

What Happened to the Cop Who Arrested the Watergate 5?

by Fred Blumenthal



Police Sgt. Paul Leeper in front of Watergate. This is how he was dressed when with two other officers of the "bum squad" he made the five arrests. It was the old clothes and the unmarked car that put the lookout off guard.

WASHINGTON, D.C. In the two incredible years since five burglars were arrested in the Democratic National Committee's headquarters in the Watergate Office Building, hundreds of lives have been irrevocably changed by that seemingly small event.

Men of power and prestige have been disgraced; some have gone to jail, others may well follow. Some men have become rich—lawyers for example, and the folk who sell things like Watergate Bourbon, or bumper stickers reading "Free the Watergate 500."

But for the key man life has gone on unchanged.

That man is Sgt. Paul Leeper of the Washington Police Department.

It was Leeper who, in the line of duty, pushed the rock that tipped the boulders that started the avalanche that filled the valley. With two officers under his command, John B. Barrett and Carl M. Shoffler, he searched the Watergate Building at 2 a.m., June 17, 1972, after a night watchman became suspicious of a taped door latch.

Beyond expectations

At the command, "Put up your hands and lean against the wall," Leeper and his comrades expected to see two grubby hands attached to a burglar in search of a typewriter or adding machine he might peddle for \$150 or so. What they got were 10 hands, gloved in rubber, and attached to men in expensive suits with rolls of \$100 bills in

their pockets. They were also carrying notebooks that connected them to men in the White House and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, to be known ever after as CREEP.

The revelations that followed shook the White House, the Republican Party, both Houses of Congress, the country as a whole. As the avalanche grew, it ground down men who had been at the pinnacle of power: Haldeman, Ehrlichman. It brought notoriety to heretofore nameless toilers in the White House back corridors—E. Howard Hunt, Egil Krogh and the rest. It threw up an instant folk hero (Senator Ervin), created overnight a Presidential possibility (Sen-

ator Baker).

But the man who started it all goes on as before, like a catalyst in a chemical reaction—a chemical entirely necessary to the reaction, but entirely unchanged by it.

Same as before

Leeper is still a sergeant, still second in command of the old clothes detail, or "bum squad," in Northwest Washington, going about in a beat-up car, wearing his old jacket with "George Washington University" written across it, and his go-to-hell golf hat, still protecting the lives and property of the citizens.

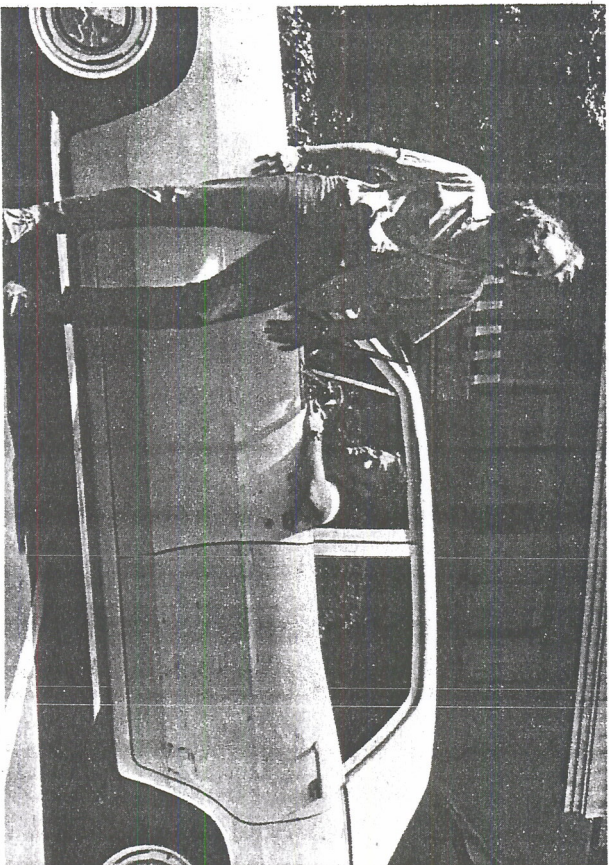
It was this very un-copish look, coupled with a very copish dedication to doing things right, that insured that Watergate would become a crucial event in American history. A point in time from which other events can be dated. "That was before Watergate, of course," someone will say, or "Well, since Watergate the political situation . . ."

Leeper is 35 years old, a 12-year veteran of the D.C. Police who served as a scout-car man and detective before moving over to the tactical squad. There, by the nature of his assignment, his speciality has been street robberies, muggings and burglaries.

"Our old clothes and ordinary cars make us blend into the background," Leeper told PARADE. "When somebody's about to pull off a crime, he generally takes a last look around. If he sees us he doesn't see anyone he's particularly afraid of; it gives us that extra step on him. We have a very high percentage of arrests."

One of the very first "victims of Watergate" was Leeper's wife Donna. She missed her birthday celebration. At 2 a.m., June 17, 1972, Leeper had already put in two hours of overtime and was about to call it a night. His plan was to go home, get some sleep, and then celebrate Donna's birthday by taking her out to dinner. A baby-sitter had already been hired to care for the three Leeper daughters, Stephanie, 7; Tracy,

continued



Here is the car in which three officers answered the Watergate burglary call. This current photo shows two of them: Leeper at the wheel and John B. Barrett.

LEEPER *continued*

He kept phoning his home 'soon'—



Marsha, Donna, Stephanie, Paul and Tracy Leeper outside their Maryland home. Life goes on much as usual even though the officer has left a mark on American history.

5, and Marsha 3 months.

Then came the burglary call to proceed to Watergate.

Donna might still have had her birthday party—and Watergate remained only the name of an office-hotel-apartment complex on the banks of the Potomac, except for several flukes. The first was that Squad Car 80, which would normally have responded to the call, was out of service temporarily. If Car 80, with "police" written all over it, had pulled up, the lookout across the street would have warned the five men via walkie-talkie, and they would have vanished.

But Leeper and his men drove up quietly in their unmarked car, found a legal parking spot, and walked casually into the building. The lookout (a former

FBI man) watched them carefully—and decided that they were harmless civilians—probably repairmen.

The first time he realized there was trouble was when he saw Leeper's team, with drawn guns, searching the eighth floor, balconies and all. But by then, the inside men, who were afraid its static would betray them, had turned off their walkie-talkie, and the lookout's warning went unheard.

Through the seventh floor and down to the sixth came the police, and the Watergate Five were trapped. Officer Barrett spotted an elbow behind a desk and the illegal entry was over.

But for Leeper, Barrett and Shoffler—and Donna waiting at home—the long night had just begun.

"Police work is mostly cut and dried

anyway," says Leeper modestly. "A well-trained officer does what he must do automatically; any fear or questioning comes later.

"But I must admit that when I saw those 10 hands go up, I thought, 'Well, I expected one and I've got five; how do I know there isn't a sixth one behind me with a .45 aimed at my skull?' I turned around ve-ry slowly. But there wasn't."

Then the careful procedures began to pay off. Even though none of the officers knew what they had gotten hold of, they knew it was no ordinary \$150 typewriter snatch.

While the well-dressed burglars looked with some disbelief at the ragtag trio which had them under arrest, Leeper read each man his rights as he was frisked. Later, Leeper read all five the same statement of rights, including the right to contact an attorney.

'On to something'

Considering the ramifications of the case, the powers who were involved and the kind of attorney who showed up (without any of the five bothering to call him), any imperfection in the arrest routine might have ended the affair very quickly. ("I knew we were really on to something when I saw that lawyer arrive to represent them wearing a \$300 suit," said another policeman later.)

The 2d District Police Station began to fill up. The FBI arrived. Higher ranking policemen rolled in, up to an assistant chief, who read the suspects their rights all over again. Everything moved very slowly as the routine took control.

Those \$100 bills

Each piece of property on the defendants was carefully logged in—including the now-famous \$100 bills and the notebooks that were to lead to higher places.

A United States Attorney arrived to get a search warrant for the two hotel rooms four of the five were occupying, and to find a judge to sign it. Then all the property in the hotel rooms had to be logged in with care.

Every few hours Leeper would call his wife and explain that he'd be home "soon." That "soon" stretched into all night and most of Saturday. When Leeper finally made it home at 8 o'clock

Saturday night—28 hours after going on duty—he was too bushed to take anyone anywhere.

Since that long night, Leeper's life has gone back to the old, comfortable routine. His captain put him in for a citation, but the Awards Committee never issued one. He did appear briefly on television as a witness at the Senate hearings, and got a few letters.

Some were from old friends from his hometown, Fairmont, W. Va., now scattered around the country. There were a few requests for autographs, and a series of letters from someone in Kentucky urging him to read the Bible and fight corruption in government. (Leeper, as it happens, is, and always has been, a member of the Church of Christ.)

'A crying shame'

Around the station house, even the kidding from his fellow officers has quieted down, or shifted to the topic of why his team in the police softball league finished only second in the city championship.

But when Leeper is not around, his fellow cops feel rather strongly about what they consider his lack of recognition. "It's a crying shame that he wasn't named Policeman of the Year, not only for the city but for the whole country," says Detective Sgt. Anthony Rogers of the 2d District.

A new home

Leeper, since the Watergate night, has received an \$800 yearly raise—but he was due that anyway. He has moved to a new home in suburban Maryland (as planned) and fights an endless war against the dandelions (not foreseen). He goes about his work happily, as he always has, proud to be a policeman.

He has had to explain to his older daughters what Watergate is—they had pictured it as an enormous gate with water pouring out.

And there came a point in time when the anonymous hero of Watergate was helping take his daughter's kindergarten class to the Smithsonian Institution's museums.

As the bus passed the Watergate complex, the teacher pointed it out and explained, "That's where it all began." Little Tracy Leeper looked up at her father and grinned. He smiled down at her, as the bus, like his life, rolled quietly on.