

The Hot Line: A Phone in No-Man's Land

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The only way to telephone was outside the door where a sniper was shooting down on the street. And an officer told me I would be safe until I got to the corner if I hugged the wall.

"He can't shoot straight down at you, and you'll be all right to the corner as long as you don't wander out to the curb," he said.

I had been holed up in the Howard Johnson Hotel lobby with other newsmen for about 30 minutes, getting information from police, and had no way to relay it to the office since authorities had taken over the hotel phones for their operations.

I decided to brave it, eased onto the sidewalk and inched my way toward the corner, but I had chosen the wrong time. A fusillade of gunfire broke out from the 100 police-

men surrounding the hotel and crouched behind squad cars.

I WAS looking toward the corner when I saw an officer crumple near a squad car. I hugged the wall even tighter, and stood frozen for about five minutes.

An ambulance then inched its way through the street and stopped by the wounded man. He was put in the ambulance, which made its way through the gunfire.

Later in the day, I learned that his name was Charles Arnold, and that he wasn't dead.

I crept back to the hotel lobby, flattened against the wall. Fifteen minutes later, with new courage, I inched my way back to the corner, expertly hugging the wall. I found that I would have to cross an exposed 30-foot street, clearly in the line of fire, before I could reach a phone.

There were a half dozen policemen across that street, protected by another building. They yelled at me, saying they would give me cover if I wanted to cross.

THEY peered from around the wall, three of them on their knees, and began firing in the general direction of the sniper. I bolted across that canyon floor as they sent a stream of lead skyward, like something out of Grade B Western.

It was the longest 30 feet I had ever covered.

On the other side, I was protected by the cliff-like walls of a tall building, but I didn't slow down for another 100 yards, until I reached a pay phone. I was so shaken I could hardly dial.

THE BAD THING was that I knew I had to go back. I returned to the corner,

and by that time other newsmen were hugging the Howard Johnson wall. With cover from the obliging officers, I dashed one way while the newsmen raced the other.

We made more than a dozen trips back and forth across that street during the day. Each time it was just as far as the time before, and each time we all made it—courtesy the hundreds of rounds of cover fire.

After about two hours, the snipers scaled back to sporadic spot firing, and it wasn't so bad crossing.

Once after I returned to the lobby, a tactical squad led by Deputy Police Supt. Louis Sirgo entered the basement stairwell heading toward the sniper. Sirgo had been called to duty from home, and was wearing a green turtleneck sweater and slacks.

THE TACTICAL unit brought

him down 30 minutes later, a bullet hole in his back. He was dead.

After that, newsmen clustered in the lobby with about 50 heavily armed policemen, and about the same number of firemen waiting for a call to duty.

We all listened to a portable police radio, picking up what we could from police spokesmen and dreading to cross that canyon again.