

“LOCK AND LOAD”

“Lock and Load” is a term dating back to WW Two, when the M-1 was the standard rifle issued to U.S. Army and Marine personnel. It meant to inject a loaded clip into the rifle and lock the bolt forward, moving a live round into the chamber and making it ready to fire.

George Gatewood first heard the term in basic training and thought it should’ve been changed to “Load and Lock”, as locking the round in a position to fire took place after the clip had been loaded. His NCO’s were unimpressed with his logic and declined to change the term. The same term was used in OCS, which he attended after basic, even though they were teaching him there to use a 45 cal pistol. After OCS, he went on to jump school, which was easy, and then on to ranger training, which bordered on torture.

Following successful completion of his officer core-courses, he was assigned to the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne, which was stationed in the A Shau Valley of Vietnam at the time, 1965. He spent 26 months in Nam, volunteering for a double tour in order to command a company, a very necessary ticket to be punched if you were a career man. He seldom saw the VC or NVA. They always saw him, and lots of bullets came his way. He was a small man, barely five-eight, and glad of it. Many a bullet whizzed just over his head.

He rarely fired his 45 cal. Couldn’t shoot what he couldn’t see. He did see a lot of dead VC and NVA, usually on sweep-throughs after artillery and air strikes. The enemy was smart, but it was hard to hide from a 155 shell or napalm.

He rotated home as a major. His promotions were rapid, not unusual in times of mobilization and rapid build-up of combat forces. He returned to Fort Campbell, where he met Nadine, his soon-to-be wife and daughter of the battle group sergeant major. She was pregnant when he was sent back to Nam in 1968, just in time for Hue and the Tet offensive and later on, Hamburger Hill. No hide and seek this time. The VC and NVA came at him in waves, and he fired his 45 cal many times.

He returned to Fort Campbell and after several months with Nadine and his new son, George Gatewood, Jr., he volunteered for his fourth tour in Nam, this time as a deputy commander of a battle group and a lieutenant colonel. He was hit several times by shrapnel from mortars and earned two Purple Hearts to go with the two Silver Stars he'd earned during Tet and Hamburger Hill.

He stayed mostly in the states for the next 20 years, as he was part of the Air Mobile Defense Group, which meant that he and his unit stayed locked and loaded, ready to move out within 24 hours of receiving alert orders. He went to Grenada and Panama, but these combat intrusions were like training exercises after what he'd been through in Nam.

He and Nadine had four kids, and none of them had to repeatedly change schools as did most other army brats. Fort Campbell was their home. He had to wait eight years before he made full colonel and was given his own battle group. It was an accomplishment for any officer, especially a black, as prejudice towards black existed even among army green – just not enough to hold back a black man as capable as George Gatewood.

His kids were grown, and he had 30 years of service. He was ready to put in his retirement papers, but it was 1990, and Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. George's battle group was airlifted to Saudi. He and his men trained in the sand and intense heat for six weeks, while the coalition air forces softened up the invading Iraqis. The Iraqis had fought a long war with Iran, had easily subdued Kuwait, and had a reputation as competent desert warriors. Given the extra incentive they would have defending their homeland, George expected fighting perhaps equivalent to that of Tet. He was pleasantly surprised when the Iraqi army turned out to be just a bunch of fleeing thugs. The ground war was over in five weeks.

George put in his retirement papers.

The general presiding over his retirement was extraordinarily complimentary when he read over George's record of service.

“Four tours in Vietnam, service in Panama, Grenada, and Desert Storm, two Silver Stars, multiple Bronze Stars, and two Purple Hearts,” he read aloud. “That’s quite an accomplishment, Colonel Gatewood. You should be wearing these stars instead of me.”

George was touched. It was the nicest compliment he’d received during his 30-year career. He was among the last of the Vietnam era officers to fade away.

He and Nadine had carefully planned their retirement. One of his mentors, Tucker Nelson, the battle group commander he’d replaced, had retired to Florida and bought a home on a salt water canal minutes from the Gulf of Mexico. Beautiful weather and fishing right off the dock, Tucker told them. Come visit me and check it out.

They loved the area. Tucker told them about a larger home down the street that’d been on the market for several months. The seller was offering it fully-furnished, with a large dock and a fishing boat included. Most of the houses in the area were in the \$200,000 range, but the seller wanted \$300,000 for this home.

George knew the military and how to wage war, but Nadine had made most of the financial decisions. She sensed this might be an opportunity for them to have the kind of retirement home they’d always wanted. They had \$50,000 saved, and Nadine tried to persuade him to make an offer on the house.

“Even if he takes it, how’re we going to pay for it?”

“Half the homes around here are rented. We’ll let a realtor rent it out for us. We could pay the note and even make some money on it. If it gets too tight, I’ll get a job. The twins are getting out of college next year, and that’ll be a load off us.”

George liked the security of having \$50,000 banked. “Maybe something less expensive,” he suggested. “That’s a big house.”

“We’ve got four kids and three grandkids already. Guess where they’ll want to spend their vacations? We’re going to need everyone of those five bedrooms.”

“How much you going to offer?”

“I’m thinking \$200,000.”

“That’s an insult. He’ll never go that low.”

“You’re right, but I’ll you 20 bucks he counters with \$280,000.”

“That’s still too high.”

“We counter with \$220,000.”

“He won’t take that either.”

“We then make a final offer of \$240,000.”

George figured that would be futile, too, but he reluctantly told her okay. It went the way she’d predicted. They made their final offer of \$240,00, and the owner turned it down, only this time not so quickly. Nadine said they’d look elsewhere.

“Told you it wouldn’t work.”

“Nothing lost by trying.”

They stayed a few more days with Tucker, then drove back to Fort Campbell. They’d no more than walked into their quarters than the phone rang. The seller would take the \$240,000 if they settled immediately.

They accepted and arranged for the broker to handle the house as a rental. He kept the home rented at a high enough price to pay the PITI and maintenance and deliver them a decent profit.

They had a retirement home waiting. They repainted the entire house, and, thanks to Nadine’s decorative skills, it became a showplace.

They dined out once a week. Most of the restaurants in the area were small plates and large prices. If they drove out of the coastal area a few miles, though, they could find more reasonably priced food. One place they liked in particular was called “Bubba’s”, a steak house among a host of seafood restaurants. If they went during the week and

made a reservation first, it was more hassle-free. The crowds were less, and they could find a place to park in the main parking area instead of the overflow lot. George disliked parking there. It was unlit, and he nagged the owner to install some security lighting, but he always got the idiot treatment. “We’ll get right on that.”

They’d been to Bubba’s numerous times. Each time the food had been outstanding and the visit uneventful. Their anniversary fell on a Saturday, though, and they wanted to celebrate that particular date. They made a reservation, but the earliest booking they could get was eight o’clock. They arrived on time, and George dropped Nadine off at the door. As expected, he had to resort to the overflow lot. Even it was almost filled. He finally found a vacant spot at the darkest, deepest part of the lot. It was a hike back to the restaurant, but he’d gone on three-mile runs nearly every day of his adult life and, if anything, was in shape.

Nadine was waiting on him, and she smiled at his irritation. “That bad, huh? You gonna give Bubba hell again tonight?”

“Doesn’t do any good. But no more weekends.”

Inasmuch as it was their anniversary, they had a leisurely dinner and enjoyed a few more glasses of wine than usual. The place had pretty much cleared out when they finished. The main parking area was nearly deserted, as was the overflow lot. Nadine was a little high from the wine and in a cuddling mood and insisted on walking with him to the car.

“I need some fresh air,” she explained. “It gets so warm in there.”

He laughed. “It’s a steak house, not a deli.”

They’d been just holding hands when they were walking across the main parking lot, which was paved, but the going got a little trickier when they reached the overflow lot. It was just dirt and grass. Fortunately, there’d been no recent rain, so there was no mud. He locked arms with her, so she wouldn’t fall, as walking was more difficult for her in high heels.

He almost needed a compass to find the car, but he did have a little experience negotiating his way through woods on dark nights. They eventually reached their car, tucked away in the outermost part of the overflow lot next to the wooded area. He was about to unlock it when two men rushed out of the woods and ran towards them. He pushed Nadine against the car and positioned her behind him. He turned to face the two men.

“They’ve got knives, George.”

Although the light was dim at best, he’d seen them.

“Help you guys?” he calmly asked.

The two men were both taller than George, one considerably so, although slight of build. The shorter man was muscular and had the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to better display them. They both had strips of dark cloth tied around their noses and mouths, Zorro-style. The one with muscles pressed close to George and held his switch-blade a few inches from George’s stomach.

“Yeah,” Muscles said in the light southern accent prevalent in Florida, “You can hand me your watch and wallet and tell your old lady to pass her purse over. And her watch, too.”

“Give me your watch and purse, Nadine,” George said.

“George, I---”

“Just do what I asked.”

She unclasped her watch and passed it and her purse to George. He held them up, and the tall, slim man came over and collected them.

“Now, yours, colored boy,” Muscles commanded.

George unstrapped his watch and held it and his wallet up for Slim to confiscate. Slim shoved everything into Nadine’s purse.

“it’s not enough that you rob me,” George said, “you have to call me a colored boy, too?”

Muscles laughed. “Ain’t that what y’all are, coloreds?”

“No, we’re black Americans.”

“Look like coloreds to me.”

George had been holding his car keys in his hand. Muscles took them and threw them into the woods. He and Slim disappeared into the darkness.

“You okay, Baby?” George asked.

“I’m suddenly very sober.”

They walked back to the steak house, and the manager called the police. They told the cops all they knew. George said he suspected the two men worked at the steak house, as Muscles reminded him of a guy he’d seen clearing dishes.

They never caught the guys who did it, or, as George suspected, never really tried to. Although Nadine was a little hesitant about it, he decided to get a gun and a license to carry a concealed weapon.

He found a used Glock for sale, a 40 cal and a police trade-in. If a cop had owned it, George was sure it’d been well cared for. The Glock was one of the finest hand-guns in the world, but it was also required careful handling. It had no safety and a hair trigger. The safety was not to lock and load it. It was standard issue for the FBI and most police departments. He took the required Florida instruction course and paid \$75 for a license to carry a concealed weapon.

“I don’t want to ever be in a position like that again,” he told Nadine. “Suppose they’d decided to kill me and drag you off with them?”

“It wouldn’t have been a very happy anniversary,” she quipped. She trusted him. She knew he could safely handle the Glock. Besides, being robbed at knife-point by Muscles and Slim had scared the hell out of her. George wouldn’t let that happen again.

He changed his mode of dress, as open-carry wasn’t permitted. He had his license to carry a concealed weapon laminated and attached it to

his shirt pocket. People noticed and asked if he were a cop. Just a gun-owner, he answered.

The years slipped by, and he could hardly remember a time when he didn't carry the Glock. It never left his holster except for cleaning and trips to the range, where he could easily put all 15 rounds from the standard Glock clip into a 12" by 12" target from 15 yards.

He'd bought the Glock for self-protection. It never occurred to him he'd be called upon to use it to protect someone else, but that's what happened.

He was in the DMV, waiting to renew his driver's license. There were maybe 50 people in the room. He was way down on the sign-in sheet, and they were slowly working their way to him. He'd anticipated a lengthy wait, so he'd brought along a Patterson novel.

Although his military days were behind him, his instincts remained. He heard the unforgettable sound of a lock and load. He looked up and saw a man wearing a black rain coat. It hadn't rained in weeks. The man in the raincoat was tall, thirtyish, and had a dazed look. A highway patrol officer was to the man's left. He shot the officer with what George recognized as an AK-47. The shooter had the weapon on automatic. Three shots hit the officer, who dropped to the floor. The shooter turned to the crowd of waiting people to spray the remainder of his clip at them.

George observed all this as he went through his prep. He'd withdrawn his Glock and locked and loaded, then framed the shooter's head in his sights. George was about 15 yards away. He pressed the hair-trigger on the Glock and watched unemotionally as the man's head disappeared. The impact of George's shot propelled the shooter backwards, and his feet sailed into the air. It was fortuitous, as he'd pulled the trigger on the AK-47 and the ten or so shots it released hit the walls and ceiling instead of anyone in the crowded waiting room.

Two highway patrol officers who were outside the DMV rushed in when they heard shots fired. George presumed they were locked and loaded and ready to shoot anyone who moved, especially if the person moving

had a weapon. He holstered his Glock and sat down. Shocked and terrified faces surrounded him.

The officers saw the dead shooter and his AK-47 and their fallen comrade. Their assumption was he'd killed the shooter. They began waving the panicked crowd from the room. George scrambled out with them. He went to his car and drove home. He told Nadine what had happened.

“Why didn't you stay?”

“I had to stop the shooter. I didn't have to stay.”

Maybe they'd figure it out, maybe they wouldn't, he decided.

It looked like at first, they wouldn't. The Media proclaimed the slain officer a hero. Even though shot three times, he'd killed the shooter before he could empty his clip into the DMV crowd. The shooter may have killed even more, as he had two additional 40-round clips in his raincoat. Then, the investigators realized the officer's Glock hadn't been fired. A DMV clerk recalled someone in the DMV crowd standing up and appearing to be aiming a pistol at the shooter. A woman in the crowd said the same thing. A black man.

By day two, they knew someone from the crowd had felled the shooter. The authorities asked him to step forward, as he was a hero. George declined.

It didn't require Sherlock Holmes to eventually solve it. They'd recovered the bullet that'd killed the shooter. So, interview everyone on the waiting list until they found someone, possibly a black man, who owned a 40 cal pistol. A week later two white cops were knocking on George's door.

“Were you in the DMV last Wednesday, Gatewood?”

“Yes.”

“Do you own a 40 cal pistol?”

“Yes, a Glock.”

The police immediately grew cautious. “Do you have it on you?”

“No.”

“Do you mind if we search you?”

“No.”

One cop stood back, his hand on his own Glock, while the other searched George. He found no weapon, but he asked George to turn around, so he could be handcuffed.

“Why the handcuffs?”

The cop turned George around rather forcibly and snapped handcuffs on him. “Because as of this moment, Gatewood, you are under arrest. Now, show us where your weapon is.”

George led them to the master bedroom and gestured to the closet.

“In there, on a holster hanging on the wall.”

The cop who’d cuffed him held George’s arms while his partner located the gun in the closet. “Glock, 40 cal,” the searcher cop announced. He smelled the barrel.” Been fired recently.”

“Yesterday, as a matter of fact,” George informed them. “I went to the range and fired 45 rounds.”

“You a good shot, Gatewood” The cop holding George’s arms asked.

“Expert.”

“Did you know Arthur Knox?”

“The Shooter at the DMV?”

“Yes.”

“I knew him Briefly.”

“Define ‘Briefly’.”

“Ten seconds or so.”

“Did you shoot him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a concealed weapon permit?”

“It’s clipped to the gun belt.”

“Do we have your permission to search the house?”

“Be my guest.”

They did a perfunctory search of his house, lingering a bit when they came to the bedroom he’d converted into an office. Dozens of plaques and certificates and awards were affixed to the wall, including a photo of George with LBJ and Westmoreland.

Nadine was in shock when they led George out the door in handcuffs. She had a temper, and she unleashed on the two cops. “Do you realize this man is a retired U.S. Army colonel?”

“Don’t worry about it, Nadine,” George said in the quiet command voice he used when he’d made a final decision. “It’ll get sorted out.”

“Should I get a lawyer?”

“No.”

It was a ludicrous arrest and an insult to handcuff him. An intelligent lieutenant ordered the handcuffs removed after only a few minutes of questioning. He gave the two arresting officers a dark look. He asked George to tell him what happened. George did.

“How’d you know so quickly, Colonel?”

“I heard him lock and load the AK-47.”

“Guess you’d heard that sound many times before.”

“Yes, I have. Unfortunately, I didn’t hear it in time to stop him from killing the highway patrol officer.”

“Why’d you leave?”

“I don’t like to hang around for post-game ceremonies.”

“But you were a hero, Colonel. Knox had two more 40-round clips in his raincoat. He could’ve killed everyone in the DMV. Those people were just plain lucky that an armed combat vet like you was there. The pathologist report said Knox was shot literally between the eyes. A guy with an AK-47 and you calmly put a bullet between his eyes. My hand would’ve been shaking like crazy if I’d been you.”

“You get used to it. it’s a useful skill to have in combat.”

“You really shouldn’t have left, though, Colonel.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience I caused. I was hoping the story would end with the highway patrolman being the hero. Anyway we can make that happen?”

“I don’t think so, especially if the ballistic tests confirm it was your bullet that killed Knox. And the officer still had his gun in his holster.”

“I’ll sign a piece of paper saying the officer was grappling with him, and then Knox shot him. That gave me the time I needed to lock and load and take him out.”

The lieutenant nodded. “Let me talk to my superiors. It might fly if you say that was the way it went down. But what really happened?”

“Knox shot the officer three times. He was dead before he hit the floor. Then Knox turned to fire at the rest of us, but by that time I had him in my sights.”

With George’s testimony, the fallen officer received a good deal of the credit. That was just the way George wanted it. He was a quiet, unassuming man, who prided himself on getting the job done and not caring who got the credit. He asked for his Glock back. He declined all

interviews. Even his best friend, Tucker, had to wrest the full story from him.

George was beyond middle-age now, so he couldn't characterize it as a mid-life crisis, but he'd always wanted a Corvette. Not one of the new \$80,000 versions, but one of the older, more curvy models – and it had to be red. He eventually found one that was exactly what he wanted. He took it to a Chevy dealer and had it checked out on their computer.

“Perfect,” the mechanic pronounced.

He loved hearing the rumble of the Vette engine. Most times Nadine or one of his kids or grandkids would accompany him. But, even without company, his excursions were pleasant and relaxing, especially in late afternoon or at night when it wasn't quite so hot. He'd put the top down and seek out a lonely road where he could let the much-tethered Vette stretch its legs a little.

After dinner with Nadine one night, he asked if she'd like to take a ride with him. She accepted his invitation more times than not, but she begged off this time.

“I'll be back in an hour or so.”

“Be careful, Hon.”

“Always.”

He drove to one of his favorite areas. It was a Sunday, and there was still plenty of light even though it was seven p.m., EDST. There was virtually no traffic on the two-lane road. He reached a spot where there was a long stretch of straight and level. He brought the Vette to a stop. He took a stopwatch out of the glove compartment and held it in his left hand, then clicked it on just as he hit the accelerator. The Vette surged to life and snapped his head back as it attacked the highway like a cheetah igniting its chase of a gazelle. The rush of wind and roar of the engine were exhilarating. When he reached 60 mph, he clicked the stop watch off and let the car slow to 40. He smiled as he checked the stopwatch. He'd broken his zero to 60 record of 5.6

seconds. Only barely, but he was now down to 5.5. Not bad for an old Vette and an even older veteran.

He'd been so intent on monitoring his run, he hadn't noticed the police car now trailing behind him. The blue and red lights began flashing. He spied some flat ground on the side of the road and pulled over. The patrol car pulled up behind him. There were two officers in it. He could see in his rear-view mirror that the cop in the passenger seat was calling in his tag number. Standard procedure, especially for a vintage Vette. Could be stolen. He'd hadn't been pulled over by a cop since he was a teenager. It hadn't been a pleasant experience.

A few minutes elapsed, and the two cops exited their patrol car. The driver of the patrol car approached him on his left, while the passenger-side cop stopped at the rear of the Vette. Both cops were white. He noticed through the rear-view mirror that they had unsnapped the safety catches on their holsters. Nothing to worry about, he concluded. Standard operating procedure when approaching a vehicle they'd pulled over for speeding. And one officer always lingered in the rear as a safety precaution.

The cop who'd been driving reached his side and studied him for a moment. "This your car?" He asked in an accent a little more southern than George was used to.

"It is, officer."

"Know how fast you was going?"

"Obviously too fast, Officer," George said affably, hoping a small attempt at humor might encourage the cop to cut him a little slack.

"Don't get smart-ass with me, boy. I asked you a simple damned question. Now, how fast was you goin'?"

So much for humor. "Exactly 60 miles per hour," George replied.

"You know what the speed limit is here?"

"It's 40 miles per hour, officer."

“And you was doing 60. That’s 20 miles over the limit. You know they’s kids what ride their bikes and stuff and play in this area?”

George looked around and couldn’t see a house in sight. “No, officer, I didn’t realize that. My fault. I apologize.”

“Lemme see your license and registration.”

George reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. He took out his license and then reached into the glove compartment and withdrew his registration. He handed them to the cop.

The cop studied the documents, then looked down at George’s shirt pocket. “If this here’s your license, what the hell’s that danglin’ from your shirt pocket?”

“My license to carry a concealed weapon, Officer.”

The cop stiffened and grew more alert. “You carrying a gun, boy?”

“I am, officer.”

“He’s carrying a gun, Mitch,” The cop shouted to his partner.

George watched in the rear-view mirror as the cop identified as Mitch quickly unholstered his weapon. George recognized it as a Glock and heard the sound of lock and load. George immediately put both his hands on the steering wheel.

“Where’s your gun at, boy?”

“In a shoulder holster under my shirt beneath my left arm.”

“Well, I want you to reach very carefully under your shirt and pass that gun over to me. I just wanna see your thumb and forefinger on the butt and nothing else when it comes out. You understand me, boy?”

“Officer, if I have any say-so, I’d rather you take my weapon.”

“You ain’t got no say-so, boy. Now, you just do what the hell I said.”

George looked in his rear-view mirror again. Mitch, the cop behind him, had his Glock pointed straight at him, and he had his finger on the trigger. It was a hair-trigger, and if Mitch breathed hard it would fire.

George knew it was futile to debate gun safety with a redneck cop, but he didn't like this particular disarming procedure. Maybe the cop figured George had his gun somewhere else, and, if he reached under George's arm, George would grab his pistol from under the seat and shoot him. Be a pretty stupid move on George's part, with Mitch standing six feet behind him with a Glock pointed at his head. But the cop at his side was getting testier and testier, so George reluctantly complied. He reached under his shirt and withdrew his Glock with just his thumb and forefinger on the butt precisely as instructed. He then held it up for the cop at his side to see.

"Gun, gun!" screamed Mitch, as he fired his Glock at George's head.

The 40 cal slug shattered George's skull and splattered blood and brain-matter all over the cop standing at his side. "Goddamn, Mitch," he yelled, "look what the fuck you done."

"What I done?" Mitchell questioned. "That damned colored was gonna shoot you. I saved your goddamned life."

"I told 'im to take the gun out, Dumb-ass. We in a world of shit, now."

"Is he dead? Maybe we can git 'im to a hospital."

"He ain't hardly got no head left. He's deader than shit."

No one had seen what happened. They decided to cover it up. They took his license to carry a concealed weapon off his blood-soaked shirt to dispose of later. If anybody said he'd been wearing it on his shirt, they'd say it must've blown off when he was speeding in the Corvette convertible. They'd pulled him over, and he became argumentive and abusive. When they tried to arrest him, he pulled his Glock on them.

They locked and loaded George's Glock and put it in his hand. Then they called it in. No need to hurry. The perp was dead.

Colonel George Gatewood, U.S. Army, Retired, despite his having been ruled at fault by a police board of inquiry, was nonetheless buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. The shooting was ruled justifiable, and the police officers involved were commended.

THE END.