

Bloody Sunday

A reporter's story

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/northern_ireland/2000/bloody_sunday_inquiry/681424.stm

John Bierman was the BBC TV journalist who covered Bloody Sunday in 1972. Sent to report on what started out as a civil rights demonstration, he and his crew ended up in the middle of the shooting.



John Bierman caught on camera during Bloody Sunday.

It started off as a routine assignment, covering a civil rights demonstration of the kind that was so common in Northern Ireland at the time.

It ended up as a story of the kind that falls into a reporter's lap perhaps once in his career - and arguably the gravest internal security incident in British post-war history.

BBC Television News headquarters in London had assigned two crews to the story - one to cover the demonstration from the standpoint of the security forces, the other to go into the Bogside, Londonderry's Catholic ghetto, to cover the march from the viewpoint of the demonstrators.

That was my task, along with my cameraman Cyril Cave and his sound recordist.

We expected some trouble of course - jostling, stone-throwing, angry confrontation between demonstrators and the security forces, even CS gas and rubber bullets if things got out of hand. But live rounds and 14 fatal shootings, certainly not.

'Get the hell out'

The first inkling of serious trouble came when we were surrounded by an angry mob of civilians in the forecourt of a block of flats, claiming that a young man had been shot in the leg by the army.

Into view, crouching low and waving a blood-soaked white handkerchief, came a dog-collared priest.

Some of them wanted to take us to where the wounded man lay so that we could film him. Others wanted to lynch us.

An authoritative-sounding man in a trench coat advised us to 'get the hell out while you can'. We obliged.

Some minutes later we and other TV crews were temporarily incapacitated by CS gas, fired by the security forces during a tense confrontation with demonstrators throwing stones and insults.

Then police water cannons opened up, putting the demonstrators to flight - and knocking out of action, as we learned later, all TV cameras but our own.

As we began to recover from the effects of the CS gas, an old lady living alone nearby invited us into her home for a cup of tea. Sitting in her modest parlour we heard the sound of live rounds being fired outside - distinct from the heavy thump of 'baton' rounds that fire tear gas or rubber bullets. Emerging into the street we witnessed an extraordinary sight.

'Hold your fire'

On a street corner in front of us a paratrooper had taken up a firing position. Single-shot gunfire could be heard. From up the street, to our left but out of sight, we heard a voice call out: 'Hold your fire.'

Then into view, crouching low and waving a blood-soaked white handkerchief, came a dog-collared priest. Behind him came two men carrying a third - a youth, whose chest was covered in blood. I had little doubt he was mortally wounded.

We felt horribly vulnerable as we ran, not knowing for sure where the firing was coming from or whether we might run into crossfire.

The para on the corner moved towards them - a spontaneous movement, as if to offer help, or so it seemed to me. 'Get away you bastard,' snarled one of the men.

All this was being captured on film and the camera followed the priest, the dying man and his two bearers as they made their way up the street.

Moments later my crew and I were racing across a patch of open ground, looking for more incidents, as the sound of firing continued. We felt horribly vulnerable as we ran, not knowing for sure where the firing was coming from or whether we might run into crossfire.

Tense interviews

On the pavement in front of some shops we saw two bodies. One man lay in his stockinged feet, his shoes beside him. Anxious and bewildered onlookers clustered around until a further burst of rifle fire sent them scurrying for cover.

Among them I saw the priest I had seen earlier - Father Daly, who later became Bishop of Derry. I conducted a tense, on-the-spot interview with him.

I walked up to Ford and began questioning him about the events of the last hour or so. He seemed to have very little idea about what had actually occurred.

Up to now I had been too busy chasing the action to give much thought to the implications of what we had witnessed - live rounds fired and at least three dead bodies. What had happened to turn an initially peaceful civil rights march into this?

But the clock was ticking on and I began to worry about my deadline. We had more than enough material 'in the can' and I would have to get back with it to Belfast for processing, editing and scripting if I was to get it on the main Sunday evening news bulletin.

But on the way out of the Bogside we ran into another incident that provided a further vital element to the story. Ahead of us as we walked, standing at the roadside in conversation with another officer, was General Ford, Commander of Land Forces in Northern Ireland.

With Cyril Cave's camera still running I walked up to Ford and began questioning him about the events of the last hour or so. He seemed to have very little idea about what had actually occurred, which - to say the least - seemed to me surprising.

Editorial decisions

Still, I had no time for reflection. Cyril hurriedly transferred his exposed film from magazine to can - this was well before the days of videotape - and I raced off towards Belfast, an hour and more away by road.

Once there, I rushed the film into 'soup' - the processing mixture - and waited another hour or so for the result while I told the editor of the day in London what we had seen.

I scribbled out my script as we went along, but the deadline was so close that I hadn't time to finish it and had to ad lib the last few minutes of voice-over live on air.

Up to that point nobody in London seemed to realise that there had been a massacre and, as I learned later, high-level consultations went on about how much length and prominence should be given to my report.

Without waiting for the official version, which eventually said that 13 civilians had been killed (a 14th died later from his wounds), the BBC powers-that-be sent me word that the bulletin that night would be open-ended and I should let my report run for as long as it needed.

This seemed to me at the time - and still does today - stirring affirmation of the confidence the BBC put in its reporters. This was, after all, an extremely sensitive story and one misjudgement might have landed us all in very hot water.

Sitting by an editing machine in Belfast, I gave instructions to the film editor and together we produced a report that ran as I recall to 13 minutes - a lifetime in TV news terms. I scribbled out my script as we went along, but the deadline was so close that I hadn't time to finish it and had to ad lib the last few minutes of voice-over live on air.