

Searching for answers

Burlington Free
Press
Friday, Oct. 24
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'Judgment Ridge' asks why two teens would kill a Dartmouth couple

By Emily Stone

Special to the Free Press

Police officers interviewed Robert Tulloch and James Parker in Chelsea in February 2001, 20 days after two Dartmouth professors were brutally killed in their New Hampshire home.

The officers knew the teens had recently bought military-style knives identical to those used in the killing. They knew Tulloch owned hiking boots matching the type of boot that left a bloody footprint in the professors' home. They knew Tulloch had a nasty gash on his leg.

Police questioned and fingerprinted the high school students. Then they let them go. No officers followed the pair when they left the station. No one watched their home to see if the boys tried to skip town, which they immediately did, leading police on a four-day, cross-country manhunt.

The idea that two small-town, popular teens, with good grades, nice parents and no criminal record could have savagely stabbed the two professors was simply too outlandish for the officers to believe that night. No way

they were looking at murderers, the officers must have thought, otherwise they would never have let the boys out of their sight.

Even nearly three years after the killings, it is still difficult to fathom how the teenagers became killers. "Judgment Ridge: The True Story Behind the Dartmouth Murders," is a new book by two Boston Globe reporters. It delves deep into the boys' past, attempting to answer the question that was omnipresent in the weeks and months after the murders, and still lingers among those who knew the boys and their

■ Review: "JUDGMENT RIDGE: THE TRUE STORY BEHIND THE DARTMOUTH MURDERS" by Dick Lehr and Mitchell Zuckoff (HarperCollins Publishers; \$25.95 hardcover)

victims, Half and Susanne Zantop: Why?

Authors Dick Lehr and Mitchell Zuckoff paint their picture through interviews with friends, neighbors and teachers in Chelsea, deftly plumb the boys' school papers and self-reviews, which provide a wealth of insight into their perceptions of themselves, and most critically, rely on Parker's own testimony to investigators.

Parker said they decided to kill someone at random so they could rob them for money to move to Australia.

The motives clearly went far deeper.

Tulloch, the authors conclude, is a psychopath. He considered himself intellectually far superior to those around him, describing himself as a "higher being." He had a profound sense of entitlement, lied easily, was charming but calculating. Lehr and Zuckoff acknowledge their diagnosis is made with the great benefit of hindsight. Those around him chalked up Tulloch's behavior to the antics of a bright, bored teenager. Indeed, it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to have concluded that he was a brooding, budding killer.

"Had they only known what to look for, Robert's parents, friends, teachers and fellow Chelseans might have recognized that right in front of them was a near-perfect specimen of a true psychopath," the authors write.

Parker, the men write, was a natural actor and class clown, who craved attention and liked the intellectually superior, adventuresome version of himself that he became around Tulloch. Parker was under Tulloch's spell, they write.

"Step by step Jim came along, a vessel waiting to be filled, blinded by what he imagined to be Robert's brilliance reflecting off his own impressive mind," the authors write.

The book also describes the Zantops' personalities and pasts, something missing at the time of the murders as attention focused on the killers.

The Zantops were a kind, scholarly couple, as devoted to their studies and teaching as they were to each other. They drew people to them with their warmth, generosity and intelligence. Half Zantop, a geology professor, was a beloved instructor, with a passion for the environment. His class field trips became highlights in many Dartmouth students' tenure at the school. Susanne Zantop, who taught German, had boundless energy and a keen intellect, which combined to prompt her to get a second master's degree and then her doctorate while the couple's two daughters were still school-aged.

The book is well paced as it alternates between the stories of the teens, the Zantops and the investigators. Anyone who followed the case will be gratified to finally get a detailed account of the police work that went into breaking the case, something that was purposely hidden from the public at the time.

The book has a few flaws. The language can be a bit purple, such as the description of a man who might have been the boys' victim had he not been armed when he answered Tulloch's late-night knock on his door.

"(The man) was unaware that the stranger had brought along two deadly weapons. One was an old but sharp hunting knife tucked in his military boot. The other was his best friend."

The authors also go off on some unnecessary tangents, such as describing in near minute-by-minute detail how the Dartmouth student newspaper handled the breaking

murder story. And the book's title, named after a nearby, defunct ski mountain that the authors explain the boys pass over both literally and figuratively, doesn't work.

But their research is thorough and illuminates many of the nooks and crannies of the boys' personalities that had not previously been told, despite the intense national media attention the case drew. They capture in chilling and heart-breaking detail the respective sentencing hearings of Tulloch and Parker in April 2002. Tulloch, 18 at the time, glared at the prosecutor and appeared to smirk at the judge. Parker, then 17, shuddered and sobbed as he apologized to the Zantops' daughters.

Tulloch will spend the rest of his life in jail.

Parker, who eventually cooperated with investigators, could be out after nearly 17 years.

The murders sent a chill through the communities of both Chelsea and Hanover and Etna, N.H., where the Zantops worked and lived. Neither community is used to violence, certainly not random, brutal violence.

Perhaps the most chilling effect of the book, however, is that despite being able to walk backwards and recreate the building blocks that led two boys to kill, there is no evidence that anyone missed any major red flags along the way. Sure, Tulloch was arrogant and out of line in some high school debates.

And yes, Parker's personality changed when he was around his best friend. But there are no glaring errors in judgment by the adults around the boys.

There is no conclusion about how to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

Emily Stone is a former metro reporter for The Burlington Free Press. She covered the Tulloch and Parker sentencings for the Free Press.