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Behind the Scenes: Tank Man of Tiananmen

By Patrick Witty Jun. 3, 2009

Update | 12:05 p.m., Thursday, June 4. *In response to this post, a fifth photographer, Terril Jones, has shared with Lens his picture of the impending confrontation, from street level. It has never before been published.*

Update | 10:30 a.m., Wednesday, June 3. *Many readers of “Tank Man of Tiananmen” have mentioned a video of the same incident. Arthur Edelstein provided a link to the footage on YouTube.*

Few images are more recognizable or more evocative. Known simply as “tank man,” it is one of the most famous photographs in recent history.



Twenty years ago, on June 5, 1989, following weeks of huge protests in Beijing and a crackdown that resulted in the deaths of hundreds, a lone man stepped in front of a column of tanks rumbling past Tiananmen Square. The moment instantly became a symbol of the protests as well as a symbol

against oppression worldwide — an anonymous act of defiance seared into our collective consciousnesses.

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“It all started with a man in a white shirt who walked into the street higher than a New Yorker hailing a taxi,” James Barron wrote the following day in *The New York Times*. The picture appeared on the front page of this newspaper as well as in countless other publications around the world.

To this day, the identity and fate of the man in the picture remain unclear. A riveting documentary, “The Tank Man,” by PBS Frontline in 2006 explored his fate. Yet still no one knows for certain who he is or what exactly happened to him. The image is largely blocked on the Internet in China. Despite its iconic status and historical significance elsewhere, most young people there do not recognize the photograph.

There was not just one “tank man” photo. Four photographers captured the encounter that day from the Beijing Hotel, overlooking Changan Avenue (the Avenue of Eternal Peace), their lives forever linked by a single moment in time. They shared their recollections with *The Times* through e-mail.



Charlie Cole was in Beijing on June 5, 1989 for *Newsweek* magazine. His version of the moment is tight — three stacked tanks, painted lines in the road emphasizing the direction of the tanks, all paths leading towards one man. The details are clear and striking: the red star on the tank and the bags held by the man, making it seem like his protest was an afterthought on the way home from work or from the market. Simple, striking, and powerful.

As the sun rose on the morning of the fourth, the automatic weapons fire that had punctuated the night tapered off. Vehicles were smoldering along the main avenues.

Information from around the city was difficult to come by, as movement was pretty much shut down by the PLA (People’s Liberation Army), who had thousands of troops stationed throughout the city and checkpoints at all the main intersections. Stuart Franklin and I had been shooting much of this time together. We had photographed a number of wounded at the hospitals and tried to get as close to citizen-and-army encounters as possible without being detected or arrested.

On the morning of the fifth, we were back on the vantage point of the Beijing Hotel balcony, trying to get a look into what was happening within the square balcony very long when a line of at least 20 Armored Personnel coming down Changan Avenue. At this point, they opened up o they were firing above the crowd or into them, but needless to say, it cleared the streets of the thousand or so persons there. The APC's continued on down the avenue, followed not long after by the line of tanks.

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As the tanks neared the Beijing Hotel, the lone young man walked toward the middle of the avenue waving his jacket and shopping bag to stop the tanks. I kept shooting in anticipation of what I felt was his certain doom. But to my amazement, the lead tank stopped, then tried to move around him. But the young man cut it off again. Finally, the PSB (Public Security Bureau) grabbed him and ran away with him. Stuart and I looked at each other somewhat in disbelief at what we had just seen and photographed.

I think his action captured peoples' hearts everywhere, and when the moment came, his character defined the moment, rather than the moment defining him. He made the image. I was just one of the photographers. And I felt honored to be there.

After taking the picture of the showdown, I became concerned about the PSB's surveillance of our activities on the balcony. I was down to three rolls of film, with two cameras. One roll held the tank encounter, while the other had other good pictures of crowd and PLA confrontations and of wounded civilians at a hospital.

I replaced the final unexposed roll into the one of the cameras, replacing the tank roll, and reluctantly left the other roll of the wounded in the other camera. I felt that if the PSB searched the room or caught me, they would look even harder if there was no film in the cameras.

I then placed the tank roll in a plastic film can and wrapped it in a plastic bag and attached it to the flush chain in the tank of the toilet. I hid my cameras as best I could in the room. Within an hour, the PSB forced their way in and started searching the room. After about five minutes, they discovered the cameras and ripped the film out of each, seemingly satisfied that they had neutralized the coverage. They then forced me to sign a confession that I had been photographing during martial law and confiscated my passport.

Sometime later, I was able to return to the room and retrieve the film, which I took over to the A.P. office and developed. Afterwards, David Berkwitz, who had been sent to Beijing as the Newsweek photo tech-photographer, transmitted the picture to Newsweek in time for our deadline.

In my opinion, it is regretful that this image alone has become the iconic “mother” of the Tiananmen tragedy. This tends to overshadow all the other tremendous photographs that photographers did up to and during the crackdown. Some journalists risked coverage and almost all risked being shot at one time or another. Photographers like James and David Turnley, Peter Charlesworth, Robin Moyer, David Berkwitz, Rei Ohara, Alon Reininger, Ken Jarecke and a host of others contributed to the fuller historical record of what occurred during this tragedy and we should not be lured into a simplistic, one-shot view of this amazingly complex event.

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Stuart Franklin’s photograph feels like a painting. Mr. Franklin, a Magnum photographer on assignment to Time magazine, was shooting from the rooftop with Mr. Cole. He gives us the entire scene. The lone figure’s small space in the frame emphasizes what he’s up against — a burned bus looms in the background, broken remains of the previous night’s violent clashes. Shadows dominate the left side, like storm clouds.

I woke up in the Beijing Hotel to find Changan Avenue occupied by a line of students facing a line of soldiers and a column of tanks. I was hunched down on a balcony on the fifth floor (I think). Three others were also on the balcony: Charlie Cole, a reporter for Actuel in France and one from Vanity Fair. I tried to photograph the whole series of events, but like any photographer working in film, I was always fearful of running out on frame 36!

At some point, shots were fired and the tanks carried on down the road toward us, leaving Tiananmen Square behind, until blocked by a lone protester. I photographed the protester. He carried two shopping bags and remonstrated with the driver of the tank in an act of defiance. He then disappeared into the crowd after being led away from the tank by two bystanders.

The remainder of the day was spent trying to gain access to hospitals to determine how many had died or were wounded. In the two hospitals I could get access to, I found young Chinese — probably students — being treated on the floor of hospital corridors. It was mysterious that there were no dead. I understood later that the majority of the fatalities were taken to children’s hospitals in the city to avoid media attention. Chinese officials worked very hard

obscure evidence of the massacre.

The film was smuggled out in a packet of tea by a French student. The Magnum office in Paris.

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Jeff Widener framed his picture a little tighter, similar to Mr. Cole's, but with an additional tank in the frame and a street light protruding mysteriously from the bottom. Mr. Widener's version, shot for The Associated Press, was probably the most circulated of the four. It was made from a lower floor of the hotel, closest to the ground, and captured a face-to-face meeting between the lone man and the driver of the first tank.

Sometime in the morning of June 5, 1989, I stumbled out of the Jianguo Hotel in Beijing and navigated my way past burned out buses and smashed bicycles to The Associated Press office. I was sick as a dog with the flu and suffering from a severe concussion. A stray rock had struck my face while photographing a burning armored car during the Tiananmen uprising. The Nikon F3 Titanium camera had absorbed the shock and thus saved my life.

As I entered the A.P. office, which was located at the diplomatic compound, I read a message from A.P. headquarters in New York. "We don't want anyone to take any unnecessary risk but if someone could please photograph Tiananmen Square, we would appreciate it." Boy, that was not what I wanted to read following the terror I witnessed the night before.

I was really scared and very spaced out from the injury and I had to find the courage to make that long bicycle ride to the Beijing Hotel, which had the best vantage point. In the end, I managed to smuggle my camera gear into the Beijing Hotel and past security police, thanks to a young college kid named Kirk or Kurt. Two decades later, I still have not been able to locate him and express my gratitude. For without his help, the world would have lost a memorable image.

As I shot pictures out the sixth floor of the Beijing Hotel balcony, I was going through film pretty fast. Tanks crashed through burned out buses. Dead and wounded were peddled on little carts. I asked Kurt/Kirk to help find me some more film. He returned an hour later with one roll of Fuji 100 ASA color negative film. Only one tourist could be found in the deserted

lobby. I normally shoot 800 ASA. This would be a critical factor later on.

I loaded the single roll of film in a Nikon FE2 camera body. It was the only camera I had with an exposure meter. As I tried to sleep off the massive headache that I had, I could not hear the familiar sound of tanks in the distance. I jumped up. Kurt/Kirk followed me to the window. In the distance was a huge column of tanks. It was a very impressive sight. Being the perfectionist that I am, I waited for the exact moment for the shot.

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Suddenly, some guy in a white shirt runs out in front and I said to Kurt/Kirk, "Damn it — that guy's going to screw up my composition." Kurt/Kirk shouted, "They are going to kill him!" I focused my Nikon 400mm 5.6 ED IF lens and waited for the instant he would be shot. But he was not.

The image was way too far away. I looked back at the bed and could see my TC-301 teleconverter. That little lens adapter could double my picture. With it, I could have a stronger image but then I might lose it all together if he was gone when I returned.

I dashed for the bed, ran back to the balcony and slapped the doubler on. I focused carefully and shot one ... two ... three frames until I noticed with a sinking feeling that my shutter speed was at a very low 30th-60th of a second. Any camera buff knows that a shutter speed that slow is impossible hand-held with an 800mm focal length. I was leaning out over a balcony and peeking around a corner. I faced the reality that the moment was lost.

I had earlier accomplished my mission of photographing the occupied Tiananmen Square so I gave all my rolls of film to Kurt/Kirk who smuggled it back to the A.P. office in his underwear. The long-haired college kid was wearing a dirty Rambo T-shirt, shorts and sandals. Security would never suspect him of being a journalist.

Five hours later, without any film and exhausted, I called the A.P. bureau in Beijing. The photo editor, Mark Avery, asked, "Jeff, what shutter speed were you shooting?" My heart sank. Mark said: "It was O.K. We used it, but it wasn't very sharp."

The next day I arrived at the office, where Liu Heung Shing jokingly said that I had "very bad messages from New York."

On the clipboard were message after message of congratulations from all over the world: "Congratulations. Widener's tank man fronting all UK newspapers half page." "Tank man fronting all European papers." "Wish I was there, Horst Faas, London." "French newspaper Liberation wants exclusive interview with Jeff Widener." "Tank man fronting USA Today and International Herald Tribune." "Please contact Life magazine for tank man image."

The response was overwhelming.

My unexpected 20th anniversary return to Beijing was filled with memories. On a particular day, I recall walking down a very tranquil tree-lined street near the embassy. As I strolled through Beijing's Ritan Park and sniffed that pleasant wood burning smell of Asia, I found it hard to imagine such hell took place on those streets two decades earlier.

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Arthur Tsang Hin Wah of Reuters was beaten two nights earlier by students who mistook him for a spy. His photograph of the tank man, divided into thirds by two light poles, was taken seconds before the others, as the tanks jostled for position behind the lone man. The burned bus looms heavy in Mr. Tsang's version.

Gun shots can be heard coming in from east and west. I felt unsafe going back to the square where the students stayed, so I went up to the 11th floor of the Beijing Hotel, where some of my press friends stayed.

The square was clear but by now there were more than 100 tanks assembled. We watched people protesting near the hotel. Troops opened fire and killed many of them. We took pictures from the balcony while, across the street, police watched everything we did. Sometimes bullets hit the hotel rooms when the troops drove past and fired into the sky to scare off people.

Rumors went around that they were going to clear the hotel. Many press people, especially the Chinese, packed up and left. At around noon, we heard the roar of tanks. More than 20 of them, in a big column, pulled out from the square and came our way. I loaded my Nikon F3HP with film and started shooting with a 300mm telephoto lens.

Suddenly one of my friends shouted, "This guy is crazy!" I saw from the viewfinder a man carrying two plastic shopping bags walk out onto the empty Changan Avenue from the sidewalk, blocking the tanks. The first tank pulled over a little but the man moved in the same direction, preventing it from advancing. I put on a 2x teleconverter and took a couple of

tighter shots. Then the man climbed up the first tank and tried to talk to the soliders inside. When he came down, four or five people came out from the side. He disappeared forever.

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I called my office and told them I had a great shot. A colleague rode over on a bike and picked up the film. I stayed behind in the hotel for the following two days.

For some reason, the editor in the office did not pick the frame of the man blocking the tanks. Instead, they picked the frame of the man climbing up the tank. The next day, A.P.'s version was widely played. They called me up at the hotel and I told them to have a close look again. So *my* photo of the man blocking the tank was released more than 12 hours later than my competitor's.

I am glad that it still has impact after 20 years. Four different versions but one same focus.”

Patrick Witty is the international picture editor at The Times.

Comments are no longer being accepted.

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