

JONESTOWN AND THE CITY HALL ASSASSINATIONS

Ten days That Shook the City

Duffy Jennings, Special to The Chronicle
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Last of Three Parts

Monday, nov. 27, 1978. 10:35 a.m.

I'm sitting at my desk in the city room on the third floor of The Chronicle at Fifth and Mission streets, reading the newspaper and waiting for a story to do.

A moment later, assignment editor Richard Hemp beckons me urgently as he hangs up a call from Bob Popp, our police beat reporter stationed at the Hall of Justice.

"Some kind of police activity going on at City Hall," Hemp says. "Lots of units responding."

"On the way, Dick," I answer, already out of my chair, grabbing my coat and notebook. "What do we know?"

"Report of a shooting is all. Call me from the car."

In front of him on the desk stands a small microphone wired directly to head photographer Gordon Peters down the hall. Hemp leans in to the mike, presses down the button. The radio crackles to life.

"Shots fired at City Hall, Gordo. I'm sending Duffy."

"Roger, Dick," Peters responds. "Clem's up."

I meet photographer Clem Albers hustling out of the photo lab. We rush down to his blue Chevy Corvair staff photographer's car parked behind the building and take off up Mission for the short ride to City Hall. Rounding the corner at Seventh, I lift the two-way radio microphone from its holder on the dashboard, pull it to my chin and push my thumb down on the talk switch.

"Jennings to desk. Any more details, Gunny?" I ask Hemp, an ex-Marine Corps gunnery sergeant

who at 59 still walks with a drill instructor's upright swagger and wears his dress shirts heavily starched and creased in the back. An ex-Marine myself, I use the Corps' informal term for his rank.

"Popp says the mayor may have been shot," Hemp replies. "And now we have shots fired in the supervisors' offices, too. I'm sending two more teams."

"Sandy's on the beat today," he continues, referring to reporter Maitland "Sandy" Zane. "Meet him up there, and call me as soon as you know more."

"Aye, aye, Gunny. Over and out."

Clem guns the accelerator.

10:45 a.m.

In the second-floor press room at City Hall, San Francisco Examiner reporter K. Connie Kang drops the phone, bursts out of her cubicle and runs past Zane. "SHOOTING IN THE MAYOR'S OFFICE!" she yells and races out the door. Zane leaps to his feet and chases after her across the building to Room 200, the mayor's office.

10:50 a.m.

Clem pulls up to the Polk Street entrance, parks diagonally against the curb. Black-and-white units converge from every direction, sirens wailing, tires squealing. My first thought is that this looks like a scene from "Dirty Harry." I wonder if this is really just a movie shoot and we heard the police radio wrong.

We bolt up the front steps to the gilded entry doors, flash our press credentials at officers guarding the entry and vault the inside stairs two at a time up to Room 200. A chaotic scene unfolds. Plainclothes detectives, officers in uniform and city officials scurry in and out of the mayor's main office door and through two side doors to the inner offices.

Off to my right, the elevator door opens, and out rushes KGO-TV reporter Peter Cleaveland. He almost collides with two fast-moving cops, one with his service revolver drawn, another holding a shotgun aloft. "GET DOWN!" one of them barks. Instantly, I drop into a crouch against the wall, glancing around for a shooter. Cleaveland tries to enter the mayor's outer office.

"Not this time!" snaps the officer barring the door.

Two plainclothes officers emerge from a side door of the mayor's offices. "El alcalde esta muerto," one of them says in a hushed tone, Spanish for "the mayor is dead."

"Is Moscone dead?" I ask another officer. "Who shot him? Is Mel Wax here?" I am hoping that Wax,

Moscone's press secretary, will confirm something, anything
sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/...

Moscone's press secretary, will confirm something, anything.

"Wait'll the chief gets here," comes the terse reply.

This is so unreal, so confusing, I think. Why won't they tell us anything? I wonder if this is connected to the mass suicides of the Peoples Temple cult at Jonestown, Guyana, only nine days before.

Just then, a side door to the mayor's office opens and two coroner's aides wheel out a gurney with a shrouded corpse strapped to it, heading toward the elevator. Surprisingly, Channel 7 cameraman Al Bullock squeezes into the elevator with them, dutifully filming the transfer down to the medical examiner's van parked outside.

I dash across the building to the supervisors' suite of offices on the Van Ness Avenue side, where about two dozen reporters and photographers are gathered outside the main door, also guarded by uniformed officers.

Zane and two other Chronicle reporters, George Draper and Ralph Craib, are there with Kang. So are Barbara Taylor and Jim Hamblin from KCBS, KYA radio reporter Larry Brownell and news director Greg Jarrett, KPIX-TV newsman Ed Arnow, Dick Leonard from KGO radio, Bob McCormick from KFRC, Cleaveland and a dozen others.

We collect in small knots, compare notes, what's known for sure. Two men are dead, police have now confirmed, but no names are disclosed. Fretful minutes pass while detectives scuttle by grim-faced and silent. Wild rumors spread that a Peoples Temple hit squad has taken out Moscone and Milk, that gunmen might still be lurking in the building. We're buzzing with nervous speculation, fear, disbelief.

I duck back into The Chronicle bureau office just across the hall from the supervisors' offices. I call the city desk to check in.

"I think Moscone and Milk are dead," I blurt, gulping air, heart pounding in my chest. "Not confirmed ... no suspect yet ... they might still be here ... can't get into the mayor's or supes' offices ... cops everywhere ... it's total chaos up here. We're still waiting for some official word."

Just as I hang up, Zane pokes his head in the door and shouts:

"Announcement in the hall in five minutes!"

11:05 a.m.

I elbow my way into the crush of newspeople and others stampeding up the ornate marble stairs beneath the City Hall rotunda. The enormity of it all is finally starting to sink in. A double assassination?

At that moment, Dianne Feinstein emerges from the Board of Supervisors' offices, closely flanked by Police Chief Charles Gain on one side and by her aide, Peter Nardoza, on the other, almost as if they are holding her up. She is smartly dressed in a royal blue jacket and skirt and a white blouse with a blue-and-white paisley scarf knotted around her neck.

Feinstein stops at the top of the stairwell. She is ashen-faced, staring straight ahead. I can't remember ever seeing a more horrified expression. Looking over the anxious group of reporters in front of her, Feinstein fixes her gaze on me, her eyes drilling into mine as if we're having a private interview.

Years later, in an interview with The Chronicle, Feinstein recalled that moment. "I remember going out and making an announcement," she said. "I'll never forget Duffy Jennings, for some reason. I saw Duffy, and I don't know why, but I will never forget his eyes, the eyes of that group, the press and others. It was like the world stopped."

She is clearly steeling herself for what she is about to say. We all fall quiet. In the hush, the only sound is that of shutters click-click-clicking. Lights atop TV cameras are ablaze, bleaching the entire scene. I try to scribble notes, but my hands are shaking.

"As president of the Board of Supervisors," she begins, her voice weak and trembling, "... it's my duty to make this announcement." She pauses, inhales deeply, exhales. "Both Mayor Moscone ... and Supervisor Harvey Milk ... have been shot ... and killed."

"JESUS CHRIST!" Zane yells. "OH MY GOD!" shouts McCormick. A collective gasp goes up, an outburst of audible shock and horror I've never heard from veteran newspeople, inured as they are to executions, war, riots, plane crashes. All around us, city workers shudder in disbelief, some sobbing.

Feinstein continues.

"The suspect ... is Supervisor Dan White."

Without another word, she and the chief turn and walk back inside her office.

11:10 a.m.

I call Hemp with the confirmation. "All right," he says. "Draper's writing the lead. Sandy will do White. You do City Hall, the reaction, the mood, what it's like there. Call back when you're ready."

The city was in shock. So was The Chronicle.

Carl Nolte, the assistant city editor that day and still on The Chronicle staff, put it this way when we talked recently: "We didn't know what the hell was going on. We just had one of our own guys shot down in a South American jungle, now this. No one really knew much about Dan White. We knew our politicians could be weird, but they didn't just shoot each other. It knocked a hole in what we

thought San Francisco was about. It shook the city to its roots. It was a crazy-ass day."

White surrendered soon after the killings. Six months later, I covered his murder trial, sitting with the late Jim Wood of the Examiner inside the bullet-proof glass separating the trial participants from the courtroom gallery.

On May 21, 1979, when the astonishing verdict of voluntary manslaughter came in, I rushed back to the office, pounded out the story, then went back out to join the other Chronicle staffers covering the ensuing "White Night" riot at the Civic Center.

I was more distraught than I admitted publicly, even to myself, over Moscone's death and White's lenient verdict. As The Chronicle's City Hall reporter during Moscone's first two years in office, I knew the mayor well from our frequent briefings in the same back parlor where White gunned him down.

From time to time, his Kennedyesque charisma and my close relationships with some of his top staff tested my journalistic objectivity, and that was one reason I returned to general assignment reporting.

I didn't realize it immediately, but a decade of one terrible event after another was taking its toll. I was barely out of my 20s, and I had already covered what many young reporters would consider a career's worth of big stories.

The Zodiac case, the Patricia Hearst kidnapping, the Zebra killings, the Golden Dragon restaurant massacre - I had shared in the newspaper's reporting on these sensational crimes and other major stories.

In between, I worked graveyard shifts on the police beat, went on call 24/7 with homicide detectives, fought fires with Engine Co. 21 and wrote about more death, disaster and destruction than I care to remember.

By 1980, I was burned out. I left the paper to be the Giants' publicity director and later went into a public relations career.

Now the 30th anniversary of that historic November is upon us. What stays with me today, more than my eye-to-eye exchange with now-Sen. Feinstein that burnished the moment into memory for both of us, is an understanding of how Moscone changed the city forever. Sadly, his legacy has been overshadowed by the memory not of how he lived, but of the way he died.

Moscone had his critics, some with good reason, but he loved San Francisco, a passion I share as a fellow native. An entire generation of San Franciscans today knows little about him other than the convention center bears his name.

He fought against racism and for civil rights, against downtown power brokers and for neighborhoods. He opened the doors of City Hall and the seats of power to people from all walks of

neighborhoods. He opened the doors of City Hall and the seats of power to people from all walks of life, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation. As deservedly iconic and significant as Harvey Milk has become to the gay community, it was Moscone who broke down the barriers.

His was a remarkable story in its own right. Perhaps on one of these anniversaries, Hollywood will give us a movie titled "Moscone."

Dates in dan white's life

Sept. 2, 1946: Dan White is born in Long Beach. The son of a firefighter, White grows up in San Francisco.

November 1977: A conservative former police officer, White is elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors after a campaign in which he pledges to defend traditional values. In the same election, Harvey Milk - openly gay and liberal - is also elected to the board.

Nov. 10, 1978: White impulsively resigns from the board, citing financial difficulties. Pressed by his supporters, he later asks Mayor George Moscone to reappoint him. Moscone initially agrees. But he is dissuaded by Milk and others who see White as a political foe.

Nov. 27, 1978: Moscone is ready to appoint Don Horanzy, a federal housing official, to fill White's seat. White takes his gun to City Hall, avoiding the metal detector by climbing through a basement window. He goes to Moscone's office, argues with him and kills him. Then he confronts and kills Milk. Hours later, he surrenders to police.

May 21, 1979: After White is convicted of voluntary manslaughter, not murder, angry protesters burn police cars in what becomes known as the "White Night Riots."

January 1984: White is paroled after serving more than five years in prison.

Oct. 21, 1985: White kills himself, using a hose to funnel carbon monoxide into a car in the garage of his family's house in San Francisco's Excelsior district.

Duffy Jennings covered the City Hall slayings for The Chronicle. Today he is a Bay Area public relations consultant and freelance writer.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/11/18/MNA1142BPH.DTL>

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