

the village

VOICE

Bullets in Beijing

(LEE & BERMAN)

REPORT FROM A MASSACRE, P.27)

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Bullets in Beijing

BY SUSANNE LEE
& MITCH BERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Susanne Lee is a host of New York Culture for WNYE-FM and a contributing editor to DV-8 magazine; Mitch Berman is a novelist and contributor to the Voice. They left for Beijing a few days before the massacre and signed on as runners for an ABC camera crew on their arrival. When the troops opened fire, they were walking along a side street half a mile from Tiananmen Square.*

BEIJING

THE ABC NEWS CREW gets out of the minibus at Changan and Fuyou, a long Beijing block west of Tiananmen Square. It's impossible to tell whether our eyes are tearing because of the city's usual mix of dust and diesel pollution or because of the residue of tear gas that police were using on protesters at this intersection a few minutes ago. All of us have tied wetted hand towels around our neck. Each bears the monogram of the Great Wall Sheraton.

Changan translates as the Avenue of Eternal Peace, but on this Saturday afternoon the broad, sunny boulevard is choked with hundreds of thousands of protesters. They are milling and shoving, passing rumors, and occasionally climbing to the top of an evacuated military bus to brandish captured boots, helmets, and tear-gas canisters.

Soon after we arrive, a mini-stampede drives us from the street, and we set up on an embankment overlooking the intersection. Small groups knot around us in the hot afternoon air to ask where we're from, urge us to "tell the world," ask us world," ask us why we weren't here when the police were shooting rubber bullets, examine our video and 35-millimeter cameras, and simply to gawk as we Westerners eat or giggle at how fast we write in our notebooks. A vendor with a wooden flat of watermelons sells out within five minutes.

The word on the street is that the military will mount a major offensive tonight, and teenagers scale the framework behind the billboard beside us to watch for signs of attack while their friends stockpile rocks and chunks of cement. On the hour, the oversimplified electronic strains of "The East Is Red" blast from a loudspeaker followed by some tinny chimes. Orwell's Bells, we call them, and it would not surprise us if they were ringing thirteen.

A man comes toward us, his shoulders swiveling through the crowd. "OK! OK!" he shouts. It is the all-purpose English word, and he shows us how the police clubbed open the left side of his nose and shattered three of his front teeth.

The street swells with people getting off work. At 6:50 a government radio announcement warns that the army will now restore order, along with the conflicting admission that certain overzealous soldiers used excessive force and shall be disciplined accordingly. There will be no more violence tonight, the army promises.

By today's standards, very little is going on now. Across from us people occasionally lob rocks over the wall of the Forbidden City into the compound where the government leaders live; for the past hour, 200 troops have been surrounded by 10,000 people at Kentucky Fried Chicken near Tiananmen Square; other troops sighted from the Beijing Hotel were stopped before they could get near the square. After 11, we decide that nothing more is going to happen tonight.

Just as our crowded taxi makes a U-turn on Fuyou to begin back toward the Sheraton, the ABC walkie-talkie lights up with reports of gunfire at Muxidi, in the west of the city.

We turn around, get out behind a hedge at Fuxingmen, and approach Changan on foot. The distant fire from the west sounds like corn popping. At this range, we can't tell whether we're hearing bullets or tear gas.

Bullets. The firing comes closer and a bicyclist screams through the crowd: "They're killing us! They're killing the common people!" A small group of young bicyclists charges the other direction, with helmets, sticks, and a red banner; the crowd, slowly falling back from the intersection, cheers them on. These are the heaviest arms borne by the people on Fuxingmen. The wind changes, and on it comes the sweetish musky smell of gunpowder.

The first few bullets in Fuxingmen sound like none we heard before: not popping corn

nor even .22's on a rifle range, but loud, commanding, immediate. They are firing into this unarmed crowd, and we run bent over, all of us, thousands. There are bullets in Fuxingmen.

We take refuge behind a reeking brick outhouse. People are trying to set buses afire in the intersection, but seem to be having little luck. The soldiers, now passing in full view on Changan, pour automatic rifle fire—hundreds of bullets—into the street where we are moving, and our bodies react before our brains know what they are reacting to. Nothing seems far enough or low enough, and we spring back to the outhouse, crouching behind a dirt mound where the residents are growing a few vegetables. Bullets tear the air directly above our heads. The sound is high, ringing.

About a dozen of us are squatting behind the garden. It takes a minute to realize why nobody is lying on the ground: even with bullets zipping around our heads, a lifetime of habit prevents us from messing up our clothes. We flatten ourselves to the rocky soil.

A very old woman smoking a cigarette comes out from the house behind us and starts yelling in Chinese. At first we think she is berating us for spoiling her garden, but it turns out that she is telling us not to get dirty, and inviting us back to her yard. She goes into her house and reemerges with a glass tumbler in one hand and a small cast-iron wheel in the other. She gives them to us and motions to the water faucet sticking out of the ground between the garden and the outhouse. There may be automatic rifle fire tearing up her windows, but the old woman wants to make certain her guests are as comfortable as possible.

Nobody has any desire to venture out for water, so we politely refuse the glass and ask her if she has a cigarette. She goes back into her house.

On Changan, the city buses barricading the intersection leap into flames 40 feet high just as the army convoy approaches. The troops come in trucks that each hold at least 30 soldiers. For the moment, the convoy is stalled. The old woman comes out with a pack of Hilton cigarettes, a luxury brand still in the cellophane, and half a dozen *bin gur*, the ice-milk popsicles ubiquitous in Beijing. We eat a couple as the producer in charge of our crew barks warnings into the walkie-talkie: "Get our people out of Tiananmen Square! These guys are launching D-Day." The warning is sent out in diluted form by the ABC control room: on the one hand, people we know are in

imminent danger of losing their lives; on the other hand, they may bring back some great footage.

As the flames reach their peak, a few armored personnel carriers in the convoy butt against the barricades. Soon the trucks are on the move through a narrow channel of dying flames. We count 20, 30, 40, and the trucks keep coming.

The bullets are coming too, but we can't tell where from. There are buildings, trees, cars, hard surfaces all around, and the acoustics are deceptive. We dive into the dirt again when we hear the singing.

The old woman discovers that we've lost her good cigarettes, and she implacably produces two fresh packs of her second-string brand. She unfolds a cot for us and squats next to it.

She is well past 70, nowhere near five feet tall, so dark it is difficult to make out her features in the night. Her husky voice comes to us disembodied in the darkness: "Such a thing has never happened before. Even the Japanese didn't do this to us." She inhales and the ember of her cigarette casts a dim glow. "It is unspeakable."

The convoy trucks continue plodding through the intersection, hundreds of them. Earlier in the evening, we were speculating about possible divisions in the leadership. As the first few troop trucks rolled by Fuxingmen, we were still marveling that, although we had been hearing all week about 200,000 troops hidden in the underground and behind the walls of the Forbidden City, there had been no intelligence about the massing of army forces to the west of Beijing. But now we are numbed into silence by the sheer and mounting military might being paraded past us. The crowds, crouched low in the street, hiding behind the outhouse, have begun chanting: "*Zui fan! Zui fan!*" It can be understood as "criminals" or "traitors." The roar is deep and massed, tolling, and higher individual voices distinguish themselves to our ears. They join in from doorways, from windows of houses all around: "*Zui fan! Zui fan!*"

The old woman brings us an enormous bowl of sunflower seeds roasted in the shell. We all begin nervously munching, bent around our walkie-talkies to hear the reports as the first troops roll through the intersection and the sounds of their gunfire recede with them, become .22 shots on a rifle range, become popcorn again. It is 2:15 am., and at least 50,000 soldiers are headed for Tiananmen Square. ■