

# I Knew Dan Rather When...

His first television director recalls Rather's Texas TV debut. **By John Baker**

I was disturbed by *The New Yorker* article on Dan Rather, just before he retired from anchoring the CBS *Evening News*. The writer obviously did his homework, interviewing a lot of people. Dan Rather would be proud.

My question is: Why are these negative nay-bobs of journalism suddenly appearing out of the CBS News closet? Now they come out after working with and around Dan Rather for 43 years.

The reason, I suggest, is a dash of envy, two pinches of jealousy, a smidgen of McCarthyism, two drops of "Get Dan" mixed with a splash of Deep Throatism. Dump all of this on a plate of Texas Field greens, and there you have it.

If there is any doubt that CBS News is a profit center, you had only to watch the end of Rather's final *Evening News* report last March 9th. After his good-bye to his colleagues and the American people, viewers see a shot from behind his anchor desk. A hundred or so people stand and applaud from the newsroom. We see the shot for three seconds. Then CBS cuts to a 10-second Wal-Mart commercial, after which they cut back to Dan standing at the anchor desk, taking congratulations from his

colleagues for six more seconds. How rude it was for CBS to interrupt Dan's poignant last moments. As we say down in Texas, "Shame on you, CBS!"

Actually, I knew about Dan Rather before I met him. I replaced him as a play-by-play radio announcer at the Conroe Tigers football games, just north of Houston, in 1954. My first sports job, I was so excited. The downside was the radio station; it received hundreds of calls and letters, demanding to know what happened to Dan Rather. They wanted him back. Not exactly a confidence builder for me.

A few years later, I met Dan Rather. Who the hell was he, anyway? I kept following him around.

I was Dan Rather's first television director. Rather became news anchor at Channel 11 in 1959, fresh from KTRH radio, where he'd done news and sports. Channel 11's press release announced a new commitment to reporting on the many problems in Houston.

Dan came in with a cigar sticking out of his chiseled face, and a "do it now" positive attitude. He knew *nada* about TV. Through cigar smoke, he clipped wire stories onto notebook paper in the order they were to run. He'd bang a typewriter for a few rewrites



**Dan Rather reporting from the field in Vietnam, 1966.**

and local stories. With his system, we didn't have problems telling the news; we had problems getting video on the air properly. I had the copy leading to a film, but rolling it was an adventure. Dan never read the copy the way it was written. He always ad-libbed, adding words, deleting words. It made it hard for me to know when to roll the film.

Both Dan and I were getting really, really upset with our sloppy production. One day, before the show, he asked me, "How many seconds do you really need to roll the film?"

"Six seconds," I replied. "That's a firm six seconds."

He thought a minute, and then said, "Watch my hands. I'll be holding a pencil. When I start rolling the pencil, you roll the film."

"Gotcha," I said. We never missed another roll cue.

Channel 11 News began to catch on. Handsome Dan, with his cleft chin, was

always chasing some kind of story. His tireless reporting made Channel 2, until then the news leader, uncomfortable. The local CBS affiliate, Channel 11 had never tried to compete with Channel 2 in news until Rather came along.

Dan and I would gather at Bob Levi's apartment after the ten- o'clock news and play sport board games, APBA football and baseball. Levi was a desk assistant and writer on the show. We'd sit on the floor in his living room and draw cards, roll dice and eat fried chicken. We had a grand time. We played with the enthusiasm of kids—28-year-old kids. Dan didn't like to lose very much.

## **Backseat Journalism**

"See that dark cloud, that's Texas City," our teacher told us when we were on the playground back in 1947. I didn't

pay much attention. No one did. I was defending myself against Charlie Brantinni. We 12-year-old guys had stopped playing drop the handkerchief when someone brought boxing gloves to recess. We spent our time beating the crap out of each other. Spitting out blood in the schoolyard was a man kind of thing.

We were just kids. Texas City was at least 50 miles away. We didn't care if it blew up. Which is exactly what it did. First, one docked seagoing tanker, then another, and another...then all the tanks on shore exploded and burned. Hundreds of people died. The city, such as it was, was wiped out. Although World War II was over, many people believed the Nazis or the Japanese were attacking Texas. The war hadn't been over that long.

Twelve years later, Dan Rather believed we had another Texas City disaster in the making. A tanker was burning at a dock next to numerous onshore oil tanks.

We got the news at seven p.m. Channel 11's one cameraman had left hours ago. Eugene Wolfe wasn't paid much, but he got to use Channel 11's news car as a perk. Eugene hated his first name and insisted on going only by Wolfe. Dan tried desperately to raise Wolfe on the radio.

"Wolfe, come in! Come in, Wolfe! We've got a disaster going on. Pick up, goddammit!" Static was the only response.

All of us—Bob Levi, reporter Earl Lotridge and I—took turns trying to raise Wolfe on the radio. Dan puffed his cigar and paced the newsroom, soccer kicking trashcans.

"You know Channel 2 has a crew

there," he fretted. "They even have film for the 10 o'clock news. What do we have? Hours-old AP wire copy! If the damn place blows up, we'll have to *hear* it to know what happened! We're going to get beaten on the biggest story since the last Texas City! Wolfe! Where are you?" Dan raged.

Sweat stains soaked Dan's shirt. His cigar had burned down to a stub of limp ash.

A little after eight p.m., following yet another plaintive call for Wolfe, the radio crackled.

"Wolfe here," he said.

"Wolfe! Where are you?" Dan screamed into the radio microphone.

An ominous pause.

"Uh, well, I'm in the back seat of the car, making out with my new girlfriend. What's up?"

"Texas City is blowing up, that's what's up," Dan hollered. "Get down there now!"

"Jesus, Dan, Louise and I are just getting to really know each other. Can't it wait an hour or so?"

"No! I need you now! Do you understand?" Another pause.

"Okay, Dan," Wolfe replied, weakly.

## **Fledgling Channel 11 kicked butt: the best coverage, a live eyewitness report and exclusive film the next day.**

All of us knew it was too late to get film for that night's broadcast. The processing place we used was already closed. But Wolfe would get us something for the next day, and Channel 11 wouldn't be completely shut out.

We gathered everything we could

from the frantic phone calls to local police and fire officials and wrote it into Dan's Texas City lead. Channel 2 and Channel 13 showed film of reporters standing in front of police barricades earlier in the day. They had to shoot it early, so the film crews could get back to develop it. A glow in the sky told us where the unseen tanker was burning. Surface reporting, but at least they were there. Dan looked defeated. Dan wasn't used to being defeated. He would have sold his soul for videotape back then.

At the top of the 10-o'clock news, Dan reported all we knew about what was happening in Texas City. At 10:05, during a commercial, the special inside phone rang.

"This is Wolfe. I need to talk to Dan."

"Where are you?" I asked.

"I can't talk to you, you idiot! I need to talk to Dan. NOW!"

I motioned to Dan. He picked up the phone's extension at the anchor desk, the commercial break still running. He signaled me, and when the commercial was over, Dan announced, "We have a report from our special correspondent at the scene of the tanker fire in Texas City."

We heard Wolfe's voice over the air. "Dan, I'm in a phone booth fifty yards from the burning tanker. Flames are licking out of portholes, the docks covered with firemen, and the heat from amidships is incredibly intense. Some of the crew have abandoned ship, jumping from the bow of the tanker into the harbor. Fire trucks and ambulances are trying to miss each other. The firemen are pouring water onto the ship. The Fire Chief says the fire is under control. He tells me this will not be a repeat of the last Texas

City disaster. But you couldn't prove it by me. This phone booth is like an oven. Dan, I'm outta here."

Fledgling Channel 11 kicked butt: the best coverage, a live eyewitness report and exclusive film the next day.

Wolfe had used a fake FBI badge to get through the police barricade, despite the brightly painted Channel 11 news car he was driving. Louise lay on the floor between the seats. When Wolfe started to feel the heat from the burning tanker, he parked in the back of a warehouse and told Louise to sit behind the wheel and not to roll the windows down. He picked up a fireman's hat and walked into the fire lit arena.

At our request, a triumphant Wolfe brought Louise into the newsroom to meet everyone. She was especially pleased to meet Dan Rather.

"I'm just a waitress at Christy's Seafood," the awestruck young lady confided, "but I've always wanted to be on TV."

We all grinned back at her delighted smile, thinking, "Don't they all? Don't they all?"

## **Dan Rather's First Overseas Assignment**

The powers that be at Channel 11 decided they needed to market Dan Rather further. President Eisenhower was going to the Far East, America's first President to do so. The idea was to send Dan on the press plane. He could do firsthand reporting on Ike's travels.

I could almost hear the debate in the conference room between the visionaries and the bottom liners. "Now,

look, this trip costs a lot of money. Dan not being on air for a couple of weeks might hurt our ratings.”

The visionary counter would be, “Dan Rather is not just a local newsman; he can report global stories with the best of them.”

The reality was that Channel 11 and Rather had to do something spectacular to unseat Channel 2’s domination of the market.

Management’s decision to send Dan to the Far East caused a few complications for me. Dan Rather left with a cameraman. He told me he’d file a report by overseas telephone for our 10-o’clock news every night. The problem was, we had Dan on audiotape, but the film he was shooting took two days to arrive. I asked the obvious question, “What video do you want to cover your audio?”

Dan grinned, “You’re the TV guy; I’m the newsman. You figure it out.”

The first night of Ike’s trip was easy. Reporter Earl Lotridge, substituting for Rather as anchorman, talked to him on the phone live from Wake Island. The next day was more complicated. No live question-and-answer, just a four-minute audiotape about Ike’s arrival in Manila. Dan’s first film had come in. It showed the entourage leaving Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. two days before, and their arrival at Wake Island. The film was outdated and unusable.

Earl told me he’d be very uncomfortable listening to Dan’s salient points and nodding for four minutes. I agreed. Bob McKay, our resident fixit guy, was standing in the hallway, drinking coffee, talking trash with a secretary.

“Get me a speaker,” I interrupted.

“What kind?” He asked.

Bob’s request for specifics took me back for a moment “The kind they have in classrooms—brown wood, a speaker in the middle. The kind principals use to tell students what not to do.”

“Lamar High School is down the street,” Bob said. “I’ll find a way to relieve them of one.”

That night at 10, Lotridge did a lead-in to Rather’s report. The camera panned up and to the left, then zoomed toward a classroom speaker mounted on our gray news set wall. Underneath the speaker was a crudely stenciled sign telling us this was a Far East report. I rolled the audiotape when all I could see on camera was the speaker.

This crudetechnique worked because it had to. There was nothing else then, before satellites gave us instant live news. Lotridge thought I was a genius for keeping him off camera.

On the other hand, top management demanded to know why we didn’t have film showing what Dan was talking about. I didn’t have the heart to tell them they were idiots. At that point, I was looking for a good excuse to leave. I just didn’t know where. Not many phone calls came from New York or any other exotic wonderful place... in fact none came at all.

I finally left Houston in the spring of 1961 and upgraded my career to the slums of Baltimore, Maryland. At my going-away bash, Dan Rather smiled and told me he’d see me soon in the big time. That fall he made history covering hurricane Carla as it struck Galveston, Texas. That was his kick-start at CBS. Everyone knows what happened since.

I find it interesting that Walter Cronkite graduated from San Jacinto High School in Houston and Dan

Rather graduated from Reagan High School in the same school district. These schools were fiercely competitive, both scholastically and on the football field. Despite their differences, Walter

and Dan stood as the symbol of broadcast news for almost 45 years. I'm impressed that all that broadcasting talent came from Texas---but of course, I'm a Texan.

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John Baker is writing a book titled "Forty Years on Broadcast Television Without Missing a Paycheck." His journey took him from Corinthian, Westinghouse and Metro Media to Post-Newsweek TV stations. He helped put CNN on the air and retired there as a vice-president. He now plays golf and drives a hybrid car.