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Flag of Lies

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Yugoslavs Claim Battle

in New York

CROWD

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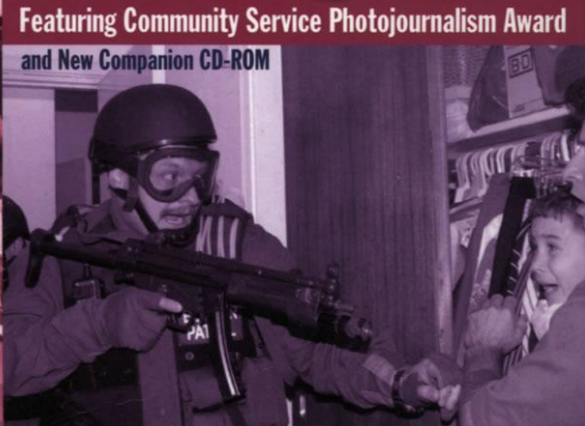
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Darrin Mortenson

Finalist, Deadline Reporting

Darrin Mortenson came to *The Virgin Islands Daily News* in January 2000 to lead the development of the paper's coverage of the growing local Hispanic population. Relatively new to newspaper reporting, Mortenson, 33, joined *The Daily News* after earning a master's degree at the University of Arizona. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has worked and traveled extensively in Latin America.

His writing experience includes monitoring political news in South America, translating news articles, and writing synopses of events for the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. He also wrote for the U.S. State Department in Nicaragua, as well as for the Nature Conservancy and the University of Arizona on U.S.-Mexico border issues. His awards include the National Headliner Award for a news series and the Society of Professional Journalists Sigma Delta Chi Award for non-deadline writing.

In reporting on the Navy's efforts to thwart an aquatic protest off the coast of Vieques, Puerto Rico, Mortenson takes readers through a tense, high-speed cat-and-mouse game with high political stakes fueled by the passions of ordinary people.

Navy unleashes force on protesters

JUNE 28, 2000

VIEQUES, Puerto Rico—Two Navy boats crashed into reefs and ran aground while pursuing five local fishing boats just after sunrise Tuesday in waters within the Navy's bombing-range impact zone. Two Marines were injured in the accident.

The Navy has denied that the boats ran aground and instead has said the fishermen attacked the vessels.

Navy spokesman Lt. Jeff Gordon told reporters at midday Tuesday that the five fishing boats entered the waters of the range and surrounded a Navy vessel, which he said was having mechanical problems. He said the fishermen pelted the two shield-wielding Marines with 12-inch-long metal bars, injuring both servicemen in the neck and chest.

The Navy report differs markedly from what the local fishermen experienced and from what *The Daily News* reporter, the only journalist accompanying the fishermen, observed.

Gordon recounted the Navy's version of events to *The Daily News* based on a videotape taken from a Navy helicopter that had hovered over the fishing boats. He said the Navy will turn over the tape to the FBI for investigation.

"I haven't actually viewed it personally. I was briefed on its content. But I have no doubts about what it contains," Gordon said.

The dramatic, high-speed boat chase in the early daylight occurred just hours after approximately 150 protesters had infiltrated, on foot, the Navy's restricted bombing range. The protesters entered the range in the dark at numerous points along a four-mile-long fence-line.

Many who penetrated the range by land were arrested immediately, but protesters who keep watch at the range gate said a number were still on the range when the Navy resumed bombing about 9 a.m.

One of those still on the range was a protester that

The Daily News reporter had seen being dropped off by a fishing boat and going into the range from the water.

Tuesday afternoon, Gordon said that 164 people had been arrested and taken to 'Roosevelt Roads Naval Station on the main island of Puerto Rico to be processed.

Protesters said that Tuesday's incursion into the range by land and water was an attempt to test the willingness of the Navy to risk injuring or killing Puerto Ricans to sustain the Navy's first military exercises in more than 14 months.

As reports of Tuesday's boat chase and the Navy boat groundings began circulating around midday, Vieques residents celebrated what they viewed as a successful mission—eluding the most powerful Navy in the world—but said they were saddened by the Navy's accusation that the fishermen had used violence.

"It just shows they completely disregard the safety of people of Vieques," said Robert Rabin, leader of the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. "The fact that they would lie about it is nothing new. The people of Vieques have experienced one-half century of lies and deceit."

Tuesday's boat chase began shortly after five small fishing boats quietly launched, under the cover of pre-dawn darkness, from the southern port of Esperanza. Their mission was to block the Navy from bombing and to drop off a small group of protesters on beaches they had occupied for more than a year before the Navy forced them off the range in May.

The tiny fishing armada moved eastward into open water, plunging through 4-foot and 5-foot swells. Heavy spray pelted the crews, and a strong headwind nearly flipped the light boats as they bounced over and through the swells and raced on.

The rising sun gradually illuminated their destination: a series of southeastern points and beaches below the Navy observation post where civilian worker David Sanes was accidentally killed by errant bombs on April 19, 1999.

In the lead boat was Fishermen Association leader and veteran anti-Navy protester Carlos Zenon, accompanied by *The Daily News*.

At approximately 5:30 a.m. a small, inflatable Navy

boat and a 30-foot federal patrol boat—a whaler marked "Harbor Patrol"—intercepted the fishing boats at high speed.

No one on the fishing boats had seen them coming.

Faster than the fishermen's small boats, the patrol boat, crewed by two Marines, raced ahead with its blue lights flashing and made zigzagging sweeps to slow the fishing boats and cut them off when they tried to escape.

The smaller of the two military boats charged at the fishing boats from the left and then from the right, nearly ramming them and forcing them to turn sideways into the swells and risk capsizing.

Using well-orchestrated interdiction maneuvers, the patrol boat broke up the fishermen's formation while the two-man inflatable trapped the slowest of the fishing boats by cutting it off from the others.

Zenon's boat and two other craft carrying his sons Pedro, Cacimar and Yabureibo, turned to give assistance to the trapped boat. The fifth fishing boat headed around a point and out of sight, to drop off a protester on the beach.

The Zenon boats bolted toward the shallow, reef-filled waters, which most of the fishermen have sailed all their lives—often in the dark. The patrol boat followed the fishermen. A Navy helicopter joined the chase, swooping about 12 feet over the fishermen's heads and nearly swamping their small craft with heavy spray.

Just after 6 a.m., the two military boats and four fishing boats had reached the shallow turquoise waters of Bahia Allende, a bay in the middle of the Navy's bombing impact zone.

Clearly visible on the long, horseshoe-shaped Carrucho beach, about 20 Marines in brown T-shirts stood about 50 feet apart, guarding the white, bomb-littered sands against a landing by protesters.

"Watch this," Carlos Zenon said as he saw a fishing boat and the patrol boat pass dangerously close to each other—no farther than five feet apart. As the fishermen and the two Marines aboard the patrol boat exchanged one-fingered salutations, the patrol boat jolted to a halt.

With the wild smiles of underdogs, the fishermen cheered as the patrol boat sat perched atop the jagged

coral and rocks of Cayo Conejo–Rabbit Reef.

Laughing, wrinkling his dark leathery face with a wide, satisfied smile, Zenon told *The Daily News*, "This is how we did it in '78—only then we had 30 or 40 boats. They need to read their history." Zenon was referring to the intensive protest period when he led armadas of fishing boats against Navy warships off the Vieques coast.

As the grounded patrol boat languished on the reef, maneuvering continued out in the bay, where the Navy helicopter controlled the action.

To conserve gasoline, the three Zenon boats halted temporarily in various spots, trying to stall until the slow boat that had been cut off from them earlier could join them.

They took turns being chased by the low-flying helicopter. The fishermen believed the helicopter would not jeopardize one of the Navy's own boats with the same blast of spray it was inflicting on them with the churning of the chopper blades, so they also took turns taking shelter close to the grounded patrol boat where they could frantically bail water.

When finally the fishing boat that had gone around the point rejoined them and the slow boat that had been cut off from them was within sight and shouting distance, the armada began moving out of the impact zone.

Once again, a military patrol boat appeared and intercepted them, then attempted to impede their return to Esperanza.

As the new patrol boat chased the fleeing fishing boats—cutting them off while the helicopter flew just above them and pelted them with spray—the fishermen sped toward Cayo Gracioso, a shallow reef barely visible on the choppy horizon.

Within minutes, the second patrol boat fell victim to the same ploy as the first: When it accelerated to pursue one of the fishing boats, it stopped suddenly in its path.

Four of the fishing boats were able to speed away and wait about a quarter-mile ahead while the fifth boat caught up to the formation. Fishermen on the boat closest to the patrol boat said they saw it strike the reef of Cayo Gracioso at full speed, then tilt to one side.

"With all their technology, all their money, they can't

drive a damned boat," one of the fishermen shouted to Carlos Zenon.

Zenon waved for the other four to form a tight victory formation, and they slowly made their way back to Esperanza.

As they approached the port, Zenon turned and told *The Daily News*: "This is very important, very important. Tell this to the people of St. Croix. Tell this to everybody."

Tuesday afternoon, Navy spokesman Gordon said that all of the occupants of the fishing boats were "involved in an assault on federal officers in the charge of their duties."

He said they would be charged accordingly.

Gordon said he could neither confirm nor deny that the two boats had grounded themselves on reefs.

A picture snapped by one of the fishermen during the chase and later distributed around the island clearly showed one of the patrol boats stuck on the rocks, and another snapshot showed the helicopter nearly on top of one of the fishermen's boats, inundating it with spray.

Lessons Learned

BY DARRIN MORTENSON

Reporters are witnesses. We are trusted by the public to observe events as they occur and immediately record them for history and all who were not there.

Writing "Navy Unleashes Force on Protesters," I learned what happens when a reporter is the only disinterested witness on the scene who can tell the story. I inadvertently participated in the events of the story, and to many people my experience of the event became almost as important as the event itself. I was suddenly thrust into the story, testing my professional mettle, my skills, my editors' confidence, and my readers' trust.

I stood subject to scrutiny from everyone. It was my word against the Navy's. I was the only reporter to go with the fishermen that morning. Most Puerto Rican reporters were prohibited by their news organizations from entering the range to document the civil disobedience.

That prohibition effectively allowed the Navy to deny claims that protesters were on the range, because the only non-Navy witnesses were protesters themselves.

As a reporter for *The Virgin Islands Daily News*—the main daily published from the island of St. Thomas, which is 20 miles east of Vieques—I was considered neither part of the Puerto Rican press nor part of the national media. Navy spokesmen and protest leaders alike occasionally questioned my reasons for so aggressively covering events on Vieques. Knowing my reports might not reach all of Puerto Rico or the mainland, they sometimes resisted giving me information or access, although there are as many Viequenses living in the U.S. Virgin Islands as on Vieques itself.

When the first Navy patrol boat appeared out of nowhere and began its high-speed pursuit, I realized I was fully committed to the story with no way to stand back and observe from afar. At that point, I couldn't be neutral. I was on a fisherman's boat trespassing in Navy waters, and my fate was inextricably linked to theirs.

Prior to debarking that morning, I had dogged the

Navy for its perspective on the protests. I repeatedly asked permission to ride along on one of the Navy patrols—either on land, sea, or air—to tell the story through the experiences and words of the sailors who were just doing their jobs by keeping the protesters off of the range.

Navy officials denied me permission every time, citing liability as the reason. After the dangerous chase, however, I realized that if the Navy had allowed a witness, its spokesmen would not have been able to tell the lies that the Navy later told that day.

When I returned from the sea that morning, I had not yet heard the Navy's version, and I had a clear story in my head and notes. I got to work immediately while my adrenaline was still pumping and while I could still smell the smoke from the overworked motors and feel the sting of salt in my eyes.

A Latin America correspondent for a major Florida daily who was staying at my hotel was the first to report the Navy's version. I was floored when he told me that the Navy was reporting that fishermen had viciously attacked sailors.

At first I was worried that I had missed the real story somewhere else, and that my story about two Navy vessels grounding on shallow reefs would fade quietly behind a story about fishermen attacking sailors with metal bars. I immediately drove to the northern port to check out my theory, but after asking around and finding that no boats from the Isabel Segunda docks had ventured into Navy waters that morning, I realized that I had not missed the story; instead, the Navy spokesmen were making up one of their own. I called back to my editors and told them what I was up against: that it was going to be my word against the U.S. Navy.

I then called the Navy spokesman myself. Before I played my hand, I asked him what happened in waters near the bombing zone on Vieques earlier that morning. He described exactly what he had already told local reporters and would later tell the national media. The spokesman even denied that any boats had run aground, not knowing that photos of the wrecks had been taken.

When I then revealed that I had been on one of the boats, the spokesman immediately threatened me with legal action, saying that I was involved in criminal acts

including an attack against U.S. servicemen in the line of duty. He said that the Navy turned over a videotape of the events to the FBI and that the evidence would be used against me and the fishermen in federal court. The FBI acknowledged that it received the tape and also warned me that I was a witness to a federal crime and that I should not talk about it.

That was out of the question, however. As news spread that I was on one of the boats and had a very different story to tell, editors from several Puerto Rican and national media organizations began ringing my hotel to verify it. One especially important call was from the Caribbean desk editor of a national wire service. After I recounted the events, she made it clear she intended to report only the Navy's version. That is what the nation read the next day, and that is what audiences around the world heard after the wire story was picked up by national networks.

While I worked on my story on Vieques, my editors and fellow reporters back on St. Thomas were scrambling to make sure we had the story nailed down from every angle. They looked at every word, every line of my story to extract me from the story as much as possible. Their biggest fear was not that I had gotten it wrong, but that we were onto a big story that would die silently right there in the Virgin Islands, never making it to the mainland audiences and policy-makers. Since the wire service obviously was not going to pick it up, *The Daily News* staff devised a last-minute plan to get our paper delivered to Puerto Rico the next morning. A group of Puerto Rican university students translated the story into Spanish and distributed it along with digital photos taken of the grounded Navy boats, gradually giving the story a larger audience in Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland.

Although the Navy continues to stick to its version of the story, the videotape has never been used against the fishermen and no charges were ever brought against my paper or any of the boats' other occupants.

Many Puerto Ricans point to the story as a record of what really happened and as proof of the Navy's long history of controlling information about Vieques. The truth made it into print by the slimmest of chances only because one reporter out of dozens was there to bear witness and tell the story.