

Details of New Orleans Shootout Emerge,

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NEW ORLEANS, Jan. 14 — Some key details of last Sunday's 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 a Howard Johnson's hotel in the center of the city, the 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 may have already 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 that the Howard Johnson's shootings were planned in advance, with ammunition having been previously taken into the hotel. The snipers may have rented a room over the weekend.

¶ There appear to be some indications that 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

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but Two Crucial Questions

Remain

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

The police have refused to give any details of Mr. Perniciaro's shooting, or even to disclose his name. No New Orleans hospital will confirm having a patient by that name.

Sources said, however, that Mr. Perniciaro was in the Hotel Dieu, a local hospital, under a police guard, with a false name and a wound in his shoulder.

The police say that some time 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 Street, about four blocks away.

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

The police say that Mr. 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 1968 Chevrolet Chevelle, was later 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 Mr. Alberts in the Howard Johnson's coffee shop at around 5 o'clock the

afternoon of Sunday, Jan. 7.

Although the police said they had lost the stolen car, the Streckers recalled Mr. Alberts's telling them that he had been picked up by a police car after the theft and taken directly to the Howard Johnson's. Reporters who have sought Mr. Alberts have found that he and his possessions have been moved out of his home.

'Only Shooting Whites'

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

One police source said reports had been circulating in the department that the hotel management had been warned that 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 has refused any comments on the case.

The confusion on the incident was further deepened over this weekend by a report that a neighbor, Edwin L. Wilson, 76, said that 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 Downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge into a scene of horror. According to witnesses and the police, the following is an account of 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 large 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. Viari, 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 through the chest. They were locked in each other’s arms.

Meanwhile, a Negro maid had rushed downstairs to tell the hotel managers that 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 Collins, 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. Mr. Collins

was seriously wounded 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 A. Gomon, the police information officer, recalls being summoned by a telephone call at home at about 10:35 telling of fires and shooting.

Firemen began arriving minutes after the first alarm, and Lieut. Tim Ursin, carrying a line to run into a window, scrambled up a ladder. A shot rang out and Lieutenant 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 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 descrip-

tions 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 turtle-neck 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 Corporation.

Mr. 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,” Mr. Beamish told reporters. “He was slender and fairly light-colored and about the same height I am, 5 foot 8.”

About 11 A.M., he recalled, the cable television in his room, No. 813, went out, the hotel operator did not answer and he smelled smoke. He

stepped into the hall and saw that “light bulbs were popping all over the place from the heat and the halls were filled with smoke.”

‘Looked Me in The Eye’

He returned to his room, gathered up his clothes and stepped out to the eighth-floor patio by the rooftop swimming pool in the rear of the building. Suddenly, a man jumped out of some bushes about 50 feet away.

“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,” Mr. Beamish recalled.

The shot, wounding him in the stomach, knocked him into the swimming pool, where the air trapped in his raincoat acted as a life preserver. Relieved, he said, because the wound did not hurt as much as he had thought it would, Mr. Beamish floated in the pool, playing dead for three hours until the police rescued him.

Dr. Edward S. Lindsay of the Tulane Medical Center, who examined Mr. Beamish at Charity Hospital, said that the small hole that ran through his abdomen, missing his vital organs, looked different from the “explosive wound” that he saw in the back of Deputy Police Superintendent Louis Sirgo, who was also killed that day.

That slug has been identified by the police ballistics laboratory as having come from the .44-caliber magnum carbine carried by Essex.

David Munch, a Jefferson Parish sheriff’s deputy who had responded to the alarms at the motel, said that he had been a black woman along with the sniper.

Mr. Munch said he had been shot at soon after 11 A.M. as he entered a vantage point on the eighth floor of the nearby Rault Center. He suffered minor wounds, apparently from chips of bullet and concrete.

He says the man who shot at him was wearing a black shirt. With him, he said, was a woman wearing a long, light brown overcoat.

“This woman could have been a man. It could have been a stud with long hair you just can’t tell these days,” Mr. Munch said. “But it looked, just looked, like a woman.”

Another witness, a man who



Associated Press

Mark James Robert Essex in the Navy in 1969.

was working in the Rault Center and who asked that his name not be used says that he first saw one sniper—whom he described as about 5 foot 9, with light skin and an Afro haircut—and that after returning with policemen to the eighth floor of the center he saw two snipers together.

He said the light-skinned man he had seen before was crouched in the bushes on the swimming-pool patio holding a rifle in his right hand and motioning with his left hand for a companion to stay inside

a room.

'Short and Skinny'

"The one in the room was short and skinny and had dark skin," the witness said. "He was the one who got killed."

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.

Patrolman Paul A. Persigo, who grew his own varieties of hybrid roses in his backyard and was said to be the youngest accredited rose judge in the country, was crouched behind a patrol car. Before he left the house that morning he had told his wife, Judy, to be sure not to open the birthday present he had bought her.

He rose up to peer over the hood and fell back, fatally shot through the head.

Patrolman Philip Coleman arrived at the hotel. Before he could take cover, he, too, was shot through the head and died.

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

As guests streamed down the stairs to escape the fires, a police officer, Michael Burl, and a police mechanic, Bobby Childress, volunteered to go through the hotel to help them.

One holding the door open with his foot, the other checking the hallways, they rode the elevator to the 16th floor. There, a woman they later described as "a little old lady" was patiently waiting for the elevator. She got on, went to the back of the car and faced the rear, riding down to the lobby without uttering a word.

Meanwhile, on the ground, Deputy Superintendent Sirgo, the second-ranking officer in

the department, heard that Mr. Childress was trapped on the same floor as a sniper. Dressed in civilian clothes and carrying a shotgun, he led a squad up the stairwell.

The police are still not exactly certain where Superintendent Sirgo's death occurred. But from the account of one policeman who was with him, it appeared that the men had come out on the 17th floor thinking it was the 18th.

The hallway was pitch-black and filled with smoke, the policeman said, and it was almost impossible to see. He said a man apparently jumped out of a room behind the deputy superintendent, fired one shot into his back, blowing out a section of his backbone, and disappeared in the darkness.

Periods of Silence

There would be long periods 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 for 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, Mr. Frashier counted 11 bullet holes in the wall within a foot and a half of where he had been.

Out on the 11th-floor balcony, the Streckers were huddled against the brick wall at about 1:30 P.M. when they heard a loud shot—sounding as if it had come from inside their room—come through the curtain into the glass. Then someone started trying to smash the window glass from the inside.

The young honeymooners climbed over the balcony into the next room, where a middle-aged couple, Ray and Florence Pfrehm of Houston, had bolted their door and barricaded it with two chairs.

The two couples lay on the floor, sometimes talking in frightened low tones. Around 2 o'clock, there was a tremendous volley of fire, they remembered, and when the Streckers returned to their room later, they found it bullet-scarred. And the Streckers, who do not smoke, found an ashtray full of cigarettes behind a bed.

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, Lieut. 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.

At 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 zigzag 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.

Guts and Potato Salad

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 a hundred bullets.

The body was identified as that of "Jimmy" Essex, a quiet black youth from a middle-class family in Emporia, Kan., who was said to have developed a hatred for whites while serving in the Navy. In the baggy cargo pockets of his fatigue pants, the police said, were found cherry bombs and firecrackers, along with spare ammunition.

Friends here said that on the night before his death he had enjoyed a dinner of grits and potato salad and said that it might be his last big meal.

Five days after his death, the police found the last of his four addresses here, a \$40-a-month flat whose walls were covered with black and red painted slogans: "Shoot a devil like you shoot a dog pig;" "My destiny lies in the bloody death of all racist pigs," and, scribbled in pencil, "The quest for freedom is death—then by death I shall escape to freedom."

The weapon he carried was broken in four pieces by the 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.

Alex Vega, chief of the police ballistics section, forced a slug through the barrel of the inoperable weapon. He said the weapon had not only killed Deputy Superintendent Sirgo but was also the same rifle that had killed a 19-year-old police cadet, Alfred Harrel, as he stood

talking to another officer at 10:35 on New Year's Eve.

And, the ballistics officer said, it was the same weapon that, 18 minutes later, shot K-9 officer Edwin Hosli as he bent over to release his dog while investigating an alarm in a warehouse five blocks away. Mr. Hosli, 33, his insides ripped apart by the heavy slug, is in critical condition at Charity Hospital, kept alive only by machines circulating fresh blood into his system.

Several reporters at the scene are convinced that they saw or heard another sniper on the rooftop after Essex was killed.

John McMillan of The New Orleans Times-Picayune says that at about 1:40 A.M. on Monday, Jan. 8, while on the 15th floor of the Rault Center at about the same level as the roof, he heard a voice shout, "you honky pigs... why don't you [obscenities] come on the roof like a black man."

A United Press International reporter, Joe Manguno, on the 17th floor of the center, said that shortly after Essex was killed he saw a man stick a rifle out of one of the concrete cubicles, shout "power to the people" and fire twice at the helicopter.

Another U.P.I. reporter, Darrell Mack of the Houston Bureau, says he is certain he saw muzzle flashes from a small ledge behind the central blockhouse at 5:03 A.M.

Inside the hotel, the police had worked their way to the upper stories. Some of the police have reported that they think they heard conversation between a man and a woman on the roof.

The 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."

At about 5 A.M. on 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 whizzing about them. With three of the men nicked by bullets or flying concrete, they retreated, with Sergeant O'Sullivan emptying his machine gun through the roof. In retrospect, it appeared that the squad and the men in the helicopter had been firing at each other.

The situation was relatively

quiet throughout the morning, as the police sought additional equipment and tried to formulate plans for an assault. Shortly after 10 A.M., police riflemen in the Rault Center began attempting to shoot a hole in the central blockhouse with armor-piercing bullets.

Meanwhile, the police radio sputtered with reports of snipers, shootings, Negro men seen roaming around various areas of the city with rifles and people shot—all, it turned out, apparently false.

But interspersed among the calls were two of possible significance:

Just after noon, the radio put out a bulletin for cruisers to intercept a green Torino. It had been reported stolen and the occupants, a black man and woman, were said to have just bought 20 rounds of .223 ammunition.

And at around 5 o'clock the radio reported that a store owner had seen a black man drop a police-type jacket near Melpomene and Clairborne and a woman in a green car pick it up.

Meanwhile, the police were completing preparations for a long-awaited assault on the rooftop. But in 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 by an engineer.

At 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. The policemen dashed, some tripping in their anxiety, from one of the blasted-out stairwell bunkers.

Soon there were about 30 officers on the roof, some 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 back and fell. They had been hit by chips of flying concrete.

As the police moved gingerly about the roof, an officer arrived with a yellow 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.