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Began as courier for ABC in 1973, later earned 4 Emmys, 4 Peabodys and a Sherman November 8, 2014

Did a massacre take place in Tiananmen Square or outside of the square? What really happened?

Originally Answered: Did a massacre take place in Tiananmen Square or outside of the square?

I was one of the producers editing in Hong Kong for Ted Koppel's Special Report on Tiananmen Square that aired a month after the event occurred. Nightline had sent 4 China experts to observe the events of June 4th from the Square in that chaotic evening. We also hired a number of smart bi-lingual college-age students who had lived in Beijing for years to help with translation and with clarifying what was really going on. (The worst part of reporting on foreign events is the knowledge that you don't have the depth of experience to place facts into perspective. It's a lot like watching programs on the BBC where people's accents are telling British viewers a completely different story that Americans miss completely.)

My primary job was to edit the lead piece--a 10 minute recap of the events of the night when the People's Liberation Army cleared the Square. I collected every videotape we had from the Square, ordered them by time as recorded in timecode, and then mapped out the location of each camera at the time the picture was taken. Then we screened every tape over and over. One of the great advantages was that I always had one of the students with me to tell me what was really happening.

This really helped me avoid some common media errors. There is a famous shot of several men carrying a badly injured man through the crowd. Virtually every news network has used this shot as depicting a wounded student. It is actually a wounded soldier being evacuated by students.

The most important fact that the kids who were working with me explained was the difference between the students (generally seen with headbands on, trying to calm things down, and get events under some control) and people that they described as "street toughs." I was told that these were the sort of minor criminal who would loiter in the Square to make currency exchanges, sell cigarette, and generally commit petty crimes. (We've got plenty of them in the US, just look at Times Square before it was Disneyfied.)

On the other hand, students, particularly in Beijing, were in many cases the sons and daughters of Party officials. Certainly these were not people that any People's Army officer with a brain would have shot or wounded.

Without exception, the violence that we found was committed by or on these *street toughs* and not by or on *students*. The worst fighting apparently occurred as the Army was making its way to the Square and there were no Western cameras to record this. Soldiers were attacked and killed--one even burnt on a road overpass--and military units fired to clear the way. From what I know, students were not involved in these

confrontations, they appear to have been between an angry urban lower class and the military. This doesn't make it right, I'm only trying to differentiate between students and other demonstrators.

Late at night, when the Square had been cleared and the approaching avenues sprayed with machine gunfire to prevent any more people from reaching the Square, we could hear the loudspeaker announcement that all should clear the area. After that, the lights went out for a time. Many news outlets in the West claimed that at this point, tanks ran over students who refused to abandon their protest.

This was one of the primary facts I was attempting to establish. There were tantalizing video clips of military vehicles crushing tents and pulling down the iconic Statue of Democracy but no pictures and no credible reporting of violence. In the end, I was informed that the only news crew that remained in the Square overnight was from Spain and we searched for their tape for days--finally locating it in Madrid.

This video shows dozens, possibly hundreds, of students walking in a long line holding hands and being watched by soldiers. As the sun rose, these students entered the University. There was no mistreatment of the students by the Army.

So, in the end, my conclusions:

1. It's almost certain that no *students* were killed in Tienanmen Square on the night of June 4th.
2. In most cases, at least early in the night, the soldiers in the square were unarmed recent recruits who were lectured at by students and pushed around by street thugs.
3. Soldiers were injured and possibly killed in a firebomb attack by non-students on the second personnel carrier to enter the square. Injured soldiers were evacuated by students.
4. There were clearly serious casualties as the Army columns made their way to the Square. I didn't have any pictures of this but reports of injuries and deaths on the access roads are credible. There are no credible reports of students being involved in these events.
5. I couldn't locate any credible reports of deaths in the clearing of the Square; only rumors and suppositions of "what must have happened." I had visual proof that the great majority, if not in fact all, students left at dawn.

In the end, my conclusion was that no students died in Tienanmen Square.

Non-students could well have died in the Square and certainly died in the streets outside the Square. It was a massacre of civilians by their own government and an outrage committed by a dictatorship against protesting citizens. On the other hand, these protesters were definitely violent in at least some of their protests at at least some locations.

That's what we reported in "Tiananmen Square: The Untold Story" but I agree with XinXin Sun that by far the majority of the Western media reported an inaccurate story that painted an incorrect and simplistic narrative over an extremely complex and nuanced reality.

June 4th, 1989 was a regrettable event--a repressive backlash by an oligarchic government. However, it also resulted in the government allowing the people of China to create a capitalist economy that is rivaling the West, enjoy lives with less restrictions, and see at least a limited relaxation of government control over speech and protest.