

"Rodney King and the Los Angeles Riots"

Stan Chambers

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In this account, a journalist narrated his first-hand experience of the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. This city-wide riot that destroyed property worth over a billion dollars and killed fifty-two people was the deadliest uprising in America since the 1863 draft riots in New York City. The largely African-American and Latino rioters had been enraged by the televised beating by Los Angeles police of an African-American man named Rodney King. The riot itself began after a jury found that all four officers charged in the beating were innocent. While African-Americans and Latinos benefited greatly from the civil rights victories of the 1960s and the economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s, the riots made it clear that inner-city minorities continued to suffer from second-class citizenship at the hands of some police forces.

RODNEY KING AND THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS

Our helicopter whirled in a tight circle over Florence and Normandie in South Central Los Angeles. Pilot Mike Smith kept the ship at an almost constant bank. I was in the left seat next to the pilot and had a clear view of the rampaging clutter on the street below. Cameraman Martin Clancey, strapped in a shoulder harness, was hanging out of the helicopter. He had opened the left side door, placed his mini-cam on his shoulder and was recording the helter-skelter action. This was the early evening of April 29, 1992. The Los Angeles Riots were erupting below us.

We had begun to get reports of scattered violence shortly after we had watched on television the barbaric video tape of motorists being ripped out of their cars, hammered, pounded and chased by rock-throwing men on the ground. The image of a man, later identified as Reginald Denny, being pulled from his truck by thugs, still burned in my mind. My memory was seared by the vivid imprint of the motionless, beaten man lying on the ground, being kicked and brutalized. I was still filled with rage at the sight of one of the assailants picking up a large piece of cinder-block and throwing it at his apparently lifeless body, smashing him in the head. Then, after the savage beating, the attacker appeared to do a dance, raise his hands towards the helicopter overhead and flashed a gang sign. Then, to my utter disbelief, another person on the street reached into the pocket of the fallen driver and stole his wallet.

This was my television memory; now I was seeing first hand what was really happening.

I peered through my side-window as the copter continued to circle in a steep bank. I could see that traffic was moving through the intersection below us. I watched as various cars whipped in a U-turn around to avoid the ominous chaos ahead. There were clusters of people milling around. They were throwing rocks and bottles at the passing cars. There were no police officers around, just an unruly mob venting hate on innocent motorists who happened to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Other figures on the street were darting in and out of a liquor store at the corner, taking what they wanted. The looting, the beating and the hysteria was going on right below me.

My mind went back 27 years to when I covered the Watts riots in 1965. I tried to draw up similarities that might help my reports on what was going on below. I remember telling myself that the big difference was that in Watts, they had fires.

It wasn't long after, that I noticed white smoke beginning to build in the street at the corner. A single overturned car had just been torched and it was beginning to smoke and burn. Within moments, I could see more smoke pouring out of the front windows of the liquor store where looters were still running wild. It was a light smoke, wispy and barely visible from 700 feet above.

As we circled, Martin, peering into the viewfinder of his Sony camera, shouted over the radio communications system, "I think that liquor store is on fire."

Our pilot nodded and refocused the flight circle to the smoking corner building below. Things began to develop in a chaotic and rapid manner. An appliance store just east of Normandie, a short distance from the liquor store, showed the tell-tale light, white smoke.

It wasn't long before that first liquor store had large flames shooting out the doors and windows. The overturned car continued to burn. The appliance store seethed with heavy white smoke that slowly turned to rolling black clouds fed by billowing flames eating their way through the collapsing roof.

My thoughts flashed back to 1965. I remember being in the newsroom watching pilot-reporter Larry Scheer in the KTLA Telecopter broadcasting the first fire pictures from Watts. My reaction tonight was the same that this was more than a quarter of a century ago, "I can't believe that this is happening, but I am afraid it is going to get worse." The light of dusk was now completely gone, the sky was black and the lights of South Central Los Angeles sparkled below.

By this time, the station had pre-empted all programs and was in full riot coverage. Hal Fishman, Larry McCormick and Jann Carl were at the anchor desks, Ron Olson was in the middle of the rioting crowd outside police headquarters at Parker Center, Steve Lentz and Marta Waller were covering other parts of the city as the riots seemed to spread.

The fires were breaking out over a widespread area below our helicopter. The dark plumes of smoke were ominously spreading to different spots of the city. New fires exploded on Manchester, Vermont, Figueroa, Martin Luther King Jr., Crenshaw, Jefferson, Rodeo and Century Blvd. Our pilot broke off from our tight flying circle as new flare-ups were spotted. He pulled the stick in one direction and cut a diagonal path across the sky to the next erupting blaze. Each one was a startling surprise. The numbers of separate fires grew from five or six to a dozen, to two dozen. They were now breaking out over a wide part of the city. This was not Watts of 1965 where the fires were started in a relatively small geographical district. These conflagrations were not limited to Watts and South Central Los Angeles. Roaring, billowing, intense flames were burning in all directions. The targets were varied, but very much the same. Supermarkets, Thifty Drug Stores, Chief Auto Parts, Liquor Stores, Swap Meets, Korean businesses, restaurants and mini-malls miles apart ignited under the arsonist's torch.

Often, our copter would arrive when a fire was just starting. We watched countless buildings where the light wisps of smoke were smoldering, where they turned to a heavier smoke, then went gray, then black, then erupted into consuming flames of intense orange. It didn't take long. One building would have flames rolling through the roof, then the fire would spread to a structure next door. Many-mini malls were completely wiped out when fire exploded in one of the stores, then raced through the common attic that other adjacent businesses shared.

Firemen could not respond to many of these early fires because snipers were shooting at them. Later police escorts went in with the fire fighters to protect them from the snipers.

KTLA remained on the air for hours. At one point our helicopter had to leave the riot zone, race back to the airport, make a fuel stop, then head back to continue our reporting.

Countless times during the night, I kept repeating to myself, "I can't believe that this is happening."

I have lived all of my life in Los Angeles. I know it well. So many places I grew up with, were burning. It was heart rending to be over my city as these buildings were melted down into charred ashes. So many new buildings had been built in the last few years, a hopeful sign that, at last, something was happening; a new shopping center here, a new mini mall there, an old building rehabilitated across the street with a new business opening up inside. All the progress since the fires of Watts lost in the heat of this night.

I kept remembering the stories we did in Watts after the 1965 riots. I vividly recall the twisted, shattered buildings that had burned to the ground. One by one, clean up crews had come in, leveled the structures, hauled away the debris, leaving nothing but vacant, weed-filled lots. Those lots had remained vacant for years after the tragedy of Watts, a wounded community with no places of business, just block after block of vacant lots. It was so sad, I felt so sad. Here, tonight, each one of these fires was burning up, not only the buildings, but the jobs and futures of so many people who live in the community. Now, there would be no jobs, no places to buy anything, no hope, no future. All because of these fires of April, 1992. For years to come, sociologists will be trying to find out why this happened. What were the deep roots that ignited this tragedy, this rebellion? There will be many questions and many answers. However, there was really only one direct, immediate cause that was the flash point; when the jury in the televised trial of the four officers accused in the beating of Rodney King announced they had found the officers innocent.

A pick-up truck with its motor running was in my parking place when I arrived on the KTLA lot that afternoon in March of 1991. A free-lance cameraman had temporarily borrowed my space while he ran a video tape of a late news story to the newsroom. I waited for about thirty seconds, he came racing out the door and waved an apology.

"Sorry, Stan, I think Rosalva will like the house fire I just brought her. Fire through the roof, good action."

"No problem," I waved back as he got into his car.

There are several of these cameramen who make a living shooting news stories and selling them for \$125.00 each to the different television stations. They drive their own camera cars, listen to police scanners and chase after important breaking news stories.

He slammed his truck door shut, backed out much too fast, then raced out of the parking lot to go to another television news room with a copy of his latest news story.

I had no idea that another one of those unexpected moments that reporters encounter frequently was about to hit me. They say we should always expect the unexpected, but I have never been able to take those moments in stride.

The newsroom was busy when I entered. I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my press pass. I keep it on a chain so I can put it around my neck when I am on stories where they must be worn. I also keep a few keys on the chain, one for the newsvan, others for my desk and mail box. I opened the narrow, book-like, metallic door of the mail box and took out a weekly paper from Taiwan, a letter from the German Consulate, three inter-office memos and my pay check. I closed the door, always hard to relock, and went across the lobby to the glass encased bulletin board. Yesterday's program ratings are posted there each morning. There aren't many businesses where you get a daily report card on how well you did the day before. It is another computer tracking of our daily lives. It is a rather humbling experience, an instant gauge on how the television viewers accept you. It is best not to lose too many days in a row.

"News At Ten" had a six rating, the other three newscasts against us had between a one and a three. That's good news, but how long could we keep it up.

My three to eleven o'clock shift is always full of surprises. Most of the scheduled stories have already been covered, so we turn our attention to what has just happened. I never know what my assignments are going to be when I am driving to work listening to the news radio stations. I don't know if those at the all-news stations, KFWB or KNX, have any idea how important their newscasts are to those of us who are field reporters. Their local news stories set the tone of the day and give us a feeling of what has happened and what might happen that night.

Our assignment editor, Rosalva Skidmore, looked up from her phone call, smiled and waved a greeting. I scanned the news wire copy on her desk while she finished the call. Rosalva is a pretty brunette with a wonderful smile and great enthusiasm. She is great to work with, very pleasant and professional. She handles stress well and refuses to let deadlines get her down.

"Stan, when you get a chance, will you take a look at this free lance video that we got today and see what you think we can do with it. It is an amateur home video, but it is really quite powerful. Take a look at it."

It was an unusual request so I put it in a play-back video unit right away. I looked at the pictures and felt a flow of adrenaline surge through my body. I had never viewed anything like this before. Although shot the night before in the San Fernando Valley Foothill Police Division, it looked like something that might have happened in Tienenam Square in Beijing, China or in a poor colored town in South Africa, not in Los Angeles.

The first part of the video was blurred and it was difficult to tell what was happening, but when the photographer found his focus, I saw an incredible scene of police officers hitting a man with batons, over and over again. The beating didn't stop. It continued at a frenzy. The person was on the ground reeling around, he seemed submissive, but the blows continued. I put the VCR in reverse and watched the blows bounce away from the victim, then I put it on "play" and looked in disbelief as they pounded him again and again.

"What do you want me to do with this?" I asked. "Some guy with a new home video camera shot this from his patio and he wants to sell it to us as a freelance news story", Rosalva answered.

I kept running the tape back and forth. More than a dozen officers had surrounded the person and three of them were hitting him with batons or kicking him. The others just seemed to stand around.

"Are we the only ones to have it? What's the background?" I asked.

"There was a pursuit on the Foothill Freeway. The guy tried to get away. When he finally stopped, he got out of the car and tried to take on the whole force", she answered.

Several others in the newsroom came over, clustered around the monitor and watched the video tape playback over and over again. Everyone had a painful expression.

"Better show this to the police first. We've got to get their reaction."

The tape had been left off at the main gate by a viewer by the name of George Holliday. He had taken the video when he heard shouting and yelling on the street in front of his apartment. He started video taping the action and the violent beating sequence unfolded in front of him. Our News Director, Warren Cereghino, had watched it many times before I saw it. He agreed that we had to show it to the Police Department brass before we put it on the air.

I called Lt. Fred Nixon in the Press Relations Department and told him what we had.

"Bring it down Stan, I'll have some of the staff take a look at it with me."

Commander Bill Booth, who had been head of Press Relations for years had just been promoted to Deputy Chief and this was the first day on the job for his replacement, Commander Robert Gil. Viewing this explosive package would be his baptism by fire.

The officers were waiting for me when I arrived with a copy of the tape at their sixth floor office of Parker Center about six o'clock that evening. They watched silently as the tape was played and replayed. You could tell, they could not believe what they were seeing, but their official reaction was calm and noncommittal.

Lt. Nixon did an on-camera interview with me and said that they would have to investigate the circumstances and try to determine what did happen. He said there was no way he could comment on the tape, until he knew more about the circumstances. It wasn't very much, but it was a reaction from the Police Department that we could use on the air when we ran the tape that night. Several other high ranking officers saw the tape before I left that evening. These

screenings gave the Department a chance to get ready for the storm that was about to engulf them. I left a copy of the tape and was assured that the investigation would start immediately.

I had no idea about the impact of the beating tape, but I knew it was bad.

I asked Lt. Nixon, "Why don't you suspend everyone involved and then worry about the circumstances later?" Lt. Nixon nodded his head but didn't give me any response.

A *Los Angeles Times* news photographer, Mike Meadows, was in the police press office that night and jumped on the story early. I filled him in on some of the details and he told his city desk about the existence of the tape. Mike came over to our news room and photographed stills of the video that we played for him on one of our television monitors. He would have his pictures in time for the morning edition of the Times. It was about seven that night when I left Parker Center. I caught up with my camera crew and drove to George Holliday's condominium in Sylmar. Rosalva had set up an interview with the man who shot the tape.

It was raining while we searched for the correct address in the condominium complex. It was a large, gated community. We followed directions, but lost our way through the maze of buildings. We had to retrace our steps a few times before we found the right unit. George Holliday answered the door and introduced us to his wife. Both were from Argentina, but had lived in this country for many years. George managed a plumbing company.

I looked around his condo, his new camera was still in the white, foam protective packaging. The new camera box was nearby, as well as a scattering of video tapes and cables and connectors.

George told me he was just learning how to use it. He had shot it only a few times. "There was an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie filming down the street last week," he told us. "I took the video camera and got shots of Arnold and some of the other members of the cast. It was good experience and I enjoyed it."

"How did you happen to take this video"? I asked.

His wife answered. "The sirens and copter noise woke me up. I went out on the balcony and saw all the commotion and called George. Maybe you should get the new camera. There is a lot going on out there on Foothill."

"I found the camera. It took a little time to get it ready and for me to start shooting. I just followed the action"

George Holliday had no idea of the impact of what he was videotaping. He didn't have any plans to contact a television station, because he wasn't sure if anyone would be interested in what he had shot. It wasn't until the next morning when his wife called the Foothill Station and inquired about the man arrested outside their condo the night before. It was only then that they considered doing anything about it. "The policeman on the phone gave me the run-around. He wouldn't give me any information at all, so I asked George if maybe we should give it to a news station. I was a little scared about doing it. Because of the way they talked on the phone we decided to call you," she told me as we sat in their living room.

The Hollidays said they had watched KTLA a lot and knew that we did these late breaking action stories and that we might be interested. They called, talked to our assignment desk and were asked to drop the tape off with the security officers at the KTLA main gate. The rest is history

It was still raining when we left the Hollidays. I knew this would be a difficult story. It was brutal and violent and would offend a lot of people. I decided to use that as a peg for my narration. I had an umbrella out as I put my notes together and decided to use it while I told the story.

I wanted to be as objective as possible and not sensationalize something as devastating as the tape. I wanted people to see it and make up their own minds.

I did the on-camera portion of my story and then went back to the newsroom to finish up the rest.

There was some concern for the safety of George Holliday as we put the finished tape together. Would we make him a marked man if his face went on the air? How important was his on-camera appearance to our presentation?

While we were getting the tape ready for our ten o'clock broadcast I was paged over the newsroom loudspeaker. "Stan Chambers, there is a call for you on extension 5501."

It was Assistant Police Chief Bob Vernon. "Stan, I want to let you know that we have already sent investigators out to the site where the video tape was shot. They are working in the rain talking to witnesses right now. All we are interested in is the truth. Let the chips fall where they may."

I thanked the chief. We now had a strong reaction from the Police Department. We could tell the viewers what immediate steps the police were taking. Vernon also told me that Police Chief Daryl Gates was out of town. I later learned that he was attending a police seminar in the East. He wouldn't be back in Los Angeles until early the next morning.

Tony Fote went over and over the tape in his editing room. He is an expert at working under deadline pressure and getting the heart of a story in the finished edit. The first ten seconds or so were out of focus as George Holliday started shooting his new camera. There were images there, but you could not tell what was happening, once he was in focus, the images were clear and the action mesmerizing. We decided to pick it up there. The officers swarmed around Rodney King. We let the tape play until the beatings stopped. The tape was so brutally powerful, we just used Holliday's voice as he described what he saw. That is the way it went on the air that night. Of course, the tape could not show what had gone on before. The camera wasn't rolling during the high-speed police pursuit down the San Fernando Freeway. The large number of officers at the scene were there because they were part of the pursuit and follow up. The camera did not show that Rodney King threw off four officers who tried to subdue him after the freeway chase. The camera did not show Sgt. Tracy Koon use a taser gun twice in an effort to subdue Rodney King. Nothing that preceded the beatings on the tape had been recorded except the out-of-focus footage taken by George Holiday before the clear pictures appeared in his view finder. The fact that the officers thought he was on PCP, a drug that seems to give super powerful strength to someone under its influence was, of course not seen on the video tape. King, a huge powerful man fought all of the officers, until he was finally subdued.

The beating that happened in San Fernando was seen all over the world. It had a devastating impact.

The tape was played over and over again on television. It incited anger, rage, sorrow and pain. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates called it an aberration.

It took almost a year before the trial of the four officers accused of beating Rodney King began.

There was wide media coverage of the trial. Many stations did live broadcasts from the courtroom. One station, KTTV in Los Angeles, televised the day-by-day proceedings of the entire trial. All the media in Los Angeles and most of the country followed every development of the trial. Those interested in the minute details of the legal arguments had access to the complete story. Defense attorneys were able to raise doubts in the minds of the jurors about the actions they saw on the video tape.

Some officers testified that they were frightened by the way King was acting. Some said they feared for their lives. Defense attorneys talked about "tunnel vision", where a person is so intent on what is happening directly in front of him that he has no idea about what is around him. The fact that there were a lot of officers there didn't enter into the mind of those faced with an aggressive, possibly PCP drugged assailant. They talked to the jury about the escalation of force. They listened to experts who said it was necessary to go all the way short of shooting to subdue the man. They had the jury look at "freeze frames" of the tape and had experts say various blows were according to regulation. Many disagreed with the testimony of some of the witnesses, but the jury could not find criminal fault and the officers were found not guilty of the charges. When the jury returned with that innocent verdict on three of the accused officers and said they were unable to reach a decision on the only remaining count against the fourth officer, the backlash slammed into the city.

Reporters covering the trial rushed to their live cameras, their microphones and their computer terminals to tell the world about the decision.

During the trial Brian Jenkins, a Black reporter for KCOP television, and Michael Ambrosini an anchorman for KNX newsradio, were fixtures in the media room of the Simi Valley courthouse. They were in the middle of everything every day covering the controversial trial. Both of them were among the two or three dozen reporters who spent weeks in the small converted courtroom, crammed with desks, monitors, chairs, computers and telephones. They were not far from the small work space that Eric Spillman and I shared while covering the trial. Brian's makeshift desk was at the end of one cluttered table, Michael sat behind an old-fashioned typewriter about two dozen feet away. They were almost chained to their computers and typewriters while the trial droned on in the courtroom next door. They listened intently to the slow-moving developments in the courtroom, condensing important issues for their audiences. Michael had to do updates for KNX radio a dozen times a day. He was always over his workstation mumbling to himself.

When the riots exploded, both were caught up in the surge of violence and both of them found themselves playing the unanticipated role of hero.

Brian Jenkins was with Bob Quinlan in a KCOP camera car parked on a street in the riot zone. They were stunned by what they were seeing. At one point they saw a white man frantically

running, being chased by four black youths. The assailants caught up and tackled the man right in front of their KCOP car. Bob Quinlan had his camera on his shoulder and was shooting the chase through the car's windshield. At the moment they all tumbled to the ground and the young men started to pounce on the victim, Brian Jenkins opened the door, raced from the truck, and began pulling them off of the man. Quinlan was taking pictures of everything that was happening.

Jenkins wasn't fighting them, he was pleading with them and trying to keep them from hurting the man, but he kept pulling them off as he tried to reason with the hot tempers.

"Come on fellows, leave him alone. He didn't have anything to do with the decision. He hasn't hurt anyone. Don't pick on him just because he's white."

Somehow, it worked. One by one, they grudgingly stopped and the imposing figure of Brian Jenkins, who talked to them like a big brother, swung the tide away from further violence. Brian took the beating victim into his camera car. The three blacks ran off looking for a more guilty target.

I talked to Brian a few days later on a hostage-barricade story that we were both on. He said, "When I saw the video tape that my cameraman shot of me running into the fight, I couldn't believe that I did it. I guess it was something inside of me that said I had to do something, so I just ran out there and tried to stop the guys from beating him." Brian was able to rescue the man, get him into their KCOP car and rush away from the scene. The victim was a photographer from France who was trying to get pictures of what was happening that chaotic day in South Central Los Angeles.

Brian's partner at the Rodney King trial table, Michael Ambrosini, also found himself thrust into a volatile situation as the riots broke out around him near the corner of Vermont and Martin Luther King Blvd. A microwave television news crew from KCAL-TV was under attack. Reporter Bill Gephardt and cameraman Chris Torgerson had been interviewing looters when several men came rushing out of the crowd and chased them. Gephardt was hit by a flying bottle. At one point he slipped and fell; the pursuers were on top of him. He was hit on the side of the face so hard, some of his teeth were loosened. They viciously kicked him in his side. Others tried to steal the television camera. In the scuffle that developed over Torgerson's camera, Gephardt was able to get up and start running through traffic in the middle of the street. The four assailants finally were able to grab the KCAL-TV camera from Torgersons and took up the chase after Gephardt. As the pair weaved in panic through traffic in the middle of the street, they spotted Ambrosini's KNX car. The car hardly stopped, the door swung open, both men jumped inside. Ambrosini tried to pull away but the car got jammed in the heavy traffic. The attackers, pounded on the windows, grabbed the locked doors and shook the van trying to get at the fleeing newsmen. The moment Ambrosini found an opening, he cut the car to some open space and the three of them fled the scene. Bill Gephardt had to be taken to a local hospital. The KCAL-TV microwave truck had to be abandoned on the street.

A KTTV television truck had to be deserted at another riot scene. There were mobs running randomly through the parking lot of a Fedco Store. Some of them vented their anger when they spotted a television crew huddled inside the big, white truck. A few rushed over and banged on

the doors, others tried to rock it back and forth, some pelted it with anything they could get their hands on. One man swinging a two-by-four, shouting and glaring menacingly at the engineers inside the cab, let loose a vicious blow to the windshield and the side of the truck. The glass shattered, but didn't break, but it was almost impossible to see through the windshield.

The crew had hoped to ride out the storm, but now it was developing into a desperate situation. Their only hope was to get out of there. They decided to start the truck and race out of there, escaping from the threatening crowd.

What the engineers didn't know was that the heavy blow by the two-by-four hit a tender target, the "kill switch" in the dash board, making the truck inoperable. The switch is there to prevent fires that might be caused by a serious collision.

The frightened crew was now stranded among the rioters. Mobs seem to have a guiding force of their own. The anger erupts in waves. New targets focus their attention. That happened here. There were too many other things to do at that Fedco store and many members of the attacking mob lost interest in the truck and turned their attention to looting.

At the right moment, when the action had turned elsewhere, the engineers opened the door and fled the scene. One of their grandmothers lived about a half mile away. Her house was the their only nearby haven of safety. They abandoned the truck and ran to her place. They stayed there the rest of the day.

For months after the looting and burning, local newsmen talked of their close calls in the riots. I remember a November afternoon in 1992 at the Los Angeles County Courthouse. A bunch of reporters and cameramen were standing in the hallway outside a courtroom where the local teachers were arguing their salary situation before a judge.

I saw Marco Peterson, a Black cameraman from KTTV, was sitting on a nearby bench and reading a newspaper. He turned out to be the hero in this abandoned microwave truck story. Marco was the one who volunteered to go back to the Fedco parking lot to try to salvage the television truck.

I sat down next to him and asked why he offered to do that.

"Stan, did you know that was my son's truck. He just started working at the station. I wanted to help out. You know Robert Campbell, well he and I went down to the Fedco parking lot to see if the truck was still there."

Marco told me how he tried to blend in as he walked through the crowd of looters to the truck. He made believe that he was trying to jimmy the front door open.

"I had my secret key hidden in my hand and got the door opened. I got some cheers when I got into the front seat. They thought that I was trying to steal the truck. I put the key in the ignition, but no luck. I tried and tried but it just wouldn't start. I kept doing it until the battery died. Robert and I drove down in a big pick up truck, so we decided to try to push the KTTV truck out of the parking lot." While this was going on, looters were running out of the Fedco Store carrying

dresses, shoes, lamps, television sets and anything else they could get their hands on. Many had driven their cars on the parking lot and filling them up with the stolen merchandise.

"With all of this chaos going on, Robert drove the pick up truck behind the disabled vehicle and started pushing it slowly. The crowd started cheering us on thinking that they were trying to make off with it."

"Keep going Brother, It's all yours."

"That's the way. You're taking the big one."

"Good going. That's what I like to see", the voices in the crowd laughed approvingly.

Marco and his friend waved back to the crowd as the two trucks eased off the parking lot to a safer spot in a quiet part of the neighborhood where a tow truck could be called in.

"That tow truck cost the station five hundred dollars." Marco told me.

A few weeks after the riots, I was in Simi Valley. About a hundred people had gathered outside the courthouse to denounce the decisions in the Rodney King case. They shouted their speeches over an amplified speaker. Many were angry, but the rally was peaceful. Local police were inside the building with their riot gear on and were ready to move into action in case things got violent. One of my colleagues also covering the story was James Bartholomew, a free lance journalist who often works for the New York Times. Bart still had a badly bruised jaw from the riots. He had been taking pictures at Florence and Normandie in South Central Los Angeles when he got caught in the flash point of the outbreak. He was attacked and beaten by an angry crowd. Someone grabbed a large stick and smashed him in the face. Others took his cameras and trashed his car. A man watching the attack, somehow, was able to get to Bartholomew and helped him to get back into his car. When other rioters saw this, they attacked the car again, pulling the doors open, rocking it viciously and jumping on top of it. Not only, did they almost total his car, they also stole thousands of dollars of cameras and photographic gear. Despite it all, Bart got his pictures of the start of the riot and they were published in the New York Times. They showed Los Angeles Police Officers trying to arrest a man while a large hostile crowd surged around them.

Bart was out of commission for a few days, but he was back here in Simi Valley with cameras strapped around his neck, covering the news.

There were many heroes among the cameramen and reporters covering the riots. Many were beaten, had their cameras stolen, vehicles damaged, rocks and bottles thrown at them. But there were no fatalities. The Greater Los Angeles Press Club saluted all of the newsmen who covered the riots during the burning, looting and vandalizing. At its 1992 Headliners Dinner, it honored "The Media 500", those members of the news media who were there and survived the Los Angeles riots.

At least three of the helicopters that flew over the fires and rioting were hit by gunfire. The KCOP and KNBC copters had bullet holes in their fuselage and my copter had a nick in the rotor blades from some gunman who took aim at the helicopter from the ground.

Los Angeles still lives with the scars of the worst uprising in this country since the Civil War. The charred debris from the fires has now been cleared, but many empty lots remain; bare, upright, exterior walls still standing, constant reminders of the days of fury. Fifty three people died in the violence, over six hundred buildings were destroyed by fire and the damage to the city was over one billion dollars. It will take a long time for the heart and spirit of Los Angeles to recover.

This riot would have been incomprehensible to people of Los Angeles in the 1930's or 1940's. They could understand the possibility of a Japanese air raid over Los Angeles, but could not imagine the people of Los Angeles rioting. In fact most of us in 1992 were shell-shocked by what happened. The world has changed dramatically in those five decades. What we are today is far different from those innocent pre-war years when radio dominated our leisure time and television was just a dream.

Stan Chambers, "Rodney King and the Los Angeles Riots," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1992. Reprinted by permission of the author.