

A series in which globe-trotting photo-journalist David Hodgson gives the behind-the-scene facts of some of his assignments and points out the lessons that can be drawn from them.

# assignment

THE world, I am reliably informed, will end not with a bang but with a Wimpey. In either event I shall know what to expect because my career in photo-journalism has given me more than my fair share of both experiences.

The eggybaconybeefyhammyonionburgers have been snatched between assignments on more occasions than I can remember – although probably my ulcers are keeping count. The bangs, in a wide variety of shapes and degrees of unpleasantness, punctuate my life a number of times each year.

Bangs come into two categories, those you are partly responsible for creating and those you don't really expect. In either case they can give you a nasty jolt.

Controlled bangs involve blowing things up for the sake of a photographic assignment and, in my time, I have seen mansions topple, apartment blocks fall, cars and planes disintegrate and trains fly off the rails – all for the benefit of a few feet of film.

I suppose there is a destructive side to all of us – hence the attraction of watching a demolition crew at work – and the idea of being responsible for something valuable being destroyed is quite exciting. But it is an excitement mingled with anxiety because if you are blowing something up – even a £30 motor car – it is a one off job. Miss the key shot, as the car/house/train, etc, is reduced to lumps of hurtling scrap, and there can hardly be a re-shoot.

A few years ago I knew a very charming girl called Trixi Kent, who was a striptease artiste and a keen amateur artist. Her ambition was to paint on chunks of blown-up motor car and a friend of hers, who owned a quarry and several old cars, gave her the chance to satisfy her ambitions.

The first shots on the story, Miss Kent helping to fix the charges of plastic explosive around the ancient saloon, were easy enough. So was an over-the-shoulder shot of Trixi and the demolition expert about to press down the plunger. But clearly the crucial shot was going to be the split second when the car became a real banger!

I decided to cover it with three cameras, two of them remote controlled and one hand held. The explosives' expert told me that a safe position for spectators would be some 50 yards away on the bank overlooking the quarry in which the car was dumped.

From this viewpoint I needed a 240mm lens to get anything at all. So I fixed up two motorised Nikons in the quarry. One was protected by a wall of sandbags, within a few yards of the car, and fitted with a 35mm lens. The second, placed on a tripod about 50ft from the doomed vehicle, was fitted with a 135mm lens.

The demolition man, with his detonator box, knelt beside me. He counted down from three to one, and on two, I started the cameras running. On 'one' he pushed home the plunger – and absolutely nothing happened. There was the car, still virgo intacta. He let everything have five minutes to make sure it wasn't going to change its mind and go pop, then advanced cautiously to see what had gone wrong. The fault turned out to be a poor connection. He corrected that, I changed films in the robot cameras, and we started again. This time, on 'one' there was an enormous explosion and the car vanished in a dense, billowing cloud of dust and dirt. Almost at once my view of things was blanketed out by the fog. I glanced down at the remote control camera with the 135mm lens and saw a door spinning from the edge of the dust wall towards it. I closed my eyes. When I opened them the dust was starting to settle and the camera was still in one piece. The door had embedded itself into the quarry floor about two feet away.

Both the remote control cameras survived without a mark on them, but of all the 90 pictures taken in the seconds before, during and just after the explosion, only one was useable. It was taken by the remote camera with the 135mm lens, and shows the door and the dust cloud, advancing on the equipment. All the other frames were ruined by the dense wall of muck churned up by the explosion. I was lucky to have got that vital shot – and even more fortunate to be able to bring my cameras home in one piece. As for the car it was a body repairer's nightmare!

When things are going bang in the day or night, remote cameras are a Godsend, enabling you to get dramatic shots without the risk of ending up six feet under. On another occasion I was shooting a story at a bomb disposal school. One of the lethal gadgets being demonstrated by instructors was the old fashioned Molotov cocktail. This is a bottle filled with petrol and fitted with a wick fuse made from a strip of material soaked in fuel. You light the fuse and throw the bottle away as quickly as possible. In the right – or wrong – hands they can be very destructive weapons capable of knocking out a tank.

## Terrible!

I remember a photographer who had been working in Belfast telling me the amazing story of a small Irishman who stood beside him watching some rioting.

'Terrible, terrible', the little man kept muttering. Then he turned to the photographer and asked for a light. Thinking he wanted a cigarette to calm his nerves, the cameraman obliged him. To his horror the little man produced a Molotov cocktail



from under his coat, casually ignited the fuse and hurled the result into the crowd. The photographer beat almost as hasty a retreat as the bomber!

There is a technique for mixing together some easily obtained chemicals, which enables you to make a much more deadly improved Mark II type cocktail, which will ignite itself on impact. Thus removing the need of looking around for a photographer with a box of matches!

This was demonstrated by one of the bomb disposal experts for the benefit of my camera. I wanted to get as dramatic a picture as possible, so I decided to use a remote control camera with a 21mm lens hard against the wall on which the bottle would be detonated. Unfortunately the weather was bad and because it was late in the afternoon in November, the light poor. Even so I decided it was worth trying the shot.

The sergeant flung his missile with a grace and precision which would have won him a round of applause at Lords, and the bottle struck the wall within a couple of feet of the camera. A fireball erupted and the camera vanished into the inferno. A few moments later when the fire had died down we ran forward to salvage the equipment. The tripod legs were on fire, but the Nikon itself seemed unscathed. A closer inspection confirmed that no damage had been done, and the pictures turned out OK. The only trouble was that unburnt petrol had saturated the equipment and so, for the next few weeks, I went around smelling like a filling-station and terrified in case a carelessly thrown cigarette end should send my camera up in flames. □



*Left: A door flies out of the dust cloud and misses the camera by a couple of feet.*



*Right: Trixi Kent puts the finishing touches to a work of art painted on part of an old banger.*

*Below: Flames leap towards the Nikon after a self-igniting Molotov cocktail exploded.*

