The Jonestown Tragedy: First Reports of Death and Violence at Peoples Temple Camp

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General Information

Description
Congressmen Leo Ryan and several others, including NBC News correspondent Don Harris, are gunned down on a runway in Guyana after visiting the campground known as Jonestown. Founded by Jim Jones, Jonestown houses members of the mysterious religious sect known as Peoples Temple. While there are reports referring to the mass suicide of the sect's members, at the time of this broadcast, confirmation has yet to be made.

Keywords
Jonestown, Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, Cult, Leo Ryan, Congressman, Representative, NBC, Correspondent, Reporter, Journalist, Journalism, Don Harris, Cameraman, Robert Brown, Photographer, Bob Brown, San Francisco, Examiner, Bob Flick, Witness, Mass, Suicide, Georgetown, Steve Sung, State Department, Tom Reston, Guyana, Greg Robinson, Sect, Religion, President, Jimmy Carter
Transcript

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JESSICA SAVITCH, anchor:

Good evening. The government of Guyana sent troops into the remote jungle of that country, a jungle which was the scene of a bizarre chain of events that led to the deaths of an American Congressman and three newsmen. They were gunned down as they tried to escort unhappy settlers from the camp of an American religious sect. They were going back home. Congressmen Leo Ryan led a delegation of staff members and newsmen, among them NBC correspondent Don Harris, NBC cameraman Robert Brown, and photographer Gregory Robinson of the San Francisco Examiner, all four, dead. Along with Patricia Parks, a member of the Peoples Temple. The Peoples Temple is a religious sect that was headquartered in San Francisco and relocated in Guyana. Representative Ryan had heard that American citizens were being held there, held against their will. There were charges of beatings and mistreatings. They were headed home when the shooting started. We now have pictures that were just flown out, fed to us by satellite from Puerto Rico.

It was yesterday evening. This was about 6:30 at Port Kaituma, the nearest airstrip to the Peoples Temple. The delegation was bordering-- boarding the charter planes there. There’s Congressman Ryan, if you watch carefully, you’ll see him go up and shake hands, moments before his death. There he is, right there. Suddenly a flatbed trailer truck pulled up, it appeared on the runway. A number of people, presumably Temple members, began shooting. This was just before the shooting broke out. The gunfire was so fierce it disabled the plane. The first plane was able to take off, the second remained on the runway.

There you see those people-- there is Con-- there is our correspondent, Don Harris. All of these taken by
the NBC camera crew, and NBC crew, the NBC camera crew were casualties of the shootout. Robert Flick, field producer with NBC News, was able to get out. If you watch very closely here, you will be able to see, just before the shooting started, right there. One gunman.

Moments before the incident happened. Flick remained with the crew, he was able to come out. He was flown to San Juan, Puerto Rico this afternoon by an NBC plane. When he got to San Juan, Puerto Rico, I was able to talk with him by satellite.

We were just able to get the slow motion footage there, of moments before the shooting. I didn’t think we were able to have this. Watch this very closely, the shooting. See the gunman right there? Unbelievable. As we mentioned, Flick, our field producer from the NBC News team, remained with the crew. He was flown to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Here is that interview.

ROBERT FLICK (Producer, NBC News): There were two shots, as the plane was being loaded to take people out and the left tire of the plane was shot away, and there were many more shots, fifty, seventy-five shots, and people were being wounded and falling to the ground. And as they fell, people with shotguns would walk over and at point-blank range, would shoot the victim in the head. Congressman Ryan died in this manner, as did Don Harris, our correspondent, and Bob Brown, the cameraman, and Steve Sung, the engineer was—

SAVITCH: But there was nothing at any time that made you think before this, that they were capable of this kind of violence?

FLICK: No, no.

SAVITCH: How did you manage to escape?

FLICK: I was at the front of the airplane, talking to the pilot about whether there was going to be another flight. This airplane was full and we were remaining behind and were concerned that because of darkness, there wouldn’t be any way of getting out. And he said that there wouldn’t be time and the shots rang out and I ran fifteen, twenty yards and dove, and got up. At the other end of the runway from where this was taking place, there was a Guyanese airplane that had crashed several weeks ago which was being guarded by soldiers from the Guyanese army who had M-16s. So I ran there and asked-- told the soldier that we had no guns and needed guns and he, couldn’t help us, or-- I can’t blame him but-- then I ran across the runway and back down to where the plane was. And by that time, people were running into the bush and some of whom were eight, ten, twelve people still missing.

SAVITCH: Robert Flick, field producer for NBC News, thank you. Thank you very much.

Flick remained in the bush all night after dragging dead and wounded with him. Then in the morning, he managed to get the dead and the wounded on the airplane, then he and three others managed to get another plane into Georgetown and from there, Flick took an NBC charter plane to Puerto Rico. Among the several people wounded in the shootings were American diplomat Richard Dwyer, Jacqueline Speier, the legislative aid to Congressmen Ryan, and Steven Sung, a technician with the NBC camera crew. Prominent lawyers Mark Lane and Charles Garry were at first reported missing, they are now said to be safe in Guyana. Other survivors including the wounded are being flown to Washington tonight aboard an Air Force medical evacuation plane. The State Department said it had been in constant contact with the U.S. mission in Georgetown and with Guyanan officials. NBC’s Bob Kur was at a Washington briefing
this afternoon and files this report.

BOB KUR reporting:

By late afternoon, State Department spokesman Tom Reston said, ‘Guyanese police had not yet reached the Peoples Temple community and were proceeding cautiously on foot.’ So, he said, the State Department could not yet confirm what he called indications of mass suicide among Temple members. But earlier today, Reston did provide reports from local officials.

TOM RESTON (State Department Spokesman): The Guyanese police in Georgetown report that a woman who ran the Peoples Temple office there has killed her three children and taken her own life. Another Peoples Temple member who says he escaped from the community and walked twenty miles to Matthew’s Ridge reported that some two hundred members of that community had already taken their lives when he was leaving. In addition, the possibility exists that Peoples Temple members here in the United States, who number some three thousand, mostly resident in the State of California, may also begin to take their own lives.

KUR: Police in California say no suicides related to the Guyana tragedy have been reported. The State Department says it urged Congressman Ryan to be cautious about taking a large group into such a remote area. Autopsies on the victims will be performed in Guyana, as part of a local criminal investigation, so there will be a delay in bringing the bodies home. An American medical pathologist is there, however. The United States does have an extradition agreement with Guyana and the State Department says a main concern now is being the perpetrators to justice, as soon as possible. Bob Kur, NBC News, the State Department.

SAVITCH: President Carter said he was personally saddened by the death of Congressmen Ryan, a man he praised for his concern for environmental and educational issues. And the president of NBC News, Lester M. Crystal, spoke for all of us in his tribute to the slain newsmen when he said, quote, ‘I shall not forget them, nor shall their colleagues at NBC News. The most meaningful memorial we can give to them is to report the news with the determination and dedication they demonstrated in their careers.'