



NANCY ANDREWS/THE WASHINGTON POST

In quiet moments of reflection, Donald Graham found private comfort in going down to the press room alone and inappropriately touching large rolls of pristine, soothing newsprint. It was kind of weird.

History

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“We responded. The security guard there, Frank Wills, told us he had found a piece of tape holding back the lock coming from a door in the garage. He had removed it but soon found it taped again. The officers, my former comrades, laughed and said this was done all the time for convenience and hardly probable cause. But I looked at Wills, 24, and saw something special, determined. He reminded me of Bennie Doe, who ran security at the Madison Hotel parking garage across the street from The Post. I know Bennie’s life story. He, his wife, Cynthia, and their nine children — Patricia, David, Ralph, Howie, Barbara, Liz, Jack, Bennie Jr. and Nancy — have done

so well. Frank Wills seemed to be in the same mold.

“I urged the guys to go up in the building and see what we could find. They humored me, and we soon were at the offices of the Democratic National Committee on the sixth floor. I had met the party chairman, Lawrence O’Brian, an old Kennedy aide, at a party at mom’s. Someone had clearly tampered with the door. We went in, and the others drew their guns. In one office we saw movement behind a cloudy glass partition. I was so excited that I jumped up on a desk. I could not help myself and I shouted, ‘Come out! Hands up! You are under arrest!’

“Soon five sets of hands, all in bright blue surgical gloves, went up. The men were wearing

business suits and clearly not your ordinary burglars. They had sophisticated photographic and bugging equipment. Their pockets were stuffed with hundred dollar bills. My former comrades cuffed the five and took them into custody.

“Then one of my comrades took me aside and chewed me out, saying, ‘How could you! You have no authority to arrest anyone. You have potentially tainted what may be a good case. Disappear. We will never tell anyone you were here, and you must do the same.’

“I felt very badly and do not consider myself an impulsive person. So I went down the stairwell, carefully holding a handkerchief on the rail to wipe away any of my prints, out the door that had been taped and tried to hail a cab home. I guess I looked so casual that no cabbie would stop. So I

walked home, read the first edition of the paper, and scribbled out 47 handwritten congratulatory notes to the reporters who showed promise or had done good stories.

“Of course, I realize that jumping on the desk and so forth was not the right thing to do. And the concealment of my presence was also not right. But the case of five burglars in business suits, I knew, would be a good story for the Metropolitan staff of the paper that was struggling with all kinds of personnel problems. One new hire covering night police for nine months was notorious. He could barely write his name, let alone the English language. Another long-time staffer was a long-haired renegade who would rent cars on a Post expense account, forget he had done so, and leave the cars in parking garages with

the car rental meter running for a month. These were difficult times. They needed my help with some good material.

“As the Watergate story mushroomed into a giant scandal over the coming months and years, each day I feared disclosure of my role. But the old comrades kept quiet. They believed in the oath of silence: Omerta.

“So this was the Watergate cover-up that worked! But, as Ben Bradlee said, ‘No gloating!’”

Other than this revelation about Watergate, Graham’s memoir is generally dull, with only 210 pages of text. “Linotype Operators I Have Known” is, however, accompanied by a 1,700-page appendix that is a small-type alphabetical list of everyone who ever worked at The Washington Post.

The perfect partner at the perfect time

Graham

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“I like the Times. They try hard every day,” Graham said. “It’s a little embarrassing to see Arthur beg like that. But I do think the Times could be an attractive option to replace our old New York bureau.”

Graham said he had decided to give away a free digital subscription of The Post with every Amazon purchase, pushing Post circulation to just over 4 billion daily. He said he was still mulling over what to do with Facebook.

“I’ve already memorized the names of Facebook’s 4,619 employees, and now I’m working on their kids’ birthdays,” he said. “And I’m moving the headquarters to Loudoun County, where I think we have real opportunities for circulation growth.”

Graham said he first had the idea for Facebook when he was a Harvard undergrad in the 1960s. But he said he “kept it to myself” because “I thought it wouldn’t really work until someone invented the personal computer and the Internet.”

On a return trip to Harvard 10 years ago to brush up on 13th century Saxon love sonnets, Graham said he met Zuckerberg at a birthday party for the Winklevoss twins.

“After a couple of fruit juices, I told Mark about this idea I had, which at the time I was calling ‘The Facebook,’ and Mark just sort of took it and ran,” Graham said. “He swiped my idea. At least today he came clean.”

Washington Post, Amazon and Facebook stock soared on today’s news, which the New York Post called, “A Graham Slam.”

“I still don’t know what Facebook is,” Bradlee said. “But if Don Graham is in charge, I’d give my left nut to work there.”

Wretch

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leaders, that the Sunday magazine should publish a story about an old shelter for members of Congress at the Greenbrier resort in the event of an attack on Washington, it was shut down. The Washington Post was blamed, even though members of Congress had told the reporter that they never would have gone there because it so outmoded.

When anyone — from businessmen to the White House — called Don to complain about or try to shape coverage, Don told them to talk to me. When it was helpful or they demanded it, he joined the meeting and had my back. This took us to the Oval Office when I was deciding about publishing Dana Priest’s story about the CIA’s secret “black site” prisons for terrorist suspects in various foreign countries. The president,

vice president, national security adviser and director of national intelligence were all there to try to talk us out of publishing it. I asked questions, and the meeting ended when Don said, as usual, “Len will make the decision.”

At the same time, Don sought my advice about whether any initiative he was considering to take as a leader in the community, no matter how beneficial, might create coverage conflicts for the newspaper.

Yet Don’s personal involvement in the newsroom was deep. He roamed it often as publisher. He sent numerous notes each day to journalists whose work impressed him. I remember visiting one foreign bureau where the correspondent’s computer was covered with taped-up notes from Don.

When our mutual close friend, Herb Denton, who had met Don

in Vietnam and was a talented and tough editor and foreign correspondent at The Post, suffered a serious illness while covering Canada for the paper, Don chartered a plane to take him and me to Herb’s bedside shortly before he died. Afterward, Don started and financed the Herbert H. Denton Jr. Memorial Scholarship, which, to this day, sends an outstanding Washington area student to college every year.

During the pressmen’s strike, Don worked alongside many of us at various nighttime tasks in the newspaper plant that long occupied the bottom of this building. One night, he and I were assigned to move huge rolls of newsprint from small carts onto the printing presses, when I clumsily dropped one end of a roll on his foot. Somehow I kept my day job.

At the annual editors’ retreats we called Pugwash, I avoided playing golf with Don because

I was lousy at it. But one year, when newspaper budget realities placed the meeting at a more modest setting in Maryland, the only sport we could find to play was basketball at the local Y. Don and I guarded each other after discovering that neither of us had any vertical leap and or much of a shot but were both very, very competitive. We pushed and shoved each other for position under the basket with increasing force throughout the game. And somehow I kept my job.

At another of those retreats, also in Maryland, I was making a presentation about something we thought quite important at the time when mobile phones began ringing, including mine. We all turned them off to concentrate on matters at hand — everyone, that is, but Don. He took his outside and answered it. It was Bob Woodward, saying that Vanity Fair had broken online its story identifying Mark Felt as Deep Throat. Through a window, Don

waved frantically for me to come out and take the call. I did and somehow avoided arrest driving faster than ever in my life to get back to the newsroom. Thankfully, there was someone at that meeting who knew enough to answer the phone just in case it was about news.

On those glorious days in the spring when we had Pulitzer Prizes to announce to the staff gathered in the middle of the newsroom, I would look out into a sea of colleagues to find Don half-hidden in the back by one of the pillars. Without him, his unswerving support and his fierce belief in the mission of The Washington Post, we would not have won any of those prizes or produced much of the rest of the outstanding journalism that served this city and country so well during his decades of stewardship.

Don has had many responsibilities in the company he and his family built. But I’ve always known him as a newspaperman.



March 14, 1999
Invisible Lives series



November 8, 2000
Presidential cliffhanger



September 12, 2001
Sept. 11 attacks



September 30, 2004
Baseball returns to D.C.



February 18, 2007
Walter Reed series



November 5, 2008
Barack Obama elected