

# LURPS

A Ranger's Diary of Tet, Khe Sanh,  
A Shau, and Quang Tri



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Revised Edition

ii

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## PREFACE

We all reach certain crossroads in our lives—junctures where a single decision sets the course for all that follows, perhaps making us a part of something larger than ourselves. Often we experience this life-changing moment without even knowing it at the time. I came to such a crossroads in the summer of 1967, when I gave up a safe posting as a soldier in Germany and volunteered for Vietnam. It was, in essence, a march to the sound of the guns.

Vietnam was a tremendously controversial, divisive war. It was a time of great rage, which I witnessed again and again, whether among friends or as a cop on the streets of Detroit. It is not the purpose of this book to advocate, condemn, or justify any particular viewpoint about the war. I only wish to bring home the reality that many men served their country during that conflicted time, that some volunteered for several tours of combat duty, and that more than 58,000 Americans gave everything.

I did nothing extraordinary in the war; I merely responded to the call to do my duty and managed to have some fun while I was at it. But I did serve with some extraordinary men. One was my commanding officer, Captain Michael Gooding, and another was my platoon leader, Lieutenant Joseph Dilger. But the one who stands out most to me was my team leader, Sergeant Douglas Parkinson. He had a quiet strength of character, sound thinking, and a kind, fatherly manner, all of which made me feel safe.

There is another purpose to this book. Coming of age amid the general turbulence of the mid- to late 1960s, I was a troubled youth, and at the time of my enlistment I had accomplished little more than a junior high school education and many run-ins with the police. Yet I am convinced that my experience in the military, and especially in Vietnam, gave me the inner strength to move on rather than languish, and to become a responsible citizen, husband, and father. It is my deepest hope that this book might inspire other young people who find themselves at a similar crossroads. But even more important, I hope this book can provide readers with a better historical and personal sense of these major battles and the men who fought them.

This is how it was:

## CHAPTER 1

### Childhood

My fascination with the military began early on, in a blue-collar neighborhood in southwest Detroit. Growing up in the 1950s, every time I listened to veterans talking of their experience I felt I had been born a generation too late. These men had risked their all in Africa, France, Germany, Japan, the Pacific, and Korea and, in so doing, had helped shape world history. For me, though, it appeared that the flower of early manhood would be squandered in mind-numbing drudgery inside one of the hundreds of dark, stinking factories in my city.

I found temporary escape in the books that held me spellbound for hours at a time, bearing such titles as *The Boy Scientist*, *Small Arms of the World*, and *Rommel the Desert Fox*. My only hope, I decided, was to wait until I turned seventeen, join the army paratroops, and pray for assignment in Germany, where I was sure to have bold adventures equal to the wartime heroics of those vets. Until that joyous day, I would keep the dream close by collecting anything and everything military. These mementos of the life I craved were to be found in the army surplus stores throughout the city. When I parked my trusty J. C. Higgins bike and stepped inside, the exciting smells of Cosmoline and canvas stirred my imaginings. Under the pallor and hum of fluorescent lights, my mind drifted to distant times and places as I poked along the aisles, examining crates of worn leather boots, olive-drab blankets, uniforms, arcane web gear, dented ammunition cans, canteens, mess kits, bayonets, and helmets.

What most fascinated me, though, were military firearms. It was a time before the Gun Control Act of 1968, and hundreds of thousands of surplus firearms were available at garage-sale prices. By scrimping and hoarding my lunch money, paper route money, and earnings from cleaning apartment incinerators, I gradually acquired a small arsenal of pistols and rifles. I learned the laws and the loopholes. Because the National Firearms Act of 1934 governed only the transfer of functional machine guns, I bought a British .55-

caliber antitank cannon complete with live ammunition, a German 88mm bazooka, and a Korean War infrared scope—all just by lying on the mail orders that I was eighteen.

Whenever I expected a package, I raced to our front door each time the doorbell rang. If I was lucky, I'd see a green Railway Express truck parked in the street, and a man standing on our porch holding a large cardboard box. After signing for the package and ripping into it, I'd pull out a firearm and lovingly touch the scratches on the stock and the worn metal, feeling magically linked to every soldier who ever carried such a weapon in battle.

Later, when disassembling the firearm for cleaning, I posed question after unanswerable question to my father: *"Who d'you think carried it, Dad? Where d'you think it traveled? How many battles you think it was in? Think it ever killed anybody? What do you think happened to the soldier who carried it?"*

The way I saw the world at the time, any day the Russians were going to drop an airborne division in Patton Park behind my home. From there they would fan out west, north, and east to take over the headquarters and factories of Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, crippling America. Since my house was right in the center of it all, I'd be where the action was—and would need every weapon I could get my sweaty young hands on.

When my parents weren't home I test-fired the small arms by shooting into a log in our basement coal room. Once, while my older brother, Richard, and I were shooting .22s at small plastic soldiers, a bullet ricocheted between our heads, striking the washing machine we were sitting against. Imagining us in a heated battle against the enemy, my brother shouted, "Don't give in to 'em, Bob—grab two of your helmets!"

Moments later we continued the firefight, with Richard in a Russian helmet and me in a Nazi one.

At that stage in life, school didn't matter so much to me, because I didn't need a diploma to join the military. Adding to that, my mom had taken me to an army recruiter when I was fifteen, hoping I would fail the written test and lose interest. But I passed, which only reinforced my dream. Envisioning school not as a doorway to opportunity but as a prison inhabited by sissies, squares, and out-of-touch teachers, I escaped by reading books about World War II that I brought from home. Since I never studied and seldom cooperated, the teachers would send me to the library for the day or just let me read my books out in the hall.

Not surprisingly, I frequently failed grades and often skipped school. When I skipped with my friends, Dave Anderson and Ron Ballard, it didn't matter to me what the weather was outside, because it always seemed like a bright, sunny day. We'd explore the neighborhood stockyards and railway sidings and the towering, bustling department stores of downtown Detroit. Other times we walked miles in the opposite direction to the vast Ford Rouge plant, where we went on tours of the foundry, engine, and assembly plants. Enjoying life as

participants rather than mere schoolroom observers, we lived off the land by cashing in bottles we found, stealing fruit from trees, and pilfering food, soft drinks, and beer from grocery stores and delivery trucks.

Military firearms epitomized history and honor to me, and before long not even Detroit's Fort Wayne, which served as a museum and military induction center, went unnoticed. Built during the early nineteenth century at the edge of the Detroit River, just across from Canada, the original fortress now served as the museum.

The fortress-museum had thick, zigzagging thirty-foot brick walls surrounded by large earthen berms; a massive arched wooden entrance door on the east led to a long tunnel and similar door deep in the interior. To the west, a number of massive two-story brick buildings served as the induction center.

One July morning, just weeks after my mom had taken me for the written recruitment test, I rode my bicycle to the museum to look at its wall displays of American military small arms. When I arrived, I parked the bike outside and walked into the tunnel, where the collection ranged from the Spanish American War to the Second World War. Among the displays I saw a beautifully crafted .30-caliber Model 1918 Browning automatic rifle (BAR) with a rich walnut stock, blued-steel receiver, and large twenty-round box magazine beneath.

Though fond of all the weapons, I was obsessed with the BAR because it was a machine gun. All that separated me from it was a thin, locked pane of glass—nothing, in other words. During repeated visits to the museum in the next few days, I discovered that only the front wooden door had a lock; the rear door in the interior was secured only by a wrought-iron latch. Intrigued by the museum's vulnerability, I examined the outside surroundings and found an area where I could scale several roofs and gain access to the interior wall once the museum was closed.

Since the fort was a full three miles from home, the job had to be done at night, with a car. Because I didn't have one or even know how to drive, I enlisted the help of my friend Ron, who kept a stolen car in a church parking lot near our homes. The two of us had already done many misdeeds together—in fact, I was with him when he stole the car—so he was willing to help.

That Saturday evening, just after dark, Ron and I drove to the fort, where he parked the car in an alley across the street. Grabbing some fist-size rocks, we made our way across Jefferson Avenue to the museum entrance gate. Though it was topped with barbed wire, we found a way under and started walking along a tall fenced roadway that separated the museum from the military side of the fort. In the distance we could see soldiers sitting outside their barracks, smoking and drinking and enjoying the quiet, hot summer night.

"Looks like they're having a good time," I said.

"Nah, they look trapped in a cage to me, A-rab," Ron replied.

"Maybe that's because they're stuck here in Detroit."

"No, it's because they're in the army."

Minutes later we reached the Detroit River, in front of the fort, and climbed up to the roof. Lying on our stomachs, we looked down into the fort for any sign of activity inside but saw nothing.

When several minutes passed with no movement of any kind, I whispered, “Seems good to me.”

“Yeah, it’s gotta be closed,” he said. “Let’s do it.”

At the rear entrance we lifted the thick metal latch, then slowly swung the heavy wooden door open. Seconds later we stepped into the cool air inside the tunnel and shut the door behind us. After letting our eyes adjust to the darkness, we went straight to the case that held the BAR.

“Make sure you throw just at the corners,” I whispered, not wanting to damage the gun.

“Don’t worry so much, A-rab,” he said as we stepped back.

The shattering glass made a frightful crash, echoing through the tunnel as thousands of tiny shards struck the cobblestone floor, sparking like fireworks. Terrified that we may have been heard, we cracked the door open and stood listening. But hearing nothing, we regained our confidence and went back to the case.

I reached inside and lifted the heavy sixteen-pound BAR off its hooks, thrilled by the heft of it and the feel of its solid construction. My very own machine gun! With the weapon in hand, Ron and I retraced our path out of the museum and started up the wall. At its top we jumped from roof to roof and back down onto the roadway below. I landed hard, though, and the trigger housing slipped out of the weapon. With no time to lose, I picked it up and carried it loose.

Minutes later, just as we neared the entrance gate, two military policemen (MPs) in a patrol car approached swiftly from the opposite side of the fence, lights flashing. Although we were momentarily protected by the fence, I knew I couldn’t run fast carrying the BAR, so I set it and the trigger housing on the grass alongside the road and scampered off, feeling as if I were abandoning a friend.

The MPs reached the fence and jumped out of their car but could only watch us slide under the gate and dash across Jefferson to our car.

Later that evening the two of us were in the basement of my house, where my brother and I slept. “You know, Ron,” I said, gazing up at my brother’s model warplanes hanging from the ceiling, “the MPs might’ve only chased us for trespassing and don’t know a thing about the BAR.”

“No way, A-rab,” he said. “They looked really pissed to me!”

“Maybe, but if we don’t go back tonight, the BAR might still be lying in the grass, only to be found by some dumb-ass visitor in the morning.”

“Go *back*? We’d have to be dumb-asses ourselves!”

“No, we wouldn’t. Those MPs’ll never think we’re coming again.”

“Yeah—maybe.”

An hour later we drove back to the fort. This time Ron waited in the alley while I made my way under the gate to where I had set the BAR, but after searching the grass, I found only the trigger housing. Disappointed but no longer tormented, I picked it up and returned to the car.

A few minutes later, back in our neighborhood, Ron stopped for a traffic light as a patrol car approached from the opposite direction. "Don't look at 'em, A-rab," Ron said as we both sat up straight, trying to appear older.

But just as the cops drove past I glanced at the two officers inside; they were looking at us with suspicion. Apparently noticing our youthful appearance, or aware of our car's description from the MPs, they pulled into an alley and quickly shifted into reverse. As their tires squealed backward, I yelled, "Ron, they're coming!" the same instant they turned on their flasher.

"I see 'em, A-rab," said Ron, watching in his rearview mirror. Then he ran the light and speeded west to the end of the next block, but the police car was catching up. Blinded by their spotlight and unnerved by the scream of their siren, Ron yelled, "I'm gonna ditch it in the street to block their path! Leave your door open when you split!"

"Got it," I said, placing my hands on the dash and door.

Ron then slammed on the brakes and lurched to a stop between two parked cars, where we bolted and ran, leaving both doors open and the engine running. But an instant later the police car raced around the car by driving over the curb and sidewalk back onto the street.

"Damn!" Ron said, glancing behind. "Didn't even slow 'em down!"

Though the officers had speed and mobility on their side, we had intimate knowledge of our neighborhood. Realizing we'd never outrun them, we headed north through yards and alleys as they raced back and forth down the streets.

We cut through a yard, and a dog leaped out to the end of its chain, sending Ron sprinting into a clothesline.

"Goddamn it!" he muttered, holding his throat.

"You okay?" I asked as lights came on in the house.

"Yeah, but I'd like to kill that dog!" he said, vaulting the far fence and shooting down the darkened alley.

Beating the police to Vernor Highway, the main business street in our neighborhood, we looked both ways. Traffic and pedestrians seemed to be moving normally, so we made a dash across the street and into Penguin Bowling Alley, where we sought refuge in back among friends at work setting pins.

After spending the next half hour talking with friends and peeking outside, we knew we were safe, so we slipped into the alley and headed home.

Ron looked at the bulge of the trigger housing in my pocket. "Don't you think you should ditch that thing?"

"I will," I said. "Just wanna hold on to it for now."

Knowing I'd never have peace until I learned what became of the machine gun, I returned to the fort several days later during business hours. After parking

my bike I walked inside the museum, wondering what I would find. Seconds later I approached the brightly lit cases and saw that none had broken glass and that the BAR had been restored to its position, minus the trigger housing. Satisfied now that I finally knew its fate, I set the trigger housing by the display and bicycled home.

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