



THE NEW YORK TIMES

After a B-25 bomber crashed into the 78th and 79th floors of the Empire State Building on July 28, 1945, the Times photographer Ernie Sisto leaned out as far as he dared from a ledge on the 81st floor — with help from colleagues — to take his shot.

‘HOLD MY LEGS’

How an ‘Ace Photographer’ Shot a Sky-High Disaster

By ANIKA BURGESS

The Empire State Building was so shrouded in fog on the morning of Saturday, July 28, 1945, that its upper floors had vanished from view. Lost in the dense clouds that smothered the city, the pilot of a B-25 Army bomber, flying across Manhattan at skyscraper-height, saw the landmark too late.

The plane smashed into the 78th and 79th floors, shearing off its wings. The twin engines ricocheted like pinballs, one into the elevator shaft, the other onto the roof of a neighboring building. “Brilliant orange flames shot as high as the observatory on the 86th floor,” The New York Times reported, “as the gasoline tanks of the plane exploded.”

Thirteen people perished instantly, including the pilot, 27-year-old Lt. Col. William F. Smith Jr., who had recently returned from service in Europe, where the war had just ended. Smith’s flight had been a training exercise before an expected redeployment to the Pacific.

When news of the crash broke, Ernie Sisto, a Times staff photographer, was in the paper’s city room on 43rd Street, discussing the day’s assignments. He rushed to 34th Street, emerging from the subway into a melee of fire trucks, police officers, ambulances and stunned bystanders.

The crash had torn a hole some 20 feet high and 18 feet wide into the Empire State Building’s north side. Roughly 900 feet below, Sisto, his camera in his hand, his press pass tucked into his hat, knew that to get a good shot he would need to get closer.

Sisto was carrying his 4-by-5 Speed Graphic, the standard for newspaper photographers since the late 1920s. It produced large, detailed negatives, but it was also cumbersome — nowhere near as unobtrusive as the smaller 35-millimeter cameras made famous by Leica. As Sisto’s colleague Eddie Hausner recalled, “Using the Speed Graphic, you had to get the picture and you had to get it right the first time around, if possible. If you didn’t, you had to pull out the film holder and reset the next sheet.”

Sisto was renowned for getting his shot, particularly at sporting events. During one football game, he was so close to the sidelines that he was tackled. Covering a hockey contest, he was hit in the head with a puck; after getting stitched up, he resumed shooting. Even when he was far from the action, he found a way to get close by expertly wielding an enormous long-lens camera known as Big Bertha.

Entering the Empire State Building, Sisto took the elevator to the 67th floor — as high as an elevator could go that morning, but still not high enough. Along with some other photographers, he climbed 14 flights of stairs, past the crash

Antia Burgess is the director of The Times’s photo archive.



ERNIE SISTO/THE NEW YORK TIMES



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site and higher still, to the 81st floor. He located a ledge that looked down onto the wreckage. The perspective was right, but he needed to get out far enough to capture the scene. Sisto changed the lens on his Speed Graphic to a wide-angle. To his colleagues, he said, “Hold my legs while I lean way out.”

Climbing onto the ledge, Sisto wedged one arm against the side of the building and stretched over the side as far as he dared to take his shot. He later recalled that he did this four or five times, crawling back to safety to change the sheet of film before leaning out again some 1,000 feet above street level, to take a shot for every other photographer as well. The Times editor Arthur Gelb, who also reported on the crash, later declared, “To all newspapermen on the scene, the hero of the day was Ernie Sisto.”

The next day, Sisto’s photograph ran across three columns on the front page of The Times. (The photos he took for the colleagues who held his legs ended up in newspapers around the country.) In it, the twisted metal and shattered stone of the crash site appear as a violent puncture in the building, disrupting the skyscraper’s sheer vertical lines. Even at that height, Sisto managed to frame the shot to include an advertisement for war bonds painted on a building below.

Sisto never lost his sense of derring-do. In 1945, he took Big Bertha onto a

Above, Sisto using a camera with a five-foot lens known as Big Bertha at Yankee Stadium in 1952. Right, Sisto covering a fire from a rooftop in 1960.



CARL T. GOSSETT JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES

175 THE NEW YORK TIMES AT 175

This story is part of a series marking 175 years of eyewitness journalism from The New York Times. Read more at nytimes.com/175.

Ernie Sisto retired in 1972, after a 49-year career, and died in 1989. His epitaph at least according to the card catalog in The Times’s clippings archive — reads “Ace Photographer.”

CORRECTING THE PAPER OF RECORD

Oliver North | July 13, 1987
A Correction: Times Was in Error On North’s Secret-Fund Testimony
Colonel, at Hearings, Has Not Said That President Was to Be Kept in the Dark About the Project

By FOX BUTTERFIELD
Reporting from the New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 12 — On Friday, Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North testified that the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, wanted to create a secret fund to underwrite intelligence operations — an “off-the-shelf, self-sustaining, stand-alone unit” that could perform certain activities on behalf of the United States.

The account of that testimony in The New York Times on Saturday went beyond Colonel North’s actual words and stated incorrectly that he had testified that neither the President nor Congress were to be informed about the secret fund.

In fact, the colonel has given no testimony as to whether Mr. Casey intended to keep the existence of the fund secret from the President. On this point he has been asked only whether Mr. Reagan or others knew about the fund.

Said issue was not broached.

Colonel North did say, in response to questions posed by Arthur L. Liman, the chief Senate counsel, that he and Mr. Casey had never discussed whether the entity to be financed initially with profits from the Iran arms deals would require Presidential approval of its operations or be subject to Congressional oversight.

The Times discovered its error in reviewing transcripts of Friday’s testimony. No members of the Iran-contra investigative committee or their legal staffs complained that the article went further than the colonel’s testimony.

Several committee members said the colonel’s testimony left an impression that neither the President nor Congress were to be informed of the fund. The committee intends to question Colonel North again on this point Monday.

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Iraq | May 26, 2004

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From the Editors

The Times and Wen Ho Lee

On March 6, 1999, The New York Times reported that Government investigators believed China had accelerated its nuclear weapons program with the aid of stolen American secrets. The article said the Federal Bureau of Investigation had received its suspicions on a Chinese-American scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Two days later, the government announced that it had fired a Los Alamos scientist for “serious security violations.” Officials identified the man as Wen Ho Lee.

Dr. Lee was indicted nine months later on charges that he had transferred huge amounts of restricted information to an easily accessible computer. Justice Department prosecutors persuaded a judge to hold him in solitary confinement without bail, saying his release would pose a grave threat to the nuclear balance.

The month after the indictment, the Justice Department announced that it was seeking a guilty plea to a single count of mishandling secret information. The judge accused prosecutors of having misled him on the national security threat and having provided inaccurate testimony. Dr. Lee was released on the condition that he cooperate with the authorities to explain why he downloaded the weapons data and what he did with it.

The Times’s coverage of this case, especially the articles published in the first few months, attracted criticism from competing journalists and media critics and from defenders of Dr. Lee, who contended that our reporting had established a political frenzy amounting to a witch hunt. After Dr. Lee’s release, the White House, too, blamed the pressure of coverage in the media, and specifically The Times, for having provoked the government’s investigation.

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Wen Ho Lee | Sept. 26, 2000

For most of its life, The Times has tried to correct its errors. These efforts have not always been perfect.

Jayson Blair | May 11, 2003

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