

5 Realities of Mass Shootings Movies Don't Prepare You For

It sure has been a lousy couple years for not getting shot. Sometimes it's at the hands of the police, sometimes it's a culture of hate, sometimes it's a garden-variety crazy person. These stories will inevitably be politicized, raising as they do important questions about guns and the culture at large, but all of that falls pretty low on your list of priorities when you are actively being stalked by a psycho spraying bullets.

We talked to an anonymous survivor of the deadliest shooting of all of these: the Utoya massacre in Norway, during which 69 people -- most of them teenagers -- were killed for the crime of attending summer camp. Here's what we learned about what it's like to be literally staring down the barrel of a gun. (Spoiler: It's dark in there.)

Anyone Can Be a Target

No one expects, say, their plane to get hijacked -- but at least you know from the news that plane hijackings are something that can happen. It's somewhere deep in the back of your mind -- even if you're just walking around downtown and hear an explosion, you're going to think, "Terrorists!" But when a genocidal maniac starts shooting up your youth summer camp? Even if somebody told you what was happening, you wouldn't believe them. You'd have trouble believing them even if you saw it. You'd think it was a prank.

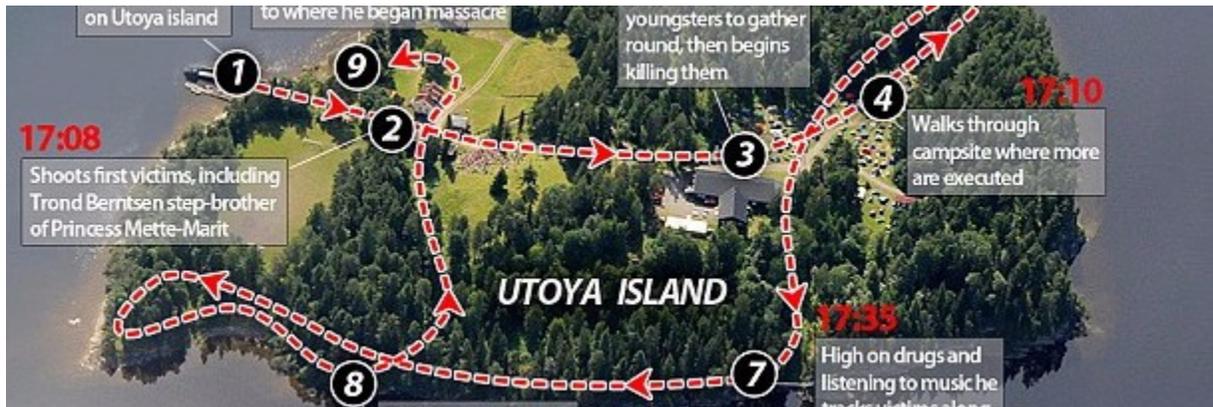
That's what we thought, anyway. Even after people started dying.

So, what made my camp a target? Well, the shooter, Anders Behring Breivik, was basically the Norwegian version of a far-right extremist. That meant he wasn't too keen on the current administration and the Labour Party in general, and the island of Utoya was home to a summer camp for the Labour Party's Workers' Youth League. So, in the tangled rat's nest of hatred that passes for logic in the brain of a spree killer, Breivik decided to blow up some government buildings and then descend upon a bunch of kids tangentially connected to the people he hated.

Camp was in full swing on July 22, 2011, when the maniac showed up. Now, despite the name, us members of the youth group aren't exactly on the guest list for many backroom deals in Oslo. For many of us, political activism took a backseat to, you know, being at camp (some of the victims were as young as 14). Many campers, myself included, just wanted to have fun and make friends. Shooting us would do nothing whatsoever toward accomplishing this man's goal.

Keep in mind -- he didn't come to kidnap a bunch of kids and demand ransom or threaten to shoot dozens of us if some political change didn't occur. He just showed up and ... started shooting.

It Starts With Chaos and Confusion



I was catching up with lost sleep from the previous day's karaoke night (that's not a joke -- you know what they say: "Labour hard, party harder") when I suddenly woke up to someone charging into the house, saying something about an explosion in Oslo. What we didn't know, while we texted our relatives from around the country and listened to the radio and tried to figure out what the hell was happening, was that the perpetrator was already on his way to the island. Incidentally, we were told quite reassuringly that Utoya was "currently the safest spot in Norway" (that part was true to the movies -- the moment a character says something like that, you know the heroes are screwed).

The camp got together and had a meeting about what we should do, and less than an hour later, the first shots were fired.

It doesn't start how you think it would, how you see it in action movies where the guy with the gun shows up and everyone immediately finds out what a mass pants-crapping smells like. Extras in action movies are running and screaming because a director yelled, "NOW RUN AND SCREAM! ACTION!" In real life, a dozen people can be getting shot while, just a short distance away, people are still calmly eating sandwiches and saying, "What's that noise?"

In my case, I had actually said earlier, "Oh, imagine if some moron starts setting off firecrackers to try to scare people?" So that's what I assumed was happening. My friends and I headed toward shelter just to be safe, but not with any sense of urgency -- at least, until we noticed people sprinting past us, including adults, looking terrified. I yelled, "If this is still a joke, we're going to hang the perpetrator in a tree by his dick."

Once I was safely inside a camp cabin building, I ran into an empty bedroom and sat down with my head in my hands, trying not to freak out. Soon after, a girl started screaming, "He's shooting at us! He's going to kill us!" At first I thought she had just snapped and had a nervous breakdown, but after she was brought into the room I was in by a pair of camp medics, I saw that she was bleeding.

That's when I finally knew that all of us could die, right there in that room.

Hiding From a Gunman Can Be as Tedious as It Is Terrifying

At first, it was a frenzy of motion inside the cabin, everyone barricading the doors and windows while the gunshots started to get louder.

He was getting closer.

Now, here is where, based on the rules of action-movie pacing, things usually would get really exciting. We'd be forced into a frantic chase or have to confront the gunman himself. In real life, at that point there just ... wasn't much to be done. We were hiding, he hadn't found us, and the only course of action was to keep hiding.

I took cover under a bed with one of the medics, while the injured girl and the other medic did the same under another. For almost two hours, I was sandwiched between my two new mistresses: a decades-old wooden floor and a bed of a size that was clearly not expected to shield a grown human. There was also the medic, but I don't think either of us feel comfortable referring to him as my mistress. This was my world for that time, my nose squeezed into the floor, listening for the shooting outside like someone with astraphobia listening to the thunder.

All we could do was hide and wait. We didn't have to run from hiding place to hiding place while ducking under rocks and tree stumps like Frodo and company hiding from the ringwraiths. We didn't have a front-row view of the action. We weren't getting updates about what was going on. And while "annoying" might be a strange word to use to describe a life-or-death situation, that's what it was. The physical discomfort of my position, the frustration of hearing people (no kidding) texting on their phones when we were supposed to be quiet -- it all ended up feeding into a grating feeling of tedium.

I started thinking about trivial things like upcoming video games I might not get to play and TV series I wouldn't get to complete. I wondered if people on Internet forums I frequented would forget me without ever knowing why my profile went silent. Extremely trivial thoughts to have while in mortal peril, but it passed the time. Eventually, I thought, "Dammit, why doesn't this guy just shoot himself already? That's how these things always end, right? This existential nonsense is getting old, so if he could speed it along, that'd be great."

And that's when the gunman tried to enter the building ...

There's No Way to Predict How You Will React in This Situation

We could hear him trying to open the locked door, followed by two or three shots through the glass into the house. My mind raced. Fight or flight. But how would I do either? I was blocked from getting out from under the bed by the medic. But even if I could get free, how could I resist the shooter? Ambush him at the door? Who am I, Rambo? The idea was laughable.

So, would I flee? I would probably be dead before I got out of the window, and even then I would have to rely on luck to avoid being shot outside.

There was nothing to do but lie there, frozen. Waiting. I had time to wonder if this was connected to the bombing, or was it just a school-shooter-type situation like you hear about? Or was it all still some kind of misunderstanding or hoax?

Everything was suddenly silent. After a few agonizing minutes of coming down off that kick to the adrenal gland, it dawned on us. He had left. Why? WHY?! We didn't get it! He could easily have fired at the lock and broken in. Maybe the room was too dark to assess, maybe he was worried about being overpowered, or maybe he got distracted. Whatever it was, it saved our lives. We would have been easy targets -- just like the dozens of others. He was seconds away from shooting us, and he just ... didn't. We'll never know why.

When you talk to people after this happens, it doesn't make any sense to them. Without fail, after any shooting, you'll find someone who wasn't there saying, "I would have run toward the shooting!" or, "Better to die fighting than being a coward." They have the entire scenario with all the pertinent details served to them safely through a monitor or newspaper, and then act perplexed that people who are being shot at would act like people being shot at. "I would tackle the gunman!" Really? How would you know there's only one? Maybe he has three accomplices who'll easily gun you down before you even get the chance. You know what happened because you read about it after the fact. The only information we had at the time was a dark room, a dirty floor, and muffled noises from outside.

The truth is that you really don't know what you'll do until you're there. What will you do if a guy with a knife suddenly bursts into the room as you're reading this? Did you have a plan before you finished reading the last sentence? Of course you didn't. *Most* people don't have a plan for reacting to a lunatic with a knife interrupting their morning latte, and, honestly, it would be pretty suspicious if you did.

For Me, the Aftermath Was the Worst Part

After what seemed like approximately 12 years, the police burst through the door and windows, and for the first time that day, the sight of guns was very welcome. One officer came into our room and asked if we had any wounded, we pointed quickly to the bleeding girl, and everyone else regrouped while the people who needed it got attended to.

I later saw that girl call her mother, and it was kind of amusing, because she was the one who had to remind her mother to breathe. I asked her name and thanked her for her admirable control, which had really helped me stay in my skin. If the wounded person could keep her head, we figured, our pansy asses could make it through. The medic was standing by her, with an obvious sense of relief on his face and tears in his eyes. He looked at me and asked, "You don't mind if I give you a hug, right?"

Turns out I didn't.

I remembered that I hadn't seen my friends yet, so I went into the main living room where everyone had gathered by now and called out to them. They turned around, cheered, and yelled my name, and at least one of them gave me a nearly neck-breaking hug. Apparently, they didn't know I was in the building and were worried that I had become a stain on the grass outside. I quickly learned that having a

phone on me made me very popular, and I was happy to help. Going through something like this bonds you together, and we were all like little abandoned baby birds trying to take care of each other and spit into each other's mouths. You know, metaphorically.

But then, the news started coming in.

First, I heard that no one was confirmed dead but that many were wounded. Then I called my family and found out that seven people had been confirmed dead (totally unaware that the true total was 10 times higher -- a mind-boggling 69 -- but that would take days to sort out). That was like a punch to the crotch. I panicked as I realized that at least four of my recent acquaintances weren't in the building, and then I thought about some other friends who couldn't come to camp that year. I was so happy that they didn't come that within a few seconds my calm appearance broke down. I cried in a way I had never cried in my life. It was panic, despair, dread, relief, and helplessness, all hitting me at once.

When I saw the news reports later, which showed the face of the killer, I got another blow: I had seen him that day. He had been there with us in police custody after we were evacuated off the island. I'd had no idea.



AFP/AFP/Getty Images It's a pretty nondescript face for [the world's most hateable person](#).

I realize that, even among the survivors, I'm pretty lucky. But that doesn't mean I got a "get out of PTSD free" card. It would hit me any time I heard someone entering my house, and I became so depressed that I had to drop out of school. These days, things are mostly fine, but I'm one of the few who can say so. And while you'd think we'd never want to go back to that place, the Workers' Youth League is considering rebuilding the camp so happier memories can take the place of the nightmares that currently live there.

Because, ultimately, that's the only way to spite people like Breivik -- to move on with your life and refuse to be silenced.