

MEMOIR

# *The Missing Piece*

A son's cross-border search to find the war trophy  
that may have killed his father

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERENCE BYRNES

## MY FATHER

ENDED HIS LIFE by shooting himself in the head as he sat watching television in his southwest Florida apartment. The police detective who investigated the death told me my father had held a powerful handgun in his right hand and a smaller, less powerful one in his left. Although he was right-handed, he raised the barrel of the smaller weapon in his left hand to his head, placed the first joint of his index finger on the trigger (he must have, since that's what he had taught me when I was a boy, instructing, "Don't pull," then, more softly, with the vowels elongated, "Squeeze"), and squeezed the trigger until—

Of course, that sentence can't be completed from my father's point of view. Most likely, there was nothing after "until." Just a full stop. The bullet, which the coroner described as a "deformed lead slug of small caliber," punched through his skull at the temporal bone, and wreaked havoc in his cerebrum and cranial fossa before coming to rest in his right cerebellum. Learning this language to describe his death gave me a way to think about it. At first, I had none.

I was washing dishes at the sink when my mother phoned with the news that my father had killed himself. My parents had been divorced for over a decade and lived far away from each other, but the larger network of family communication remained intact. I knew he had terminal cancer, and I assumed he had chosen to die by his own hand rather than suffer in the hospital. During his last hospital stay, he had endured terrifying delusions of being trapped in a cellar in France, where he had fought during the Second World War, while the Germans advanced on the building.

Uncertain about what to do or even what to feel after my mother's call, I dried the dishes, placed them in the cabinets where they belonged, had a drink, watched the news, and went to bed. The next day, I awoke to thoughts of my father and his death, but they had the quality of an anagram, as though the mere facts of the situation could be unscrambled into another meaning. By the day's end, I found myself thinking about one of his handguns, and I could think of nothing else. It was a war souvenir, a German nine-millimetre Mauser Luger.

WITH BEST WISHES  
FOR  
CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR

EUROPE 1944

DISCHARGE

RECORDS



Armoured Car Regiment XII  
from 21 Oct '43 until  
and saw action in the European theatre

This is to certify

Service

He had put it into my hands only once, when I was a boy, and he watched the gun and my handling of it as though it were intrinsically more dangerous than any of the other weapons he owned. The Luger was heavy, which made it feel somewhat awkward in my hand. Its short barrel tapered toward the front sights and swelled toward the receiver. The wooden grip was checkered over its entire surface, to ensure a firm hold. I had never seen it fired. It was my father's most closely guarded possession.

In the days following his death, my father's Luger began to feel like the strongest link between our unimaginably different lives. His: Depression-era Cabbagetown in Toronto; ninth grade education; years of service on the battlefields of Europe during the Second World War; jobs from Fuller Brush man to con man; hard drinker; amateur war historian. Mine: a north-south childhood shuttling between central Ontario bush and south Florida sand; university educated; lucky winner of a low number in the American draft lottery during the Vietnam War; university professor in Montreal.

I felt sure that the Luger must have attended my father's death. I decided that it had not been the gun that killed him, but rather the one he held in his right hand, either as a backup or as a final link with the past he was about to abandon. I resolved to get it back.

**WHEN I WAS TEN YEARS OLD** WE OWNED A SMALL summer resort on Catchacoma Lake in Kawartha Lakes, northeast of Toronto, renting cottages and selling groceries in the summer and doing odd jobs in the winter. We lived off a winding lumber road, in a tiny frame house my father had built. We had no neighbours, telephone, or indoor plumbing. One morning, I found a bear's body on the ground in front of our house. It looked like a pile of dirty brown rugs. The animal had developed the dangerous habit (for him and for us) of raiding our garbage truck. My father shot it while standing at our front door in his pyjamas.

The first weapon my father gave me could not have killed a bear. It was an Italian handgun, a .25-calibre semi-automatic

with one rusty clip, a pitted barrel, and a wooden grip adorned at its centre with a small brass medallion. Before giving it to me, he slid out the clip and opened the chamber to make sure they were empty. Then he pulled back the slide, popped it off the frame, and removed the firing pin and its spring, rendering the gun incapable of firing. I nonetheless cherished it, as a sign of change, of great things to come.

They did come. Over the next few years at Catchacoma, I owned or fired air guns; .22 rifles; a .410 over-and-under shotgun; twenty-, sixteen-, and twelve-gauge bolt action shotguns; a cut-down Lee-Enfield .303; a .30-.30 lever action; a .22 revolver; and a huge Japanese whale of a rifle that released a furious little burst of flame from what appeared to be a blowhole above the chamber each time it was fired. Some of these weapons came my way because cottagers—many of whom had been at war just a dozen years before—would bring them up north for their two-week stay at the cottage. Because I was so young, I suppose, these men would sometimes tell me that their weapons were “from the war,” as though the war were a different country, a homeland.

My father usually remained silent about his own war, as he was about his life in general. I know that he served in intelligence as a radio operator with the Eighteenth Armoured Car Regiment (Twelfth Manitoba Dragoons) reconnaissance unit. That he had been wounded, more than once. That when he returned home, he disturbed his eighteen-year-old wife's sleep with his screaming nightmares. We now have a crisp acronym to categorize the disturbances faced by soldiers returning from the battlefield. Enlightened military policy can offer some help. Back then, people only had their families.

I thought of my father as a gentle man because he was gentle with me. Yet, as a trainee for an executive position with Goodyear Tire and Rubber, just after leaving the army, he punched a boss who annoyed him and lost his chance at the job. He told me he tried to re-enlist during the Korean War but was rejected because of his age, which must have been about twenty-five. (I say “about” because he claimed to have forgotten his birthdate

after altering his birth certificate so he could join the army while still underage.) A few years later, when a bus driver cut him off on the highway, he followed the bus to the terminal, waited for the passengers to leave, and decked the driver. At Catchacoma, he narrowly escaped prison when he became vice-president of a non-existent mining company whose sole purpose was to mine the pockets of gullible Americans. When I was a teenager, he told me that if it hadn't been for my entry into his life, he would have tried to assemble a team to rob a casino in Las Vegas. He got involved in a bar fight when he was in his late fifties and came away with broken ribs. The life he seemed to want was a high-stakes affair involving huge risk and the companionship of brothers in arms.

My father must have taught me to handle weapons because it was the most intimate thing he could share. Apart from that, we had books. He would spin through as many as three a day, sometimes reading while he stood almost at attention but rocking slightly on his heels. I read his books after he finished them, and was quite likely the only ten-year-old at my two-room school in Buckhorn, Ontario, who could speak knowledgeably about the sexual services offered beneath the Roman Forum during gladiatorial matches, the operation of fuselage-mounted machine guns on World War I aircraft, the superhuman endurance of First Nations runners, and British naval tactics against the Spanish Armada. We never discussed these things, though. Books were just the air we breathed.

He showed me how to shoot in the fields dotted with Scotch pine behind our house on Catchacoma Lake. When I picked up my rifle, a Cooney .22 that I loved, and pointed it at a distant target (usually a tin can), I could glimpse his red and black lumberjack shirt at the edge of my vision. When he placed his pipe back in his mouth after gesturing with it as though it were a pointer, I could hear the briar stem click against his teeth. These brief moments filled me with a reassuring sense of acceptance and love.

To impress him, I would stand straight and plant the butt of my rifle, firmly but not rigidly, against my shoulder. My left hand forward, but not too far, supporting the wooden stock and steadying the barrel. My right arm held parallel to the ground. He taught me to inhale and hold my breath for just a moment, to let the slight tremor in my arms come to a stop and make the front and rear sights align with the distant target. Then squeeze the trigger until—

Until the simultaneous sensations of the rifle's crack, the light blow to my shoulder, the sight of the soup can fifty metres away miraculously hopping as it expelled a puff of grey dust, and my father's satisfied smile. It was like that effect in physics that Einstein called "spooky action at a distance"; it was magic and power. It was also part of my father's instruction in how to kill efficiently and quickly, whether a partridge, a deer, or a man. He had told me, for instance, to cross my arms before slipping a garrotte around someone's neck, to make the deadly pull of the wire stronger and swifter. And to hold a knife with its sharpened edge up, which made it easier to lift the hilt in a killing thrust and do more internal damage.

The idea of schooling a ten-year-old in killing seems disturbing. It was less so then. Many of the men around me had done a great deal of killing just a few years before. Their sons, my

classmates, were doodling World War II Stukas, Messerschmitts, and panzers in the margins of their homework and assembling models of Mosquito bombers. We boys were still fighting the war by proxy, but with plastic and balsa wood rather than guns and explosives.

In our last year at Catchacoma, I was accused of committing real violence. One afternoon, I returned from school and found my father tensely waiting for me. The owners of a competing summer resort a few miles down the lakeshore said I had shot a workman on their property. I searched my father's face for some sign that he would know, beyond the slightest doubt, that I could never do such a thing, but there was no reassurance there. The next day, I sat in school, choking with fear and confusion, desperate to get home and face the situation. When I did arrive, though, it was all over. My father had confronted the accusers and found it was all a malicious lie. Yet it filled me with guilt because it made me imagine having shot someone, guilt I never felt purged of. Its residue returned in nightmares for years afterward.

I discovered that my natural abhorrence of violence could be short-circuited by circumstance when I went hunting with a beefy, grinning sixteen-year-old boy who had bloody fights with his father and who, in a rage, fired his shotgun at a cabin with his mother inside. The kitchen cabinets on either side of her were shot through with pellets, yet she survived unharmed. As we hunted, the teenager frightened me, and excited himself, by talking about sneaking up on duck hunters and killing them.

When he was perhaps five metres ahead of me on a lakeside path, he suddenly turned, pointed his shotgun at my head, and slid off the safety with his thumb. I felt nothing like the cold horror I had experienced when I imagined having shot the workman down the lake. In this situation, I was all deliberate calculation, confident that I could raise my rifle and fire first. My certainty that I could shoot him without hesitation gave me the confidence to realize that I didn't have to. I don't think this was the reaction he was hoping for, and my lack of alarm, more than any direct threat from me, caused him to lower his barrel. It was only when the danger had passed that I felt anything like fear.

I never told my father about this incident. I was afraid it would lead to an awful tangle of accusation and counter-accusation. I knew he would do anything to prevent harm coming to me or my harming another person with a firearm. Instruction about killing was a game of reducing it to words, just as, decades later, I would reduce the violence of his death to words. Real violence was another matter entirely.

My father rarely spoke of his own history of violence; he said that people who talked about their battlefield experiences had usually invented them. Only once, when he got drunk with an army friend, did I hear a story that lodged in my imagination. It was about a night patrol in France, on the edge of the German lines. A Canadian soldier ran around the side of a farmhouse and collided with a German lieutenant—my father, affecting a lack of affectation, pronounced it in German as "*Leutnant*"—fumbling to withdraw his pistol from his holster. The soldier killed the German by driving the bayonet fixed on the end of his rifle through the man's chest. He then took the nine-millimetre Luger and its holster from the German's body as a war trophy.



Adults almost always underestimate children's ability to decode their tone and sniff out hidden references. I knew the soldier in the story was my father. The Luger I had sometimes glimpsed in the upper drawer of my parents' bureau, behind the socks, the underwear, and the condoms tucked in the back, had belonged to the German lieutenant. The same Luger I imagined my father holding in his right hand when he killed himself.

**THIS STORY** FUELLED MY DETERMINATION to possess my father's Luger. The more I dwelt on having it, the more my mind was filled with nightmare images of awful clarity. I began to inhabit a waking dream of my father's suicide. I reconstructed the moment of his death, down to the heft, smell, and feel of the weapon he used. I imagined myself standing a few feet behind him as he watched television in his Florida apartment that night. Sparkling noise spilled from the black and white television screen, supplying the only light in the living room. The back of a winged armchair with flowered upholstery reached to the middle of my father's skull, leaving a dome of curly black hair visible over the top. He had chosen to fire the less powerful gun, presumably because he did not want the bullet to pass entirely through his skull and harm anyone. If the first weapon had been too light, the Luger was still available to do the job.

The job.

Then I saw his head hanging loosely toward his right shoulder. Copious, dark, glistening blood appeared on the floor and pooled around my feet as I tried, and failed, to glimpse his face one last time. This moment of love and horror began to define my days. I imagined that recovering his Luger was recovering him, but a part of him that was more knowable, less mercurial, and easier to love. It was one last glimpse of his face.

The Florida police detective who investigated my father's death wasn't surprised when I called and asked for details—all the details. In a calm, solicitous voice, he read to me from the coroner's report. "You shouldn't be ashamed of your father's act," he said. Shame had never occurred to me. I was interested only in facts,

and I needed to know everything. When I told him I wanted my father's handgun, he reacted, again, without surprise, but he cautioned me in a roundabout way that "interesting" weapons sometimes went missing from the police property room. A new kind of urgency began to drive me: the police themselves might steal my father's Luger.

Even if I could locate the gun, I still faced the problem of bringing it home and legally owning it. This was in the mid-'90s, early in the days of the new Canadian Firearms Registry, and everyone I asked for help sounded either confused or accusatory. I first spoke with the Montreal police and the Sûreté du Québec. Their responses were suspicious and evasive, as though I were trying to get away with something. A licensed gun dealer with the Lower Canada Arms Collectors Association told me to disassemble the weapon and piece it out to individual buyers, but not to carry it across the border without papers. If I got caught, he warned, I could receive an automatic sentence of twenty-four months' hard time. Another dealer suggested I handle it through "the Mohawks," who, he said, ran an active business smuggling weapons through border reserves. A laughing RCMP officer I phoned advised me to hide it under my bed. Department of Justice lawyers I spoke with were patronizing and maddeningly cautious in their interpretation of laws that would make no sense to anyone who understood weapons or physics. (For instance, an air-powered shotgun whose heavy slug could punch through a wall required no permit if that slug travelled at less than 500 feet per second, while a tiny lead pellet only capable of denting a tin can but travelling 501 feet per second could land an unregistered owner with a criminal offence.)

I increasingly doubted that I could acquire my father's Luger legally, but I didn't care. I saved money for a trip to Florida to see his apartment, which I located—in the era just before Google Maps—on a blanket-sized road map of Florida. And on weekends, I took a bus to a sporting centre on the St. Lawrence River, where an instructor taught a government-certified firearms safety course, the first step on the ladder to legally owning

a weapon. I know this was magical thinking, but, then, I still believed I would be able to own it. In class, I sat among a dozen fiercely attentive young men, studying lessons that had long ago been part of my father's training: the difference between rim-fire and centre-fire cartridges, how to cross a fence safely with a gun, and the proper stance while holding a rifle. None of the others in the course knew about weapons, and the instructor often asked me to demonstrate technique. I have been a teacher for many years, but I have never felt a group watching me with the intensity and undivided attention shown by my classmates in that firearms safety course. The last time I had been watched that carefully was when my father taught me to shoot behind our house on Catchacoma Lake.

Immersed once again in a world of men and weapons, I felt my resolve to possess the Luger—and even to possess all the details of my father's death—start to lose its firmness and shape. As time passed, the thought of travelling to Florida to see his apartment began to seem like a bizarre, pointless adventure. What would I do there? Look for bloodstains? And what would I do with the Mauser Luger? Point it at my own head?

**A YEAR OR SO LATER** THE GUN came to me. My father's older brother had died, and I inherited a box filled with tools, service medals, electronic gadgets, documents, and weapons—the things that are left to men. The Luger, with its holster and ammunition clips, lay at the bottom of the box. It was exactly as I remembered it. The enclosed documents showed that my father had placed it in his brother's care in 1958, the year before we left Catchacoma. He could not have been holding this gun when he killed himself.

For a while, I hid the German pistol behind a false front under a heavy bookcase, deciding what to do with it. I had inherited something I could not legally own but could not bring myself to dispose of. Every time I looked at it, I thought of my father's attempt to re-enlist during the Korean War, his gentleness and anger, his nightmares, his physical wounds, and his inability to

live with, and without, something war had shown him.

The last time I took a gun out with my father, I was a young teenager. We had recently moved to Florida. We drove out on the Tamiami Trail to fish for alligator gar in the canal that ran through the swampy backcountry between Tampa and Miami. I brought along a .22-calibre pellet pistol that I used for target practice. When we pulled off the Trail and took out our fishing gear, a local man who lived in a shanty poised on stilts above the canal came to warn us that the water and shore were swarming with venomous snakes—water moccasins. He pointed to the middle of the canal, and indeed there were two snakes, unmoving, their heads raised, on a clump of grass and dirt. I took aim and shot one, killing it. The local man whooped with pleasure at my shooting, but my father remained silent.

"I got it," I said pointlessly.

My father often masked his expression with irony or discomfort or an emotion I couldn't read, but at that moment there was no mask.

"Why?" he asked.

I instantly felt flooded with regret. The answer, that I had killed something just to show my skill, disturbed me in ways that I didn't understand, but that I couldn't deny and couldn't stop thinking about. We put our fishing rods back into the car and drove home in silence.

After his death, I thought I wanted my father's gun because it was a direct link to the complicated puzzle of him and his life: to his nostalgia for war, to his contradictory violence and protectiveness and his love, to his decision to take his own life, and to experiences I would never have. But there was more to it than that, something I felt when the Luger found its way to me and I sighted along its barrel, ran my thumb over the checking on the grip, and snapped the magazine into place. This feeling had little to do with my father. I thought instead of the young men—all men—in the firearms training course, watching me with something like reverence as I demonstrated how to fire a rifle. The truth is a simple one. It is, above all, the gun's capacity for destruction that we cherish. ☉