

My Checkered—No, Make That Downright Awful— Career as a Boy Scout

A True, Yes, Absolutely True, Memoir

by Lee Enderlin

The other day, my son was promoted to Tenderfoot. He's even earned a handful of merit badges and been made an assistant patrol leader. Scouting has been a terrific experience for him, helping him grow, even teaching him a few things. Watching how proud he was of himself got me to thinking of my own, rather laughable, life as a scout. Especially since Tenderfoot was as far as I ever got in the Boy Scouts. Of course, Scouting was a whole different back in the early 60's than it is today...

The first thing I remember about Boy Scouts was listening to the sounds of the scouts as they were apparently having a great time after a meeting one night around the outside of the school where they assembled. I could hear it all because my house stood in the middle. On one side was the home of my next-door neighbor and best friend, Jay, while on the other side, just across the street, stood our grammar school, a Catholic parochial school that also hosted the Boy Scout troop. On late spring nights, I would lay in my bed next to an open window that drew in all the sounds of the activity going on at the school like an old-time ear trumpet.

My room faced my friend's house so I could not actually see the school or what was going on. The next day, I questioned him. "Jay, what was all that noise about after the scout meeting last night?"

"Oh, we were having a rumble."

A rumble! Wow! Scouts had rumbles! Of course, this particular rumble was nothing like the Jets/Sharks thing with knives and other sharp objects and such. It was more of a giant, spontaneous game of Tag.

But still, it was a rumble!

The thing about Jay was that he was a year and a half older than I was. He really was the older brother that I didn't have. He got to do everything first. Graduate from eighth grade, drive a car, ride a motorcycle, join Boy Scouts. Have rumbles. And, oh yeah, at that age, he attracted girls like a magnet. Me, well, let's just say I was one of the numberless rabble who would never be so blessed.

In other words, Jay was cool.

And if Jay said it was a rumble, then it was a rumble, by God. I couldn't wait to join. There'd be camping and adventure and *rumbles!*

When my time finally came, my parents were happy to sign the papers. Just one question needed to be answered. How long did I want to subscribe to "Boys' Life," the monthly magazine of the scouts? I looked at the options. Three years was the best deal.

"Three years."

"You're sure you'll want to read this for three years?"

"Yup." I was sure.

And with that, I joined up and soon became a proud member of Cobra Patrol, my very own band of brothers, so to speak. Oddly, I didn't see Jay much during scout meetings. He was in a patrol with older guys and we didn't interact much.

Things went pretty well at first. Well, there was one incident where I put the American flag in the wrong stand, (“It goes first, right?” “No, it goes in the middle.” “Well, it looked like it fit in the first hole.” “Well, it doesn’t. The American flag always goes in the middle. Fifteen minutes bird-dog.”)

Oh, yeah. Bird-dog. That was a punishment where you had to hold your arms straight out from the shoulders. It really ached quickly even if they didn’t make you hold something in your hands. I must point out that the adult scoutmasters never imposed bird-dog. Only the older boys did. And then only on the younger boys. Usually, it was just something they made you do for a couple of minutes. A major transgression was worth five minutes.

I got fifteen.

Even our two scoutmasters laughed at me when their backs were turned. They thought I didn’t see them, but I did. Maybe that’s the real reason why I never saw Jay. Any idiot kid who got fifteen minutes of bird-dog wasn’t worth knowing.

Things continued to slowly unravel on our first campout. It was going to serve as practice for the upcoming statewide jamboree which was going to be a competition among a large number of patrols from different troops.

Me, I couldn’t keep my bedroll tied to the top of my backpack.

It wasn’t as if I couldn’t tie a knot. Heck, any moron could tie a granny knot and it would work perfectly well holding things together. What I couldn’t do was figure out how to keep the stupid rope taut. The bedroll kept sliding loose, falling behind my back, and flapping ingloriously against the backs of my legs as I hiked up the trail to the campground. I must be very good at messing up my pack, too, because no one who tried to help me as we hiked along could get the darn bedroll to sit taut, either. Tying down a bedroll was a mystery I never solved.

Except for my flopping bedroll, we got through the campout okay, but next week came the jamboree. It began auspiciously with a torrential downpour. That kind of weather had been expected, though, and our adult scoutmasters, clearly living by the “Be Prepared” motto, thoroughly briefed us at our weekly meeting on the procedures and benefits of “ditching” your tent. This doesn’t mean to throw it away, like you might think (which, in retrospect, we might have been better off doing), but rather to dig a little trench around the entire outside of the tent once you have it erected. The idea is to give rain a sort of natural gutter to flow into and to keep it out of the tent. The technique is especially helpful around tents in low-lying areas. In fact, if you’re on high ground, you don’t generally have to do it.

Cobra Patrol arrived at the jamboree site late and all of the good, i.e., hilltop, tent sites were taken. Our only choice was a site at the foot of a hill. “Well, boys,” our seventeen-year-old patrol leader announced, “it looks this is the only spot left. I guess we ditch the tents.”

Four tents and four ditches later, we fell exhausted and soaking wet into our tents for a bit of rest. Shortly thereafter, a trio of somber-looking jamboree judges stopped by to assess our site. Each carried a clipboard that they scribbled notes on.

We piled out and they looked around.

“You picked a pretty lousy location at the bottom of a hill in rainy weather.”

Scribble, scribble.

“Well, yeah, it was the only place available by the time we got here.”

“We see you ditched your tents.”

“Of course,” we said proudly. We were prepared!

“Didn’t you know that ditching was outlawed in this district years ago?” they asked sternly.

“Huh?”

“Don’t you listen to what your scoutmasters tell you?” they asked even more sternly.

“Yeah, they told us to make sure we ditched our tents.”

“They did, huh?”

“Yes, sir.”

Scribble, scribble.

“Well, you’ll have to fill in those ditches,” they said as they turned and left.

We watched them disappear as we contemplated the joy of kneeling in wet grass around four tents, stuffing cold, wet mud back into the little ditches we had spent so much time digging.

“Well, how many points do you think *that* cost us?”

“Lots.”

Eventually, we finished up and fell asleep exhausted. Filthy, soaking wet, and exhausted.

The next morning, the rain let up long enough to permit the competition to take place. First was orienteering. They stretched a long rope along the ground that had little metal tags, like dog-tags, clipped to it every five feet. Each tag had a number on it. You started at one tag and followed the directions that they assigned you (go 50 feet north, turn 30 degrees west, go 38 feet, etc., etc.). You had only a compass for direction and your stride to measure distance. After a while, you ended up back at the rope at a differently numbered tag. We were in good shape. We had a kid who was certain his stride was exactly two feet long.

We followed the directions to the letter. After the last instruction, I was sent ahead with a couple of other scouts to determine where we would end up. Directly on tag #57! Perfect! It had to be! We were headed straight at it!

When we were done, the somber-looking judge came over. Evidently, you couldn’t be a jamboree judge unless you were somber-looking.

“Where’d you end up?”

“57.”

He checked his sheet and noted the number we had been assigned to start from.

“Is that where we were supposed to end up?”

“Nope. 53.”

Scribble, scribble.

He walked away.

“How many points you think *that* cost us?”

“Lots.”

Next up was a kind of relay race against a patrol from another troop to see who could tie a dozen knots the fastest. Each patrol lined up single file and the first guy in line ran about ten feet to a judge (yes, somber-faced) who had the name of a knot on a card. If you knew how to do the knot, you grabbed a nearby piece of rope and tied it. If you didn’t, you ran to the back of your line and the next scout took a shot at it.

The other patrol won ten knots to two. We spent most of our time running in one big circle. As we walked away dejected, we had only one question.

“How come none of us knew how to tie any of those knots?”

Our patrol leader had the answer.

“We were too busy learning how to ditch tents.”

Shortly afterward came the final humiliation. Semaphore.

“Semaphore? With flags?” we asked our patrol leader.

“Yeah, with flags. Don’t you know how to do semaphore?”

“No, do you?”

“No.”

We were duly handed a list of letters, two flags, a piece of paper, and a pencil. Two guys took the paper and pencil and marched off across a meadow about a hundred yards away. The rest of us stood on top of a ridge with the list and the two flags. Our patrol leader took control of the flags. One of us read him the next letter on the list whereupon he guessed what the semaphore positions for that letter were while the two guys across the field guessed what letter he was guessing at.

The last letter was D.

“Maybe we’ll get this one right,” the patrol leader muttered, dropping one of the flags. He then swung the remaining flag straight down like an axe and then made a large semi-circle to complete the D.

Even from a hundred yards away, you could see the confusion on the other guys’ faces.

They rejoined us at the top of the hill as the judge came up to get their answers. He took it from them and checked it against his answer key. Somberly.

Scribble, scribble.

“What did you write down for the last one?”

“A.”

“A? It was a D. I was drawing a D.”

“Well, it sure didn’t look like any semaphore we ever heard about.”

“You must be illiterate.”

We looked back at the judge as we walked away. He was still scribbling. And somber-looking.

We just rolled our eyes and left. Nobody bothered to ask how many points that cost us.

Around noon that Saturday, the torrential rain returned and the jamboree decided to send us all home. We struck our tents, packed up, and started marching out. There were two or three judging checkpoints on the hike out where we were scored for our appearance. Every judge we passed along the way had the same reaction to Cobra Patrol as they watched me trudging along with my bedroll slapping against my hamstrings.

Scribble, scribble.

I no longer cared.

Eventually, despite my flag and bedroll faux pas, I made it to Tenderfoot which nearly fifty years ago was far less of an accomplishment than it is today. Back then, there was no “Scout” rank. Tenderfoot was the lowest and easiest to get, but you couldn’t get merit badges until you were Second Class. I still had a ways to go. Merit badges! I wondered if they had one in Rumbling!

About halfway through the year, the scoutmasters brought in a first aid expert. That was great! We learned all about shock and broken bones and all kinds of things. To this day, I still remember the one thing he drilled into us—when caught in an emergency situation with a lack of supplies, improvise!

After a few weeks, we had a test. This, too, was a competition among the various patrols, except, of course, this time, we were competing only against the patrols in our own troop.

We were doing okay until the last scenario. Each of us took turns being the victim. The judge (at least these guys weren't as somber-looking as the jamboree judges—they were adults from our own troop) gave us the circumstances and one of the guys from the patrol laid down to be what we called "the corpse" even though he wasn't supposed to be dead. After all, what was the point of doing first aid on a dead guy?

The last one was a trick scenario. You're supposed to raise the legs of a victim to prevent shock except when the victim is bleeding from the head. That was the case in this scenario. Just one problem—only one of us remembered that.

The corpse.

"Quick!" our patrol leader said, "put his feet up on a chair." Which we proceeded to do.

The corpse kicked the chair about four feet away.

"Well, at least he didn't kick the bucket," one kid said, "then he'd be dead."

Scribble, scribble.

A good friend of mine, Paul, working on the other side of the corpse from the patrol leader, had a sudden revelation. "You're not supposed to raise the legs of a guy with a head wound," he complained to the patrol leader.

Our patrol leader then did something that still burns in my memory. He leaned across the corpse and slapped Paul. Not jaw-cracking hard, perhaps, but still somewhat more than a love tap. Honest. I'm not making that up. *Slap!*

Scribble, scribble.

We finished second.

The rest of the year passed uneventfully and we wandered off into the summer. I was still a Tenderfoot with no merit badges and no rumbles broke out that spring around the school.

When we reconvened in the fall, we had to reorganize our patrols as the older boys left. Our former patrol leader was one of those. Cobra Patrol needed new leaders from among the younger guys. We elected another good friend of mine, Steve, as patrol leader. Then came the election of the assistant patrol leader which was the pinnacle of my Boy Scout career. For all of about five minutes.

It came down to me and yet another classmate and good friend, Eddie. I won by a single vote and proudly took my place standing next to Steve. There was a sudden commotion as Eddie left the room. Steve followed him out to see what was wrong. He came back a few minutes later.

"Eddie's really upset and he's crying. Would you mind stepping down?"

I guess I'd make a lousy politician. I said no, I wouldn't mind, and have never won an election since. All that power just slipped through my hands in an instant. I should have appealed the Florida results. Instead, I just meekly took my place at the end of the Cobra Patrol line.

Two weeks later, the scoutmasters decided to pull a power play to force more parents to help out. They called a mandatory meeting for all fathers on a Tuesday night. Anyone whose father didn't come would be kicked out of the troop. My dad held a town job as the director of the housing authority. (In an ironic twist, it was Jay's father who was instrumental in my dad getting the position.) It required him to meet with the town manager and several elected officials every week. These meetings took place on Tuesday nights. He did that every Tuesday night for years and needless to say, he didn't make the scout meeting. I got kicked out. Along with a rather large number of other boys.

Naturally, there was a huge stink. The scoutmasters relented. Everybody who wanted to return were welcomed back. My parents asked me what I wanted to do.

I thought about the bedroll whacking against my legs, campouts in the pouring rain, assessments by somber-looking judges (*scribble, scribble*), elections relinquished, all zero of the merit badges I had earned, and the equal number of rumbles I had taken part in. And oh, yeah, bird-dog.

"Well, if that's the way these two guys are running things, I don't think I want to go back," I said. And so I didn't.

With that, the final, sad curtain of my scout career came down with an inglorious thud.

Except for two more years of "Boys' Life."

The End