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SOURCE: Hugh Turley (Special to HNN)

5-29-09

## Historians Support Inquiry into the Death of James Forrestal

Historians in the News

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[Hugh Turley writes for the The Hyattsville Life and Times .]

This month marked the 60th anniversary of the death of James V. Forrestal, America's first secretary of defense. Historians were invited to comment on the official investigation of his death. The investigation is known as the Willcutts Report. In 2004 The History News Network announced the [report was available on line at the Princeton University Seeley Mudd Library](#).

Keith W. Olson, professor emeritus of history at the University of Maryland told The Life and Times by email, "If I had more time I would read it and write an analysis. The need for such a study is obvious."

New evidence in the report indicates that Forrestal was assassinated. Pulitzer prize-winning American history professor, Martin Sherwin told us, "I have always

thought Forrestal committed suicide, but this is not because I investigated the manner of his death. You are doing that and I look forward to reading the results.”

Sherwin, a professor emeritus at Tufts, now teaching at George Mason University, co-wrote an acclaimed biography of nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, a Forrestal contemporary.

Initial reports of his death said Forrestal transcribed a morbid poem as his suicide note and then jumped out of a window at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. The Hyattsville Life and Times (Dec 2007) published the transcribed poem from the Willcutts Report alongside a letter written by Forrestal, obtained from the Truman Library. The writing appeared to have been that of different people.

The story that Forrestal copied the poem from a book has been repeated for decades. In 1992, Forrestal biographers Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley said a corpsman looked in on Forrestal at 1:45 a.m. and saw him “busy copying onto several sheets of paper the brooding classical poem ‘The Chorus from Ajax.’”

That story is not supported by the corpsman’s testimony in the Willcutts Report:

Q. What time did you last see Mister Forrestal?

A. It was one forty-five, sir

Q. Where was he then?

A. He was in his bed sleeping.

Q. Where were you at that time?

A. I was in the room when I saw him.

The official report makes no mention of the book of poetry or any witness who supposedly found the book and transcription.

The Willcutts Report offers new evidence of a struggle in Forrestal’s room. Broken glass was found on his bed and photographed on the floor of his room. This could explain why the sash from his dressing gown was knotted around his neck.

Initial news reports contained speculation that Forrestal used the sash in an attempt to hang himself out of the 16th-floor window from which he fell. None of them even hinted at the much more plausible notion that the sash had been wrapped around his neck to subdue him.

The Willcutts Review Board did not comment on why the sash was around his neck.

Professor Olson, currently teaching at the University of Vermont does not have any graduate students. Recognizing the need to study the Willcutts Report Olson said, “Were I still at the University of Maryland I would convince a graduate student to undertake the project.”

The Willcutts Report did not conclude Forrestal committed suicide. Professor Sherwin wrote to us, “You don’t need the validation of a historian to put together an article that opens up this issue to a new understanding.”

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mhdecoursey . ▾

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**anastasia2657** • 3 years ago

The Review Board conducted an investigation to see if there was hospital negligence. there was no investigation to determine whether a crime was committed. The suicide was a presumption on their part. When my mother died in her bed, the police came over to conduct a brief investigation to see if there was any foul play. This is commonplace when someone dies at their home. . Why was their no police investigation (military police) when a man falls from a 16th floor window with a cord twisted and tied tightly around his neck? They presumed that the cord was tied to the radiator. There was no evidence that this sash or cord around his neck was ever tied to a radiator or anywhere else. Pure presumption. Convenient?

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**MORE COMMENTS:**

**Mark Hunter - 2/3/2010**

An easy-to-read HTML version of the Willcutts Report, with an informative introduction, is now available at <http://jamesforrestal.ariwatch.com>

The work of puzzling out the near illegible parts of the photocopy has been done once and for all. Besides being easy to read you can instantly search the report as with any HTML document.

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Historians

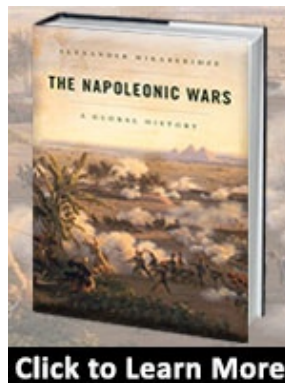
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