

# Beijing's tiananmen square protests – who is a tank man?

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On June 1989 in Beijing, China, what started as a protest at whose treatment grew in momentum, emboldened, the protestors wrote a list of demands where they poured onto Tiananmen Square. About a hundred-thousand students and workers had defied their dictator, all camped out near the T-Square as they demanded for change. It was only a matter of time before it captured the world's attention, while the communist party scrambled with the mass movement. A spirited resistance carried on until the end, and one brave man became the symbol of the movement. The figure who they referred to as, " Tank Man" wouldn't be well known if it wasn't for Jeff Widener's effort to travel across the world.

What began as a simple gift at the age of ten, Jeff's parents surprised him with a Kodak Flashfun Hawkey. The Kodak Flashfun was noncomplex and user-friendly, it wasn't the proper camera to use for distant shooting, yet it was enough to intrigue him. Before long, his avidity for picture-taking grew larger than what his parents had imagined. He crafted his photographic skills with the guidance from his instructor, Warren King, who helped him win the 1974 Kodak Scholastic National Travel Scholarship. And nearly a decade after improving his expertise, photographing had brought him overseas. He landed in Southeast Asia as a picture editor under The Associated Press office. While he was there, he learned about the pro-democracy protestors building up in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. There was a strict control over media coverage of the demonstrations as journalists from all around the world were already on location, to cover the visit they ended up staying to report on what turned out to be a bigger story. Although, it was outside of Jeff's boundary and he was advised to stay out of the Peoples Republic for

safety reasons, but he ignored the warnings in hope that he'll go aboard.

Beijing was in tight control before, hence it wasn't easy for a photojournalist to pass the embassy since China had banned all media outlets. But Jeff's idea worked when he filed for a lost passport and with this intent, it wiped out any previous journalist stamps on his book and he obtained a fresh blank passport.

Then around noon, after a rigorous day in the airport, Jeff ended up in a town congested with thousands of demonstrators who didn't even understand what democracy was, although they liked what was happening in Tiananmen Square and wanted more of it. With people all over China walking in the streets to openly call for change, the communist state looked fragile.

Conservatives within the party now started to lobby for a forceful response, and a confrontation seemed inevitable. Some began to lose patience with the government's refusal to discuss their list of demands. The student's actions had inspired many, for instance, the laborers formed the first independent workers union in 40 years. With the situation escalating, Secretary General Yang was delegated to visit the protestors in the Square. They ignored his plea to end their action which caused the administration to declare Martial Law on May 20th, troops moved onto the streets of Beijing immediately.

After 3 days, the soldiers retreated to the outskirts of Beijing, the protest continued for another 11 days as Communist Party leaders planned their next move. Then on June the 3rd 1989, an official gave the order to clear the Square. Citizens were shocked when they witnessed their own government

gunning their natives, despite all the madness that was inflicted against the protestors, one man carried the essence of non-violence. The most iconic image to come out of Tiananmen Square protest is the young man who blocked a row of Type 59 Tanks. This mystery man, or otherwise known as “Tank Man” carrying a grocery bag, as shown above, represented a non-confrontational, orderly manner. “It all started with a man in a white shirt who walked into the street and raised his right hand no higher than a New Yorker hailing a taxi,” James Barron wrote the following day in The New York Times. The picture appeared on the front page of this newspaper as well as in countless other publications around the world. Being aware of the heavy tank’s power-driven ability, the man stood on his ground. “I assume he’s going to die,” Widener remembers. “But he doesn’t care, because for whatever reason—either he’s lost a loved one or he’s just had it with the government, or whatever it is—his statement is more important than his own life.” The image symbolizes the authority of the people, figuratively speaking, if a man alone has the courage to stand against an infamous dictator, imagine what the majority of people could do. The following day, it became the symbol against oppression worldwide — an anonymous act of resistance seared into our collective consciousness. Tank Man unknown until this day, but whatever happened to him after the act of defiance is really anyone’s guess.

Overnight the Chinese Red Cross issued a statement saying two thousand and six-hundred people have been killed. That figure was rapidly retracted, the death toll range from several hundred to thousands but since no

government record was ever officially released, we don't know the exact number of casualties. In the days and weeks that follow the Chinese Government cracked down on the survivors, they arrested hundreds accusing them of being counter-revolutionary or for disrupting the social order. Chinese sensors want people to forget this happened. Based on various reports and documentaries it seems that most of China's younger generation has never seen images of tank man or at least they avoid admitting they have, this is likely because the Chinese government goes to great lengths to not only make sure that citizens don't commemorate the Tiananmen Square protest but to ensure that people don't actually know what happened since books, TVs, movies, and the Internet are all under tight control as well as the fact that the events are banned from being publicly discussed. Protestors have tried to subvert the government using phrases like May the 35th instead of June the 4th but that just caused the authorities to clamp down even harder.

I find this image significant in our history for it illustrates the people's power. The Tank Man manifested signs of opposition against the cruel and oppressive government. Although standing alone, the man shows no fear of death, that is to say, what good is living if authority constraints our freedom, organize our livelihood, and punish the rebels. He reminds us that if the government holds an unreasonable amount or an arbitrary use of power, then it must be impeached, we are empowered to rule. Everybody connects to this image, that all hope is not lost, that you can make a stand, there is some dignity, and that you should fight for your rights.