

Sniper

How to Preempt TV Time

NEW ORLEANS—A nation injured to visual violence may have found a new benchmark last week: the dramatic network television coverage of police attempts to dislodge a sniper from the roof of the high-rise Howard Johnson's Motel across from the New Orleans City Hall.

Never mind that the ending was anticlimactic. Embarrassed members of the volunteer assault team—except for three or four felled by ricochets from blazing police guns — peered down empty air-conditioning ducts or elevator shafts, then shuffled around the riddled body of Mark James Robert Essex. A slight, 23-year-old Black from Emporia, Kan., he had been shot the previous night, after being flushed out of hiding by a helicopter attack. Networks pre-empted valuable Monday daytime shows, including com-

mercials, so that the afternoon audience might watch a real-life drama.

Despite the immediate insistence of some state and local officials that the sniping was part of a national black-militant plot to kill policemen, there are those who wonder about the significance of the event. Most of the sketchy evidence available, from witnesses—while it shows that there may have been one or perhaps two other persons involved with Essex in the incident—does not seem to point to a national conspiracy.

In addition to Essex, six persons, including three policemen, were killed in the shooting. A score of others were wounded, eight of them seriously. A big local news story.

Network television time is usually limited to Presidential speeches, manned space shots, the assassination of major political figures. Natural disasters talking the lives of thousands have waited their turn on the scheduled news shows. Why, then, the coverage of the super hunt?

Probably, because it was there. All afternoon and well into the night last Sunday, local stations filled much of their air time with the siege of the motel—the downtown of their familiar city was turned into a battle scene.

More than 600 policemen cordoned off the 18-story motel, some dashing from parked car to protective pole to safe corner, while others lurked men-

acingly on the roofs of nearby buildings. Sirens wailed, bullhorns squawked and thousands of shots whined through the Sunday air. Red blood—seen in living color—spurred from those who were hit. By nightfall the clattering of a helicopter filled with police marksmen heightened the drama. Hovering over the motel roof, it beamed its spotlight on corners where the sniper or snipers were thought to be hiding.

It was tracer bullets fired from the helicopter that had cut down Essex as he stood on the hotel roof and fired back at the aircraft. Witnesses said that before the shooting started he had shouted "Power to the people."

For many home viewers, it was like watching a high-wire performer work without a net—evoking a stomach-clutching fear that tragedy would occur.

But, for those who walked the tight-rope, things were somewhat different. For eight hours Ed Frasher, a 36-year-old director of sales for a Baton Rouge hotel was trapped in Room 1825. Most of that time he spent lying flat or crouched on the balcony outside his room to escape smoke that was coming from fires set by the sniper or snipers inside. At one point, a sniper was firing from the next room, and police bullets were chipping concrete from the building so uncomfortably close.

From time to time, television view-

ers could see Mr. Frasher wave an arm in a seemingly casual gesture. It wasn't. He knew the police bullets were real. "I wanted everybody to know I was alive," he said later. "I thought they might not be so careful of their shooting if they thought I was dead."

No matter what history makes of the New Orleans shootout, one person at least hopes the nation finds a lesson in it—Mrs. Mark Essex, mother of the dead sniper. Friends described him as a cheerful boy who had returned from a tour in the Navy a bitter hater of whites.

"I don't want my son to have died in vain," Mrs. Essex said. "If this terrible thing will awaken white America to the injustices that blacks suffer then some good will have come of it."

Mrs. Essex told a television interviewer that a series of incidents while he was in the Navy had influenced her son. She said these included white guards stopping her son more often than they did whites; white policemen, presumably in San Diego where he was based, frisking her son more often than whites, and complaints by white sailors about soul music being played too loud in her son's barracks.

"You know," she said, "you just keep on putting a little snow on top of snow and pretty soon it's going to break. Jimmy wanted to be a man."

—DOUGLAS E. KNEELAND



The body of New Orleans sniper Mark Essex, riddled by policemen's bullets, lies sprawled on the roof of the motel he held under siege: "Red blood—as seen by TV viewers in living color . . ."

Chris Hertis/Camera 52