

New Nonfiction by Fred Cheney: Tracers



I've changed all the names in this story except my own. They're all dead, but ... that afterlife thing just might be true.

I'm an old man now, but I was ten or eleven or so in this story. Across the road, lived Ben, six months my senior, and Timmy, six months younger than me. We lived out in the country, without another kid our age for miles. So, we bonded. We bonded by chasing the neighbors' cows. We bonded by stealing cigarettes from our parents. And we bonded by reading GI Joe comics. Each week one of us would put up the nickel to buy the latest one. When we got a chance, we lied our way into a war movie in Brunswick, usually Audie Murphy stuff. We were fixated on the glories of war.

At the time, Ben and Timmy's father, Arkie, would get drunk and talk about war. He had fought in the South Pacific. Word was he'd killed 27 men in hand-to-hand combat there. [I wonder why he drank.] Another skill he had was theft—or souveniring, as he called it. He shipped or brought home on leave an impressive assortment. Helmets, ceremonial flags, swords, maps, and firearms. Had he made a career of the military, I'm positive there'd have been a Sherman Tank over there.

Did I mention firearms? The one that fascinated us most and was most supported in the GI Joe comics and Audie Murphy movies was the BAR—Browning-Automatic-Rifle. And among the things we liked about it from our reading and viewing were **TRACERS**. These were bullets that left a fiery trail so the soldier could see where his ammo was hitting at night. This was exciting on the pages of a comic. It was thrilling in a

movie. And Arkie had a BAR and according to Timmy a bunch of clips with *TRACERS* written on them.

We knew better than ask him for a demonstration. "You stay the hell away from that war shit. It ain't good," is what sober Arkie would have said. However, we weren't about to stay the hell away from this fixation, and besides ... we were sneaky.

I don't know if the counterpart of *carpe diem* is *carpe nocturn* or *carpe noches* or what, but there came a night for us to *carpe* ... or seize. My parents were going over to Cumston Hall in Monmouth where the players were doing Gilbert and Sullivan operettas that summer. I had made them pay dearly for dragging me to *Madam Butterfly* two weeks before. So, they made me promise to brush my teeth and go to bed on time. Step 1 of the plan was handed to us. Step 2 came just about as easily, as Arkie nodded off just when it got dark. Ben snuck the BAR out, and Timmy scored three clips that were marked as having one tracer every fourth shell or so. We headed for their back field.

We settled ourselves on a rise with about 120 yards of open field before the tree line and the railroad tracks. We hefted the rifle, and brought it up to our shoulders, practiced bracing our feet. That last didn't work so well, and I decided that I'd shoot from the hip, just like GI Joe. But I wouldn't do it one handed because, at about 18 pounds, the gun was too heavy.

We usually did a series of rock-paper-scissors to determine who would go first, but this night Ben played the age card. "I'm oldest. I go first." Since we'd all get a chance, Timmy and I let him get away with it.

Ben got into a sitting position and mock sighted with his elbows on his knees. Satisfied, he set the adjustment for full-automatic, slapped the clip into the magazine, jacked a shell into the chamber, and released the safety. He took a

breath and pulled the BAR tightly into his shoulder. He held the trigger enough time for four or five tracers to launch. Then, he put the gun on safety and prepared to hand it to me.

But I was jumping up and down and slapping Timmy's back. We were excited beyond belief that it was even better than the comics or the movies we'd seen. Then Ben, reflecting on something new, yelled, "Stop, for chrissake. STOP!" We stopped.

What neither G.I. Joe nor Audie had explained to us was why tracers glowed. It's a magnesium fire in the bullet, and it burns at about 3500 degrees.

Ben elaborated. "Down there. We set the pickin' woods on fire."

Pickin' was our word then; it was safe to use around adults, and they wouldn't get on our ass, but we knew what we meant. Timmy and I looked at the tree line and, sure enough, the pickin' woods were on fire.

I've never known that level of fear, before or since. We three were ripping up ferns and tearing down branches that were on fire. We stomped them out. We kicked apart brush piles and jumped on anything that glowed. We gave up our bodies rolling on tufts of flaming grass or even sparks. We had to get those fires out, all of them, or Arkie could easily round his total up to 30.

With our last breath, we felt that we had all the fires out, little and big. We unloaded the BAR and headed for home. They went in their house, and I went across the road to mine.

Since we didn't have running water then, I couldn't take a bath or wash my clothes. They were burnt and sooty, so I threw them away. I went to bed without brushing my teeth.

I was asleep when my parents came in all excited about *The*

Pirates of Penzance. The smell in the house dispelled that excitement right away and drew my mother to the trash bin. "These are what Freddie wore today, but they look like they been rubbed with ashes. Look, some are burned through."

My father took the clothes, sniffed them. "I'll get him up."

The combination of fear and fatigue put me in a truthful state. I didn't even consider making up a story to cover this. I told the truth, the whole truth.

"Are you sure you got all the fires out?"

I nodded.

"We'll check."

So, I put my filthy body into clean clothes, something I was never allowed to do, and my father and I walked past Arkie's house and down to his back field. I showed him where Ben sat when he shot, and where the fires were. I skipped the part about how pickin' dramatic tracers are at night. Right about then, I just wasn't feeling it.

We went behind the tree line and paced back and forth. In somewhere between 30 minutes and three months, Dad said, "Looks like you got it. Good job."

When we got back to the house, Mom had bath water heated. I stripped down in the middle of the kitchen and washed the grime off.

Dad said, "Now go to bed. We will never talk of this again."

And I haven't until now. Everybody's dead.