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Veteran editor leads Times through terror, wars and deaths

**BY IAN
MacCALLUM**
NNB Student
Reporter

ST. PETERSBURG
– Ron Brackett’s
work day starts
about 9 a.m. with a
cup of coffee and
an email check.
Then he surfs the
websites of major



Ian MacCallum | NNB
Deputy Managing Editor Ron Brackett

national newspapers to check on their big stories of the day.

A coworker pops her head into his office. “President Bush jumped

out a plane today. Seems like prime front-page material,” she said. (The 41st president marked his 90th birthday by skydiving in Maine.)

Brackett, 51, has spent 29 years in the news industry, all but a few months of that at the Tampa Bay Times. During that time, he has worn many hats and taken on many roles. His current title is deputy managing editor/tampabay.com and presentation. He oversees the paper’s website and supervises copy editors, page designers and news artists.

Brackett has helped lead the Times newsroom through events such as the Columbia shuttle disaster, the 9/11 terror attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the deaths of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.

But he knows it isn’t just the big stuff that makes news.

“That’s always been our brand at the Times: strong local news,” he said.

Even on a slow news day, the newsroom bustles with increasing activity as the day’s deadlines draw closer.

Brackett grew up in Inman, a community in northwest South Carolina. He graduated from the University of South Carolina in Columbia with a bachelor’s degree in journalism.

“I spent the whole of my senior semester working on the college paper, The Carolina Reporter,” Brackett said. “I spent half of my time reporting, and the other half editing.”

Although he enjoyed reporting, “news editing appealed to me because it allowed me to take something – in this case a story – and make it better. To improve on someone else’s work,” he said. “I also enjoyed the coaching aspect of that.”

Brackett’s first job was at the Greenville News, about 30 miles from Inman. He was hired as a copy editor and page designer for the paper in 1985.

Later that same year, Brackett began his career with the Times, then known as the St. Petersburg Times.

“It was a weird transition for me,” Brackett said. “This is a much bigger city; then, the Times had a Sunday circulation of around 450,000 papers.” (Although the population of the Tampa Bay area has grown dramatically in 30 years, the Times’ circulation has not. The paper’s website says Sunday circulation is 397,000.)

Once another coffee has been consumed, more emails have been read, and the news wires have been perused again, the next order of business is the 3 p.m. news meeting.

At the budget meeting – the name is derived from the budget of stories for the day – editors from each department discuss what should appear on the front page of the next day’s paper.

On a typical day, there are about 20 people at the meeting. Each department describes its top stories. The most important and interesting stories are pitched for the front page. The day’s best photographs are presented on a TV at the front of the conference room.

There is often spirited conversation during these meetings, and usually a few laughs.

While there is normally a strong focus on the day’s deadlines, sometimes the newsroom gets to relax and celebrate.

“The most fun days are when you win a Pulitzer,” Brackett said with a chuckle. “There are speeches and Champagne and cake. It’s the only time we can drink in the newsroom.”

Brackett has been present for seven of the newspaper’s 10 Pulitzers. “On Pulitzer (announcement) day, everyone in the newsroom gathers around one computer for the announcements about 3 p.m. If our name pops up, we all clap and cheer like crazy.”

Once the stories for the front page are selected, the department heads return to their desks to make the discussion become a reality. A page designer then drafts several examples of how the front page might look.

At 5 p.m., eight to 10 editors meet to look over the front-page design options and decide which one they like best. Of course, if a major news story breaks during the evening, they tear up the front

page and design a new one.

The newsroom is an electric environment as deadlines approach. Reporters, editors, photographers and designers all work together to assemble the newspaper.

As the day wears on, Brackett remains composed and collected. As he gets his night editor caught up on the day's happenings, he checks the Times website one last time before leaving the office. He usually heads home about 7:30 p.m.

With the speed at which news travels, it can be difficult to fully process a big, breaking story. 9/11 was one of those days for Brackett.

“We were trying to make sense of it for the public and that was very hard,” he said. “It was so trying because we couldn't stop and make sense of it ourselves.”

For the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in 2005, Brackett helped produce a special section honoring those involved in the war, both here and overseas. It is one of his most enjoyable memories at the paper.

“I solicited stories from readers,” he said. “What they remembered from the war. We got great responses – love stories, war stories, rationing stories – I got to talk to so many people.”

The section was put into an online special report, which can still be enjoyed today.

“They shared their treasured old photos and scrapbooks with me. You don't always know that you have an impact,” Brackett said, “but I know I had one on that edition.”

To see the special report on the 60th anniversary of
WWII, visit
<http://www.sptimes.com/2005/webspecials05/wwii/index.shtml>

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