

Eyewitness Account

'I Will Never Forget the Tiananmen Massacre'

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June 4, 1989, was no ordinary day in Chinese history. I was at Tiananmen Square then and what follows are my memories of when the Chinese military crushed the pro-democracy student movement in Beijing.

The evening air of June 3 was thick with anticipation. Rumors flew that the military was going to remove the demonstrators from the square. In response, many people hurried to the site of the students' protest. Some came out of curiosity. Others, to show support.

"Attention, I am Wuerkaixi," the hurried, excited voice of a famous student leader said. "The military is coming into Beijing city from West Chang An Avenue, and they have opened fire on residents and the students!" Many people started walking and riding bicycles to West Chang Avenue to try to block the army's access to the square. I had my bicycle and rode with the crowd to the avenue.

11 p.m., June 3

West Chang An Avenue was as brightly lit as usual, but the number of people gathered on the street this time of night was unusual. Residents and students heard the army was firing as they advanced. The people set up barricades along the street. Several young men pushed a cart with glass bottles full of milk. They smashed the bottles on the street, hoping the glass fragments would puncture truck tires and soldiers' shoes.

The street was fully covered with obstacles big and small. People did their best to prepare the barriers. Nobody gave any orders. No one led us. Everyone contributed without regard for personal safety. We sensed the magnitude of the moment: the final confrontation was upon us.

Suddenly we heard rumbling in the distance and turned to see a tank crossing the avenue. It ran over many bicycles and ran into a bus at Xidan Crossroads.

The people's indignation reached its limit. Some people set fire to the damaged bus. The bus became a mass of flames; people hoped it would stay the military. The bus lay on the crossroads from north to south, and it blocked the army that was moving from west to east.

The flames were getting higher. It looked as if it were a wall of fire reaching to the sky. Suddenly I heard "pop ... pop ..." coming from the direction of the army. I thought someone was setting off firecrackers, so I asked a man close to me

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if that were so. No, he answered, "It's gunshot, real gunshot. I was in the army, so I know it's gunshot." My heart pounded with surprise.

I stepped onto to the base of a lamp post, because I wanted to have a clear view of the action. Suddenly the street lights dimmed, and everything around me became still. I didn't understand what was happening, so I stuck my head out and looked in the direction where the gun shots had come from. Oh, my! What I saw will be with me forever.

Soldiers were carefully making their way around both ends of the burning bus. They wore steel helmets, were holding guns, and were slightly bent over as they moved. After clearing the bus they formed a line, shoulder-to-shoulder, and were moving toward Tiananmen Square.

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"Pop" ... a bullet flew right toward me and hit the ground in front of my feet. At first I didn't know the bullet was meant for me, but I looked around and realized I was the only one there, my long, flowered-print dress blowing in the wind.

My thoughts raced: "I can hide behind the light post, so they won't see me, and take photos to record this for history." On second thought: "They have already opened fire on me and, when they get closer, they won't let me go. I should leave!"

I jumped down from the lamp post and ran from the street. As I passed, a man waved me into an alley where 40 to 50 people were hiding. At the entrance of the alley, some students, wearing headbands, formed a human chain to protect the people behind them.

Everyone in the alley stood wide-eyed, staring in the direction of the advancing troops. We held our breath. The angry flames from the bus were still burning, silently burning. The night sky was quiet. It felt cruel and merciless.

12 a.m., June 4

Gun shots rang out loudly. "Pop ... popppppppppppop." The soldiers opened fire on us with semi-automatic weapons. They opened fire on people who had no weapons, no rocks, and no bricks.

The groups's anger reached their limit, and everyone in the alley yelled with one voice: "Down with fascists! Down with [Premier] Li Peng!"

"Pop, pop, pop" the bullets flew at us. To avoid getting hurt, we stopped roaring. Residents of the alley opened their doors to us. A

lady drew me into her home and said to me, "If soldiers enter the alley, come back to my home, and I'll say you are a member of my family."

I stepped out of this kind woman's home and saw injured people being carried to the back of the alley. Some young men found a cart and sent the injured to the closest hospital.

A student wearing glasses and a headband was badly injured. He was shot in the left chest. The blood gushed. Two students held his arms and legs, and moved him to the middle of the alley. He muttered weakly, "I'm got going to make it. I'm not going to make it."

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Gun fire continued to come from somewhere. Tank after tank rumbled past the alley "How are the students at the square? Are the soldiers going to shoot them as they did us?" I wondered.

Some people ventured out of the alley to have a look. They came under more gun fire. Some of them fell to the ground, wounded. Some others hiding in the alley ran to save them, but more shots rang loudly again. I was very angry we didn't even have the right to save wounded people.

Then nurses arrived from the closest hospital. They, too, rushed from the safety of the alley and tried to save the injured ones. They, too, were fired upon. At last some young men crawled under the flying bullets and pulled the injured ones back into the alley.

Those who had ventured out of the alley said they saw soldiers lying in wait for anyone who would dare go into the street. A similar story was repeated by a group of four young men and women, who stumbled into our safe haven.

The youth ran into an alley and were chased by some soldiers who yelled, "Stop, don't move or we'll shoot."

These young men and women had been hiding on a street near Tiananmen Square when the military approached and fired at them. The youth ran into an alley and were chased by some soldiers who yelled, "Stop, don't move or we'll shoot."

The young people noticed a public bath house and dashed inside, the soldiers in pursuit. There the youth were captured. They said the soldiers put guns against their chests and interrogated them.

"You didn't go home at midnight, what are you doing on the street?" a soldier queried.

"We just got off night work and there is no bus, so we have to walk back home," one of the four responded, making up a story on the spot.

"We have orders. Anyone on the street tonight is a counterrevolutionary rebel and must be shot! Do you know that?" the soldier shouted in their faces. Fortunately the soldiers didn't shoot the youths and let them go instead.

"Go home! Don't go on the street," the soldiers directed.

3 a.m., June 4

During the three hours it had taken the military to occupy Tiananmen Square, I witnessed about 10 people shot by soldiers. The military finally stopped moving once they had surrounded the square. Since there was no more space along the square for all the vehicles, the rest of the trucks stopped on West Chang An Avenue.

After the rumble of tanks and trucks finally stopped, countless people surged onto West Chang An from many alleys. Spurred by the newfound power of the crowd, I limped out of the alley with a ripped sandal and made my way to the square. We passed long lines of military trucks. The surface of the avenue had deep tracks from the caterpillar belts. The outer layer of military vehicles that ringed Tiananmen carried soldiers who pointed guns at the masses. Many people sat down and faced the soldiers. The people repeatedly, defiantly sang the Internationale as loudly as they could.

Some of the people started talking to the soldiers who stood, quietly listening, in the trucks on West Chang An Avenue. Suddenly, "pop, pop, pop," a soldier fired toward the sky. People ran or bent down in response.

When the gunfire stopped, the people surged back to the trucks. Again the soldiers fired. This time no one moved.

Sunrise, June 4

The morning of June 4 was eerily quiet, deadly quiet. In this grievous dawn a line of students appeared, waving red flags. They were leaving Tiananmen Square.

When I saw the students marching from an alley near the square to West Chang An Avenue, I momentarily thought all the people who were worried by what had transpired could breathe a sigh of relief. But in the blink of an eye, everything fell into hell again.

As the small line of students crossed West Chang An and headed toward school, a tank rushed out of the square and sped toward them. It didn't stop. Six or seven students fell badly injured or dead.

I was on the avenue and from a short distance I watched as the students were crushed by the tank. Some people among us ran to the scene, then came back and described the sight. One of them said a student's head was flattened. Another dead student still gripped her English lesson book.

I was shocked. I couldn't move ... for a long time. Then I saw some more students. A male student with glasses was assisted by two others. He was staggering, weeping.

"We had already retreated. They still wanted to kill us. They still had a tank run over us," he sobbed to no one in particular.

He seemed to have lost his mind. A young college student! His cries faded as he stumbled along, until I could hear him no more.

He seemed to have lost his mind. A young college student! His cries faded as he stumbled along, until I could hear him no more.

Another group of students appeared with red flags fluttering, as they attempted to march to school. I slowly rode my bike beside them, and we made it to safety.

Along the way, many residents silently gazed at this group of students. Some residents walked up to the students and vigorously shook their hands. This gesture silently communicated their thanks and encouragement to the students. In their eyes I sensed a deep respect that a thousand words could not express. Many women had tears in their eyes. I knew they were trying to control their emotions because I was trying to control mine.

A man came up to me and asked, "Students retreated?" He spoke softly but his words hit my heart as heavily as a stone. I broke down and cried.

The students and I finally arrived at the Politics and Law University of China. Some other students and residents were already gathered there. The atmosphere was solemn.

Five or six corpses lay in the hall of the main building. The students began to care for the bodies and when the preparations were finished they gathered to pay respects to those slain. The funeral music reverberated on campus, moving many to tears.

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A student leader told me the corpses were snatched in the midst of gun fire. No one knew the names of the dead. They could be residents or students, or both. But everyone knew the courage these people had displayed, defending a great democratic movement.

Ten years have past since the Tiananmen Square massacre, but every scene from that day is still fresh in my mind's eye. I will never forget.

Even though the democratic movement was suppressed, and the students were forced to leave Tiananmen Square, the spirit of the 1989 democratic movement will live in people's hearts forever. The students always will be heroes.

Contributing writer Jia Zu was born in Beijing, and worked in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as an assistant editor during the 1989 pro-democracy student protests in Tiananmen Square. She came to the United States several months after the massacre.