

Opinion

Victims suffer more than criminals ever could

It was about 5 a.m., August 1985.

I was the assistant manager of a Houston restaurant, about half of a mile inside the city limits. We had a breakfast manager, but he needed at least one day off each week, and this time it was my turn to fill in for him.

As always, I had had three hours of sleep. I pulled into the parking lot and looked around at a few abandoned cars, a truck and the lighted stores in the strip shopping center. Nothing peculiar. A gas station was across the street, a dim arc light burning 20 feet off the ground.

I got out of my car and wearily walked toward the front door, turning the dozen or so keys over in my hand. It was then that I noticed something out of the corner of my eye — something moving. It came from the truck. I turned and saw a man slightly shorter than me, but much stronger, coming toward me with jumper cables dangling from his hands.

He said, "I need a jump," or something to that effect. I should have thought, "Something's wrong; why 5 a.m., why am I standing here, why don't I get out of here?"

But I didn't. And he continued walking toward me, very calmly with a normal gait.

About 15 feet away he repeated his request. When he got within five feet, I looked him right in the eye, and I knew he was going to rob me.

"This is a hold-up," he said. "Stay calm, I've got a gun." He said it almost matter-of-factly, as if he had practiced it for hours before trying it out on me. While he said this, he casually pulled his shirt up, revealing a gun sticking barrel-down in his pants. In hindsight, it might have been interesting to see a court's decision had I reached out and pulled the trigger. Self defense? Creative capital punishment? Thank God, I did nothing.

A painful chill went through my body. I was absolutely still, rigid, for what seemed an eternity. After a few seconds, I managed to calm myself and find enough energy to say, "What do you want me to do?"

"Just open up the store and let's get to the safe."

"You're right," I said, as if he could be wrong. The truth sounds so easy behind the barrel of a gun.

I gambled twice. I figured he either didn't know or didn't care about the store's alarm. So when I turned the key to unlock the door, I didn't attempt going to the back of the store and deactivating it within the required 45 seconds. I calmly led him to the office and turned on all the lights.

But that wasn't the most important

alarm. If the alarm panel back at the ADT security office started blinking when the store alarm was tripped, the guard would figure I hadn't turned it off in time and would wait for my call. If I didn't call, then he would investigate.

The store also was rigged with about six "hold-up buttons," one under each cash register, one in the cooler and the freezer and one under the counter in the manager's office.

As we walked in the office, I made certain that my back covered my hands long enough for me to hit the button. In as natural a move as possible, I put both my hands on the counter, reached under it with my thumb, pushed the button and calmly knelt to open the safe. Another alarm was in the safe, but at this point it didn't matter.

I opened the safe and pulled out a bag of about \$60 in coins and small bills — pocket change compared to the thousands of dollars that sat directly above it in another safe. I told him that safe couldn't be opened without a special procedure, which wasn't exactly true.

He must have figured that he had wasted too much time, because he shoved the money into a small gym bag, told me to stay where I was and left.

I was past nervousness, past shock, past simple fear. The adrenalin pumping through my heart put me into a semi-dizzy, semi-alert state. At that point I could have run the three-minute mile.

I got up and peeked around the corner. He was gone. About one minute later I heard the door creak open. I looked through the one-way mirror and saw a Harris County deputy crouching, gun out, looking around. I relaxed and told him he was too late.

But while the robber was gone, my ordeal was far from over.

In his technically correct handwriting, the deputy got my whole story down.

"No, I can't remember what kind of shoes. No, I can't remember what color the gym bag was. Scruffy beard. No, I don't know anything about guns. It was big, and it looked like it could fulfill its designer's purpose. No, no scars or birthmarks. He had the meanest look I've ever seen, does that count?"

About two weeks later I went to a detective agency, as per the restaurant's policy, to take a polygraph test. I hate polygraphs. It ran pretty smoothly, the background information coming first: name, work history and so forth. And then: Did you know the robber? "No." Had you ever seen him before? "No." Did you agree to split the take with him? "No." And out of the blue: What's eight times 16? I was confused for a second, but then answered 128.

He explained that he just wanted to make sure I wasn't under the influence of any alcohol or drugs.

I didn't think anymore about the robbery until I got a letter in December from the sheriff's office saying that it was my responsibility as a witness to appear in court if needed. I'd be glad to help without being asked.

Then I got a call from the detective assigned to the case. He first followed up on some information, but then he asked me to come downtown to look at a lineup.

I went down to the sheriff's office the next day. There was a woman there who was also going to look at the lineup. Apparently, this guy had knocked over a few stores in his time. We went in one at a time.

The lights were off so they couldn't see us through the mirror. I saw him. He had shaved, but I knew his look, his jaw, the half-nervous, half-defiant way he stood in line. Yes, that's him, third from the right. The woman wasn't sure, but my memory was good enough for them.

I quit my job in January in order to come back to A&M for the spring semester.

The second week of the semester, I drove back to Houston for the arraignment, and I was the star witness.

It didn't get to a jury trial, fortunately. His court-appointed lawyer plea bargained a 24 year sentence, eight of which he had to serve. He couldn't get time off for good behavior because he had used the weapon.

And so it ended. Naturally, people are supposed to learn something from their experiences. They're supposed to "grow," to "mature," to become "more worldly."

For crime victims it's different. I know I can't speak for all of them, and I'm not going to try. I'll just tell you what it's done to me. It's made me more cynical, paranoid and emotionally more fragile. No, I'm not going to be tomorrow's criminal. Everybody's paranoid to a degree, if Freud can be believed. But it has changed me, maybe permanently. No longer will I be able to read about crime, or watch a violent movie in quite the same way. No longer will I assume that someone has "only good intentions." And trusting strangers will be even more difficult.

In direct contrast and coexisting with those feelings are the ways in which it has helped me. For the longest time I've heard the well-worn, almost threatening advice: "you only live once," and "life is short." Well, I've learned they're well-worn for a reason: they're true. I take more chances now, and enjoy life more.

There is nothing more emotionally traumatic than to have your life — your very existence — threatened. Whatever the consequences, it's something I'll never be able to forget.

Robert Dowdy is a senior English major and a guest columnist for The Battalion.

Robert Dowdy

Guest Columnist

Good news is no news

I recently spent an entire week without any news. It was great.

I was out in the Greek isles somewhere sailing around and doing very little else, and not once did I come into contact with even the slightest bit of news.

I had no idea what was going on in South Korea, with Irangate, or with the latest analysis of how much longer the world population can make it without all of us dying of AIDS.

I became quite relaxed as a result of this. My food also tasted and digested better and the nervous habit I've had of wiggling my left foot even went away.

I thought to myself, "I wish everybody could have such an experience."

It's the news that makes most of us worry and get ulcers and do stupid things like running five or six miles in extreme heat.

And you can't escape the news. So you don't read a paper for four or five

days, and you avoid evening news broadcasts on television.

Somebody will still walk up to you and say, "Hey, did you read in the paper where the earth is getting hotter and will burn to a crisp sometime between next Monday and the year 3000?"

If you don't have the news to disturb and concern you, your outlook on life, I discovered, improves dramatically.

You can watch the beauty of a sunrise over the Aegean and say to yourself, "Nobody is stupid enough to blow all this up with a bomb."

You really can believe things like that when you're not getting any news.

You can watch three generations — father, his son, and his son — build a boat by hand on some remote island where fishing has fed the inhabitants for hundreds of years and come away convinced maybe there are some things and some people a computer will never replace.

You can eat fresh tomatoes and cucumbers in a tavern with its own garden and forget there is such a thing as fast food or that if you eat too much bacon you can get cancer.

You can take a nap in the middle of the day and not give a damn what latest

craziness had been attributed to Oliver North.

You can plunge into the clear sea in some deserted cove and never once consider who's going to get the Democratic nomination for president in 1988. (I personally think it's going to wind up being Sam Nunn, but who cares? An octopus could be about to grab your bag.)

You can visit a 700-year-old monastery and wrap yourself in the quiet sacredness of the place, and never once wonder how many people died that day in some nuthouse holy war.

You can breathe the salt air and feel the spray on your face as your boat chops onward under sail and it matters not that there is a new rock song out titled, "I Want Your Sex."

You can even look at a nude bather lying on the rocky Aegean shore sunning his buttocks and never once think of Ed Meese.

Then, after all that, you can take leave of that setting and buy the International Herald Tribune in the Athens airport, and the first thing you read is Oral Roberts is now claiming he has raised the dead.

Film, I suppose, at 11.

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Lewis Grizzard

Mail Call

Media distort news through liberal bias

EDITOR:

Trying to present a different aspect of the Oliver North testimony I conducted an unscientific survey of some Houston, Dallas and local papers (including The Battalion). Out of 24 editorials, 19, or 80 percent, viewed North personally as a villainous figure of one degree or another randomly breaking laws to reach his goals. In contrast, many legal experts have questioned if any of his actions were illegal leading to the larger question of the legality of the Boland amendment or even the congressional hearing itself. Furthermore, a large majority of the public views North much better, seeing him as, at the least, a patriot.

The interesting point is that before the public or professional sectors had access to the unfiltered information provided by the public hearings, their views were uncannily similar to that held by the media. This provides a modern example of how the organized media present information in the tinted light in which they perceive it, whether it be tilted to the right or left. The news anchor, commentators and editors apparently can only control the attitude of the populous by providing disinformation. As in this case, if they provide the actual raw information, people tend to form their own views apart from that held by the media.

As long as journalism continues to attract certain sectors of society into its ranks (the majority being liberal), this situation will continue. The business world has a similar problem. It attracts the more conservative people into its realm. Of course the difference is that the business world makes the news. Journalism simply becomes parasitic to the news others create.

Ron Rice

Too much staff parking going unused

EDITOR:

Fine. I've been parking on Wellborn Road this week due to the firemen living in the dorms and parking in the lots that we each pay \$16 for. Anyway, this wasn't quite enough to infuriate me to write the letter. No, Ags. Today I parked (amazingly enough) in the Belltower lot (I live in Haas), and as I was walking to my dorm, I almost threw up as I rambled through a staff lot about 30 percent occupied. Wellborn and girls, it's obvious something needs to be done about these terrible empty staff lots in order to cure the already terminal student parking problem. Somebody please tell me how we can change this and help me move to do it. Otherwise, I'll continue to park in the Rocky Mountains and continue to pay all my money to do so. Oh, by the way I'm quite impressed with how the new parking garage is coming along. I'd like to think my parking fee went to good use, but I know that the lot is destined to be another empty "staff only" lot.

Pete Owens '89

There's more to Reagan's election than just personality

EDITOR:

If the public elected President Reagan twice only because of his personality, then the public is an ass. If we are asses, we'd have voted with Palmeyer for that winner of a state or two Mondales. Also, the best and brightest of the military, except for Eisenhower and Washington, don't belong in politics. Yes, I'm a conservative, though not a demigod. But if being one would give me an intellect equal to Adm. Poindexter's, and the dedication to a worthy cause such as that of Lt. Col. North, sign me up.

David Harrell

Hearings a diversion from more important things

EDITOR:

I cannot but help cringe at the remarkable similarities between the Iran-Contra hearings and George Orwell's "Two minutes of hate" in his novel 1984. They both serve an identical purpose — to rally a nation's people around a purported "patriotic" event. Have we as a nation become so naive that we do not understand the true purpose of these hearings? These hearings serve three purposes:

1. To unite the nation by causing all of its citizens to combine in search of "justice." It's been long known that the best way to bind people together is to give them a common enemy.

2. To promote the illusion that we, as Americans, can actually have an influence in the dealings of our highest officials. The President and his men have always had the final say in all secret dealings. Remember the Bay of Pigs? Our "advisers" in Vietnam?

3. To keep the public's mind off more pressing matters. Did poverty and unemployment disappear when Oliver North took the stand? Of course not. But by watching television or reading the papers you would never know.

Enough is enough America. Wake up and smell the coffee. What happened has happened, and it is too late to change it. We should unite to face the challenges of the future.

Hope Warren '89

Letters to the editor should not exceed 300 words in length. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must be signed and must include the classification, address and telephone number of the writer.

The Battalion

(USPS 045 360)

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The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes in the Department of Journalism.

The Battalion is published Monday through Friday in Texas A&M regular semesters, except for holidays and vacation periods.
Mail subscriptions are \$17.44 per semester, \$34.88 per year and \$86.44 per full year. Advertising rates published on request.
Our address: The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4111.
Second class postage paid at College Station, TX 77843.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4111.