Interview for John “Dal” Cannady
August 20, 2018
Marriot Riverfront Hotel, Savannah
Interviewer: Anna McIntyre
Transcription: James C. Wright

00:01 Introduction to date, persons, and place.

00:48 Dal started his journalist career by writing for the Claxton Enterprise. During his time in Claxton he networked with law enforcement including GBI, DNR, the police department, and the sheriff’s office. He eventually obtained a position working with a local cable company in Statesboro, recording 30-minute news episodes. To supplement this work, he continued to network with law enforcement around Statesboro.

01:39 Working in a small community helped Dal to obtain resources as well as get to know citizens and peers better. Small towns have a slower pace of news events.

01:58 Savannah television legend Jim Hildebrandt passed away, and Dal applied for his position. Hildebrandt also networked with law enforcement, especially before the days of cell phone communications, so Dal’s experiences in Statesboro and Claxton supported his ambition. The officers stated that “out of respect for Hildebrandt, we’re going to start you off with the same trust that we gave him until you mess up.”

03:20 Dal was 29 years old when he was privileged with the trust of law enforcement. They informed him of cases with instructions not to release information until days later to help support the police investigation. This allowed Dal to get advanced notice of operations for photography and press. It was a mutually symbiotic relationship.

04:13 Dal’s favorite part about reporting on law enforcement agencies was having the trust of the officers. He was privy to special inside knowledge that conflicted with stories the police told other media. None of the information was compromising or sensitive, it just demonstrated that Dal was treated as a fellow associate with the agencies. Dal cherished that depth of friendship and trust.

04:50 Dal found occasional humor at work. On one occasion, he was at the police station when they brought in several arrested drug suspects. One of the deputies was five feet tall, escorting a six-foot nine-inch tall detainee that was one-third of the deputy’s age. The officer leaned down and whispered to the deputy, who relayed to Dal, “he doesn’t want to be on tv” [in a country accent]. Dal enjoyed the humor of the situation.

06:30 An aspect of his job that Dal finds humbling is when an officer tells him information without notifying Dal to keep it quiet for a time. When Dal uses
information in a story and his source returns disgruntled, he points out that “you
did not tell me you did not want it released.” Dal and the officer count it as a
learning experience and became more open with their intentions.

07:30 “There’s politics in everything, including law enforcement.” Agencies who are
omitted from credit to the public get offended and may not return Dal’s phone
calls as quickly as they did before. Dal considers his access to information as a
great responsibility and has no malicious intent to hinder law enforcement.

08:18 Today’s public wants details: types of guns or vehicles involved in crimes.
Officers are reluctant to give details for the purpose of the investigation, which
can place Dal in a tough position. That is part of what Dal believes is humbling
about his job, how fragile his relationship with law enforcement can be.

09:27 Dal’s access to information has sometimes affected relationships with coworkers.
They don’t tend to be as patient with police intelligence as Dal is and accuse him
of being on the side of law enforcement more than the side of the media and
public. Dal tries his best to find a balance between the two.

10:14 Dal must occasionally remind his coworkers that the public does not need to
know every aspect of a case or event. He tries to filter salacious details, such as
excessive gore, morbidity, and gross elements. That puts him at odds with other
reporters and competitors.

11:16 An incident where Dal considered changing his field of reporting was the
disappearance and murder of a seven-year-old boy. Dal’s youngest child was that
same age at the time. Being intimately involved in that case by interviewing
neighbors and family members, witnessing the body, and watching the arrest of
the suspect are unforgettable. It forced Dal to ask himself, “is this really what I
want to do?” Dal has not worked another case like that incident, but remembers
the stress it placed on him.

12:43 Technology has impacted Dal’s career for good and bad. When he started, time
and tape space were limited. Tapes had to be edited and physically carried to
Savannah by deadlines. If editing was not finished you had to turn in whatever
you had at the time. The Savannah office rarely sent the camera van to Dal so he
could film live. He created a routine: interview stories in the morning, afternoons
may or may not be eventful, and racing to the station to report in the evenings was
“like a game of chicken.”

13:42 The advent of electronics changed everything. Digital video, laptop editing, and
cellular internet with hotspot has changed the news reporting routine. A reporter
can be at a scene, such as a trial, at 4pm, edit the video on the laptop in your car,
and send it to the station immediately. It generates continuous, instantaneous
coverage. Social media has also played a part.
In the “old days,” a reporter would be dormant between the 12 o’clock and the 5 o’clock news. They could interrupt the afternoon soap operas, but there better be 14+ people dead to do that. Social media, websites, and various platforms have allowed news to be reported at any hour of the day with a regular audience. This has caused reporters to alert the public about events with little to no details. The promise of “we don’t know what happened, but we will be here to tell you when we find out” has affected reporting.

Premature reporting of an incident misleads the public to believe something contrary to actual events. An example is when police social media or radio traffic claims “body found in a home,” which causes reporters to rush to the neighborhood and ask neighbors about their feelings of safety. Then they later discover the death was a suicide, so there was never any real danger to the public.

Most reporters do not publicize suicides as a matter of decorum. However, because a reporter has already alerted the neighborhood to a death, there is no taking back that information. That is the downside to instantaneous reporting; reporters do not let the story develop and gather details before alerting the public.

Dal quotes a sheriff friend, “with all of this technology stuff, we’re about to the point where we’re outrunning our headlights.” Dal finds truth in that statement.

As a media reporter, Dal thinks that part of the reason for the divide between law enforcement and the public is that law enforcement is guarded and has to protect details of developing cases. When reporters alert the public to an incident without details and rely on neighbor accounts without credibility, it causes the public to accept the neighbor’s story because it is the only story they have. The constriction of information in law enforcement causes the public to make uninformed or inaccurate conclusions.

“There’s a rush to judgment [by the public], but the first one to talk is not always right.” When a citizen hears an unverified account from a neighbor, friend, or witness they take it as truth and assume that the police are ignorant. This places law enforcement in the position to defend themselves and their actions, which makes them appear guilty until proven innocent.

Another memorable case to Dal is a missing elderly person in Long County in the late 90s. The man was a great grandfather, whose family noticed his suitcase and some clothes missing with him. Dal ran a picture of the man on television. In a week, Dal was notified that GBI was digging and may have possibly found the man’s body in the family’s backyard. Dal rushed to the scene. GBI arrested the family, who began to report abuse.

[Interview interrupted, lasting until 20:57.]
The family members were arrested on charges of murder. One of the daughters claimed the old man was molesting her, even after she was grown and married. She claimed the old man “dared the husband to do anything about it.” The family also claimed that he molested his granddaughter and abused his grandson. They portrayed him as a monster.

The case drew national attention. The GBI stated that after the family murdered and buried the old man, they bought tomato plants and planted them in the turned soil to camouflage the site. When asked about the body, the family confessed that the body was in the tomato patch. Thus was the case called by national media, “the tomato patch murder.”

TruTV, which was CourtTV then, arrived to film the investigation. Legal shows asked if the homicide was justified. The case was hot with national attention. After the case was tried, a network interviewed the defendants in prison as well as prosecutors, defense attorneys, and members of the local media including Dal.

“It was the epitome of Southern gothic.” A creepy house with tall grass in the front yard gave a spooky appearance. The man’s grandson and son-in-law were the primary defendants. The son-in-law was close to the victim’s age and had a heart attack in the courtroom during the trial. He was stretchered by EMS and the trial was postponed for a couple of months.

Dal thought the case would never end. Appeals were settled recently. The grandson was also recently released after serving 20 years in prison. (Case occurred in 1988.)

From time to time, the news had to report about an officer who did the wrong thing or failed to do the right thing knowingly. The public misinterprets that a few bad officers represent the whole of law enforcement. Dal wishes the public had a better perspective about information. The news is about reporting exceptions to the norm: they don’t report all the planes and cars that travel safely, only the ones that don’t. They also don’t report about every individual child who graduates school, the news only reports the children who get into trouble.

Dal claims that the public misinterprets exceptions as the norm and loses perspective. Because the public hears about car and plane wrecks, they think that every car and plane crashes. Likewise, the news does not tell the public about every officer who does a good job; they only report about the officers who do something bad. People need to step back and look at law enforcement as a whole to realize that very few officers actually do bad things.

Dal also believes that the public has a misinterpretation about the legal process. They watch police shows that conduct an arrest, gather evidence, have a trial, and produce a conviction in 45 minutes with time for commercials. It does not work that fast in reality. People’s impatience gives a false sense of timing. Dal says
“this is not Law and Order; this is real life and this is how it works. It’s a slow, methodical process.”

26:53 Dal thinks that people tend to lose interest and forget about crimes. When a trial of a murderer happens three years later, citizens admit they had forgotten about the suspect’s trials.

27:22 To the audience, both officers and civilians, Dal advises to be grateful for what peace officers do. We forget that officers go into dangerous situations and may have to sacrifice their lives at any moment, which we should remember.

27:47 Officers and civilians who conduct misdeeds or violate the law should be held to a higher standard, but an officer who simply got frustrated or yelled at a citizen should not be scrutinized. Some people want to find fault, so they exaggerate acts that were a judgment call.

28:25 Remember the bigger picture: officers are regular people too. They have families and neighbors. They want to protect their community and the people in it. They want to catch the people who have put other folks in harm’s way, deal with them quickly, and get them somewhere they can’t hurt people anymore. Officers have to deal with that on a daily basis.

29:09 End of interview.