

Views from the other side:

Two veteran journalists recount how people close to them became victims of violence — and of the media

Newspaper 'professionals' react like anyone else when the shooting strikes close to home

By John G. Taylor

On the 10th anniversary of a shooting incident involving colleagues at the Milwaukee Sentinel, John Taylor recalls what it was like being on the other side of a crime story. Taylor, now news editor of the Fresno (Calif.) Bee, was a Sentinel copy editor from 1976 to 1981.

The bullets that smashed into John Tracy's brain and tore through Paul Rieger's intestine hit me by telephone.

Tracy, Rieger and 30 other Milwaukee Sentinel news staffers, family and friends had gone to a west Milwaukee tavern in hopes of keeping alive the official 1979 newsroom Christmas party, a party that had sent many of us home with the beginnings of a hangover. They had counted on a jukebox with 1950s music. But on that December night they hadn't counted on a motorcycle gang member also taking a liking to the bar, or the rival who would spot him there. A fistfight between the two escalated, a gun

was pulled and one gang member fell dead. Before fleeing, the shooter fired into the crowd of dazed bystanders, striking Tracy and Rieger.

What happened to Tracy, Rieger and the rest of us washed away the cozy assumptions about newspeople being cool, detached and objective. After that collision with chance 10 years ago, many of us learned that in crossing the line from covering the news to becoming the news, we were no different from the public we wrote about.

We learned to hate the hounds of the news media because each report about us gave the killer a clearer picture of how big a threat we were to him.

We reviled our own newspaper management, who viewed our emotional struggles as yesterday's news that should be left outside the workplace.

We hollered for vengeance even as we suspected that the authorities regarded us as being just another, though particularly noisy, bunch of statistics.

Those of us who had not gone to the tavern watched in the extraordinary quiet of a Sunday newsroom, almost forgetting to breathe, as those who had been there flowed in. Although we submerged ourselves for that first "day after" paper, the chin-up reserve would not last long. The story was us, and we were not in control of it.

The phone assault came first. Wire services and reporters from papers in Chicago, Minneapolis and Detroit hammered for detail and new angles. All told, they published more than a few inaccuracies, those professional word-smiths writing about and being fed information by fellow professional newspeople.

When television camera carriers got off the elevator, however, the mood changed. Television's lights magnified our hurts and shriveled our good-soldier willingness to wearily retell what we knew. Throw the cameraman down the stairs, someone said.

That kind of chaos swirled for days, reminiscent of the way relatives screen their bereaved from snoopy

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neighbors. The public's right to know had turned into hide-and-peek in a room that quite improbably happened to be a newsroom.

Tracy clung a finger's distance from death. Every call to the hospital for a condition check, every bulletin board posting brought a hush and a rush for the latest information.

Rieger, the other victim, had delivered a hilarious reading of the "The Night Before Christmas" in a German accent at the official Christmas party. He'd puffed our cheeks red with laughter. Now Rieger was all orange antiseptic and tubes.

Although we felt certain that each day's newspaper represented our best labors, management took note of lunch breaks that stretched a bit because of visits to hospitals, and grew impatient with the staff's sometimes zombie-like focus on its own suffering.

Therapies were found in bars, pool halls and bowling alleys. Some took to racquetball with viciousness. "Every shot we hit we pretended we were hitting his face," said a desk editor of the tavern gunman, who was still unnamed and on the loose.

Emotions were churned by events at the hospital and by the Milwaukee police investigation.

Rieger progressed after having part of his intestine removed. A phone call I placed in hopes of hearing a glimmer of Rieger's old self brought a healthy retort: "Your face looks like my stomach."

Rieger's 1979 Christmas presents were memorable. A nurse helped him walk around to dispel stomach gas; he dined on a cube of Jell-O and ice cubes.

Tracy left us no such easy breathing. Bullet lodged near the motor area of the brain. Holes drilled to relieve pressure and to check for infection. Once he returned a kiss that his girlfriend gave him; once he moaned as if to talk with his parents. Then, just as suddenly, all his vital signs deteriorated, his brain waves "speared." His parents agreed that life supports were not to be used. Any day, doctors said, any time.

The absence of an arrest brought a barrage of Archie Bunker-like cynicism about the gunman. "I hope the other gang gets him," said a desk editor. "It would spare a lot of people a lot of trauma."

The Milwaukee Sentinel would not refer to the Heaven's Devils or the Outlaws, the apparent combatants in the tavern shooting, as anything other than motorcycle "clubs" in stories. Other major papers called them gangs.

The Sentinel shunned the word gang largely because an outspoken and lawsuit-minded attorney who represented the "clubs" had claimed gangs had an unfavorable and inaccurate connotation.

Reporters and desk editors alike had traditionally viewed the mandated use of "clubs" as a kowtowing to lawyers, a cowardly retreat from reality. The bloodshed hardened that opinion.

A hellish drama was played out for some staffers. There were repeated trips to police headquarters or the district attorney's office for new pokes and prods in the search to identify a suspect.

Come dark, there were tensions from real or imagined fears of harassment by gang members or weirdos. Phones rang in predawn hours with no voice at the other end. Apartment door buzzers were pressed, but no one stood in the lobby. Automobile lights were left shining through staffers' living rooms far too long for a driver just to be making a U-turn at midstreet.

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However, these highly skilled observers also detected critical blank spots in their recollections. They found they could describe the handgun to the smallest detail but not nearly so the man who flexed its trigger.

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Shooting incident

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Ultimately, the newsroom's poorly stitched wounds broke open from an accident atop an accident. One of the Sentinel's senior desk editors and her husband had been at the shooting. He happened to be an assistant district attorney. That coincidence fueled a rumor that the district attorney did not trust his assistant to maintain the confidentiality of the investigation.

Shortly thereafter, the district attorney got several witnesses from the newsroom to appear at a lineup without informing the paper. The teeter-totter of emotions shifted nervously. Shaken citizens were making their best effort toward solving a crime. Being professional journalists had to take second stage, they felt.

But in the back of their minds they knew they were putting their jobs in jeopardy. Not long before the shootings, the paper's desk editors, who rarely were required to work as reporters, had been issued state police press credentials giving them reporter status. They had also been told by their supervisors, "We're always on duty when there's a story."

During a casual conversation at a bar, the Sentinel's city editor learned of the lineup. He returned to the newsroom, livid with rage, and wrote a memo to the staff, in which he said he wished that some competing medium had uncovered the lineup. "If you don't tell the news," his memo read in part, "you're not telling the truth. That's the North Star on this cruise."

Amid the torments, two miracles stood tall. Paul Rieger returned to work on the photo desk, although cramping from his wound sometimes dropped him to the floor. His humor retained its polish.

"You know how all this happened? I asked a girl to dance and she said 'Blow it out of your a—.' That was

Rieger's wise-guy way of describing the bullet that went into his abdomen, exited his butt and was found in his pants pocket.

John Tracy not only survived, but became well enough to phone in his own daily condition reports. Part of Tracy's memory was gone, and he suffered periodic seizures from the bullet doctors had to leave in his head. He could no longer "read" words — he could see them and tell you what they were about, but he couldn't tell you what the words were.

In that way, we in the newsroom were much like him.

A diary of those days, which I pounded out on my home typewriter, has haunted me. I wrote it to ease my anguish and in hopes that I'd uncover answers to impossible questions. Why "innocent bystanders" describes most of us most of the time. Why "bad luck" is supposed to explain why a friend's warm blood is flowing through your hands. Why "grief" must be stolen by lunatics who toss it in a wad of paper on thousands of doorsteps, or who feed it like cinematic peeping toms into insatiable news shows.

Last Christmas passed with less hurt than I'd had in 10 years. For the first time I asked about my wounded former colleagues.

I'm told Rieger lives just across the Massachusetts border in New Hampshire. I'm told Tracy was forced by medical costs to get care at a veterans hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, and that he may be working with brain-injured people.

A man eventually was convicted and jailed in the shootings, and was refused parole after a letter-writing effort opposed his release.

At last, it seems, I've clipped this horror from my memory. Suddenly, a newsroom phone snaps to life. A story has shoved a reader's private pains onto the street for the world to pick over. You wouldn't be so cold-blooded and insensitive, she yells at me, if what you put in the paper ever happened to you.

I bite my lips. ■