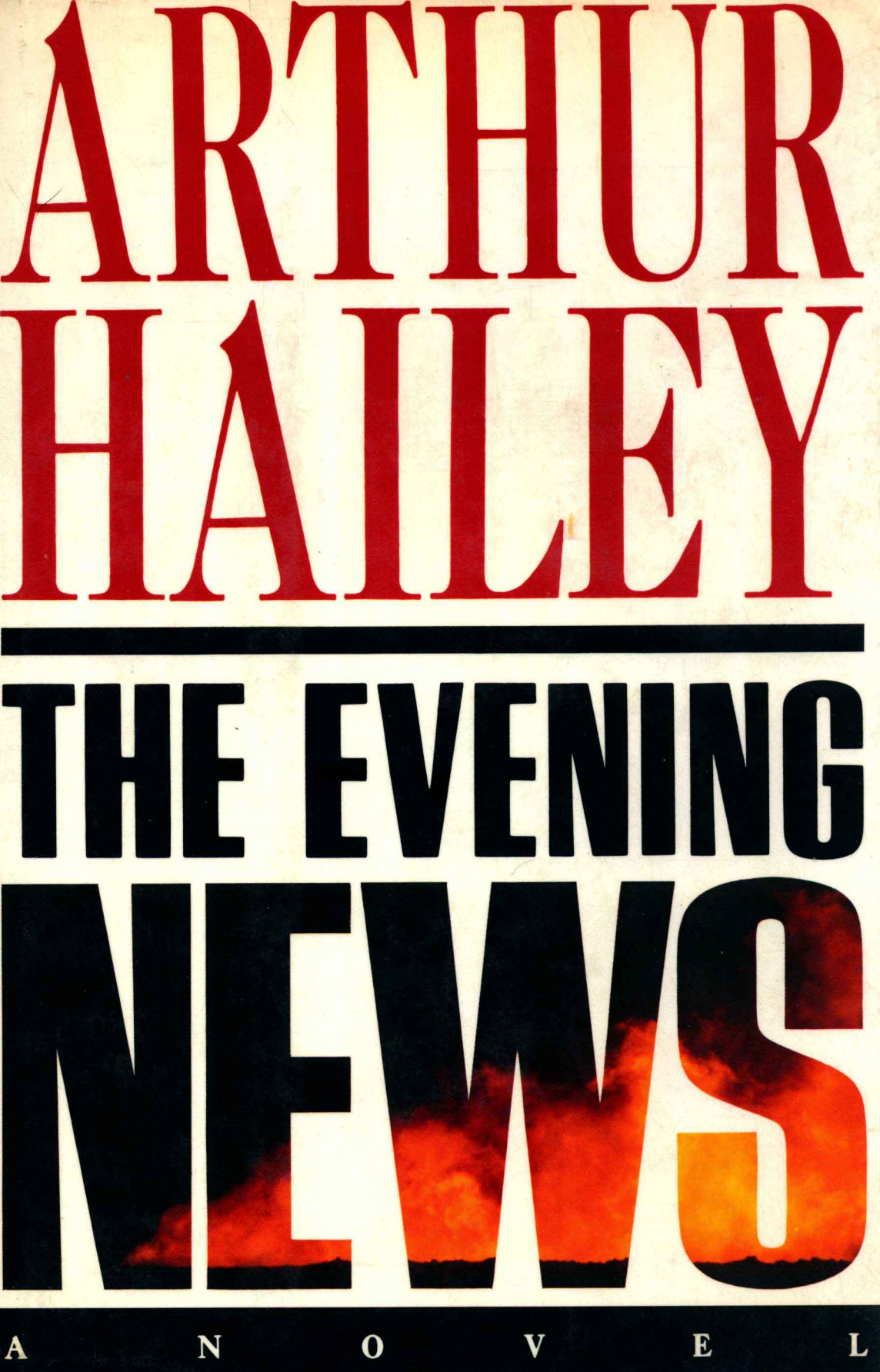
ARTHUR HAILEY

THE EVENING NEWS



A N O V E L

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EVENING NEWS

PART ONE

1

At CBA Television News headquarters in New York, the initial report of a stricken Airbus A300, on fire and approaching Dallas–Fort Worth Airport, came only minutes before the network's first feed of the National Evening News.

It was 6:21 P.M. Eastern daylight time when CBA's bureau chief at Dallas told a producer on the New York Horseshoe through a speakerphone, "We're expecting a big aircraft crash at DFW any moment. There's been a midair collision—a small plane and an Airbus with a full passenger load. The small plane went down. The Airbus is on fire and trying to make it in. The police and ambulance radios are going wild."

"Jesus!" another Horseshoe producer said. "What's our chance of getting pictures?"

The Horseshoe, an outsize desk with seating for twelve people, was where the network's flagship news broadcast was planned and nurtured from early each weekday morning until the last second of air time every night. Over at rival CBS they called it the Fishbowl, at ABC the Rim, at NBC the Desk. But whichever name was used, the meaning was the same.

Here, reputedly, were the network's best brains when it came to making judgments and decisions about news: executive producer, anchorman, senior producers, director, editors, writers, graphics chief and their ranking aides. There were also, like the instruments of an orchestra, a half-dozen computer terminals, wire news service printers, a phalanx of state-of-the-art telephones, and TV monitors on which could be called up in-

stantly anything from unedited tape, through a prepared news segment ready for broadcast, to competitors' transmissions.

The Horseshoe was on the fourth floor of the CBA News Building, in a central open area with offices on one side—those of the National Evening News senior staff members who, at various times of day, would retreat from the often frenzied Horseshoe to their more private work quarters.

Today, as on most days, presiding at the Horseshoe's head was Chuck Insen, executive producer. Lean and peppery, he was a veteran newsman with a print press background in his early years and, even now, a parochial preference for domestic news over international. At age fifty-two Insen was elderly by TV standards, though he showed no sign of diminished energy, even after four years in a job that often burned people out in two. Chuck Insen could be curt and often was; he never suffered fools or small talk. One reason: under the pressures of his job there wasn't time.

At this moment—it was a Wednesday in mid-September—the pressures were at maximum intensity. Through the entire day, since early morning, the lineup of the National Evening News, the selection of subjects and their emphasis, had been reviewed, debated, amended and decided. Correspondents and producers around the world had contributed ideas, received instructions and responded. In the whole process the day's news had been whittled down to eight correspondent reports averaging a minute and a half to two minutes each, plus two voice-overs and four "tell stories." A voice-over was the anchorman speaking over pictures, a "tell story," the anchorman without pictures; for both the average was twenty seconds.

Now, suddenly, because of the breaking story from Dallas and with less than eight minutes remaining before broadcast air time, it had become necessary to reshape the entire news lineup. Though no one knew how much more information would come in or whether pictures would be available, to include the Dallas story at least one intended item had to be dropped, others shortened. Because of balance and timing the sequence of stories would be changed. The broadcast would start while rearrangement was continuing. It often happened that way.

"A fresh lineup, everybody." The crisp order came from In-

sen. "We'll go with Dallas at the top. Crawf will do a tell story. Do we have wire copy yet?"

"AP just in. I have it." The answer was from Crawford Sloane, the anchorman. He was reading an Associated Press bulletin printout handed to him moments earlier.

Sloane, whose familiar craggy features, gray-flecked hair, jutting jaw and authoritative yet reassuring manner were watched by some seventeen million people almost every weeknight, was at the Horseshoe in his usual privileged seat on the executive producer's right. Crawf Sloane, too, was a news veteran and had climbed the promotion ladder steadily, especially after exposure as a CBA correspondent in Vietnam. Now, after a stint of reporting from the White House followed by three years in the nightly anchor slot, he was a national institution, one of the media elite.

In a few minutes Sloane would leave for the broadcast studio. Meanwhile, for his tell story he would draw on what had already come from Dallas over the speakerphone, plus some additional facts in the AP report. He would compose the story himself. Not every anchor wrote his own material but Sloane, when possible, liked to write most of what he spoke. But he had to do it fast.

Insen's raised voice could be heard again. The executive producer, consulting the original broadcast lineup, told one of his three senior producers, "Kill Saudi Arabia. Take fifteen seconds out of Nicaragua . . ."

Mentally, Sloane winced on hearing the decision to remove the Saudi story. It was important news and a well-crafted two and a half minutes by CBA's Middle East correspondent about the Saudis' future marketing plans for oil. But by tomorrow the story would be dead because they knew that other networks had it and would go with it tonight.

Sloane didn't question the decision to put the Dallas story first, but his own choice for a deletion would have been a Capitol Hill piece about a U.S. senator's malfeasance. The legislator had quietly slipped eight million dollars into a gargantuan appropriations bill, the money to oblige a campaign contributor and personal friend. Only through a reporter's diligent scrutiny had the matter come to light.

While more colorful, the Washington item was less important, a corrupt member of Congress being nothing out of the

ordinary. But the decision, the anchorman thought sourly, was typical of Chuck Insen: once more an item of foreign news, whose emphasis Sloane favored, had gone into the discard.

The relationship between the two—executive producer and anchorman—had never been good, and had worsened recently because of disagreements of that kind. Increasingly, it seemed, their basic ideas were growing further apart, not only about the kind of news that should have priority each evening, but also how it should be dealt with. Sloane, for example, favored in-depth treatment of a few major subjects, while Insen wanted as much of that day's news as could be crammed in, even if—as he was apt to express it—"we deal with some of the news in shorthand."

In other circumstances Sloane would have argued against dropping the Saudi piece, perhaps with positive effect because the anchorman was also executive editor and entitled to some input—except right now there wasn't time.

Hurriedly, Sloane braced his heels against the floor, maneuvering his swivel chair backward and sideways with practiced skill so that he confronted a computer keyboard. Concentrating, mentally shutting out the commotion around him, he tapped out what would be the opening sentences of tonight's broadcast.

From Dallas–Fort Worth, this word just in on what may be a tragedy in the making. We know that minutes ago there was a midair collision between two passenger planes, one a heavily loaded Airbus of Muskegon Airlines. It happened over the town of Gainesville, Texas, north of Dallas, and Associated Press reports the other plane—a small one, it's believed—went down. There is no word at this moment on its fate or of casualties on the ground. The Airbus is still in the air, but on fire as its pilots attempt to reach Dallas–Fort Worth Airport for a landing. On the ground, fire fighters and ambulance crews are standing by . . .

While his fingers raced across the keyboard, Sloane reflected in a corner of his mind that few, if any, viewers would switch off until tonight's news was concluded. He added a sentence to the

tell story about staying tuned for further developments, then hit a key for printout. Over at Teleprompter they would get a printout too, so that by the time he reached the broadcast studio, one floor below, it would be ready for him to read from the prompter screen.

As Sloane, a sheaf of papers in hand, quickly headed for the stairs to the third floor, Insen was demanding of a senior producer, "Dammit, what about pictures from DFW?"

"Chuck, it doesn't look good." The producer, a phone cradled in his shoulder, was talking to the national editor in the main newsroom. "The burning airplane is getting near the airport but our camera crew is twenty miles away. They won't make it in time."

Insen swore in frustration. "Shit!"

If medals were awarded for dangerous service in the field of television, Ernie LaSalle, the national editor, would have had a chestful. Although only twenty-nine, he had served with distinction and frequent peril as a CBA field producer in Lebanon, Iran, Angola, the Falklands, Nicaragua and other messy places while ugly situations were erupting. Though the same kind of situations were still happening, nowadays LaSalle viewed the domestic American scene, which could be equally messy at times, from a comfortable upholstered chair in a glass-paneled office overlooking the main newsroom.

LaSalle was compact and small-boned, energetic, neatly bearded and carefully dressed—a yuppie type, some said. As national editor his responsibilities were large and he was one of two senior functionaries in the newsroom. The other was the foreign editor. Both had newsroom desks which they occupied when any particular story became hot and either was closely involved. The Dallas–Fort Worth Airport story was hot—*ergo,* LaSalle had rushed to his newsroom desk.

The newsroom was one floor below the Horseshoe. So was the news broadcast studio, which used the bustling newsroom as its visual backdrop. A control room, where a director put the technical components of each broadcast together, was in the News Building basement.

It was now seven minutes since the Dallas bureau chief had

first reported the wounded Airbus approaching DFW. LaSalle slammed down one phone and picked up another, at the same time reading a computer screen alongside him on which a new AP report had just appeared. He was continuing to do everything he could to ensure coverage of the story, at the same time keeping the Horseshoe advised of developments.

It was LaSalle who reported the dispiriting news about CBA's nearest camera crew—though now rushing toward DFW and ignoring speed limits en route, still twenty miles from the scene of action. The reason was that it had been a busy day at the Dallas bureau, with all camera crews, field producers and correspondents out on assignment, and by sheer bad luck all of the assignments were a long way from the airport.

Of course, there would be some pictures forthcoming shortly, but they would be after the fact and not of the critical Airbus landing, which was certain to be spectacular and perhaps disastrous. It was also unlikely that pictures of any kind would be available for the first feed of the National Evening News, which went via satellite to most of the eastern seaboard and parts of the Midwest.

The only consolation was that the Dallas bureau chief had learned that no other network or local station had a camera crew at the airport either, though like CBA's others were on the way.

From his newsroom desk Ernie LaSalle, still busy with telephones, could see the usual prebroadcast action in the brightly lit news studio as Crawford Sloane came in. Television viewers watching Sloane during a broadcast had the illusion that the anchorman was in, and part of, the newsroom. But in fact there was thick soundproof glass between the two so that no newsroom noises intruded, except when deliberately faded in as an audio effect.

The time was 6:28 P.M., two minutes before first-feed air.

As Sloane slipped into the anchor desk chair, his back to the newsroom and facing the center camera of three, a makeup girl moved in. Ten minutes earlier Sloane had had makeup applied in a small private room adjoining his office, but since then he had been sweating. Now the girl mopped his forehead, dabbed on

powder, ran a comb through his hair and applied a touch of hair spray.

With a hint of impatience Sloane murmured, "Thanks, Nina," then glanced over his papers, checking that the opening words of his tell story on top corresponded with those displayed in large letters on the Teleprompter in front of him, from which he would read while appearing to look directly at viewers. The papers which news readers were often seen to shuffle were a precaution, for use only if the Teleprompter failed.

The studio stage manager called out loudly, "One minute!"

In the newsroom, Ernie LaSalle suddenly sat up straight, attentive, startled.

About a minute earlier, the Dallas bureau chief had excused himself from the line on which he had been talking with LaSalle to take another phone call. Waiting, LaSalle could hear the bureau chief's voice but not what was being said. Now the bureau man returned and what he reported caused the national editor to smile broadly.

LaSalle picked up a red reporting telephone on his desk which connected him, through amplified speakers, to every section of the news operation.

"National desk. LaSalle. Good news. We now have immediate coverage at DFW airport. In the terminal building, waiting for flight connections, are Partridge, Abrams, Van Canh. Abrams just reported to Dallas bureau—they are onto the story and running. More: A mobile satellite van has abandoned another assignment and is en route to DFW, expected soonest. Satellite feed time, Dallas to New York, is booked. We expect pictures in time for inclusion in the first-feed news."

Though he tried to sound laconic, LaSalle found it hard to keep the satisfaction from his voice. As if in response, a muffled cheer drifted down the open stairway from the Horseshoe above. Crawford Sloane, in the studio, also swung around and gave LaSalle a cheerful thumbs up.

An aide put a paper in front of the national editor who glanced at it, then continued on the speakerphone, "Also from Abrams, this report: *On board Airbus in distress are 286 passengers, eleven crew. Second plane in collision, a private Piper*

Cheyenne, crashed in Gainesville, no survivors. There are other casualties on ground, no details, numbers or seriousness. Airbus has one engine ripped off, is attempting landing on remaining engine. Air Traffic Control reports fire is from the location of missing engine. Report ends."

LaSalle thought: Everything that had come from Dallas in the past few minutes was totally professional. But then, it was not surprising because the team of Abrams, Partridge and Van Canh was one of the crack combinations of CBA News. Rita Abrams, once a correspondent and now a senior field producer, was noted for her quick assessment of situations and a resourcefulness in getting stories back, even under difficult conditions. Harry Partridge was one of the best correspondents in the business. He normally specialized in war stories and, like Crawford Sloane, had reported from Vietnam, but could be relied on to do an exceptional job in any situation. And cameraman Minh Van Canh, once a Vietnamese and now an American citizen, was noted for his fine pictures sometimes shot in dangerous situations with disregard for his own safety. The fact that the three of them were onto the Dallas story guaranteed that it would be well handled.

By now it was a minute past the half hour and the first-feed National Evening News had begun. Reaching for a control beside his desk, LaSalle turned up the audio of an overhead monitor and heard Crawford Sloane doing the top-of-the-news tell story about DFW. On camera, a hand—it was a writer's—slipped a paper in front of him. Clearly it contained the additional report LaSalle had just dictated and, glancing down and ad-libbing, Sloane incorporated it into his prepared text. It was the kind of thing the anchorman did superbly.

Upstairs at the Horseshoe since LaSalle's announcement, the mood had changed. Now, though pressure and urgency remained, there was cheerful optimism with the knowledge that the Dallas situation was well in hand and pictures and a fuller report would be forthcoming. Chuck Insen and others were huddled, watching monitors, arguing, making decisions, squeezing out seconds, doing still more cutting and rearranging to leave the needed space. It looked as if the report about the

corrupt senator would fall by the way after all. There was a sense of everyone doing what they did best—coping in a time-confined, exigency situation.

Swift exchanges, jargon-loaded, flowed back and forth.

"This piece is picture-poor."

"Make that copy shorter, pithy."

"Tape room: We're killing '16: Corruption.' But it may come back in if we don't get Dallas."

"The last fifteen seconds of that piece is deadly. We'll be telling people what they already know."

"The old lady in Omaha doesn't know."

"Then she never will. Drop it."

"First segment just finished. Have gone to commercial. We're forty seconds heavy."

"What did the competition have from Dallas?"

"A tell story, same as us."

"I need a bumper and cutline fast for 'Drug Bust.' "

"Take out that sequence. It does nothing."

"What we're trying to do here is put twelve pounds of shit into a ten-pound bag."

An observer unfamiliar with the scene might wonder: *Are these people human? Don't they care? Have they no emotion, no feelings of involvement, not an ounce of grief? Have any of them spared a thought for the nearly three hundred terrified souls on that airplane approaching DFW who may shortly die? Isn't there anyone here to whom that matters?*

And someone knowledgeable about news would answer: *Yes, there are people here to whom it matters, and they* will *care, maybe right after the broadcast. Or, when some have reached home, the horror of it all will touch them, and depending on how it all turns out, a few may weep. At this moment, though, no one has the time. These are news people. Their job is to record the passing parade, the bad with the good, and to do it swiftly, efficiently, plainly so that—in a news phrase from an older time —"he who runs may read."*

Therefore at 6:40 P.M., ten minutes into the National Evening News half hour, the key remaining question for those

around the Horseshoe and others in the newsroom, studio and control room was: Will there or won't there be a story soon, with pictures, from DFW?

2

For the group of five journalists at Dallas–Fort Worth Airport, the sequence of events had begun a couple of hours earlier and reached a high point at about 5:10 P.M., central daylight time.

The five were Harry Partridge, Rita Abrams, Minh Van Canh, Ken O'Hara, the CBA crew's sound man, and Graham Broderick, a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*. That same morning, in predawn darkness, they had left El Salvador and flown to Mexico City, then, after delay and a flight change, traveled onward to DFW. Now they were awaiting other flight connections, some to differing destinations.

All were weary, not just from today's long journey, but from two months or more of rough and dangerous living while reporting on several nasty wars in unpleasant parts of Latin America.

While waiting for their flights, they were in a bar in Terminal 2E, one of twenty-four busy bars in the airport. The bar's décor was mode-utilitarian. Surrounded by an imitation garden wall containing plants, it sported hanging fabric panels overhead in pale blue plaid, lit by concealed pink lighting. The *Times* man said it reminded him of a whorehouse he had once been in in Mandalay.

From their table near a window they could see the aircraft ramp and Gate 20. It was from that gate Harry Partridge had expected to leave, a few minutes from now, on an American Airlines flight to Toronto. But this evening the flight was late and an hour's delay had just been announced.

Partridge, a tall and lanky figure, had an untidy shock of fair hair that had always made him look boyish and still did, despite his forty-odd years and the fact that the hair was graying. At this