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Peabody Award Winners: CBS News, '60 Minutes', 'The Killings in Haditha'

By Elizabeth Jensen, Special to TelevisionWeek

For 17 months after 24 civilians were killed in the Iraqi town of Haditha, none of the U.S. Marines involved in the killing—four of whom eventually were charged with murder—spoke publicly about the events. That changed in March 2007 when Scott Pelley of CBS' "60 Minutes" interviewed Staff Sgt. Frank Wuterich, the 25-year-old in charge on that day: Nov. 19, 2005.

Facing life in prison on charges of murdering 18 people, Staff Sgt. Wuterich told his version of how the men, women and children died after an improvised explosive device blew up one of the Marines' vehicles, killing one of the American troops and injuring two. The Peabody judges called the CBS report a "thorough, open-minded investigation of the worst single killing of civilians by American troops since Vietnam" that put both the incident and the Iraq war into better perspective, illuminating "the terrible choices it presents both soldier and civilian."

Mr. Pelley and his producers, Shawn Efran and Solly Granatstein, first got interested in the case after Time magazine's Tim McGirk reported that the military version of the Haditha events—a Marine press release said 15 civilians were killed by the roadside bomb—simply wasn't true. The appearance of a cover-up helped fuel outrage about the case.

The "60 Minutes" team courted Staff Sgt. Wuterich and his attorneys for many months, Mr. Pelley said. The pitch: "We wanted to hear the story told for the very first time by the people who were actually there on the ground," he said. "There had been a lot of reporting that this had been a massacre, that they were killed in cold blood. It sounded like just a venal attack on innocent civilians and children."

The team, Mr. Pelley said, "also felt it was very, very important that we set the scene of Haditha, that it is a very hostile town to the American occupation."

The actual interview with Staff Sgt. Wuterich, he said, took about a day. The producers also reached out to all the squad members and hired Iraqi journalists to travel to Haditha, where the Americans couldn't go, to videotape interviews with witnesses.

Mr. Pelley acknowledged the challenge of saying with certainty what actually happened that day. "It's very difficult. If you have 100 witnesses, they saw 100 different things. Members of the squad disagreed," he said. "I've been in combat a number of times, and it is a very confusing situation to be in."

Nonetheless, he said, "I think one of the things that our story accomplished was, again, to provide the context that this was a case where this terrible incident was misrepresented at every step and every level." What was clear, he said, "was that the American people were getting a lot of bad information. Our effort was designed to put it in context, to get one of the Marines for the very first time to tell the story and get a little bit closer to what happened."

In the aftermath of the "60 Minutes" story, charges against three of the Marines were dismissed. Meanwhile, Staff Sgt. Wuterich has yet to go to trial, as prosecutors and CBS News battle over unaired footage from the interview that prosecutors subpoenaed, claiming it contains admissions of crime in the attack. CBS successfully got the motion quashed, prosecutors appealed and the case is currently before an appellate court.

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