

Gary Greenberg

# I, THE JUROR

Our man tells what it's like sitting on murder jury in case of Viet vet who was knifed to death

**I**n my mind's eye, I can still see the chilling videotape of Roy Thompson's confession – the accused killer demonstrating exactly how he twisted a knife into a helpless man's throat to snuff out his life.

Yet, as foreman of the jury in Thompson's trial, I helped deliver a stunning verdict that rocked Judge Jorge LaBarga's Palm Beach County courthouse.

Typically, the true-crime stories I write for GLOBE are sensational cases involving serial killers and other perverse or infamous fiends. Though no less gripping, Thompson's second-degree murder trial was a more common example of crime in America – three guys get drunk in a local bar, brawl over something stupid and one of them winds up dead.

The victim was Raymond Robb, a

**'The victim ended a boozy night lying in a pool of his own blood'**

lonely 54-year-old Vietnam War vet who ended a boozy night lying in a pool of his own blood on the floor of his one-room motel apartment.

The prosecution's star witness was flooring installer Barrett Phelps, 29, Thompson's supposed partner in crime. Phelps was nabbed first and, heading up the river without a paddle, struck a deal with the state in which his life sentence would be reduced to 15 years in exchange for his testimony against Thompson, 25.

Phelps wouldn't admit to dealing the fatal wounds, but he did confess to viciously bashing Robb in the head with a wooden pole and later using the dead man's cell phone to call 900 sex lines to "cheer myself up after all that happened."

Ironically, Thompson said he came to Florida to start a new life after splitting with his stripper

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Thompson, Phelps and Robb met in this Lake Worth bar, which has since undergone a name change from the R&V Lounge



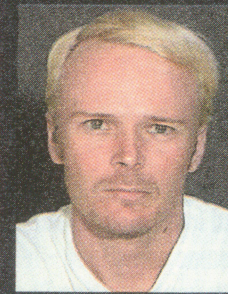
Robb was brutally stabbed to death in his tiny motel apartment

**GLOBE EXCLUSIVE**



**ACCUSED**

Drifter Roy Thompson says he came to Florida to start a new life, but wound up standing trial for second-degree murder



The prosecution's star witness Barrett Phelps (left) and Thompson's crackerjack defense attorney Ronald Chapman



girlfriend in Michigan. He lost his few belongings on the Greyhound bus ride down and arrived in Lake Worth, Fla., with little money and just the clothes on his back.

**Gave him money**

But within 24 hours, the young drifter found a home oasis in the R&V Lounge, a storefront bar set along a strip of cheap motels. A likable stray, Thompson easily made friends who bought him drinks, offered tips about getting work in the area and even gave him money.

He eventually hooked up with Phelps, a hothead who got into a

fight with equally belligerent Robb over a TV report about the war in Afghanistan. Thompson broke up the scuffle, and eventually brokered an uneasy peace.

And here's where the stories begin to differ. Phelps and the prosecution said that he and Thompson hatched a plot to rob the Vietnam vet, then killed him when Robb caught wind of it.

Thompson insisted that he was just hanging out with his two new pals in Robb's tiny apartment when they got into another fight over Afghanistan. Like earlier at the bar, Thompson says he tried to break it

up. But Thompson claims in his courtroom testimony that it was Phelps who went berserk, stabbing Robb to death, then threatening to "stick" Thompson if he tried to flee – and implicate him in the murder if he ever told the cops.

So Thompson claims he did whatever Phelps said. And as soon as his ex-girlfriend could wire him money, he hopped a bus back to Michigan, praying that the whole thing would just blow over.

Of course, it didn't. And a few months later, he was apprehended in Mt. Clemons, Mich. In withdrawal after going back on a \$150-a-day

heroin habit, Thompson gave the dramatic videotaped confession during his third day of interviews with the Florida cops who'd flown north to interrogate him.

At his trial, prosecutor Angela Miller seemed confident that the confession made this the slam-dunk case. But Thompson's court-appointed lawyer, Ronald Chapman, contended that it had been coerced. And there was ample evidence to support the claim. For example, the gaunt, strung-out suspect admitted to doing some things he couldn't possibly have done, like stabbing Robb in the groin, where the autopsy report

showed no wounds. If that wasn't true, what was? The jury ultimately decided that the confession wasn't worth the tape it was recorded on.

Throughout the trial, Chapman relentlessly pounded reasonable doubt into every point Miller made with her two dozen or so witnesses. And he exposed Phelps as a scoundrel who'd say anything for a reduced sentence.

**Scenario made no sense**

Finally, Thompson took the stand, told his story with conviction and survived a blistering cross-examination with his credibility intact.

At one point, he emotionally told Miller, "It was the most horrible thing I ever saw. I couldn't do anything like that. I'm not a murderer."

And ultimately, the jury believed him. We believed him because the robbery scenario made no sense – they didn't even take the cash Robb had just withdrawn from a nearby ATM. We believed him because Phelps' story was so obviously fabricated. And we believed him because everything Thompson said he'd done during those fateful minutes in Robb's tiny apartment was consistent with the way he'd acted in the immediate past – trying to break

up a fight rather than start one. But we couldn't just let him off because he hadn't done the right thing when Robb was lying on the floor bleeding to death. So we convicted him of battery, the only charge on the table that wouldn't send him to jail for a very long time.

Aware he'd get off on time served for the misdemeanor conviction, Thompson cracked a relieved smile when the verdict was read. Then the once-accused killer broke into tears, no doubt overwhelmed that this particular long, drawn-out nightmare in Florida had finally run its course. — GARY GREENBERG