





THE SPARK RANGER

**ROY SULLIVAN
WAS HIT BY
LIGHTNING
SEVEN TIMES.
INSIDE THE
LIFE OF THE
MAN KNOWN
AS THE "SPARK
RANGER."**

By TOM DUNKEL
Illustrations by
Frank Stockton



4.15 in 100,000,000,000

Dickey Baker is a son of the Shenandoahs: born, raised and firmly rooted. He talks country-slow, as if each sentence is a chess move requiring careful deliberation. “It’s a pretty place,” he says of the verdant meadows and mountains that surround him. “I’ve left a few times but always come back.” ¶ Baker — a hefty man with a ruddy complexion and pompadour gone gray — has been a Shenandoah National Park maintenance worker for 43 years. He walks to the rear of a cabin at the Skyland campground and gazes across the ruffled landscape he loves. Page Valley tosses and turns directly below. It’s a beautiful late May day, but Baker describes for me how very different things can be when thick clouds barrel in, cannon shots of thunder resound, and lightning fractures black skies. He flashes back to a tumultuous afternoon some 20 years ago.

“I was painting the bedroom in that house,” he says, nodding toward the cabin next door. “I got to be honest with you. I laid on the floor between two beds. That storm actually scared me comin’ up the mountain that day.”

Instead, a crack of lightning took out an oak tree by the maintenance shed just down the road.

I’ve come to talk with Dickey Baker about the legacy of Lightning Man. When Baker was a teenage employee, he crossed paths with Roy Sullivan, who died 30 years ago and undoubtedly is the most famous ranger in the history of Shenandoah National

Park, if not *every* national park.

Baker saw the tan ranger hat that Sullivan kept in his truck as a souvenir. It had two scorched holes where a lightning bolt supposedly entered and exited. “He used to haul it around with him,” recalls Baker, who also saw Sullivan’s wristwatch that got toasted black by another bolt.

Forty-one years after his debut in the “Guinness Book of World Records,” Ranger Roy Sullivan continues to hold the dubious distinction of being struck by lightning more than any known person. Not twice. Not three times.

Seven times.

That’ll attract attention. In the early 1970s, Sullivan did an interview with expat British broadcaster David Frost and appeared on the quiz show “To Tell the Truth.” In 1980, Sullivan was featured in an episode of the TV series “That’s Incredible.” More recently, Discover magazine (2008) included him on its list of memorable survivors, along with the Soviet World War II pilot who bailed out of his plane at 22,000 feet without a parachute and the hapless sailor who endured being adrift at sea for 76 days in a five-foot raft. The Web site Cracked.com (2009) selected Sullivan as one of the seven “Most Bizarrely Unlucky People Who Ever Lived.” (Tsutomu Yamaguchi was named most unlucky, having been at ground zero when atomic bombs fell on *both* Hiroshima and Nagasaki.) In 2010 Sullivan’s misadventures were the basis of a humorous South African TV commercial for, of all things, energy-saving milk cartons. His birth-chart reading is posted on AstrologyWeekly.com in the heady company of Elvis Presley, Bill Clinton and Leonardo da Vinci.

And surely he has to be the only National Park Service ranger ever immortalized in song. A Florida fringe band called I Hate Myself recorded “Roy Sullivan, By Lightning Loved” in the mid-1990s. It did not become a cult

, 000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000

– THE ODDS OF SOMEBODY BEING STRUCK BY LIGHTNING SEVEN TIMES

classic, perhaps because of convoluted lyrics such as this:

*Am I graced or grounded?
Blessed or burnt to crisp?
Through this mud, we're impounded
Is this bliss?*

We humans yearn for order and structure, taking comfort in whatever certainties can be found in a seemingly chaotic universe. But life misbehaves. What sense can be made of its twists and turns? Did Roy Sullivan have an explanation for his epic misfortune? Why him? Can the fickle finger of fate really be that posterously unfair?

Dickey Baker points me toward an unmarked trail about 100 yards away. That's where the Sullivan saga begins. Twenty-five minutes of hiking mildly undulating terrain brings me to Miller's Head overlook and what remains of a fire tower; a 15-foot-by-15-foot stone foundation topped by a concrete platform. Back in the day, the tower afforded a panoramic glimpse of Page Valley. This was Sullivan's perch during a vicious storm that pounded Shenandoah National Park in April 1942. Unfortunately for Sullivan, lightning rods had yet to be installed.

"It was hit seven or eight times, and fire was jumping all over the place," Sullivan told a reporter some 30 years later, reliving the moment.

He decided to make a run for it.

Bad idea.

"I got just a few feet away from the tower, and then, *blam!*"

Lightning burned a half-inch stripe down Sullivan's right leg and demolished the nail on his big toe. Blood spurted from his foot, draining through a hole ripped in his boot sole.

Strike One! Only six more to go.

A George Washington University

statistics professor once calculated that the odds of somebody being whacked by lightning seven times is 4.15 in 100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.

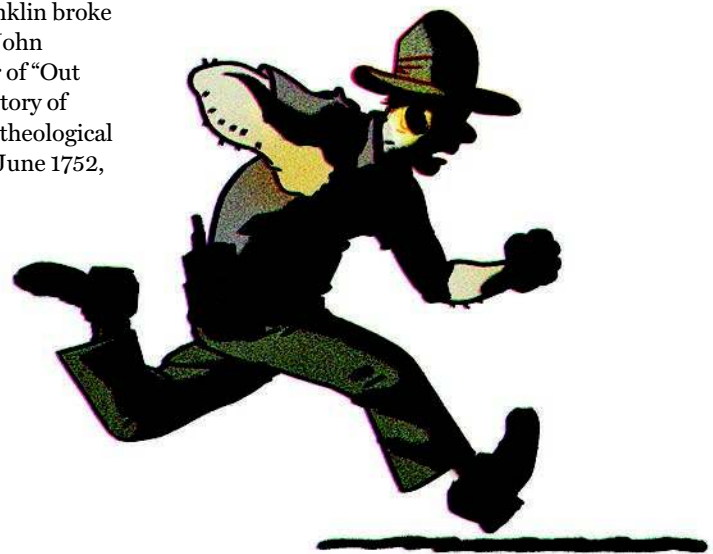
That's a lot of zeros. And they don't come close to putting the Roy Sullivan story in proper perspective.

Lightning strikes are text messages from Mother Nature: fast, furious and frequent reminders of who's boss. The typical bolt lasts less than a half second. It is 1 to 6 inches in diameter, spans nearly five miles, and can pack a punch of 100 million volts. Earth gets peppered billions of times a year, with lightning killing an estimated 24,000 people annually. Roughly 40 of those victims will be Americans. Raw, unrestrained power of that magnitude captures the imagination. Dozens of ancient societies conjured up mythic figures who brandished lightning bolts. The Norse had Thor. The Egyptians, Typhon. The Chinese, Lei Tsu. The Greeks, Zeus. Across cultures lightning became regarded as an instrument of a vengeful God, His joke's-on-you way of settling scores with sinners.

Benjamin Franklin broke the spell of what John Friedman, author of "Out of the Blue: A History of Lightning," calls "theological meteorology." In June 1752,

Franklin conducted his kite-flying experiment, proving that lightning was nothing more than a gigantic electrical charge and, therefore, inexorably drawn to the metal key dangling on his kite string. As brilliant as Franklin could be, he neglected to patent his invention. Poor Ben. By 1870 some 10,000 salesmen were hawking lightning rods in the United States, according to Friedman's book.

Post-Franklin scientists studied lightning and, over the centuries, discovered that the phenomenon amounts to a gigantic floating battery. Cumulonimbus clouds reach heights of eight miles, with temperatures varying as much as 100 degrees within. Rain, sleet and hail are produced simultaneously. High winds whip everything into an unstable stew. On a subatomic level, agitated particles collide like bumper cars. Some particles become negatively charged, others positively. As a rule, the positive particles rise toward the top of the cloud. Negative ones sink to the bottom. The two extremes act like polar-opposite terminals of a battery. When electrical



transference occurs between them, a visible flash results. Lightning!

About 90 percent of lightning is inter-cloud fireworks that never reach the ground. The other 10 percent — what we see and run from — takes place on a grander scale. Lightning shoots downward (on occasion *upward*, if the cloud happens to be more positively charged than the ground) to achieve circuit neutrality. Thunder is owed to the lightning flash giving off millions of volts of electricity, which superheats the air to more than 50,000 degrees, five times the temperature of the sun.

Most people are struck nowhere near the mother cloud. At NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va., the protocol is for pilots to stay 70 nautical miles away from the periphery of a storm. For good reason. Lightning wreaks havoc with the body's delicate

about a storm: petit mal seizures. Mike, hit while golfing: completely paralyzed but slowly recovering. Rachel, hit once indoors, once outdoors: no lasting effects. Geneva, hit once indoors, once outdoors: headaches, chronic pain, digestive problems, fatigue, sensitivity to barometric pressure. Angela, hit three times: severe neuropathy, chronic pain, digestive problems, aphasia, apraxia, frontal lobe damage, short-term memory loss and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Then there are the Twilight Zone cases such as Nina Lazzeroni, an Ohio woman who turned into a walking circuit breaker after being struck in 1995. Lights inexplicably flick off when she passes street lamps, billboards and parking lots. As she told author John Friedman, "They come back on after I leave the area and turn off again if I return."

on hundreds of research flights through the wildest of thunderstorms but can offer only this tidbit about Sullivan: "I heard he had lightning rods on his four-poster bed."

Just as with Dickey Baker, Sullivan's existence was circumscribed by the Blue Ridge Mountains — the difference being Sullivan never ventured into the wider world. He was born in February 1912 in Greene County, the fourth of Arthur and Ida Bell Shifflett Sullivan's 11 children. The Sullivans and Shiffletts were well-established mountain families. They hacked a living from the soil and kept their distance from genteel society.

Like many "hollow folk," as academics dubbed mountain inhabitants, Roy Sullivan didn't graduate from high school. Instead, he got a thorough grounding in the outdoors, hiking the ridges and woods around Simmons Gap. He claimed to have once shot 30 rabbits in a single day as a boy, selling them for 25 cents a head. In his early 20s, Sullivan joined the Civilian Conservation Corps. It had just started the dirty work of building Skyline Drive and Shenandoah National Park. Part of his job entailed demolishing the homes of neighbors forced to relocate so the forests could be returned to pristine condition.

Sullivan hired on with the park's fire patrol in 1940. Forest Service ranger Franklin Taylor, who recalls fighting one fire in which "Mr. Roy" — as Taylor still respectfully refers to him — advised the crew, "If a storm comes up, you all get away from me." Sullivan later became one of three rangers responsible for monitoring the 40-mile stretch from Swift Run Gap to Waynesboro, the southern terminus of Shenandoah National Park. William Nichols supervised him for five years. "He was uneducated but a very intelligent man," Nichols says. "He loved telling a story. In a word, he was a character." But a gracious one. Sullivan readily shared his practical expertise with colleagues who held college degrees; he was able to

"I heard he had lightning rods on his four-poster bed."

— NASA ENGINEER BRUCE FISHER ON ROY SULLIVAN



wiring. Mary Ann Cooper, professor emeritus of emergency medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has studied strike survivors for three decades. "It causes chronic pain and causes brain-injury, post-concussion-type symptoms," she says. "You and I can filter out distractions and still focus. One of the things we see with lightning and electric[-shock] patients is that ability is scraped off."

Death by cardiac arrest is the worst scenario. Other potential effects run a wide and unpredictable gamut. Consider these injury reports filed by members of Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors, a North Carolina-based support group that held its annual meeting recently in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. Cheryl, hit while phoning her husband to warn him

Florida is the lightning capital of the country, recording 468 deaths between 1959 and 2012, according to National Weather Service data. Texas is a distant second with 215. Maryland reported 126 fatalities and the District only five. Virginia had 66, tied for 26th place with Kansas. Yes, the "Spark Ranger" had a job that put him at greater-than-average risk, but current and former Shenandoah National Park staff can't think of a visitor or a ranger struck in the past 17 years, and probably much longer.

The collective knowledge about odds-beating, death-defying Roy Sullivan appears to be spread thin, even among those in the know. He preceded the science community's interest. "None of us working in lightning ever met him," Cooper says. NASA engineer Bruce Fisher has been



easily identify assorted trees, even in the dead of winter, when they'd been stripped of their leaves.

Sullivan may have related to trees better than he did women. He had four wives. It's unclear if all those unions were legally consummated, but genealogy records indicate that in 1932, at age 20, he took the hand of Martha Herring. They had a son, Roy Jr., who died in 1996. On the heels of Martha came Madeline Shifflett (1943) and Vinda Blackwell (1953). In March 1962, Sullivan married Patricia Morris, an Augusta County girl. She was 19. He was 50. Tongues wagged, especially when they had three children.

Says Frank Deckert, who was a Shenandoah park ranger from 1968 to 1971: "We used to kid him that he'd get recharged with the lightning strikes and have another kid."

After his harrowing experience at Millers Head fire tower, Roy Sullivan enjoyed 27 years of uneventful skies. That streak ended in July 1969 near milepost 97 on Skyline Drive. It was rainy but sticky-hot. He was driving in the southbound lane, negotiating tight S-curves, when lightning blasted two trees on that side of the road, then

deflected into the northbound lane and took out a third. In between, the bolt passed through the open windows of Sullivan's truck. His wristwatch got cooked, his eyebrows fried. Any hair not protected by his hat was burned off. Sullivan lost consciousness, and the truck rolled to the lip of a deep ditch.

Strike Three occurred exactly one year later: July 1970. Pat and Roy Sullivan were living in a house trailer on the western fringe of the park at Sawmill Run. Roy was tending his garden one afternoon. Lightning suddenly streaked out of a relatively clear sky, pulverizing a power transformer near the trailer, then smashing into his left shoulder and

sending him airborne. A month later Pat got dinged, for the first and only time, while she was standing in the front yard.

Following in Sullivan's electrified footsteps, I'm uncertain if there's a pattern developing. Does each strike get progressively more dramatic and harder to swallow? Or am I being city-slicker cynical? There's no denying, however, that Strike Four takes the Sullivan narrative to a new level.

A gentle rain fell on April 16, 1972. The Spark Ranger was in a small guardhouse atop Loft Mountain, registering carloads of visitors who were arriving at the campground. Not so much as a coo of thunder riffled the air. Then ... KABOOM! Lightning annihilated a fuse box inside the guardhouse. "The fire was bouncing around inside the station, and when my ears stopped ringing, I heard something sizzling," Sullivan told a Washington Post reporter who contacted him a week later. "It was my hair on fire."

Sullivan stuck his head in the sink, but it wouldn't fit under the spigot. He used wet paper towels to extinguish the hair fire and drove to Waynesboro Community Hospital. He lamented that he "tried to lead a good life," but God seemed hell-bent on barbecuing him. He also gave The Post a mini scoop. While cutting wheat as a kid, a lightning bolt had zapped his scythe, setting the field ablaze.

Strike Four went global, capturing the attention of Ross and Norris McWhirter, the British twins who co-edited the "Guinness Book of World Records," the Bible of oddball superlatives. The 1972 edition went to press with Sullivan heralded as the "only living man to be struck by lightning four times."

The success of the Guinness franchise largely hinges on credibility. It's considered the go-to source for confirming, say, the world's heaviest tumor or the fastest time pogo-sticking to the top of Mount Fuji. Ross and Norris McWhirter reputedly were sticklers for facts.

Within a year they had to update Sullivan's entry. On Aug. 7, 1973, he racked up Strike Five. The precise location is lost to history. The Guinness publishing company changed hands a half-dozen times, and the Sullivan files got lost in all the corporate shuffling. The National Park Service kept no documentation.

Details about Strike Five come from an account Sullivan gave three weeks later. He was driving his truck on Skyline Drive, trying to outrace a storm. Once he got out of range, he stopped to have a look. Apparently he didn't drive far enough. "I actually saw the lightning shoot out of the cloud this time," he said, "and it was coming straight for me."

Bull's-eye! This was a head shot that ignited another hair fire and sent Sullivan pinwheeling. The flash funneled down his left arm and leg, "knocking off my shoe but not untying the lace." He talked openly about the cosmic ramifications of these brushes with death. He'd dreamed about this strike in advance, just as he did Strike Four. Only now there was a follow-up dream, which he interpreted as signifying the spell had been broken: no more lightning strikes.

"God spared me for some good purpose," declared Sullivan, refusing to reveal exactly what that purpose was: "It's between God and me, and nobody but us will ever know."

Apparently God changed His plan. On June 5, 1976, Sullivan got bopped for the sixth time. He'd been walking alone on Sawmill Shelter Trail, about a mile from where Strike Two found him in 1969. Enough already! Sullivan retired from the Park Service five months later. He and Pat moved to a plot of land in an unincorporated town just north of Waynesboro that seemed meant for him. It's called *Dooms*.

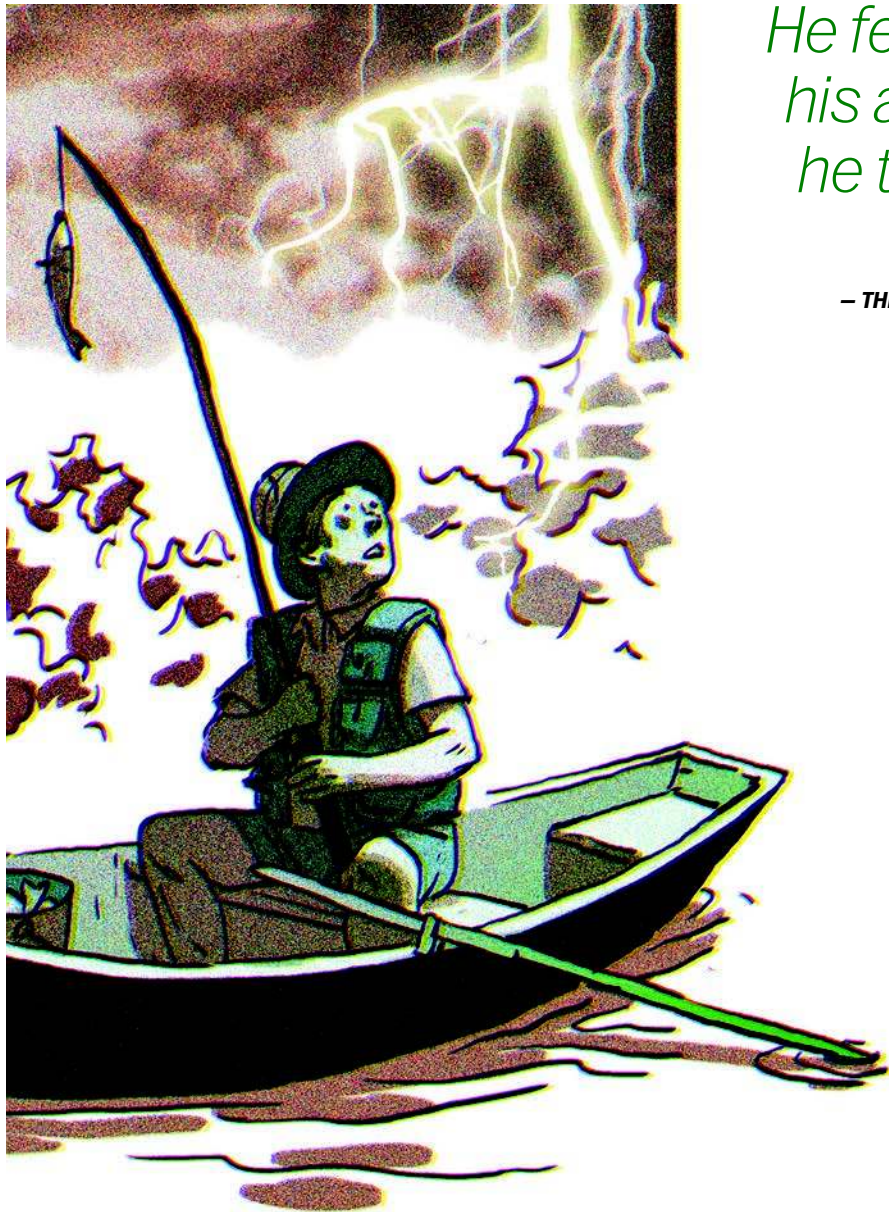
They parked their house trailer, and Roy spared no expense on lightning rods. He never equipped the four-poster bed, but he did affix them to all four corners of his trailer. He fastened more rods to the TV antenna, electric meter and six of the tallest trees. Each was made of heavy-gauge



copper wire and sunk seven feet in the ground.

He should've put a lightning rod on his head.

On June 25, 1977, Sullivan was trout fishing when he smelled sulphur and felt the hair bristle on his arms. Seconds later, he took another shot in the coconut, pitching him into the water. His hair got singed, and he sustained burns to his chest and stomach, plus hearing loss in one ear. Holes were burned in his T-shirt and underwear. Sullivan pulled himself



He felt the hair bristle on his arms. Seconds later, he took a shot, pitching him into the water.

— THE SEVENTH TIME SULLIVAN WAS HIT BY LIGHTNING

check into a motel in

Waynesboro and ask Franny, the desk clerk, if she knows anything about Roy Sullivan.

Nope. However, she does know a woman who got slammed by lightning when she was about 17. “Turned her hair snow white,” Franny says. “It lost all its pigmentation. ‘It was like I saw a ghost’ is how she explained it to her kids.”

Depression is a more common side effect. Did Sullivan pay a steep psychological price for his ordeal? That, of course, presumes the Human Lightning Rod was a straight talker and not the Human Lying Rod. Nobody witnessed any of Sullivan’s seven strikes. Not his wife. Not a fellow ranger. And not a peep out of an attending physician. On the other hand, newspaper articles do credit his family doctor and Park Superintendent R. Taylor Hoskins with verifying his injuries, if not the actual strikes themselves. “My father was very conservative,” says R. Taylor Hoskins Jr. “He never would have stuck his neck out if he didn’t have fairly credible information.”

I hit the streets of Waynesboro in search of clarity. At Weasie’s Kitchen, where locals flock for breakfast, I take a seat by a man who mounted a deer head for Sullivan’s youngest son, Bobby. Decent guy, he says. A contractor. I’d already left multiple phone messages for Bobby, sister Kathy and older brother Tim. All to no avail. At Weasie’s, I get directions to Bobby’s house. He inherited his father’s old place in Dooms. The trailer has been replaced by a prefab home.

together and scrambled to his car, whereupon he bumped into a hungry black bear that swiped his lunch and the three trout on his line. He drove home in a daze.

Pat took him to the hospital, where a cub reporter for the Waynesboro News Virginian interviewed him. Sullivan described how he shooed away the bear by smacking it in the snout with a tree branch, claiming that was the 22nd bear attack he’d fought off (another Guinness record?). “Some people are allergic to flowers,” Sullivan

mused, “but I’m allergic to lightning. It’s funny stuff.”

In another interview that fall he speculated “some chemical, some mineral” in his body made him super susceptible to lightning. “I have a feeling,” he added, “I’m going to be struck again someday.”

That premonition came true in the early morning hours of Sept. 28, 1983. Only lightning didn’t strike Roy Sullivan. Lying in bed next to his wife, he pressed a .22-caliber pistol to his right ear and pulled the trigger.

Warm and cozy it's not.

A huge scarlet flag adorned with the word "REDNECK" hangs loosely from a pole in the front yard. A Confederate battle flag fills the front window in lieu of curtains. I walk briskly up the driveway, past the barbecue grill, past this sign tacked to a tree: "No Trespassing! Violators will be shot. Survivors will be shot again." I knock on the door. Inside, country music plays on the radio. I keep knocking. Music keeps playing. I stick a note in Bobby's mailbox but never hear from him.

In newspaper clips Roy Sullivan comes off as an affable, slightly befuddled "good ol' country boy," as somebody characterized him for me. Did he get carried away with his lightning stories? Five grizzled men in baseball caps dawdle outside a 7-Eleven in the town adjacent to Dooms. They're sipping coffee and jawing in the midday heat. "There's some skepticism," one fellow admits. His pal Larry — I can't drag a full name out of any of these guys — says he knows why Sullivan was such an easy target: "He had a plate in his head. Pat's sister's husband told me that."

Well, another voice pipes up, if that's true, what about the lightning bolt that zipped straight through the windows of Roy's vehicle? "Why didn't it attack the metal in his car?"

Hmmm.

Larry suggests I might get answers from Pat's sister, who lives just down the highway. I find Dee Morris and husband Ronny Roadcap lounging in patio chairs behind their white clapboard house. Dee confirms that her sister did get stung by lightning at Sawmill Run. Roy was gone that day. "She went out to pick up the kids' toys. She didn't even see a storm coming up."

They both snicker at this notion that Roy was a marked man because he had a metal plate in his head. Nonsense. "You know how people like to talk, especially around here," Ronny says.

Funny thing, forest ranger Franklin Taylor also remembers "Mr. Roy"

"I think his mental health had been failing some. They started getting more difficult to believe."

— A RANGER WHO ONCE TOOK SULLIVAN TO THE HOSPITAL

mentioning he had a metal plate in his head. But that doesn't entirely square with what Sullivan told the News Virginian after Strike Seven. "I have a metal plate in my right ankle from when I broke it years ago," he said. "That plate got hot, I'll tell you."

Roy Sullivan belonged to Shenandoah Heights Baptist Church, where 83-year-old Bob Campbell worships. I give him a call. He didn't know Sullivan well, but Campbell says something that gives me a start, something that his wife overhears and causes her to cluck and playfully shush him up.

"I did hear one rumor that lightning couldn't kill him. But his wife's .22 did."

Ware all soap operas. There are no simple lives, not even those led by the simplest of men. Roy Sullivan's lightning encounters do defy logic. Still, it's hard to imagine him taking a blowtorch to his hair or cutting burn holes in his underwear. Reed Engle, a retired National Park Service historian, has full faith in those Guinness records. "The lightning happened, and it was well documented," he declares.

A ranger who transported Sullivan to the hospital once is wary. "My gut feeling," the ranger says, "is he was struck probably several times. I think his mental health had been failing some. They started getting more difficult to believe. I think as the notoriety grew, Roy liked the notoriety."


I presume that NASA engineer

Bruce Fisher will be a vocal critical. Not so. "I can believe it," he says, "because he was out in the open. He's exposed, and he's got metal on him, probably carrying a gun and a badge."

I'm curious what survivors of multiple lightning strikes make of Sullivan. They've been there, felt that. Wayne Cottrill, retired from Fairfax County Parks Authority in 1998. He got lit up three times between 1969 and 1971. All were indirect side strikes; all taking place while he was managing boat rentals. He experienced temporary paralysis and had hair burned off his arms. "I've always been fascinated by Roy Sullivan," Cottrill says. "Maybe sometimes he made things up. Who knows?"

Bob Edwards of Charlotte works as a nuclear power plant mechanic and rigger. He's 52 and a three-time lightning victim dogged by post-traumatic stress disorder. He's contemptuous of South Carolinian Melvin Roberts, who professes to have been hit seven times but has not cracked the Guinness record book. (One reason could be that Melvin insists he now "sees dead people.") Edwards reserves judgment on Sullivan but can't conceive a body withstanding seven jolts of lightning.

"Each time I was hit, I was out of it," Edwards says. "I was on the ground convulsing. I was curled up in a fetal position. I'm a hard-core redneck, but when a storm comes I run like a silly-a-- girl and get in the house."



Media and Internet scuttlebutt has it that Sullivan killed himself because of a broken heart, the implication being that this was a devoted husband who proved to be as luckless in love as he was with lightning. But there are whispers of a darker side, thoughts only shared off-the-record and cryptically phrased. Sullivan left behind an extended family large enough to accommodate a few conspiracy theorists. One relative unloads a lot of innuendo but refuses to be specific. "I know the man. I know his reputation. I know people who could tell you what he was *really* like." Beyond that, those lips stay stubbornly sealed.

Another conspiracist contends that Pat and Roy had "a rough marriage"; rough enough that Sullivan's younger sister, Ruth — who passed away in June at age 92 — believed to her dying day that Pat murdered him.

The facts of the case invite speculation. The Waynesboro first-aid squad transported Roy Sullivan from his home to the hospital at 9 a.m. on Monday, Sept. 28, 1983. He was pronounced dead on arrival. His two sons provided information to news reporters. Tim was then 13; Bobby, only 10. They quoted their mother as saying the shooting took place at approximately 3 in the morning but went unnoticed for hours.

Pat was in bed next to her husband. Why didn't the gunshot rouse her? Randy Fisher, now Augusta County sheriff, recalls being dispatched to the scene that morning. He found Sullivan bleeding from a single .22 bullet to the head, "a contact wound through a pillow."

There were no witnesses, not even Pat Sullivan.

"She was a very sound sleeper," Fisher says. "The speculation on her part was that he'd been very depressed. She woke up in bed, and he was dead."


Time passed, and rumors bubbled to the surface. Both Fisher and Officer Philip Broadfoot, today chief of police in Danville, caught wind of them. "The family doesn't want it to be suicide. It's hard for people to accept," Broadfoot

says. "You've got to put a lot of faith and trust in folks responding to the scene. If it hadn't been Roy Sullivan who'd been struck by lightning seven times, I don't think we'd be having this conversation."

Edgewood Cemetery occupies what appears to be a converted cornfield across the dusty road from a lonesome country church. The headstones stand in rows straight and tall, as if ready for harvesting. A townie joked that I should look for the gravesite with charred grass on top.

A deer leaping over a log is etched into the granite surface of Roy Sullivan's marker. Pat died in 2002. She's buried about 10 feet to his right. Wedged between them is the tiny grave of their grandson, an unquestionably unlucky soul who lived for all of one day in December 1995.

Researchers marvel at the complexity of lightning storms. They've learned a lot but are still puzzled by the physics of how air ionizes and reconfigures or exactly how a strike affects the body's chemistry. Yet nature at its spectacular, mysterious best is no match for what goes on daily inside a person's head and heart. How much do we know about the storm clouds and blue skies within any of us?

The Human Lightning Rod never divulged the deeper purpose he claimed to have discerned in his star-crossed life. If he was, indeed, singled out in a peculiar otherworldly way, somebody seems to have concluded it was for the best. Here's what is chiseled on Roy Sullivan's headstone. "We loved you, but God loved you more." 

Tom Dunkel is a freelance writer and the author of "Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball's Color Line." To comment on this story, e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine. Eddy Palanzo contributed to this report.