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THE REAL NIGHT CRAWLERS

Across the vast expanse of Los Angeles, a handful of hard-core news-hounds spend all night racing to crime scenes and car crashes to film them for local TV news. Known as 'stringers', their exploits were recently seen in the movie *Nightcrawler*. The Raishbrook brothers are three such stringers who acted as advisors on the film and they gave Scott Snowden a rare chance to ride along

CH1
CH2

Like a giant illuminated lattice, the lights of Los Angeles stretch out, extending in every direction to the horizon. Tiny, bright clusters of colour seem to shimmer in a big, black ocean, made dark by the night sky above. At night the city looks at peace. Traffic congestion commonplace during the day has all but disappeared and there's hardly a vehicle in sight.

On this hot June night however, a silver, super-charged Ford Taurus raced northwards along the 405 freeway, the needle on every dashboard dial was flung to the far right and its mighty six-cylinder engine roared.

"Fuck. We've got to get ahead of it. I'm coming off here," the driver snapped, cutting across three lanes and barely making the exit.

The driver was Howard Raishbrook, a 38-year-old, British-born resident of Los Angeles with an unusual occupation. He's a stringer, a profession recently brought to the public's attention in the Oscar-nominated movie *Nightcrawler*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal, Rene Russo and Bill Paxton.

The lights at the bottom of the exit ramp were just changing from green to amber as Howard put his foot down and made a hard right turn at the same time. The tires squealed and I slide across the back seat, scrambling to put my seatbelt on.

A stringer is slang for someone who listens in to emergency service radio frequencies and then engages in a race to reach the scene before anyone else, so they can film it first and sell it to the TV networks in time for the next news broadcast. We'd heard a call for a code-3,

possible 503, units in pursuit. Half a dozen cop cars were chasing someone at over 100 mph eastbound on the 101 freeway. This is the sort of thing that makes it onto *Police Camera Action* and it wasn't even 10:30pm yet.

Knowing he would be stuck behind pursuing police units if he stayed on the freeway, Howard hoped to take a short cut and get ahead of the chase, which would give him the footage he wanted. Throughout our attempt to catch up, he was listening to every overlapping broadcast on the scanner so he could keep track of exactly where the fleeing vehicle was.

"Possible BFMV," the scanner crackled. "That's a 'burglary from motor vehicle' suspect," Howard explains. "It's getting too dangerous. The ground units are gonna have to back off."

At the next intersection the lights were red and Howard's frustration was fairly obvious. "Fuck. The trouble is we're at the top of the last news hour, so there will be choppers all over this any second. They're hit and miss, these pursuits, but Christ I love 'em," he laughs. "It's just a cat and mouse game really..." at which point the light changed and we left a trail of rubber and a cloud of smoke behind us.

"He's coming off the freeway... Lindley and Burbank... Oh my God...he's going right past where Austin lives." He hit a couple of buttons on his steering wheel and the sound of a phone ringing blared out of the back shelf-mounted speakers.

"Mate, are you tracking this? Hell yeah - this is unbelievable. Alright. Yup. OK, bye."

Howard is one of three brothers, all of whom have chosen this quizzical career path. Together they make up RMG News, short for Raishbrook Media Group. His younger brother Marc was also out tonight covering the Downtown area, but his twin brother Austin was at home nursing a sick wife and child. As it turned out, Austin had only to slip some shoes on, walk 20 metres to the bottom of his road and hold his camera steady as the suspect vehicle raced past followed by nearly 10 police cars with sirens screaming and lights flashing. It was already becoming apparent that the reason the Raishbrook boys had been put on this earth was to do this kind of work.

Meanwhile, we were still in the chase, but not for very long. The scanner bleated out something incomprehensible. "They've got him," Howard said, sounding surprised and disappointed at the same time. "Marriott hotel, Ventura and Sepulveda. That's just two blocks from here..."

The tires squealed once more as he pulled a sharp u-turn in the road and I virtually face-plant the rear passenger-side window. We pulled up to the hotel forecourt and I could already see a perimeter being set up. A small crowd of people had gathered and more police units were arriving all the time.

"We might be able to get the arrest..." he muttered already half way out of the car and scrambling to get his camera. Sadly, the suspect was already in custody and I could see Howard talking to one of the Los Angeles Police Department officers and then into his cellphone.

After a few minutes we walk back to the car. "Listen to this..." he says. "There were undercover officers working a prostitution sting at this hotel...he dumped his car and ran straight into them," he laughed. "And Austin got some footage of the chase going past his street. Unbelievable." Howard was happy.

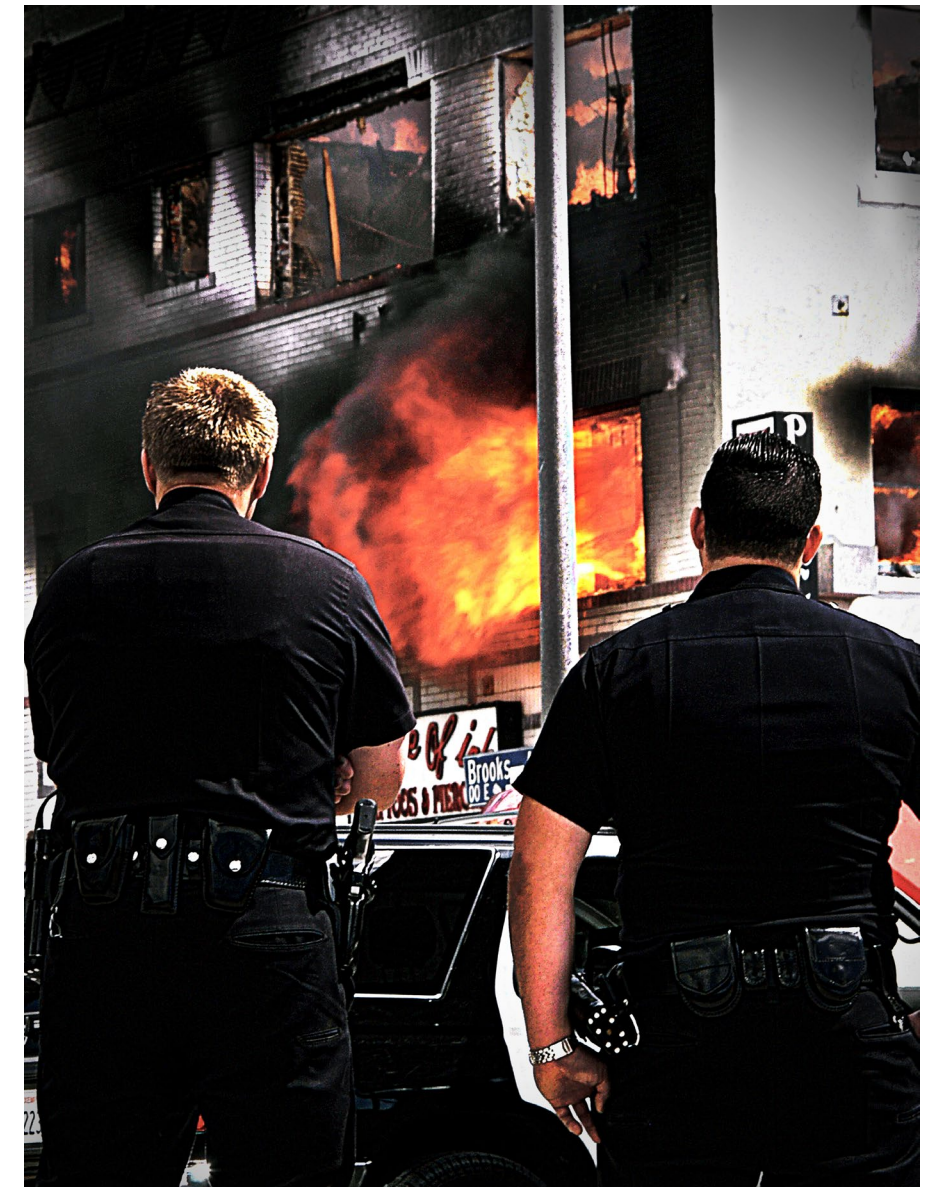
Straight away other stringers showed up and mobile response vans from every local news station were on the scene seconds later. In the night sky above us, a news helicopter hovered. "You hear that?" He laughed pointing up the chopper. "I love that. I love the sound of news choppers overhead."

According to Howard, many of the TV stations were based not far from here and it was still early enough in the night for the mobile crews to make the last news segment at around 11 o'clock.

"They would've been following it on the ground and in the air, but if that pursuit had been in say, South Central, that wouldn't have happened." He tells me that there wasn't really anything he could get from this and it was better to continue waiting, so we gently cruise past the flashing lights and media frenzy and crept off into the night.

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PICTURES: RMG NEWS



Above: The work of a stringer is very much dictated by the news schedules of Los Angeles TV stations

Left: Born and raised near Gillingham in North Dorset, the Raishbrook boys developed an interest in the work of the emergency services from an early age

Less than a minute later the scanner cackles into life: 1-Adam-16 requesting back-up with supervisor code 37.

"Ooh, stolen vehicle. It could be a pursuit again. They ran the plate and it came back stolen. Chatsworth and Hayvenhurst, that's quite a way, but there's a good chance it could turn into a pursuit. Come on you bastards, be a pursuit..."

Thankfully Howard continued to translate the tangled mess of transmissions coming from the five scanners he has mounted in his car. Occasionally I make out the odd phrase, but it's still meaningless.

"Code 6-Charles. Burglary suspect at gunpoint in a stolen vehicle. Right, they've got their guns out, so dispatch is telling all other units to respond from the other way. Hmmm, nothing here," he sighs.

We continue driving albeit at more leisurely pace and return to our 'staging area', which is an empty parking lot close to a strategic intersection of the 405 and the 101 freeways. There's also a gas station here where we can refuel and visit the restroom.

Born and raised near Gillingham in North Dorset, the Raishbrook boys developed an interest in the work of the emergency services from an early age.





Above: Despite capturing countless shootings on film, Howard has never actually been hit. He does however, insist on having a bullet-proof vest and a Taser in his car whenever he's out working

Below: Howard was filming nearby when a huge fire broke out in downtown LA, consequently he was first on the scene and his footage has been used to identify the arsonist

Above right: Many incidents take place in troubled South LA

Below right: All three brothers have training and carry emergency first aid kits in their cars

“Anytime we would hear sirens in our town, which was probably twice a month, we’d get on our bikes and pedal miles to try and follow it.”

After a few years, the pushbikes were replaced with police scanners and they would listen in to the local law enforcement, although there wasn’t much murder or mayhem in North Dorset.

“Most of the time the calls were about things like a stray cow or injured badger,” he laughed.

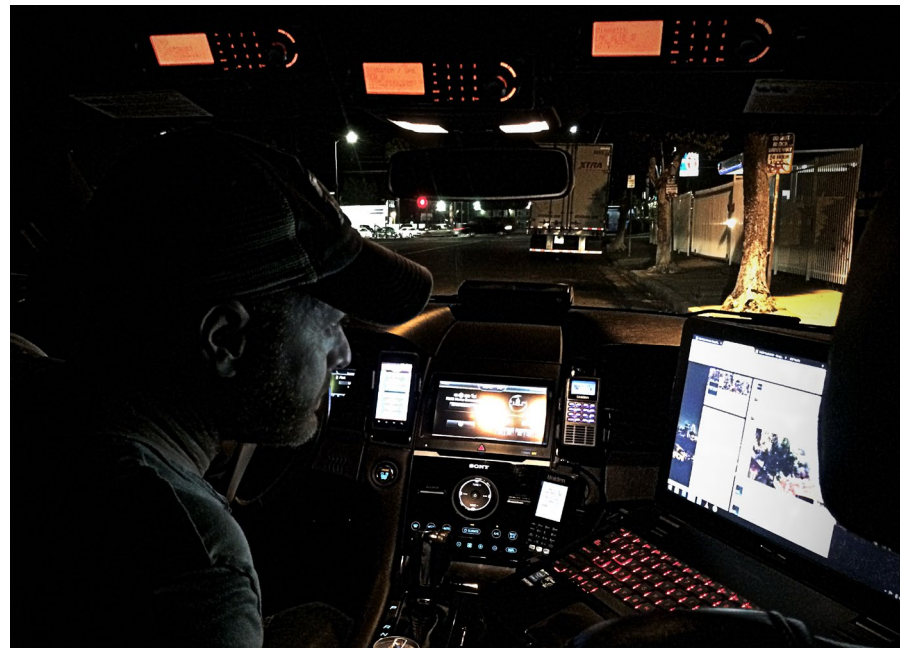
Together with his twin brother, Howard became interested in photography and video production and following some work experience at the BBC, they both decided to move out to Los Angeles, aged 18. Sustaining themselves with studio-based production work, they bought a cheap \$100 police scanner from RadioShack and listened in to the LAPD. Back in 1995 resources were limited, the internet as we know it was only just beginning to take shape and there was no GPS to speak of, so Howard and Austin were forced to rely on fold-out maps and an inch-thick annual of technical terminology called *Police Call Radio Guide*.

From early on, they learned that most incidents took place in South Los Angeles, a troubled area south of Downtown, between the 10 and the 105 freeways. “Everything outside of that was either too far away or we wouldn’t listen to.”

The sound of scanners squawking was constant in the background as we talked. Every now and again Howard would translate. “Code 3-11 indecent exposure. Some guy masturbating in a truck at Pico and Western.”



PICTURES: RMG NEWS



On the outside his silver Ford Taurus looks like an ordinary car, but on the inside it looks more like the cockpit of a stealth bomber

For five years they spent their nights sitting in a rented car in the worst areas of Los Angeles, listening to a police scanner and driving to the scenes of crimes to film. “We had this huge archive of footage and it dawned on us that we could make some extra cash on top of our day jobs. We could sell this stuff that we loved making anyway.”

The work of a stringer is very much dictated by the news schedules of Los Angeles TV stations. Every local station has 10 o’clock and 11 o’clock news that will broadcast any breaking stories. However, the next such news broadcast after this is 4am, which leaves a window of about six hours and the busiest time, when most incidents occur, is usually between midnight and 2am.

“News crews don’t work during this time because of union rules that dictate the number of hours between shifts, plus they’d have to get hazard pay, double time and stuff like that. Helicopters can’t go up ‘cause of noise complaints. They all go home at 11 o’clock or 11:30, so it’s fair game then and that’s what it’s all about.”

Within this opportunistic window of anarchy, the night often unfolds in a predictable manner. “Between 2am and 3am you get your DUI crashes as people leave bars. Between 3 and 4 you get your domestics ‘cause the husbands and wives get home drunk. And then when it’s hot, there’s more crime and when it’s cold there’s more fires.”

However, he explains that unless it’s a particularly big story, we’d need to get something out by 3am at the latest, since the station still needs to contact the emergency services to get details, they have to write the story, edit the footage, set their news agenda and so on.

“Traffic stories sell, so if you have a traffic story that’s going to block the morning commute, they’ll always cut to that. An over-turned rig, avoid this freeway – and they’ll run your footage. But as far as a shooting or a fire or anything after 3am, they’ll probably send their own crew a little later in the morning.”

Friday and Saturday nights are the busiest Howard says. And holidays. “July 4th or New Year’s Eve are gold mines, absolute gold mines. People burn themselves, set fire to things, get drunk, shoot each other...yeah, love it.

“Code 419, DB, that’s ‘dead body’, San Gabriel Valley, that’s over where Marc is.”

In the movie *Nightcrawler*, both Jake Gyllenhaal and Bill Paxton play stringers. It was praised when it premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and it later performed well at the box office. *The Atlantic* said it was Gyllenhaal’s “best performance to date” and it was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. When director Dan Gilroy approached the TV stations and asked who was the best at this kind of work, he was told to contact the Raishbrook boys and they ended up serving as technical advisors for the film. Austin even has a cameo.

“People know who we are. We have contacts at the fire and police departments, we’ve done training videos for them, so we have a good reputation and because of that we were asked to help out.”

Jake Gyllenhaal and Bill Paxton rode along with Howard and his brothers for several nights. “Bill was really good fun. Jake was focused on researching his part, so he was quite serious. Bill grew up around here and one night we got into a police chase, he was giving me all these brilliant short cuts, so I told him if I ever need a navigator, I’d call him. He loved that. We were high-fiving in the street, it was a bit surreal.”

“Someone’s just thrown a brick through a department store window at La Brea and Venice.”

Following the film’s success and frustratingly for Howard, the number of people attempting this work has risen significantly. “Since the movie came out, we get job requests all the time, but they’ve got to be switched on, they have to have their own equipment, they have to be able to film and edit footage. It’s usually young guys, full of piss and vinegar, I think the expression is.”

The rates vary slightly between stations, but they are flat rates nonetheless. Howard gets paid the same for a plane crash as he would for a hydrant crash. He might get a little more from the networks, like CNN or ABC Network News, but the entertainment shows like *World’s Weirdest Videos* pay the most.

“There are almost a dozen stations to sell to. There’s no exclusivity like in the movie and everybody talks to everybody, so if you sell an exclusive for say \$500 to just one station, you’d probably still earn more doing a non-exclusive to every station, plus you’re going to piss everybody off at the same time. I wish I earned the money he’s seen to demand in the movie, but it’s not like that.”

This is not the Raishbrook brother’s first flirt with fame. Back in 2008 they were the subjects of a reality TV show called *Stringers LA* that was shown late at night across America on truTV.

“It became quite popular, but we only did two seasons. There’s only so much you can do with that formula. It

“I’ve been involved in a chase alongside the LAPD and California Highway Patrol and each one thinks you’re the other,” he laughs

was quite graphic though, we had a few producers quit ‘cause they couldn’t deal with it.”

Before his tragic suicide, Tony Scott had expressed an interest in the Raishbrook’s story after Scott Free, the production company co-owned by Tony’s brother Ridley, bought their life rights. They even hired scriptwriter Brian Helgeland, who won the Best Original Screenplay Oscar for *LA Confidential* – sadly though, no further activity has been seen on this front.

On the outside his silver Ford Taurus looks like an ordinary car, albeit with a few more aerials sticking out of the back, but on the inside it looks like the cockpit of a stealth bomber. A lot of careful planning has gone into his set-up. This is the same vehicle that the police department will soon use as standard and many unmarked units use already. Even the police sometimes mistake him for an unmarked unit, which is secretly part of the plan.

“I’ve been involved in a chase alongside the LAPD and California Highway Patrol and each one thinks you’re the other,” he laughs.

Mounted above his head are control panels for three digital scanners, plus he has two handheld scanners fitted to the dashboard and with these, he can monitor the police and fire departments and CHP. The car has an internet hotspot hard-wired into the ignition, so whenever the engine is running, he has high-speed Wi-Fi access, enabling him to upload video to a dedicated server from his laptop, which is locked into a stand on the passenger side. The car also has emergency flashing lights, two double flashes in the back window and one in the front window and two strobes in the front grille.

“I’m more scared of filming a crash on the freeway at 3am than I am going to Gangland with a video camera, I’m terrified of being hit by a vehicle, so I want to be seen. And those lights are really bright.”

Finally, he has mounted HD dashcams, front and back, and his handheld camera. “It’s not the best in low light, but it’s a run-and-gun thing. Doing our job cameras get dropped, broken, burnt, stolen, that kind of stuff. So we don’t buy expensive network cameras [the one he uses costs about \$4,500] it’s not worth it.”

With this set up, Howard can shoot, edit, upload and have his stories seen around the world in under 10 minutes. We continue driving as the scanners blurt out bits and pieces of information.

“Trailer park shooting. Hmmm, that’s hardly news.”

Operating a police scanner isn’t just a case of sitting there listening, Howard was constantly adjusting one scanner and then another, gently turning a dial here, occasionally pushing a button there, tweaking this, adjusting that, taking in everything that was going on.

“They’re set on ‘hyper scan’ so they’re scanning through every dispatch channel and every tactical channel. When I hear a specific tone I’ll pause it on that because I know it’s going to be a new dispatch,” he says.

“There’s a guy walking down 6th Street in Downtown waving a machete.”

It goes without saying that not everyone looks favourably on the Raishbrook’s work and they’ve had their fair share of bad press; the *Los Angeles Times* called them the “paparazzi of pain”. Distressed friends and relatives at the scene of a crash or a fire have also been known to hurl abuse and even take the occasional swing.

However, according to Howard, they don’t spend much time deliberating the moral qualms that come with the job. They keep a clear conscience by sticking to a simple code: help first if you can, film second. Soon after discovering they would beat the paramedics to a scene, they all underwent first aid training and carry emergency first aid kits in their vehicles.

“People have come up to us and say ‘how dare you film my cousin who’s been shot’ or ‘that’s my grandmother’s house burning down, you heartless bastard’ and they’ll start pushing us away and smacking our camera,” he says.

“People want to see it, so we shoot it. If we didn’t shoot this stuff, it would still happen.”

“We do have a morbid interest yes, but that’s who we are, we’re news gatherers. We also film animal rescues and things like that. And to be honest, the stations wouldn’t buy blood and gore anyway...well, except for the Hispanic stations,” he laughs.

“We’ve seen headless bodies, people actually being shot and burning, crispy bodies. We’ve seen people that have run over on the freeway, they jumped off bridges and committed suicide and there’s just nothing left of them. It just looks like a bunch of animal parts. You have to think ‘it doesn’t look like a body’ and just separate yourself from it. We’re not really surprised by anything any more.

“I wouldn’t want to work in a studio, it wouldn’t interest me. I think it’s about being out in the field and witnessing this and actually being part of the action and the adrenalin rush of it. I probably earn more than them anyway, to be honest.

“I like how Jake Gyllenhaal put it in the movie, he’s like a coyote, he’s out there, he’s hungry. And that’s how we feel, we feel like the city is ours. It quiets down, most people are at home and going to bed and that’s when the criminal underbelly here really comes alive. And I love it. I just love it.”

I hadn’t seen any shootings or dead bodies mangled car wrecks, but every time now I see a news story or tweet about an accident or shooting in Los Angeles I think of the Raishbrook brothers working hard to bring viewers the footage and photos.

A scene from the movie *Nightcrawler* starring Jake Gyllenhaal. The Raishbrook brothers acted as technical consultants on the film

