the scene throughout the sequence. And fourth, he confirms the ambulance had already left before he departed with the cabdriver, consistent with the overall timeline.

The detail and internal coherence of this account make clear that Callaway was not fabricating. He was drawing on something real—authentic memory of events at that patrol car. The question is precisely which events, and in what sequence, his memory had consolidated by the time he testified.

The apparent irrationality of the later citizen transmission is difficult to explain—until the purpose of that call is reconsidered entirely.

Here is where Domingo Benavides' Warren Commission testimony proves unexpectedly illuminating. Benavides' testimony describes the following sequence of events. T.F. Bowley, who was the one who had successfully operated Tippit's radio to report the shooting—Benavides had tried and failed to work the equipment before Bowley took over and got through—said in an affidavit that he had moved Tippit's service revolver from the hood of the patrol car to the front seat inside the patrol car. Callaway arrived at the patrol car, opened the door, picked up the microphone, and called in. In Benavides' rendering, the dispatcher's response was to tell Callaway to hang up and keep the lines clear. Callaway then 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.

(T. F. Bowley affidavit, Dec 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…”)

The Benavides sequence is revealing in several ways that have not previously been appreciated.

First, the fact that Tippit’s revolver was on the patrol car seat places Callaway physically inside or leaning into the patrol car—right at the microphone—when he picked up the gun. The radio call and the arming for pursuit were part of a single continuous episode at the patrol car, not separate actions. This unity of action strongly suggests the radio call was preparatory to the pursuit rather than an independent act of civic reporting.

Second, the dispatcher’s response as Benavides renders it—hang up and keep the lines clear—is subtly but importantly different from the way Callaway himself described it. Callaway presented the response as confirmation that police already had the information, framing his call as a legitimate if redundant report. Benavides renders it simply as being told 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. In Benavides’ version there is no suggestion that Callaway successfully delivered any report at all. He was cut off. (The dispatcher’s voice, though polite and professional, carries an implication of mild exasperation: the information was already known, and the interrupting voice was occupying valuable bandwidth during a major ongoing emergency.)

Third, and most strikingly, the gun retrieval in Benavides' account comes after the radio call and after Callaway's proposal to pursue—meaning when Callaway got on the radio he had not yet armed himself for the pursuit. This is the sequence of a man 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. That is not the behavior of someone making a civic report and then moving on to unrelated heroics. That 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 or direction, perhaps simply to ensure that police knew a civilian with the officer's weapon was going in pursuit so as not to be mistaken for the perpetrator himself. That instinct, given his Marine background, makes complete sense. He was about to do something bold and potentially dangerous, and his trained impulse was to communicate through proper channels before acting. He was shut down before he could say what he meant to say.

That Callaway would quietly reframe this episode in his testimony is consistent with a pattern already known for Callaway in his account of 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, who suspected Callaway and Scoggins of being the perpetrators (*With Malice,* pp. 169, 731 of 2013 edn). Holmes in a hostile confrontation at gunpoint relieved Callaway of Tippit's revolver before the situation was clarified. In Callaway's own telling this tense episode was smoothed into a narrative in which Callaway had willingly cooperated in handing back the Tippit revolver to police at the scene—the indignity of being held at gunpoint and surrendering important physical evidence to a complete non-police-officer stranger was quietly dropped from Callaway's version of the incident. Myers noted that even years later Callaway showed sensitivity about this 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 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)

The radio call episode follows the same psychological pattern. In both cases the underlying action was well-intentioned and ultimately defensible, but the surface appearance was awkward—in one case being disarmed at gunpoint, in the other being curtly dismissed by a dispatcher before getting a word in edgewise. In both cases Callaway's retelling presents a cleaner, more flattering version of events. The aborted and purposeless-seeming radio call becomes, in Callaway's testimony, a timely and purposeful report made before the ambulance arrived—its shape and details borrowed from the

Benavides/Bowley transmission, at which Callaway was likely present as part of the small crowd gathered around the patrol car. Background voices are audible on that earlier tape, consistent with several people clustered around the car, and Callaway's presence 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].)

What Callaway wanted to convey, and what his testimony projects, is the portrait of a man who responded to the murder of a police officer with decisiveness, competence, and courage at every step—who reported the shooting promptly, then went after the killer himself. That portrait is not fundamentally false. He was courageous, he was decisive, and his instincts that day were those of trying to do the right thing under pressure. But the specific detail of the radio call, on the best reading of all available evidence, involves a quiet act of personal mythologizing—the kind that is human and understandable.

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 the close reading of Callaway's own testimony—converges on a conclusion that is as close to definitive as the available record permits. The call Callaway made was not a report of the shooting. It was an interrupted attempt to communicate his pursuit intention, cut off before he could deliver his message. And the composed, purposeful narrative he offered to the Warren Commission was shaped as much by self-image as by precise recollection.