

[< Back To Article](#)

Salaam Bombay

Text by Eva Pavithran and Mamta Badkar and Photographs by Mamta Badkar

Published: Volume 17, Issue 1, January, 2009

You can see the horrors of 26/11 not only in the backdrop but also in people's eyes. For those who have seen terror up close, their lives have been changed for ever. Some went beyond their call of duty and for many it was a one-man show only made possible because of their convictions. Those who survived may not even remember the faces of their rescuers. It didn't matter to them, for they knew the value of a helping hand. Verve spotlights the unlikeliest of heroes who found themselves in the likeliest of places...

CHATRAPATHI SHIVAJI TERMINUS (CST)

RE-FRESH FOOD PLAZA

"I was fortunately out of town. Else one of the bullets would have hit me," says Re-Fresh Food Plaza proprietor, Pankaj Goel, pointing at a bullet hole near the cash counter of the 300-square-foot eatery that was the first to be hit on that dreadful night at CST. But his uncle Mukesh Agarwal was not as lucky. Even as the two terrorists opened fire at CST from platform number 13, which is diagonally opposite to the restaurant, Mukesh lead about eight to 10 people to safety. Amidst all the chaos, he was hit by a bullet in the stomach and a shell of another one pierced his shoulder. He continued in his mission to the injured, hardly realising that he had been hit. "The wound caught his eye only when it started hurting him. He got into a cab and admitted himself to Bombay Hospital. There was no blood loss or damage caused to his internal organs because the bullet was stuck in the soft tissue," says Pankaj. Mukesh is recuperating at home, even now.

Cashier Dinesh Seenamoily says, "There was firing at the start from the front but I didn't really know what was going on. After two seconds, the glass door entrance shattered, that's when we realised." The door was made of Teflon glass; it didn't let the bullet pass through.

The terrorists first threw two hand grenades – one where the unsuspecting outstation passengers were waiting and the other in front of the food plaza, which was later diffused. The first of the 19 bullets that hit the restaurant, was shot at 9.54 p.m. There are 17 bullet holes you may count. Two doors bore the brunt of the other two. Pankaj managed to collect most of them, except the one that pierced the AC. The attacks haven't stopped patrons from thronging the food plaza.

Imagine being holed up in a place that separates you from terror by just a glass wall. "When they began firing I literally crawled out through the kitchen (the only place that has a solid wall) and ran out the side door with bullets flying past, over us. We knew we had to get out of the station as quickly as possible but the side gate was locked. People were running helter-skelter. One man broke the lock of the luggage room with a huge stone and then we managed to open the gate and run out from there," Dinesh says.

"My staff who witnessed this heinous crime say that the two terrorists seemed like they were in some sort of race with each other. They would see which one of them felled more people and laugh. It was like a game for them. They were definitely 'high' on something. Who in their right mind would be able to kill infants? They didn't even spare the stray dogs!" exclaims Goel.

The terrorists left the outstation waiting area after a rampage of about 45-50 minutes, after which the staff came back to shut the cash registers and take their mobile phones. "When we returned we saw bodies sprawled everywhere. There was blood and people's brains were smeared on the floor. We took the injured on handcarts to St George's Hospital," recalls staffer Bharat Patel.

You can't help but note the absence of (or even a mention of) cops during the initial firing at the Main Line. Pankaj maintains that the terrorists left not because of retaliation from cops but because they didn't have people left to kill. A lot of them including women, children and men were already dead or injured while the rest had managed to flee from the scene.

There are still some workers who are scared to return to work. And those who have resumed feel that it's dangerous because there isn't enough security for a huge station like CST. "What can the government do for us?" asks Dinesh. "The terrorists managed to fire at their own will without any resistance, for more than half an hour...."

SANJAY KUMAR PANDEY, DEPUTY STATION MANAGER

He heard the gunshots as he was walking towards his office, ignoring them thinking they were firecrackers. Until he saw people being felled by bullets. "I still get nightmares. Those who tried to escape fell dead in their tracks," he says. That's when he noticed one of the terrorists, Ajmal Amir Kasab, making his way towards the suburban platforms. "Senior inspector Shashank Shinde (GRP), rushed to the scene and fired at Ajmal. However, the other terrorist (slain Ismail Khan) shot him from behind. I saw that with my eyes. It was shattering." Sanjay then hurried towards the local platforms. A homeguard who was next to him was shot on his leg. He immediately put him on a wheelchair and took him out through one of the gates of the station. By then the announcements had been made and the platforms had been emptied, diverting further casualties. Sanjay is full of praise for his senior, station master R. B. Sharma, who made the watchmen of St George's open the gate facing the station to facilitate easy transfer of the injured. Both of them rescued people through the night. Sanjay received an award for his courage from the South Indian Education Society and the Shanmukhananda Sabha.

A. K. TIWARI, ASSISTANT CHIEF TICKET INSPECTOR

He lost his friend and colleague S. K. Sharma on that dreadful Wednesday. Naturally, he is livid and angst-ridden. "I just want someone to explain to me why there were no cops in the vicinity even after constant gunshots were heard from the outstation platforms?" he asks.

Sharma was winding up his work for the day after a routine round of the station with Tiwari, when they heard the gunshots. "The firing stopped suddenly. We thought they had left the station," recalls Tiwari. The two got separated and Sharma, unaware that the terrorists were just taking a break to reload their guns, proceeded down the stairs and was gunned down. He died on the spot. Tiwari helped a woman and her child who were bleeding profusely. "She was crying for help. I carted her to the hospital. They didn't make it," he sighs. He was there until the last body had been taken out. When he returned to his office, "There was a grenade stuck in the ticket punching machine.

Sharma's wife called me up to ask about his whereabouts. I assured her that everything was under control. Your mind always expects people 'you' know to be invincible. But, when I didn't see him till 3 a.m. I hurried to St George's and saw his body there. I couldn't believe my eyes."

He doesn't think twice before talking about "people making tall claims". Tiwari seemed quite miffed with announcer Ram Zhende for taking all the credit and not even mentioning his fellow announcer (Main Line) who had initially warned him about the firing. "You can't even see the outstation platform's waiting room from the suburban ones," he justifies. He calls senior inspector Shanshank Shinde a true martyr. "He's the only one who I saw fight and die in the line of duty."

Tiwari didn't even spare the media for not getting the figures right. "I hand carted at least 40 people, both injured and deceased, to the hospital. So how can the figure be just 56? And why are none of you asking for the CCTV footage from the Main Line that captured the actual rampage?" he questions. "The suburban platforms were empty by the time the terrorists reached and the media has CCTV footage for those." A question that hasn't still been answered....

R. H. DUBEY, SENIOR TICKET CHECKER

He was sitting in his office on platform 1 when the Harbour Line train coming towards CST was to reach the platform on 26/11. The motorman had no clue of what was happening at the station. "I heard the shots but ignored them thinking they were firecrackers, as India had won a match. But it got louder and started coming towards the suburban platforms," he says. "That's when I heard Ram Zhende's announcement."

When the train reached the station, some 200 people alighted and on seeing this Dubey rushed and pleaded with people to move out of the platform from the Masjid end. "If we had stayed there, Kasab (the captured terrorist) would have shot at us as he left the station," says Dubey. The people in that train have a lot to thank Dubey for. Had he not shouted and pleaded to them to take the rear exit they would have fallen prey to the AK-47s.

SUSHILA PYARELAL, CLEANER GROUP SUPERVISOR

Sushila lost her good friend in the attack. But that didn't stop her or her team from removing all traces of the sinister assault from the station. Her colleague Rukhmani Shanmugham had a narrow escape, as she was sitting near Platform 13 when the terrorist entered! They managed to get away unhurt but returned to the station at around 1.30 a.m. after getting instructions from the Central Railway authorities. "By then the bodies were all cleared. I can't still sleep at night, the images still haunt me. There were pools of blood, bullets, shattered glass and pieces of bodies amongst open tiffin boxes and luggage. But, we had to do our job," she says. A team of seven cleaned up the

entire section. It was no mean feat. The blood clots were so thick that they had to scrape them off the floor with stones. They also collected all the bags, including the one with explosives that was discovered later, and footwear of the victims and those who had fled and stored them in the unclaimed baggage section. Sushila and many in her team are scared of coming to work, but feel that life has to go on... like so many, this job is her only source of income.

Nileema Zoheri, Wheeler Bookstore

Commuters swarm all around CST's Wheeler Bookstore. Many stop to pick up magazines and other reading material but only a few pause to notice the make-shift lamination of former staffer, Chandulal Kashinath Tandel's photograph that hangs at the storefront. If they have noticed his absence, they're not telling. The salesmen and Nileema Zoheri, who is in charge of the store, stare blankly for a while and it is Nileema who finally speaks.... "I tried to get in touch with him and his family after I saw the attack on the news but I couldn't get through. We thought he had shut shop and left. It was only when we came in the next morning and saw that the store was still open, that we realised what had happened." Chandulal who has worked there over three decades was about his daily routine when the gunfire broke out. "He was shot trying to pull down the shutters of the store. No one knows exactly what happened that night. No one was there, but it was pre-destined," she admits fatalistically. The only reprieve for most people swept up by this immense tragedy.

COLABA

CAFÉ LEOPOLD

A few days after the firing at Leopold, some popular dailies reported how the two terrorists who unleashed death at the café and later at The Taj had dined there and even paid the bill! Quiz manager Eric Anthony on this and he rubbishes the stories as rumours spread by people trying to cash in on the tragedy. "The attackers came in through the two entrances in the front. First, they threw a grenade and then started firing arbitrarily at around 9.40 p.m. It was very loud...like war." It was full house, despite it being a Wednesday, but luckily there were no customers waiting outside. The attacks killed two staffers, six customers including foreigners and left many severely injured. Eric who usually stands at one of the main entrances to usher the guests in was at the cash counter on that fateful night. That was escape number one, for him.

As soon as he heard the blast he ran out of the side exit. That's when staffer Kazi Mohammad came out and collapsed in front of him. "He was bleeding profusely. Peeru Pasha, a staffer with Leopold for 17 years, followed Kazi. I told Peeru to help me take Kazi to the hospital. He said he was feeling giddy and couldn't take the sight of blood. We all assumed that it was a bomb blast. Peeru turned to go back in when the terrorist caught him. He was shot in the neck," he chokes. After Peeru fell, the terrorists got out. One took over the footpath and the other the by-lane. When a bullet brushed past his head, Eric ran towards Colaba from the lane behind Taj. Escape number two. When he reached Colaba there was firing at Nariman House. He jumped into a taxi and went to GT hospital. He was stuck in the X-Ray room for over an hour because of firing at Cama hospital. Escape number three.

"I am not scared of death any more. I'd like to think of myself as God's favourite child," he says optimistically trying to conceal the trauma of those 15 minutes spent almost in the claws of death. Thomas Fernandes, captain of the restaurant was stuck inside and has some horror stories to tell. "I ducked under a table along with two customers. One took a bullet on the head and the other succumbed to six. People who got trapped were customers sitting in the middle," he says. He stayed put in the kitchen and came out later to clean up and pick up the bodies with the help of locals.

The café, a hotspot in the city thanks to Gregory David Roberts' Shantaram, still holds wounds of the attack on its walls and glass panes. "We are not fixing them at the moment. It's like a tribute to the ones who lost their lives here. We'll never forget them," assures Eric.

Bharat Waghela, Owner Chamunda Chemist

Bharat Waghela was at home watching cricket like most Indians on November 26th, when he was distracted by flashes of light and what sounded like firecrackers. As he stood by his building gate, peering in the blinding darkness, he saw what he would later identify as the second terrorist standing on the road diagonally across from him. His house, opposite his chemist-store Chamunda, is nestled next to Café Leopold. The terrorists who exited from the café's side entrance unleashed a barrage of bullets in the by-lane, at anything that moved. "There were six of us standing at the building gate, I don't know what possessed me to duck when I did. The tailor standing behind me was hit by three bullets, one got him square in the head and he died on the spot," he recounts. His body language belies the horror that is plainly visible in his eyes.

Once they opened fire, he ran upstairs and kept his family away from the window but they fired into his home. After a lull, he opened the window and saw his brother, Subhash, prostrate on the pavement. "I ran downstairs immediately but I couldn't get to Subhash because one of the terrorists

was still standing there. I waited till he had walked ahead and then pulled my brother into a little alley. He told me he had been shot, 'my stomach's really hurting' he kept saying." After managing to get his brother into a taxi he took him to Pophale Nursing Home and was refused service. "They told me it was a police case and that I would have to take him to a government hospital. I begged and pleaded, I even had a relative go to the police chowky but it was empty. He lost too much blood and despite five hours of surgery he did not survive."

Tears of grief are replaced by those of anger and frustration. He vividly recounts the events even as he is forced to carry on his business as though nothing happened. His passion however translates into his dealings with traders and maybe, just maybe, he's being a little harsher with them today?

"People told me to lodge a case against Pophale but what's the point in that? It's not going to bring my brother back. But why become a doctor if you're not going to help?" he asks helplessly.

"Subhash was shot at while he was securing the store. He had pulled the shutter half way down. A foreigner who had been shot ran in and pulled the shutter down completely. He told my father and the customers to remain inside. This man was helping even though he had been shot!"

Bharat points to the spot outside his store where they later found a haversack full of magazine cartridges and the little alley he pulled his brother into. He shows us where they found empty cartridges the following day and the route the trigger-happy terrorists took. He tells us how they barricaded their lane with bicycles and that he also lost a cousin, the victim of a stray bullet from Nariman House. He has come close to breaking down three times while recounting that harrowing night. And yet he retreats into his apothecary that houses idols of innumerable Indian deities.

CAMA AND ALBLESS HOSPITAL

CHAYYA LAD, MATRON

Baby burps, chuckles and cries reverberate from the different wards of Cama Hospital. You wonder how the nurses and young mothers managed to keep the newborns calm and quiet. On 26/11, after the cold-blooded killings of several commuters at CST, the two terrorists decided to take 'unplanned' refuge in the hospital. They killed two unarmed watchmen, in their attempt to take asylum. Watchman Raosaheb Funde, who escaped from the clutches of death by a whisker, ran to the main building and informed the staff on every floor about the approaching jeopardy.

Today, Chayya Lad is a proud matron. Her team of nurses, watchmen and ward boys performed incredibly under mind-numbing circumstances. "I left for J. J. Hospital at around 8.30 p.m. on the night of the attacks. But I came back as soon as I was allowed to enter Cama. After receiving the warning from the watchmen the first thing the nurses did was to switch off all the lights. They locked patients, babies, relatives and even people who had fled from CST, in the milk bank and the baby room on the fifth floor. Others were holed up in bathrooms on the fourth floor," she says. The terrorists knocked on every ward, all of which were empty by then. The nurses made everyone turn their mobile phones off and urged mothers to feed their tots to keep them quiet. It was their sheer presence of mind that saved the lives of several people, including 40 babies and their mothers.

The sixth floor where the gruesome encounter took place was damaged beyond recognition at the time of going to press. The terrorists had made the ladies loo on the floor their base. Two constables fell prey to a grenade. The walls look like a canvas of bullet holes and shrapnel marks. One of the lifts has been replaced. You can almost hear gunshots echo in your heart....

Chayya conducted group counselling sessions for all her staff. "I gave them a platform to express their feelings and assigned them morning shifts for a few days after the attack. I am so proud of them; they are role models for people wanting to be in this profession."

NARIMAN / CHABAD HOUSE AREA

Varun Sonawane, BPO employee residing in Mehta building diagonally opposite to Nariman/Chabad House.

Blink and you might have missed the narrow residential by-lane, which nestles Nariman/Chabad House. Now, even a kid playing on the streets seems to know its exact location. The five-storeyed building, formerly known as Nariman House, is currently in the limelight for the unfortunate killing of Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg, his wife Rivka and their few Israeli guests.

Some dailies and news channels had reported that the terrorists were staying in the building for a couple of months before the attack. Varun who witnessed the siege up close rubbishes this claim. "They were orthodox Jews and rented out rooms only to visiting Jews," Varun justifies. Ask him if he saw the terrorists walk in and he says, "I can't tell. Many people who visited them carried knapsacks. Although it's quite clear that they had studied the entire area."

Varun heard the gunshots at around 10.00 p.m. At first, he thought that a fight had broken out between the Jews in the house. "I came out of my room and saw some people from the alley throwing bricks at the house. The terrorists fired in retaliation. That's when we ran out," he says. Varun realised the seriousness of the situation when a few grenades exploded in the lane and later, one almost blew up a petrol pump nearby. He and many residents spent the following two days on

the main road watching terror unfold in front of their eyes.

According to Varun the terrorists wanted to clear the area and take Israeli hostages. "There were around 80 people in the lane. They could have easily killed them all. But, they just fired warning shots."

Varun remembers the couple to be friendly. "They kept to themselves, but often came down to watch us play cricket. Two days before the attack, few of us went to collect donations for the yearly Sai Baba puja. Gavriel gave us 500 rupees and promised more if required."

Varun returned to his one-room house on the morning of November 28 and helped social worker Vijay Surve in serving food to the commandos after their mission ended late that night. Those 60 hours of terror have changed Varun's perception of 'safe' Colaba. "I always thought South Bombay was safer than the suburbs... but I guess I was wrong."

Iqbal Singh Jaggi, resident of Prem Bhavan behind Nariman/Chabad House.

A former army trainee, 84-year-old Iqbal Singh Jaggi was born in Rawalpindi. He's proud to say that he's a Sikh with a Muslim name. Familiar with almost all holy texts, he feels that today's generation doesn't understand religion. "No religion patronises miscreants," he exerts.

On the night of the attacks when he heard the explosion, his immediate thoughts were that of kids with no manners celebrating India's victory in a cricket match. It's only when his son rang up from Kuwait that he switched on the TV.

Iqbal's house in Prem Bhavan is ground zero. Its backyard is Nariman House. Yet, he and his wife refused the cops' offer to be evacuated. "A couple from the adjacent Fardoon Court moved to another building called Colaba Court and were shot dead, when they peeped out to see what was happening. The NSG commandos were being air-dropped on the terrace of our building and cops had surrounded the area. It would have been foolish and cowardly to move out. What better protection could I have got elsewhere?" he asks.

For two days all they could hear were gunshots, blasts and choppers circling the area. He recalls hearing a loud blast around 7.30 p.m. on November 28. "No one could have survived that blast. It echoed 'the end'."

BYCULLA FIRE STATION

H. V. Girkar, Station Officer

It wasn't long ago that children wished to grow up and become firemen. But in a capitalistic, brown-noser world those dreams faded into the desire to become corporate honchos and movie stars. But on November 26, these unlikely heroes recaptured the innocent childhood dreams, when they stepped in the line of fire to save their city, under siege.

H. V. Girkar's first call came from the Oberoi. Firemen from Nariman Point had already responded at 10 o'clock that night but they needed more manpower. "Every unit from south Bombay was responding to these calls. We headed to the Oberoi at 11.22 p.m. and remained there till 1.04 a.m. when we headed to the Taj. At first, we saw no fire and circled the heritage building. It was only when we got to the terrace of Salvation Army that we saw the Taj in flames, around 3 a.m."

The distinctive, red fire engines and the emblematic blue woollen uniforms were plastered all over the papers. They rescued about 300 people that night and the bronto skylift became famous overnight. That's because the firemen were willing to take on flames and AK-47s.

"We were advised not to get too close as the terrorists were hurling grenades and firing from inside the Taj, but the sight of people desperately climbing out of windows to escape, was enough. We were terrified that they would jump or fall and lose their lives. We saw them throwing objects at the windows to break them and attract our attention. We started evacuating those on the first and second floors." Girkar broke into one of the rooms on the second floor to help a civilian and got stranded, locked out by the Taj's one-way doors.

"I am different when you see me in regular clothes and different in uniform. When you see people trapped you don't think of personal protection...just that you can't stop your work. Our job was to rescue, reassure and help." And these under-sung heroes take it all in their stride. They don't hold the government accountable for inadequate protective gear. "We don't need bullet-proof vests in our line of duty but who knows it may be the need of the day, in these times."

Our interview is interrupted by a loud, unsettling alarm. We catch them practicing their drill for an upcoming competition but can't seem to rid ourselves of the knowledge that the alarm that alerts them to terrorist attacks is the same one that calls them out now.... Only today, it's to the aid of a hapless bird caught in an electric wire. They, of course, respond with the same conviction.

Interview with a NSG Commando

They are used to laying low, doing their job and getting on with their lives without much notice or credit but the NSG commandos descending from choppers against the Bombay skyline have created another iconic image that we aren't likely to forget soon. The commando who has spoken with us on conditions of anonymity maintains that this was routine practice and they were briefed on

the targets they would encounter.

Unaware of reports that claim they used mobile phones as visibility aids he insists, "We were well equipped with illuminating devices, however new equipment is a force multiplier." The only thoughts our intrepid commando had through the encounter were the thoughts he is trained to have. "No civilian casualties, capture the terrorists, rescue the hostages, adapt to changing situations and plan accordingly.... I was confident but had butterflies in my stomach. I had so much to do and a chain of events ahead that did not leave me time to do anything except continuously devise moves to end the siege."

Commemorating Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan and Hawaldar Gajendra Singh whom he was close to, he says, "The public needs to be helpful, aware and awake. The requirement is to say 'we' rather than 'I, me, myself'. The government needs to provide us with the latest equipment. The media should not let this issue die its own death till some concrete results are seen. We have proven our worth even to the peril of our lives on numerous occasions and will continue doing it because we understand our responsibility towards the nation. Now it's your chance to play your role towards your own country."

D. B. MARG POLICE STATION

N. MALI, SENIOR POLICE INSPECTOR

He's in charge of the police station and deployed the team that was responsible for the capture of the lone surviving terrorist Ajmal Kasab. "We got information on the firing at Colaba at around 9.40 p.m. Later, we were filled in about the terrorists at CST. The control room asked us to set up barricades." After receiving details of their blood trail, Mali made sure the entire area near TBZ jewellery and Girgaum Chowpatty was doubly secured. "We strengthened the barricades after we got the news of them escaping in a police car." This step played catalyst to the most talked-about arrests of recent times. He also made sure the restaurants in that stretch were shut down.

S. GOVILKAR, ASSISTANT POLICE INSPECTOR

S. Govilkar worked at the immi-gration office before joining the police force just a week before 26/11. It was his first mission. "I finished my day duty and went home for dinner at around 9.30 p.m. When I watched the news about the Leopold firing, I thought it was a gang war." He left much against the wishes of his concerned wife. "When I reached, Mali Sir who was at the gate of the station asked me to go to Girgaum Chowpatty." All he had for protection was a lathi. "The revolvers in the station had run dry, as 15 police officers had taken them," he says. They then formed two teams – one with himself and the late T. S. Omble and the other with assistant police inspector H. Bawdankar and police sub inspector B. Kadam. "Bawdankar and Kadam were in civilian clothes, as they are part of the detection squad. Both of them were armed with automatic guns. We were constantly getting information on the wireless from Sanjiv Patil and were expecting the terrorists at any moment," he exclaims.

Govilkar's team concentrated on Ajmal Kasab, the captured terrorist. "We saw the white Skoda approach at around 12.30 a.m. After firing two rounds, they tried to take a U-turn but hit the divider. Kadam and Bawdankar who were at the driver's end fired three rounds and Kasab, pretending to surrender, fell onto the road on his stomach with an AK-47 between his legs. He started firing and Omble, who tried to snatch the gun off him, got shot five times in the bargain," he recalls. "That's when I felt a burning sensation on my waist. There was blood, a bullet had brushed past." They pounced on Kasab with lathis as they needed to capture him alive. "It was team work, no one had to give anyone orders; fuelled by anger, we just wanted to capture him alive."

B. KADAM, POLICE SUB INSPECTOR

When he saw the Skoda approaching, he was positioned behind the pillar of the bridge at Girgaum Chowpatty, armed with a gun. "When the terrorists saw the area cordoned off, they stopped the car way ahead, put the headlights on high beam and started the wiper with water spraying so that we couldn't see their faces. We shouted and asked them to get out of their car. At this point they tried to escape but hit the divider."

The driver, slain terrorist Ismail Khan, shot two rounds from a pistol. Kadam and Bawdankar fired three rounds each. Bawdankar's bullets severely injured Ismail. "P. N. Avade from our team crossed the divider and took the key and pistol and S. C. Nikam Kalhe took the AK-47. Omble saved the entire team. We hardly had weapons against the AK-47, but everyone present there acted like a soldier." These officers feel that the public mindset has changed towards the force after 26/11 and they hope that they'll be better armed and prepared for any such emergency in the future.

In The Line of Fire

Vasant Prabhu, Indian Express Photographer

Vasant Prabhu's unforgettable images of the foreigners assassinated by the Taj poolside have been splashed across dailies world over. "I saw the bodies of two foreigners lying near the poolside and

their blood had sprayed everywhere. It was dark and I was in two minds about using a flash because it could attract unwanted attention. I also knew that this was a historical moment which I could not miss.”

After finishing his assignments that infamous November night he answered a call about a shootout at Café Leopold and hopped on to his bike with fellow Indian Express reporter Aditya Paul making a beeline for Colaba. “I could hear loud firing at the Oberoi but I assumed they were crackers. I was focused on getting to Leopold. The public was rushing out at Regal Circle so I dropped my reporter off and took the back route.” As he parked his bike, he saw two khaki-clad cops jump out of a car and followed them in, unaware that they were actually tailing terrorists.

Photographers by virtue of their profession must be opportunists and amid the chaos Vasant got past the Taj security and the cops, both assuming that he was with the other. The destruction that confronted him came as a shock but he followed the policemen, one of whom he later discovered was Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Nagre Patil. Following the bloody footprints, often crawling on his knees and sometimes sliding on his stomach, he only saw the ruin the terrorists left in their wake. “I could constantly hear echoes, so if there was one shot fired I could hear three echoes. On the first floor you’re quite safe but the construction is such that on the second floor you can be shot at from anywhere. Nagre Patil shot and injured one of the terrorists who shouted ‘b@\$#!#’ and fired back at him.”

Cognisant of the ever-present danger and attuned to the sensitivity of the situation he insists, “I didn’t want to compromise their work or their safety because if anything went wrong I would be responsible for that the rest of my life. I kept in mind that the police didn’t have adequate protective gear. The staffers also requested me not to take any pictures when they were moving the bodies. I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings so I put my camera away.” Vasant got separated from the police at this point and after escaping into a basement via a narrow wrought-iron staircase, he left the Taj on a bullet-proof van that came to rescue a VIP. “It was only after I got to my office and washed up that I sat down and thought about what I had done.”

There has always been a raging debate about the ethics of war photography. “I met James Nachtwey (renowned war photographer) and I remember thinking if you’re a photographer you should be like him and that day, for just a moment, I felt like maybe I was.” And while the circumstances of this epiphany seem tragic and it doesn’t offer much consolation, it’s all he can hold onto at this time.

Sebastian D’Souza, Photo Editor, *Mumbai Mirror*

Ajmal Mohammad Amin Kasab, the baby-faced assassin who terrorised commuters at CST was captured on camera by Sebastian D’Souza. After hearing gunshots from his The Times of India office, he entered the station from the Harbour Line and saw the terrorists walking towards the suburban platforms. “They were quite far so I ran towards the entrance opposite Wheeler bookstore and I saw the salesman get shot. There were three cops with me, the terrorists spotted them and fired at them. Two died on the spot and the other was severely injured. I ran and climbed into the ladies compartment of the train on platform four.” Seeing more policemen behind the bookstore, the gunmen split up and charged them from both sides. That’s when Sebastian took Kasab’s picture. “I got him as he stepped out shooting at the announcers’ cabin. They then got onto the motorman’s compartment on platform three and reloaded their guns. I was only a few compartments away on the same train. I lost them when they went towards the main entrance. A few cops who had run away returned after the terrorists had left the station. I asked them what the point was. I would have followed the trigger-happy duo but I had to avoid being seen.” The photographer was shocked at the cavalier behaviour of the terrorists but shrugs, “I have seen plenty of blood and gore in my career.”

Express yourself: leave a comment on the article telling us what you think.
Write to us at edit@verveonline.com

Join us at our **Facebook group**

Subscribe to Verve Magazine or buy the Verve issue on stands now!