

ERIC W. EIFRIG ATTORNEY AT LAW (/)

[HOME \(/\)](#) [ABOUT \(/ABOUT.HTML\)](#) [SERVICES \(/SERVICES.HTML\)](#)

[ON LAW AND BROADCASTING \(/ON-LAW-AND-BROADCASTING.HTML\)](#) _____

[CONTACT \(/CONTACT.HTML\)](#)

Remembering Challenger, 30 years later (<http://www.eifriglaw.com/on-law-and-broadcasting/remembering-challenger-30-years-later>)

1/20/2016

[0 Comments \(http://www.eifriglaw.com/on-law-and-broadcasting/remembering-challenger-30-years-later#comments\)](http://www.eifriglaw.com/on-law-and-broadcasting/remembering-challenger-30-years-later#comments)

For this blog entry, I'm taking off my lawyer hat and instead am sharing a memory from a newsroom long vanished of a story never forgotten. It's the story of what I was doing 30 years ago, January 28, 1986.

At the time I was a news writer at WXYZ-TV in Detroit. ABC owned Channel 7 at the time and there was no story too expensive to cover, the newsroom was full of editors and researchers and producers and production assistants, the reporters were all savvy and smart and had editors and writers to help them with their stories, and at the hub of all of this was the legendary anchorman Bill Bonds. If there was a better television newsroom in the United States in 1986, I

have yet to hear about it.

At about 11:30 in the morning on January 28 Mike Meyerand, the 5:00 producer, assigned me to write a story about the Challenger lifting off. He suggested I write a 20-second voiceover story which he planned to run in the third segment of the broadcast, next to the weather forecast. With Bill on duty, this was a dangerous place for a VO. Mike normally allowed six minutes of "pad" time and even with that amount of slack Bill normally would test the limits of a producer's

Eric Eifrig

Lawyer and local
businessman sharing his
knowledge of law and other
topics.

Archives

[April 2017 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/04-2017\)](#) _____

[November 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/11-2016\)](#)

[September 2016 \(/on-law-](#)

patience by the end of segment two, the "Frontline" segment which featured infamous (and lengthy) interviews with favored sparring partners such as Coleman Young, the mayor of Detroit; Jim Blanchard, then governor of Michigan; and later Orrin Hatch who famously walked off camera in mid-interview. Taking all of that into consideration, it seemed unlikely my VO of a routine shuttle liftoff, no matter how visually appealing, would ever see air.

I had another concern as well which I expressed to Mike: namely, where to find video of the liftoff. The networks had stopped carrying shuttle launches live because they were getting too predictable. Even the infant CNN had no plans for live coverage.

Fortunately, NASA Select was available. NASA Select, the precursor of today's NASA TV, was carrying the liftoff via satellite to anyone who had a downlink. In 1986 that means a handful of television stations since many had no dish and would instead await a refeed of the liftoff on ABC's Direct Electronic Feed, NBC's News 1, or CBS' Newspath affiliate services.

Channel 7, thank the news gods, didn't believe in waiting for an afternoon feed of the liftoff – especially since there was no guarantee ABC would feed the story in time for its slot in Detroit of approximately 5:22 PM.

So Mike alerted me to the satellite feed and, sure enough, the ENG supervisor Terry Pochert had the feed up on a monitor by the producers' desk. Just then, 11:38 AM Detroit time, the shuttle blasted off the launch pad and into the heavens.

Mike, the 6:00 producer Helen Pasakarnis, and I watched the liftoff and briefly commented on how visual a shuttle liftoff is. After a few seconds, Mike and Helen redirected their attention to the newscast rundowns in front of them, while I continued to watch the feed as assigned.

About a minute into the liftoff I saw something I had never seen on a shuttle liftoff: the smoke trail was odd. Very odd. Not only that, the NASA announcer narrating the launch had gone silent, another unusual occurrence. It took my brain a couple of seconds to process what my eyes were telling me, but once my nervous system synced up I knew what had happened.

"HOLY S#IT!!!" I announced to the newsroom. If you ever want to see a television newsroom come to a dead stop -- a DEAD stop -- do what I did; you won't believe the results. Mike and Helen looked at me as if I was insane. The writers' typewriters stopped clacking. The assistant news director, Bob Rowe, whirled around the corner where he had been talking with reporter Mary Conway. There was dead silence while I figured out the next thing I would holler: "IT BLEW UP!!!"

If you ever want to see a television newsroom sprint into action, just do what I did and you won't believe the results. Bob was right on top, ordering a reporter into the flash chair right away. Mike and Helen, who were well-schooled at what to do, went right to the phones and let the master control people know what was going on. The reporter -- I think it was either Mary or Mike Holfeld -- wondered, and rightly so, exactly what it was he was going to say. I was told to stand next to him and tell him exactly what I knew, which wasn't much, although by now the AP teletype was providing a small amount of information.

Before doing that, however, I sprinted to the tape room to talk with Terry. I was so new that I had no idea how to air a piece of videotape while continuing to record. Fortunately Terry was experienced and he had about eight record decks in the tape room, all of which now commenced recording the NASA feed. That allowed me to grab the tape, put a big red label on it (I believe it said "NEVER ERASE") and cue it to the correct spot.

Just as Mike was about to go on the air, though, ABC News came to life and took the air with a special report. ABC would remain on the air until 5:00 when the Challenger explosion led the newscast. I remained assigned to write the story, but needless to say it was no longer a throwaway VO. When a story was big enough, Bill and I would tend to be thoroughly in sync and so it was with this one. Bill did his usual excellent job with the story, which as I recall ran a good 15 minutes with video of the explosion, of Christa McAuliffe's New Hampshire home, of the launch pad area, still photos of the crew members, sound bites with NASA and dignitaries, and local reaction gathered by the Channel 7 photographers and reporting staff.

The story of Challenger, like the other big stories I found myself covering during my time in broadcasting, was both terrible and wonderful: terrible in the sense of the tragedy that unfolded and the lives lost, but wonderful in the sense of beholding an outstanding newsroom coming together to deliver the story in a crisis atmosphere. The city of Detroit was

and-
[broadcasting/archives/09-2016\)](#)

[August 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/08-2016\)](#)

[July 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/07-2016\)](#)

[May 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/05-2016\)](#)

[February 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/02-2016\)](#)

[January 2016 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/01-2016\)](#)

[November 2015 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/11-2015\)](#)

[September 2015 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/09-2015\)](#)

[August 2015 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/08-2015\)](#)

[June 2015 \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/archives/06-2015\)](#)

Categories

[All \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/all\)](#)

[Advance Health Directives \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/advance-health-directives\)](#)

[Children \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/children\)](#)

[Estate Planning \(/on-law-and-](#)

privileged to have a news operation like Channel 7's in the 80's, and I do wonder whether we ever will see a newsroom like that again.

Like 0

Tweet

0 Comments (<http://www.eifriglaw.com/on-law-and-broadcasting/remembering-challenger-30-years-later#comments>)

Leave a Reply.

[Estate Planning \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/estate-planning\)](#)
[Guardianship \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/guardianship\)](#)
[Powers Of Attorney \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/powers-of-attorney\)](#)
[Real Estate \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/real-estate\)](#)
[Taxation \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/taxation\)](#)
[Trusts \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/trusts\)](#)
[Wills \(/on-law-and-broadcasting/category/wills\)](#)

 [RSS Feed \(/1/feed\)](#)

Your comment was successfully posted.