

TRUE CRIME

The Doris Duke Cold Case Reopens: The Only Known Eyewitness Speaks for the First Time

A former Newport, Rhode Island, paperboy says that in 1966 he confronted the billionaire heiress right after she may have committed murder—a chilling update to *V.F.*'s previous reporting and the author's new book, *Homicide at Rough Point*.

BY PETER LANCE

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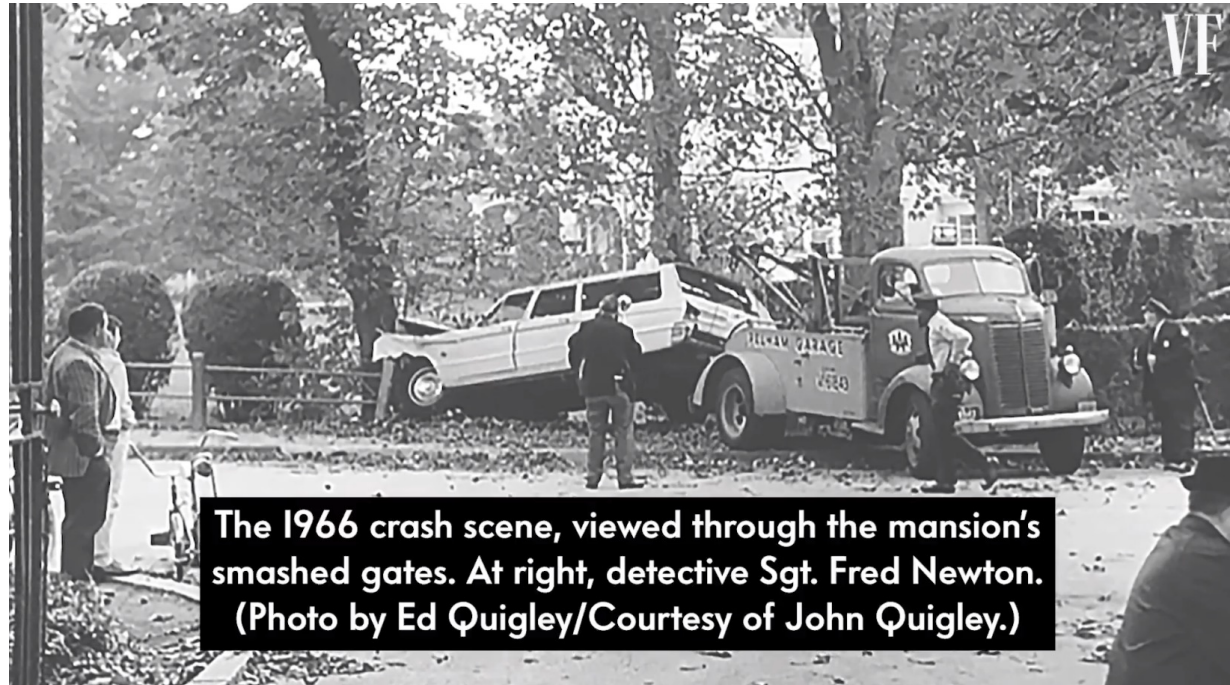
Bob Walker, third from left, with seven of his brothers and sisters and father, Bob Sr. COURTESY OF ROBERT WALKER JR.

Mario Puzo famously began *The Godfather* with Balzac's observation, slightly amended, that "behind every great fortune there is a crime." And so it was with the tobacco, aluminum, and energy fortune inherited by Doris Duke, once the richest woman in America.

A year ago, *Vanity Fair* published [my account](#) of the life and death of designer Eduardo Tirella, who, late one afternoon in 1966, was crushed under the wheels of a Dodge Polara station wagon driven by Duke. For seven years, he had been her constant companion, planning her gardens, curating her art collection, and decorating her mansions. In fact, his death occurred just outside the gates of her most sumptuous home: Rough Point, the sprawling estate on Millionaire's Row in Newport, Rhode Island.

A notoriously jealous and possessive woman, Duke had stabbed her common-law husband, jazz musician Joseph Castro, with a butcher knife three years earlier and escaped any criminal charges. On the afternoon in question, Tirella had just told Duke he was leaving her employ to make his mark in Hollywood. Then, moments later, as they left the mansion, he was dead.

Within 96 hours the local police closed the case, declaring it “an unfortunate accident.” Within a matter of months, Duke began donating what would today amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars to organizations in the city of Newport. The police chief who oversaw the probe, Joseph A. Radice, retired months later; others involved in the perfunctory investigation were promoted. For years residents whispered that Duke had gotten away with murder and that “blood money” had helped pay for her eventual restoration of more than 80 Colonial-era homes.



The 1966 crash scene, viewed through the mansion's smashed gates. At right, detective Sgt. Fred Newton. (Photo by Ed Quigley/Courtesy of John Quigley.)

In last summer's *Vanity Fair* story and in my new book, *Homicide at Rough Point*, I concluded that Duke had deliberately plowed into Tirella—"with intent." I based my findings on long-missing documents, including crime-scene photos, official police reports, autopsy summaries, and new evidence from witnesses who quickly arrived on the scene, including Officer **Edward Angel**, a Newport patrolman. He explained how the case had actually been solved within hours by Sergeant Fred Newton, the department's top accident investigator. I also determined that Police Chief Radice, who had Mafia ties, had run a sham investigation that allowed Duke to avoid being indicted for murder.

A year passed. And then, on July 3, 2021, something unexpected happened. I was doing a book signing at the Brenton Hotel, on Newport's waterfront. A heavyset 68-year-old man with a walrus mustache came up to me and said, "I just read your book. Not only was your account of the murder 100% consistent with what Fred Newton concluded, but I was *there*. I *heard* the entire lead-up to the crash and I confronted Doris Duke seconds after it, when she jumped out of the car and was staring down at it."

That got my attention.



[Watch a video](#) of Peter Lance's interview with Bob Walker at Rough Point

On the day of the homicide, the man said, he had been a 13-year-old paperboy, literally on his way to deliver Doris Duke her copy of *The Newport Daily News* when he heard a series of sounds that tracked precisely with Sergeant Newton's analysis of Tirella's killing. He told me that the events were "seared" into his memory and he spelled out why he'd been reluctant to come forward for nearly 55 years. Most importantly, he said that the day before the book signing, he'd gone to the Newport Police, recounting the events of that day in 1966. He said that Detective **Jacque Wuest**, who debriefed him, told him that she'd prepared for the session by reading my piece in *Vanity Fair*.

On August 2, the Newport Police Department confirmed that it has now opened an active investigation into the matter.

July 4, 2021. The day after we first met, I take **Bob Walker**, a retired steamfitter, former U.S. Marine, and father of five, back to the scene. I videotape him giving his account as he retraces his path on that fateful afternoon outside Rough Point on October 7, 1966.

It was just approaching 5 p.m. Walker was on his Schwinn 10-speed bike at the corner of Ledge Road, just west of the Duke estate. He was heading there to deliver *The Newport Daily News*, intending to slip the paper into a mail slot next to the Rough Point service gate, located about 250 feet from the main entrance at 680 Bellevue.



Eduardo Tirella & Doris Duke Mid 1960's Providence Journal

Unknown to him at the time, Eduardo Tirella was at the wheel of the Dodge wagon with Doris Duke in the passenger seat. They were about to exit the estate when Tirella pulled up 15 feet from the wrought-iron gates and got out to open them. Moments earlier, workers in the mansion had overheard the two of them in “a big argument,” and apparently they were still going at it.

“I initially heard the argument and screaming of two people,” Walker tells me. “Back in those days, it was quiet in this area. There were no cars, no people walking. I was immediately intrigued about what must be going on and I quickened the pace.” Turning the corner and pedaling toward the voices, Walker says, he heard a series of noises that, he later realized, synced with Sergeant Newton’s thesis about Tirella’s death.

“The arguing stopped for a couple of seconds,” Walker continues, “and the next thing I heard was the roar of a motor, the crash, and the screaming of a man.”

Based on my interview with Officer Angel, Sergeant Newton had concluded that as Tirella stood at the gates to unchain them, Duke got behind the wheel. She disengaged the parking brake by hand, shifted into drive, and pressed down so hard on the accelerator that she left tire-wide gouge marks in the gravel.

Then she roared forward. Tirella went up on the hood of the wagon, possibly staring at Duke through the windshield as the Polara burst through the gates.

At that moment, as Bob Walker was getting closer, he heard the man scream yet again. “That proceeded for a couple of seconds,” he says, “and then there was a deceleration of the motor and a slight skid.” That’s when, for unknown reasons, Duke, in Newton’s view as related to Angel, had tapped the brakes and Tirella rolled off onto Bellevue Avenue, having sustained a broken right hip, but still alive.

Walker, by now, was pedaling furiously, closing in on the Rough Point service gate when he heard the man “scream again and the roar of the motor,” at which point, he says, the man’s wail “turned to horror. ‘Noooooo...’”

It was then, Sergeant Newton concluded, according to Angel, that Doris Duke hit the accelerator and drove forward, crushing Tirella under the wheels of the wagon and dragging him across the street. The Polara jumped the opposite curb, knocked down a section of post-and-rail fence, and ended up against a tree. Tirella, officials later determined, was killed instantly.

If his account is accurate, what paperboy Bob Walker had heard was Eduardo Tirella’s last spoken word—perhaps a plea for mercy as he realized he was about to be run over.

Now, on July 4, as Bob Walker replays that day, he tells me how, after dutifully delivering the paper, he looked left about 250 feet down the block, to the crash site, and encountered something startling.

“I saw a woman getting out of the car,” he insists. “She was a rather tall woman—regal. When she got out, she took, like, six or seven steps. Quick and deliberate. She then spun around looking at the car.”



Doris Duke at a Polo Match held on Meadow Brook Field, circa 1934. FROM BETTMANN.

Walker approached her on his bike, from behind. He watched as the tall woman “just froze there looking down, very deliberate. She was like that the whole time it took me to go from the service gate. Now steam’s coming out of the motor and she’s just standing there doing nothing, looking down at the bottom of the car.”

At that point the woman and the paperboy were apparently the only two people on that stretch of Bellevue Avenue. Then, Duke heard the click, click, click of the gears of the bike. As Walker came up behind her, he says, “She spun around and looked at me. I said, ‘Can I help you, ma’am?’ And she said,”—screaming and pointing her finger—“You better get the hell out of here!”

“I was a little taken back,” he recounts. “There was the car and the steam. So I started to go around the car and she started ghosting me.” He imitates Duke doing a kind of crab walk, back and forth, that he says prevented him from looking under the vehicle where Tirella’s mangled body was wedged under the rear axle.

Twice more, Walker says, he offered to go for help, and in an increasingly louder voice, Duke bellowed at him. Finally, as he got closer to the back of the station wagon, she screamed, “Get out of here now!” At that point, shaken, he left the scene to finish his paper route.

Thinking back to how the woman had loomed over him, he remembered that she appeared to be uninjured. “She didn’t have a scratch on her face,” he maintains. “If she had, I would have been even more insistent on going for help.”

Walker would tell his father of the incident—and confide in various friends in the years that followed. But for reasons that will soon become clear, he decided not to approach the authorities.

Edward Angel, then a rookie cop, arrived within minutes of the paperboy’s departure. When I interviewed him for *Vanity Fair*, he said he had found Doris *inside* the vehicle. As chronicled in more detail in my book, he reported that she was bleeding from the mouth from what another officer later described as “steering-wheel injuries.”

Angel recalled that as soon as he began to look under the wagon, Duke jumped out and began pacing across Bellevue, evidently in shock. Just then, **Judith Thom Wartgo**, a newly commissioned Navy nurse who happened to be driving by, got out of her car and tried to comfort her. Suddenly, Wartgo later told me, Duke turned and ran into Rough Point, searching, as Angel would report, “for someone named Ed”—despite the fact that Duke likely knew Tirella was lying dead under the station wagon.

At that point, as Bob Walker pedaled north to finish his route, he thought to himself, “Where’s the guy? There were two people arguing with each other, a male and a female. Where’s the guy?”

When he got to his house—in Newport’s heavily Irish Fifth Ward—he couldn’t wait to tell his family about what he’d just witnessed. But his father, Bob Sr., a six-foot-four master steamfitter and former boxer, told him to help get dinner ready. He wasn’t in the mood to hear whatever story his son had to tell.

Events changed radically the next afternoon. When Bob, the son, picked up his bundle of copies of *The Daily News* for delivery, there, sprawled across the front page was a headline that took his breath away: “Doris Duke Kills Friend in Crash.” Even more shocking was the two-column photo showing the underside of the smashed Dodge Polara, from which Tirella’s lifeless body had been extracted.

“I just sat there reading it, stunned,” says Walker. “Eduardo Tirella. That was the man I’d heard screaming. Only they got it all wrong. The story said he was ‘crushed against the iron gates,’ which was a lie. It also said, ‘She was admitted to Newport Hospital, suffering from facial cuts and severe shock.’ More lies. I raced through my route that day and couldn’t wait to show my dad the paper. He was a man of ‘the code’ who always told us to ‘Do the right thing. To always step up.’”

Walker got home and handed his father the front page. He began to blurt out what he’d seen the day before. But Bob Sr. had other ideas. “He grabbed me by the chest,” Walker tells me, “drove me right up against the wall, and said, ‘Now you *listen* to me, son. You will never, ever, *never* tell anybody this story again. Do you understand me?’” The paperboy was quaking. “You will not tell your mother, your brothers, your friends, and of all people, you’re not going to say anything to the police. Do you understand me? Do you understand me?”

Bob Walker Jr. was dumbfounded. “This was completely inconsistent with what my father had taught me.” In his son’s eyes, Bob Sr. was a stand-up guy—always by the book, always honest and forthright. Even so, he was a hulking presence. And in the Walker family, his word was the final word. “You didn’t cross him,” says his son. “He was a stern man. To be obeyed. And that was the end of that.”

As it turned out, it was. The media also bought the official “accident” story, and for decades Eduardo Tirella had largely been erased from the narrative of her troubled life. In 1993, in Duke’s roughly two-thirds-page obituary in *The New York Times*, the designer, who’d won the Bronze Star in World War II, was given a single sentence of 34 words. The truth of the homicide at Rough Point stayed hidden—until my piece broke in *Vanity Fair* last summer.

During his high school years, Bob Walker kept his pledge to his dad. He didn’t dare breathe a word to anyone. But starting in 1973, after joining the Marines, he recounted the incident to several friends. Two were Marine buddies with whom he was stationed at Marine Headquarters in Washington, D.C., where the former paperboy had a top-secret security clearance. Today, retired colonel **Tim Moore** affirms that Walker is a man of honor and integrity. **Paul Gall**, another retired leatherneck, says, “If Bob Walker tells you something, you can take it to the bank.” Moreover, they both related to me the same account that Walker has shared.

Both of them, in fact, were contacted by Detective Wuest, the Newport Police Department’s cold case detective who debriefed Walker on July 2, the day before he met me. In an interrogation room at police headquarters, he gave her the names of those Marines, three of his oldest Newport friends, and his younger brother, all who could corroborate that he told the identical story within years of Tirella’s death.

In addition to the Marines, I interviewed each of those Newporters, including **Dan Sullivan**, a former firefighter and lifelong friend of Walker’s who actually gave him the *Daily News* paper route. In each case, these men vouched for his reputation for honesty, and related that decades ago he’d given them the same description of his brush with Doris Duke.



From the Archive HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT

For five years after the incident, however, Walker was haunted by the fact that his father had told him to keep quiet. Then, he turned 18 and was about to enlist in the Corps. He says he decided to confront his father, believing his stony reproach to have been completely out of character for a man of his rectitude. Why, he asked him, had he reacted this way?

Bob Walker Sr.'s answer was clear-eyed and resolute. "He said, 'You know, son, at the time when you told me that story, I recognized that you could have shown motive and intent. I was concerned that you, as a key witness, could have been doing your paper route on the Ocean Drive [some late afternoon] and a truck could have come up on you from behind. The life of my child was more precious to me than that woman on Bellevue Avenue. That's why I acted the way I did.'" Bob's father died in 2000 at the age of 74.

A lifelong Newporter, Walker became a successful steamfitter like his dad, while volunteering in his spare time to support his kids and thousands of others in Little League baseball. For 23 years he was the league's district administrator; for the last five, he's been Rhode Island state coordinator. But all that time the incident with Doris Duke continued to plague him.

"When I sat down to read your book," Walker now says, "I was drawn back in time. I thought about it all night. I thought about it the next day and then for the next five days. I thought about the consequences [of coming forth]. I thought about all the ups and downs, the right and wrong, the ins and outs, and I was like, 'I need to tell this story. The truth needs to come out. The community that I live in needs to know. The world needs to know. This was the sensational murder of a wonderful person who was wrongly taken from the earth. It needs to be righted. It needs to be told.'"

I wanted to run all of this past Edward Angel, the patrolman who had come to Rough Point right after the incident. After he viewed the videos of Walker, he had the following observation: "If the former paperboy's account is credible it could very well mean that [Doris Duke] was covering up her actions and was pretty deliberate about it. She had a history of losing her temper over the years. So she would have been capable of that kind of act; first in killing him and then immediately thereafter in the cover-up. If [the] testimony is to be believed, this changes everything...It certainly throws a whole new light on the case."

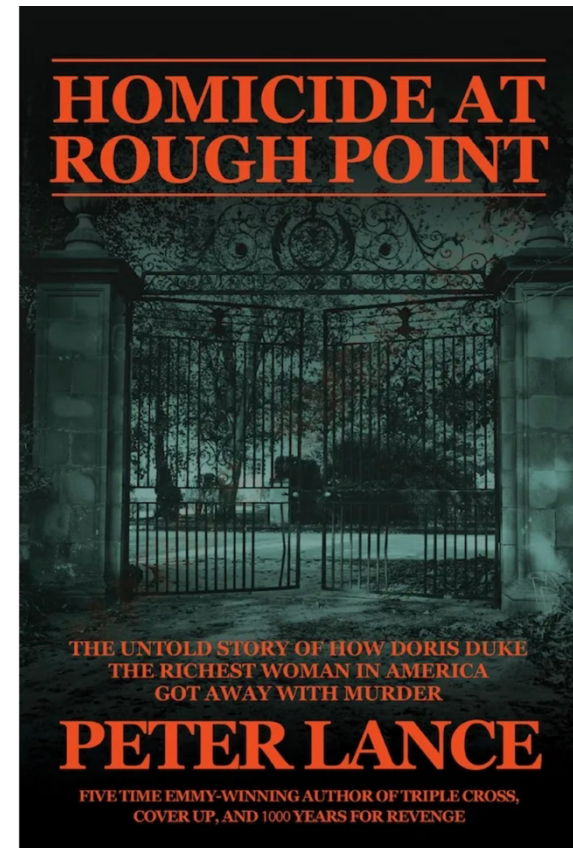
On August, 2, Detective Wuest responded to my request for a comment on the significance of what the former Duke paperboy had told her: "I can confirm that what he told you of his accounts of the incident on October 7, 1966, are the same accounts of what he told me," she said in a statement.

“I did read your *Vanity Fair* article prior to Mr. Walker coming in to familiarize myself with the history of this case. Also, to continue educating myself with the history, I’ve started reading your book. Mr. Walker did give me the same names you listed in your email, names of people he has told his story to in the past. I have spoken to most of these parties, who have confirmed what Mr. Walker told me, therefore finding Mr. Walker’s account of the incident on October 7, 1966, credible.

“I am now assigned to follow up with this case and it’s not going to be ignored. This case is now open for further review due to new facts coming forward...The Newport Police Department would like to look further into this (due to the new information we’ve been given), and rectify any possible misinformation concluded in the past, if any... I would love to bring justice for Eduardo and his family.”

In the course of my earlier investigation, I had relied heavily on the input of a retired detective, **James Moss**, who had solved hundreds of murder cases for Brooklyn South Homicide. When I showed him Walker’s videotaped testimony and the transcripts of the Marines who had corroborated his story for the Newport Police, he assessed it this way:

“Bob Walker’s account solidifies what you first reported in *Vanity Fair*. But the former paperboy’s most impactful revelations come in his detailed account of how Doris Duke behaved in the immediate aftermath of Eduardo Tirella’s death: using her dominating presence to dismiss a young witness to what she knew was an intentional murder. Bob saw her deliberately exit the crashed wagon, uninjured and cold-blooded. For her to then get back in the car, marking herself with bruises and cuts in an attempt to play the victim, is behavior consistent with the acts of a pure psychopath.”



[Buy Homicide At Rough Point on Amazon](#) and [watch a trailer](#)