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'Inside Story' on N.O.



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(This article was written by John Kifner and was based on reporting by Kifner, Paul Delaney, Douglas E. Kneeland and Martin Waldron.)

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Some key details of the Jan. 7 confusing hotel shootout, which plunged this city into 30 hours of terror, are beginning to emerge.

However, a week after six people were slain by sniper fire, a gun battle raged and a gunman was riddled by police bullets at Howard Johnson's Motor Hotel in the center of the city, authorities have no public answers to two crucial questions:

Was there more than one sniper? If so, how was an escape made past a swarm of 600 heavily armed policemen in and around the hotel?

A reconstruction of the shootout and the events leading up to it — based on interviews with the police, witnesses and other informed sources — indicates the following:

—There were probably at least two additional persons — a black man and a black woman — involved in the shootout.

—Before the shooting the police already may have linked the slain sniper, Mark James Robert Essex, or his possible confederates with the New Year's Eve slaying of a policeman and the critical wounding of another.

—In the hours just before the shootings began, the police may have had Essex or one of his possible confederates under surveillance, but lost him.

There are strong indications the Howard Johnson's shootings were planned in advance, with ammunition having been taken previously into the

Sniper Emerging

hotel. The snipers may have rented a room over the weekend.

—There appear to be some indications the police may have been aware that something might have been about to happen at the Howard Johnson's.

A KEY LINK in the chain of events is the shooting the morning of Sunday, Jan. 7, of a 33-year-old white man who had a small store — Joe's Grocery — at Erato and South Gayoso Streets in a black neighborhood.

The grocer, identified by neighbors as Joseph S. Perniciaro, is believed widely to have been shot because he had identified, or was about to identify Essex or a confederate to the police as the New Year's Eve assassin.

Police have refused to give details of Perniciaro's shooting, or even to disclose his name.

No New Orleans hospital will con-

firm having a patient by that name. Pressed on the shooting incident, policewoman Carol A. Gomon, the department's information officer, said: "I have been ordered by the superintendent not to discuss that."

SOURCES SAID, however, that Perniciaro was in the Hotel Dieu under a police guard, under a false name and with a wound in his shoulder.

Police say that between 10 and 10:30 — apparently a few minutes after the grocery shooting — Marvin Alberts, a black man, parked his car with the motor running in front of his home at 1506 South White St., about four blocks away.

A black man with a rifle jumped into the car, police said, and sped off.

Police say Alberts immediately reported the theft and that they gave chase. The car sideswiped another car

along the way, the police said, but they lost it "in traffic." The car, a light-colored Chevrolet Chevelle, was found on the fourth level of the Howard Johnson's garage.

Mr. and Mrs. Raymond F. Strecker, a honeymooning couple from Philadelphia who were staying at the hotel, recalled running into Alberts in the Howard Johnson's coffee shop about 5 p.m. Jan. 7.

ALTHOUGH THE police said they had lost the stolen car, the Streckers recalled Alberts' telling them he had been picked up by a police car after the theft and taken directly to the Howard Johnson's. Reporters who have sought Alberts have found that he and

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his possessions have been moved out of his home.

The Streckers also say Alberts noted that the man who stole his car was carrying a rifle, but no visible quantity of ammunition, indicating the large amounts of ammunition the police say were used in the shootout already were in the hotel.

A police source said reports had been circulating in the department that the hotel management had been warned a group of people the police were interested in had checked in over the weekend. According to this source, they had taken a room or rooms. The hotel management had refused to make any comment.

The confusion on the incident was deepened further over this weekend by a report that a neighbor, Edwin L. Wilson, 76, said he was given a lift to church by Essex in a dark blue car at 10:45 a.m. last Sunday. If true, this would place Essex away from the hotel at the time the fires and shootings are believed to have begun.

WHEN THE MAN in the stolen car arrived, the stage was set for a drama that would transform the motor lodge into a scene of horror. According to witnesses and the police, this is what happened:

Sometime around 10:30 a.m., a Negro maid known only as Carrie—the police have refused to identify her further—was accosted by a lanky black man carrying a rifle who took her keys. He was reported to have told her that this was “a revolution,” but to have added, “Don’t worry, sister, we’re only shooting whites today.”

In Room 1825, Ed Frashier, the director of sales at the Prince Murat Inn in Baton Rouge, had just finished two glasses of orange juice and about four cups of coffee when he heard a loud noise in the hallway and a woman screaming.

“I looked out the door and saw two men coming out of a doorway struggling and a woman coming after them trying to stop them,” he recalled. “I called the operator, but there was no answer. Then I heard screaming again and looked out and saw quite heavy smoke in the hallway—and an arm coming out of a door holding a rifle.”

FRIGHTENED, HE ducked back into his room, trying unsuccessfully again to reach the operator. Smoke began coming under his door and he

moved out to the balcony. It was, he remembered, about 10:50 a.m.

Down the hall were Dr. Robert V. Steagall, 27, and his wife, Elizabeth, 26, of Roanoke, Va., who were planning to check out that day to visit Pensacola, Fla., where he was born. They had been married about six months.

Using a searchlight to cut through the blackness and smoke, Joseph F. Vitari, administrator of the coroner’s office, would find them later under a pile of charred debris. She was shot dead through the back of the head, he thought through the chest. They were locked in each other’s arms.

Meanwhile, a Negro maid had rushed downstairs to tell the hotel managers a man with a rifle was going through the hotel setting fires. When they appeared disbelieving, she slumped, sitting, to the lobby floor, her arms crossed, moaning, “Oh, me, Oh, me.”

FRANK SCHNEIDER, 62, the assistant manager, went upstairs to investigate, along with Walter Cotlin, the desk clerk.

In Room 1131, the 21-year-old Philadelphia honeymooners, Raymond and Carolyn Strecker, heard shouting in the hallway and “two loud noises” that they are sure now were shots. They recall the time as being “about 10:30.” Later, they would see a big spot of blood in the hall, where the body of Frank Schneider had been found and removed. Collins was wounded serious-

ly in the back.

The first alarm was recorded on the Fire Department’s taping device at 10:52 a.m., with alarms rapidly following at 10:55 and 10:57. However, Carol Gomor, the police information officer, recalls being summoned by a telephone call at home about 10:35 telling of fires and shooting.

Firemen began arriving minutes after the first alarm, and Lt. Tim Ursin, carrying a line to run into a window, scrambled up a ladder. A shot rang out and Ursin, wounded in the arm, slid back down the ladder, carrying the men below with him. He was the first man shot outside the hotel.

IT WAS IN those first few frantic hours that most of the dead and the 15 wounded were shot. Policemen, armed with a variety of weapons, went to the scene and huddled behind cars and trees and against walls, scanning the building. Gunfire crackled. A fire rescue truck on its way to the scene crashed into a car and overturned.

Many of the early descriptions of the sniper, or snipers, told of a tall, lanky,

light-skinned Negro with a goatee. Essex, the slain sniper, was about 5 feet 4 inches tall and 135 pounds, with dark, chocolate-brown skin.

When cut down, Essex was wearing olive-green fatigue pants and a black turtleneck sweater. Some guests told of “a man dressed all in green, like Robin Hood,” and several witnesses, including a police chaplain, reported having seen “a man in a green jacket.”

There are several witnesses, moreover, who are convinced they saw gunmen other than Essex.

“The man they shot on the roof is not the same man who shot me,” said Robert Beamish, 43, vice president of engineering for the Starr Broadcasting Corp.

BEAMISH, WHO stared at his assailant before being shot, then watched him intermittently from a distance for three hours, said the man had been wearing “a light tan jacket and brown slacks.”

“I would say this man was taller than 5 foot 4,” Beamish told reporters. “He was slender and fairly light-colored and about the same height as I am, 5-foot-8.”

There was bedlam as police officers in increasing numbers rushed into the vicinity of the hotel. Gunfire seemed to be going off all over, the reports echoing off the nearby higher buildings. Three policemen fell to the ground, wounded in rapid succession.

Smoke and fire were visible inside the hotel. The Fire Department said 15 to 20 fires had been set on several floors, primarily on the 18th, by the lighting of drapes with matches.

THERE WOULD be long period of silence, broken suddenly by furious fusillades of gunfire, pockmarking the building and sending puffs of dust and concrete flying from the two stairwells and a blockhouse containing the elevator shaft openings and air-conditioning equipment. The snipers were believed using the concrete structures on the roof for shelter.

On the 18th-floor balcony, Ed Frashier, the Baton Rouge hotelman, lay pinned down more than five hours, with gunfire rattling about.

At one point, he remembered, “the guy was in the room right next to me. I’d hear shots. That thing sounded like a cannon.”

When he was finally able to get up from the balcony sometime after 5 o’clock, Frashier counted 11 bullet holes in the wall within 1½ feet of where he had been.

A LITTLE AFTER 5:30, a big green

H-46 Sea Knight helicopter from Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 767 arrived from nearby Belle Chasse Naval Air Station.

For about a dozen flights that night and the next day, Lt. Col. C. H. Pitman brought the craft, bearing usually five police marksmen, hovering over the center of the city, circling only about 25 feet off the roof while the riflemen blasted away at the concrete

enclosures.

About 9:15 Sunday night, a phosphorus grenade or flare from the helicopter arched a red path into one of the enclosures.

A lone figure, carrying a carbine, burst into the open. Hunched over, crouching low, he began to cut a zig-zag running path across the roof.

A **TORRENT** of bullets — red tracers, armor-piercing shells, shotgun pellets, ammunition from AR-16 carbines, pistols and private rifles—literally ripped him apart. Even after he fell to the roof, the gunfire continued, until police commanders screamed for a halt.

Even then, at intervals, an angry, cursing, frustrated policeman would fire another burst at the body. The coroner's office said it had been struck by more than 100 bullets.

The body was identified as that of "Jimmy" Essex, a quiet black youth from a middle-class family in Emporia, Kan. In the baggy cargo pockets of his fatigue pants, police said, were round cherry bombs and firecrackers, along with spare ammunition.

The weapon he carried was broken in four pieces by gunfire; the police put it together for display later with scotch tape. It was identified as a .44-caliber magnum Ruger carbine purchased by Essex from Montgomery Ward in Emporia on April 11, 1972.

Police inside the building were dressed in a variety of outfits: Regular uniforms with a nylon, furry-collared bombardier-style jacket, windbreakers and dungarees, sports clothes. Some had cut holes in hotel blankets and were wearing them poncho-style against the cold.

THEY HAD a simple code for safe conduct in the halls and stairwells. They would yell "officer" or "policeman coming down."

About 5 a.m. Monday, the Marine helicopter made the major pass of the dawn hours, firing at a concrete bunker atop one of the stairwells.

Inside the stairwell was a four-man squad led by Frederick O'Sullivan. Suddenly bullets began whizing about them. With three of the men nicked by bullets or flying concrete, they retreated. With Sgt. O'Sullivan emptying his

machine gun through the roof. In retrospect, it appeared the squad and the men in the helicopter had been firing at each other.

Meanwhile, police were completing preparations for long-awaited assault on the rooftop.

BUT while reading the building plans, the police did not notice a stairway that leads from the maid's storage room next to the elevators on the 18th floor up to the inside of the rooftop mechanical building. Apparently they did not learn of this until early Monday, when told of it by an engineer.

The police superintendent, Clarence B. Giarrusso has said there was a "period of time" when an exit from the roof was unknown to the police.

About 1:45 Monday afternoon, officers stationed on the 18th floor began to rush the roof. One by one, they popped up through a hole in the roof of the steam room. Other policemen dashed, some tripping in their anxiety, from one of the blasted-out stairwell bunkers.

Soon there were about 30 officers on the roof, sore in casual clothes, others in flak jackets or bullet-proof vests, some wearing the motel blankets flapping as they ran.

THEY BLASTED away at the central blockhouse. As the shots echoed, three officers staggered and fell. They had been hit by chips of flying concrete.

As the police moved gingerly about the roof, an officer arrived with a fire ax. First he beat on the door of the blockhouse. Then they climbed to the top and began beating and prying at a trap door until it finally sprang open. Rifles at the ready, they peered in.

Eventually they would search the air-conditioning ducts and machinery and nooks and crannies along the roof and tear out the false ceilings in the hotel bathrooms.

They found no one.