

Shootings Raise Unanswered

Questions

EDITOR'S NOTE — In this whip-lashed world, almost nothing shocks anymore. But on Jan. 7, in a setting as common, as placid, as the Downtown Howard Johnson's Hotel, all hell broke loose, paralyzing a 50-block area of one of the nation's most quaint cities. A week later, the ordinary questions of who and why are still not fully answered. But the questions are demanding.

By SID MOODY

AP Newsfeatures Writer
NEW ORLEANS (AP) — On April 11, 1972, a salesman in a chain store in a Midwest town sold a six-shot carbine to a customer, thereby adding yet another item to the vast arsenal where the nation's private arms are stored.

The gun was a Ruger .44 magnum, ideal for hunting in brush country for deer because at short range, say 200 yards, it had "a hell of an impact," as a policeman would say.

The town was Emporia, in Kansas, home of William Allen White, the prairie sage, an American Gothic town—grassland, stoplights, grassland again. One of Emporia's 9,000 residents at the time was 23-year-old Mark James Essex, black, son of a packing plant foreman. An unremarkable lad, "just like millions who pass through," recalled his high school counselor.

"Sort of a soft kid, a delicate sort of man," said the Rev. Rex A. Williams, his scoutmaster.

"January, 1969. Mark enlisted in the Navy. Thirteen months later he was discharged. For 'character and behavior disorders.' Psychiatric jargon.

"More to the point, his sister said, was that the small-town Kansas boy 'really saw what life—the world—was, that whites run things.'"

Join the Navy and see the world. By his lights, Jimmy Essex had.

Stationed in San Diego he

continually had to show his I. D. cards, had continually been stopped by police, his mother said. "These little things made Jimmy what he was." Which was?

"He just hated white folks," his family minister said.

After several stabs at college, Jimmy Essex packed whatever things he thought he'd need and moved to New Orleans where he enrolled in a job training program. There was a family phone call this Christmas. "It sounded like the same old Jimmy," his mother said. He liked the South.

Far away that night, in Roanoke, Va., a young intern, Dr. Robert Steagall, was finishing up his work. He was accumulating time so he and his new wife, Elizabeth, 26, could take a vacation: to New Orleans, where a fellow intern lived, and Pensacola, where he grew up. They had married last June after graduation from the University of Virginia, he in medicine, she with a master's degree in speech pathology. A striking couple: looks, brains, future.

Young Dr. Steagall planned to work New Year's Eve, too.

Just that much more time off for Pensacola. And New Orleans.

Shortly before 11 p.m. that same night, in that city, Cadet Alfred Harrell Jr. of the New Orleans Police Department reported for duty: the graveyard shift while the city revelled. He paused outside headquarters to talk to Lt. Horace Perez. There were shots. Harrell, a black silhouette in the light of the doorway, fell, dead. Perez was slightly wounded.

Some minutes later and a few blocks away, Edwin Hosli, a white patrolman with the department's canine corps, was answering a burglar alarm with a fellow officer and their dog. As Hosli was about to unleash the animal, a shot was

fired from the shadows. Hosli was seriously wounded.

Police Supt. Clarence Giarrusso said the shootings had "overtones of a militant group. Evidence would seem to indicate a sniper intended to kill one or more patrolmen."

There was other evidence no one could then appreciate. The bullets that hit the officers had been fired from a Ruger .44 magnum. It had been bought April 1, 1972. In Emporia, Kansas.

Sunday, Jan. 7 in New Orleans was cold and misty, a lousy day for roses, Patrolman Paul Persigo, 33, might have noted. Persigo's hobby was roses: growing them, judging them. He had been president of the New Orleans Rose Society but had been spending more time of late with his three children. Nonetheless, he had recently spaded a new bed and was ready to plant. Sunday, however, was another day of duty, albeit his wife's birthday. He gave her a present and told her not to open it until he returned that evening.

Elsewhere in town, Deputy Police Supt. Louis Sigro, 48, had the day at home. Sigro was handsome, articulate, one of the few if only police officials blacks said they trusted. In a speech, he once said: "... the greatest sin of American society ... is the status of the American Negro."

He was a cop's cop, too, the man chosen to act in the television series "N.O.P.D." as

a real, live officer. When there was real, live trouble, a city remembered "Sigro always stepped out first."

Now, shortly before 11 a.m., the Steagalls were about to leave for Pensacola, checking out of their hotel, the Downtown Howard Johnson's Hotel.

The Battle of Downtown Howard Johnson's, televised live nationally for a time, was to rage across the towers of New Orleans' skyline for 27 hours. A city official estimated 100,000 rounds were fired. Seven died, 17 were injured, as many Americans killed as in the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812—which also occurred on a Jan. 7.

But when the shooting stopped it remained uncertain just who or how many had been fighting for what reason, whether it was the stranger than

fiction climax of a plot or the final desperation of an embittered lone black. There were as many as rumors as official "no comments," many pieces and little clue.

Some of the pieces: the significance, if any, of an alert sent police here from Detroit that four men wanted in the shooting of six officers there during December might be heading this way. The significance, if any, that Jimmy Essex gave one home address to his training school, got his mail at another and actually lived at a third. The significance, if any, of the wounding of a man, unidentified by police, at a grocery store two miles from Downtown Howard Johnson's about a half-hour before the battle began.

Police put the whole grocery store incident on a back shelf, but unsubstantiated whispers circulated that the victim had known or told too much about the New Year's Eve shootings or plots. Supt. Giarrusso said Tuesday he wasn't "satisfied" the shooting was connected. There the matter did not rest.

In any event, minutes after the grocery store shooting, one Marvin Albert parked his car outside his home nearby, leaving the motor running. He saw a man with a rifle hop in and drive off. The police gave chase. They lost the stolen vehicle in traffic near Downtown Howard Johnson's. Hours later it was found in the hotel's fourth floor parking level.

At 10:45 a.m. Downtown Howard Johnson's called the fire department: flames on the eighth floor. (Six persons had died in a fire there in July, 1971. Arson had been suspected but never proven.)

At the front desk assistant hotel manager Frank Schneider, 62, told two guests to stay put. Then he went up the elevator.

On the 11th floor an unidentified black maid ran into a man with a gun.

"This is the revolution, sister," he said, and ran off.

As fire engines began arriving about 11 a.m., shots started coming from the hotel. Nonetheless, fire Lt. Tim Ursin began climbing an aerial ladder. A gunman stepped onto an eighth-floor balcony and fired. Ursin fell back, the first victim, wounded in the arm. Hunched over from the invisible menace, pedestrians fled for cover as sirens began filling the emptying

streets.

Inside, high above the streets, terror was walking from room to room, floor to floor. One guest remembered a gunman dressed in green "just like Robin Hood." On the 18th floor a man and a woman struggled with a man with a rifle. Two shots. Dr. Steagall and his wife were found dead. Schneider's body was found later on the 11th floor, in a stairwell.

On the eighth floor Raymond and Carolyn Strecker, honeymooners from Philadelphia, heard shots, smelled smoke and called the desk. They were told there had "been a disturbance." Someone began battering at their door. In terror they climbed the balcony of an adjacent room and hid under the bed. They heard shots blasting from their room.

Robert Bemish, 43, a broadcast executive just transferred to New Orleans from San Francisco, wasn't so lucky. The smoke had driven him from room 813 to the rooftop outdoor swimming pool on the same floor.

"A fellow jumped out of some bushes. He looked me in the eye for a full second, then he raised the rifle, cocked the bolt on it and took very careful aim. I was saying it couldn't be for real."

The gunman fired, the blow of the bullet knocking Bemich

into the pool. "I was kind of happy to look around in the water and not see much blood." He played possum for over three hours in the frigid water, meanwhile warily watching the sniper duck in and out of various rooms.

"If I was going to get it again, at least I wanted to see where it was coming from," Bemich said.

By now the area was alive with officers, hiding behind cars, scurrying up skyscrapers to rooftops, making hurried plans in an improvised command center in the hotel cafeteria. Sirgo arrived, still in civvies. Grabbing a 12-gauge shotgun, he took a six-man tactical force up into the hotel, now a glassed-in honeycomb gone berserk. On the 17th floor he led his men out into the corridor. A gunman shot him in the back and fled up the stairway. Sirgo dropped, dying. As ever, he had stepped out first.

Shortly before noon Persigo

and patrolman Phillip Coleman were shot and killed; a fireman and an ambulance man coming to their aid were wounded, all within a few minutes. The rapidity of the fire and the distance separating the victims led some police authorities to believe a single sniper could not have fired so quickly from so many

places in the hotel.

The belief was strengthened by a hotel employe who said he had seen two snipers together on the eighth floor some time before noon. Bemich also gave a different identification of his assailant from the one other guests had described.

By now police had blocked off a 50-block area in the heart of the city. Streets whose names are a bibliography of jazz — Basin, Canal, South Rampart, Perdido; streets that yearly thumped to Mardi Gras pa-

rades, now shook to a fiercer rhythm.

At 2:06 p.m. hundreds of police began a sustained roar of gunfire towards the upper floors of the 17-story, 300-room hotel. It continued several minutes.

Meanwhile, in Charity Hospital, there was a series of explosions in the basement. Firecrackers, it turned out. Moments later two blacks with shotguns appeared at the hospital entrance. Police arrested one, Robert Peters, 18. He said they only wanted to help the officers. The other man fled. Police suspicion of a plot deepened.

5:00 p.m. A big Marine helicopter from the nearby Belle Chasse Naval Air Station fluttered in and a police gun team got aboard. The craft took off into the dark, rising towards the cold fog that had sunk down over the surrounding skyscrapers to the 30-foot level.

Pilot Lt. Col. C.H. Pitman hovered the copter just above the roof of Downtown Howard Johnson's and flipped on his landing lights. The police gunners fired a barrage toward three concrete structures on the

roof—two stairway entries at either end and a machinery en-

closure in the middle.

From the helicopter: "He's still shooting now and then to let us know he's there."

Repeatedly the helicopter clambered into the gloom for another round in a sky-high fight, eerily lit by spotlights, tracers and muzzle blasts.

Rooftop marksmen steadily fired at the hotel roof, stopping for a time because police on the top floor complained incoming bullets were hitting too low.

Police Capt. Edward Laporte was watching for the sniper with binoculars from the roof of City Hall about 9:40 p.m.:

"The sniper had been sticking his nose out before, but this time he popped right out there and aimed his rifle. Everybody on the chopper opened up on him and he started running a zigzag pattern, but they cut him down." He sprawled on his back. Police kept firing at the body. When found, the sniper's face was unrecognizable.

The battle continued all night and into Monday in belief there was a second sniper after the one was killed. Three officers were wounded about 5 a.m.

when they tried to rush the roof. Some thought they may have been hit by ricochets from the helicopter then overhead.

Also, during the night newsmen on adjacent roofs claimed they heard someone shouting defiant obscenities from the improvised fortress of the hotel roof. But when the roof was finally stormed about 2 p.m. Monday, only the riddled body was found: Jimmy Essex, identified from fingerprints. Had there ever been a second sniper? Or had he escaped down an air-conditioning duct, down the elevator shaft, or just wandered out in the confusion?

Tuesday, Giarruso said the evidence could point both ways. The investigation would continue.

Then, periodically during the week, the dead were buried. Persigo's widow, her birthday cake uneaten, left her husband's grave clutching four

roses.

The New Orleans Rose Society said it would plant the new bed her husband had never gotten around to finishing.