

Wilderness House Literary Review 1/2

Veterans of the Boy Scout War

By Gary Beck

I was so impatient that I kept waking up to see if it was Saturday morning yet. Tommy and Phip were supposed to call for me at five a.m. Even my camping gear looked restless. Besides, I was having a dream about bald men in long black coats that were chasing me. I kept tripping as they got closer, while windows were opening and people were throwing things at me like rattles, marbles and kazoos. I'd wake up, then each time that I went back to sleep the dream started again and the men got closer. They grabbed me. I started to fight and heard Tommy's voice saying: "Jeez. Ya dope. Wake up," and woke up to see Tommy pulling off my blanket and Phip climbing through the window.

Tommy was my best friend. We grew up together in Brooklyn on a working class street of connected brick houses. Tommy was the best baseball player in school and the leader in our adventures, with a talent for getting us in and out of trouble. I mostly went along with him, except if I thought something was really bad. I was becoming an avid, though secret reader, just beginning to think about what was right and wrong. Phip, however, was another country. He had always been dumb, but now he was getting weirder and weirder. I didn't want him hanging around with us anymore, but Tommy liked having a loyal follower and I didn't want to lose Tommy as a friend.

It was a few minutes after five and the first hint of light was licking at the chill spring air that smelled like ice cubes. I put on dungarees, a red and black checkerboard flannel shirt, thick sweat socks, boots and a denim jacket. Then I started to fix my backpack. Tommy silently helped me put on everything. My sleeping bag, pack, webbed belt with two canteens, ax, sheath knife and compass gave me a competent, military look. When we left we looked like well-equipped rebels going off to the hills to dynamite trains.

We took the IRT subway to the George Washington Bridge and the early Saturday morning passengers looked at our equipment, our Australian bush hats and us with drowsy curiosity and I-remember-when-I-was-young smiles. We had been going camping since we were twelve years old and had developed real woodcraft skills in the last two years. So we sat there like old pros, real cool, waiting for action.

By the time we reached the bridge it was a beautiful morning. We walked across the glimmering span that straddled the Hudson River like a many-tendrilled insect feeding on decay. We marched past the state line marker in the middle of the bridge and entered New Jersey like an invading army.

We stopped for a moment, leaning over the railing, looking

way down at a service road that spiraled round and round until it reached the bridge. I took an apple from my pack and bit into it, juice rushing down my throat like the end of a drought.

"Hey. I got me a bomb. Look at me. I'm a B29," yelled Phip, snatching my apple.

"Gimme my apple, Phip," I demanded.

"Wadda ya mean, apple? This is a bomb. Cantcha see it's a bomb?"

"Will ya give me my apple?"

"Bomb bay doors open.... Bombs awayeee...."

He dropped it and we saw the red sphere plunge to earth. It hit a car with a loud bang and we looked at each other in disbelief.

"Holy shit," yelled Tommy. "You hit that taxi, you asshole. Look at it. Look at that hole in the roof."

Far below us, the brakes screeched as the taxi stopped. The driver jumped out, looked at the roof, looked up and saw us hanging dangerously over the railing and started waving angry fists at us. He looked so funny that we started laughing harder and harder, until tears swam in our eyes and saliva sprayed from our mouths. We slumped down on the ground, rolling around and laughing hysterically. Phip kept yelling: "Bombs away," over and over.

"Hey, Tommy," I asked. "What if someone was in the back seat?"

We got up, rushed to the rail and looked down. The angry midget was still waving furious fists, but we could see that he was alone.

"Jeez," said Phip. "I'm gonna join the air force an' be a bombardier." This started us laughing like crazy again. Tommy calmed us down by saying: "Awright, you guys. He's gonna be after us, so let's get outta here."

We quickly picked up our gear and trotted towards the end of the bridge.

"Hey. Tommy," I whispered.

"Yeah?"

"That Phip's a real nut, ain't he?"

"You're not kiddin'. We better go a little faster, though I don't think that taxi can get up here before we reach the bus."

Tommy had been watching the taxi, which had started up the road leading to the bridge. We trotted a little faster, breathing hard, but still giggling when we thought of the apple.

We got to the bus stop without seeing the taxi and got on a bus that went north through Fort Lee. When the bus passed the town limits we got off and headed into the woods. Once we were out of sight of the road, we unrolled our sleeping bags, took out and loaded our BB guns, then moved out silently in single file, rifles in safety position, Indian scout fashion. We knew that the ominous forest silence, pierced by bird cries, forest sounds and crackling, rustling, swaying underbrush held brooding enemies contemplating our scalps,

so we walked tense and alert, ready for an ambush.

Suddenly, a deep, gruff voice from nowhere asked:

"Where are you taking those BB guns, boys?"

We almost jumped out of our skins and whirled around. A big man with red jowls, and a bulging belly barely held in by a tan uniform, came out of the bushes. He had a shiny, round badge on his shirt, a huge revolver on his right hip and high, glossy black boots.

"Into the woods, sir," I piped up nervously.

"Are you boys sixteen?"

"No, sir. Fourteen," I said, which drew a disgusted look from Tommy, because he knew you had to be sixteen to legally use a BB gun. And Phip just stood there, slowly pushing his tongue between his lips, gazing gunfights at the big, black revolver.

"Well. Did you boys know that you can't have BB guns in New Jersey if you're not sixteen?"

"No, sir," Tommy and I answered, while Phip just stood there, wishing that he could outdraw and gun down the lawman.

"Well. You boys can leave them with me, in my office and pick them up on your way home."

"But we won't be going home until after midnight," Tommy cleverly said.

"Hmmm. I tell you what, boys. You can wrap your guns in a cloth and bury them here and dig them up on your way home. Would you be able to find them again?"

"Oh yes, sir," Tommy and I chorused.

His big hands waited patiently as Phip dug a shallow hole. Then Tommy carefully wrapped the guns, covered them with dirt and marked the spot with some sticks.

"Okay, boys. Have fun and don't get into any trouble."

"We won't, sir. So long," I said, as he turned and walked away.

"So long, boys."

We headed into the woods again. Tommy was savagely quiet, Phip was staring flaming pistols and I was relieved that the sheriff didn't lock us up for throwing the apple through the taxicab roof. After walking for about ten minutes I noticed we were circling back the way we had come, and that Tommy was making less and less noise.

"Hey, Tommy. Where we going?" I asked.

"Back to get the guns, dummy."

"That's it, Tommy," Phip chortled. "I knew you'd think of somethin'."

"Keep it down, Phip. I don't wanna announce we're coming."

When we got close to the disarmament conference site, we left our gear and approached the clearing stealthily. The birds were talking to each other and only stopping as we got closer, so we knew that the sheriff was gone. Tommy and I were lookouts, one on each side of the clearing, while Phip dug up the guns. Armed once more, we headed into the

woods in single file, Indian scout fashion, ready for war parties.

We followed a tiny path that ran next to a stream. After four or five miles it seemed as if we were the only travelers who dared the hostile ambushes of the brooding forest.

"Awright, Billy. Start lookin' for a clearin' where we can pitch camp. And keep your eye on Phip."

"Where ya goin'?"

"I just wanna be sure that cop's not followin' us. Make a blaze with your ax every fifty yards or so and when I get near I'll hoot like an owl."

"Okay. See ya later."

"Hey. Phip."

"Yeah, Tommy?"

"You go with Billy and help find a campsite."

"Where ya going?"

"I'm just makin' sure that cop's not followin' us. I'll see ya in a little while."

"Oh. Lemme go with ya. We can dig a trap and when he falls in we can make him give us his gun to get him out."

"Ya know, Phip, sometimes you're real stupid. Go with Billy."

"Awright. But I think it's a great way to get a gun."

"You would. I'll see ya later."

Tommy left and I started walking again, leaving trail marks every fifty yards or so. Phip rambled behind me, shooting his BB gun at anything that moved. Birds, squirrels, rabbits, large insects, even rustling leaves, innocently going about their business, were suddenly deluged by grape-shot, ripping and tearing through the trees, humming like maniacal bees. Phip, jacking the lever of his gun, looked like a four-armed epileptic madman, shooting it out with shadows. He really was a jerk.

We walked a few more miles and found a good clearing for a campsite. I sent Phip to get kindling and firewood for the next two days. He changed from heavy walking boots to sneakers, because Tommy believed that nobody, not even Indians, could run fast in moccasins, let alone in boots. Gun in one hand, ax in the other, Phip stalked into the woods, intent on pillage. I started setting up camp.

First I set the tent fronting the stream. Then I dug a small moat around the tent, with a run-off drain to the stream, so that if it rained we would survive the flood. Next I dug a latrine about twenty-five yards from the tents and marked it with stakes and rope, so we wouldn't find it suddenly in the dark. Then I dug a garbage pit and a fire pit. I searched along the side of the stream until I found enough flat rocks to line the fire-pit.

I finished what could now be an oven or fryer and turned to my last chore, a lean-to for the supplies and firewood. I cut big branches with my ax and made the frame, then I covered it with medium-sized twigs and tied them together with grass. The lean-to would keep our supplies dry and it looked

better than the pictures in the Boy Scout handbooks.

Phip had been industriously lugging in wood and had made a big pile that he stacked near the lean-to. And then I realized that Tommy hadn't come back yet.

"I wonder what happened to Tommy?" I asked. "He's been gone a long time."

"I dunno. Maybe he met a girl."

"Jesus, Phip. In the middle of the woods?"

"Wouldn't it be a great place to meet a girl? Nobody around for miles. We could take off her blouse and feel her knockers, an' maybe even let her have the old finger."

"You're crazy, Phip. If you had half a brain you'd be dangerous."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Ya better watch watcha sayin', Billy, or we're gonna hafta have it out."

"Oh shut up, or I'll crack your head and let the sawdust out."

Tommy's irritated voice snapped us out of our confrontation. "Is that all you guys can do when I'm not around, get ready to fight? You didn't even hear my signal."

Tommy had come up on us stealthily and I was annoyed at myself for being caught twice in one day. Phip was real happy, wagging his tail and asking questions.

"Where ya been, Tommy?"

"To see the Queen of England, ya jerk. Where do you think I've been?"

"I don't know. What were you doin' all that time?"

"I wanted to make sure that nobody followed us. Then I followed two Boy Scouts until they camped about a mile away from here. Maybe we'll have some fun with them tonight."

"Yeah, Tommy? What kinda fun? Whatta we gonna do with them? Tell me. Tell me."

"Take it easy, Phip, I'll tell you later. Let's have somethin' to eat first. I'm starving. Hey. You guys did a real neat job here."

"Phip just brought the firewood. I did everything else. Doesn't it look great?"

"Yeah, Tommy, it does. But look at all the logs I got and they're real good ones too."

"Ya did a good job, Phip. Come on, let's eat. I'll cook and we can talk about a raid."

We hadn't eaten breakfast that morning and the tantalizing odors of frying bacon and eggs, sizzling in butter, poured out overwhelming messages to our stomachs. And when the coffee began to boil, the smells mixing in the cool, clear forest air made us mad with hunger. We ate like ravenous wolves. After the third cup of coffee, with cigarettes lit, we sat back full of food and power like ancient generals and began to plan the war against the boy scouts.

General Tommy O'Corman, with pointer in hand for use on the terrain map, began to develop the campaign that

would defeat the unsuspecting foe.

"Now they're camped about a mile away. There's a thick clump of trees on one side, swamp and muck on another and an open area in front of a stream. This is what we do. Phip, you come through the trees from one side, covered with leaves and branches and carryin' the red lantern. You'll moan and screech and shake the bushes. Billy, you'll come in from the other side, climb into a big tree near them with your BB gun, caw like a crow and keep shootin' at them. I'll go in first, wrapped in a ground cloth, an' stay in front of the swamp ta make sure they don't run in an' get hurt or somethin'. I'll roar and growl like a bear."

"We could scare them to death," I said. "What if we just make some animal noises and leave it at that?"

"Why can't we let em run into the swamp?" Phip asked. "Maybe they'll fall into quicksand an' we can watch'em get swallowed up and sucked under, like in the movies."

"Ya know, Phip. You're real sick," I said in disgust.

"I'm warnin' ya, Billy boy, watch whatcha sayin' ta me."

"Both of you shuddup," Tommy ordered. "Well that's my plan. You guys got anything better?"

"I guess not," I muttered.

"No. No," Phip replied. "When da we start? When do we do it? Huh? Huh?"

"We'll leave here about nine o'clock, so when we get there the moon'll be up," Tommy explained. "We oughta catch them when they're relaxed and not expecting anything but a good night's sleep."

"Can we beat 'em up afta we scare 'em?"

"No, Phip. We don't want to hurt them. Let's just make 'em think they're bein' chased by bears an' spooks, an' stuff like that."

"I can't wait. Oh, Jesus. I can't wait."

And scooping up his ax, Phip began spinning around like a hopped-up dervish, throwing his ax into the ground and pulling it out again, yelling nonsense words in a mad chant:

"Horse blood....Ohhhh. Big gumps....Aya. Umba....Ohhh, Porp....Cut 'em. Cut 'em."

"Jeez, Tommy. He gives me the creeps sometimes. He's out of his head and getting worse."

"Aw. He's all right. Ya just gotta humor him. That's all."

"Not me. From now on that nut-job is not gonna go off his rocker when I'm around. I don't want to go camping with him again."

"Take it easy, Billy. You know we've all been friends for a long time. Let's just relax and have a good time together now that we're here."

"He's making it harder and harder to have fun anymore."

Finally Phip stopped raving and we spread our sleeping bags on the ground and sprawled in front of the tents, lazing in the hot sun. We lay there smoking and talking, mostly about girls and about how far the ones we knew would go. Phip couldn't get a girl to go near him, so he cursed a lot and

told us what he'd do if he ever met a girl in the woods.

Tommy told us about how he was making out with his girl friend Serena one day, when her father came home early from work.

"There I was on top of her, half undressed, an' she's sayin' do it, do it, I'm not scared. An' I was gettin' so hot that I was gonna do it, when all of a sudden I hear the door slam downstairs, an' her old man yells: 'Anybody home?'"

"I grabbed for my clothes an' shot into the bathroom like a rocket an' hid behind the shower curtain. Her old man came upstairs an' stopped ta talk ta Serena and that saved my ass. I got dressed while they was still talking and waited for my chance to get out of there. The next thing ya know the bathroom door opens and her old man comes in, drops his drawers, sits down on the bowl an' starts blowin' off farts like a mad whale."

Phip and I howled with laughter, picturing Tommy hiding in the shower and Serena's father, a tall, skinny plumber, sitting on the toilet, farting like wild.

"So what happened?" I demanded.

"Yeah, yeah. What happened? Tell us."

"I waited until he finished stinking up the joint an' went into his bedroom. Then I snuck downstairs real quiet an' went out the door."

"What would ya have done if he caught you in the bathroom?" I asked.

"Man, I woulda said I was local fart checker an' took off like a hot-assed cat. I almost cracked up when I heard him soundin' off like that an' I almost choked to death to keep from makin' any noise. He'd 've broken my head if he caught me there."

We laughed again and when we settled down I told them about the girl I was fooling around with. But even though I lied and made it seem like something was happening between us, after Tommy's close call it didn't go over too well.

A little later we went for a walk and wandered through the woods exploring old trails, looking for animal tracks and having target practice with our BB guns. I found an old rusty ax head, Tommy found an empty beehive that had some old honey combs and Phip fell into the stream.

We walked for three or four hours, just prowling through the woods, investigating anything that interested us, feeling that if we just walked a little further we would find something wonderful. But we didn't discover a lost civilization and started back to camp.

We were getting hungry again, so when we got back we made dinner, ate, cleaned the cooking gear, then just loafed around the campsite. Time passed, while the golden sun burned blood red and slowly set behind the trees. The sky changed from blue, to purple, to black and the stars appeared, making gleaming speckles on the night roof. Venus and Jupiter were blazing bright and whispered

together, surrounded by lesser lights.

The moon rose, huge, dazzlingly bright, close enough to see seas and craters. We were silent for long stretches of time, just dark outlines, tipped with tiny burning coals from cigarettes. Tommy mentioned an old fight and Phip eagerly chimed in.

"Remember when we went down to Marine Park and got into that fight?"

"Yeah. Yeah," Tommy answered.

But before they could get going about fighting I changed the subject. "Hey! Tommy. Remember the first hike we ever went on?"

"Yeah. I'll never forget that one. That was when we got lost before we ever left Brooklyn and it rained all day and all our food got ruined. We didn't eat anything until we got back to Fort Lee and had to swipe hot dogs from a stand, 'cause we only had carfare money."

"That was the time you threw your ax at Phip, remember?"

"Yeah, when he pretended to be a bear. I almost made him into a rug."

"That was a real funny hike."

"Oh it was real funny alright," Tommy teased. "I guess ya forgot how wet, cold an' hungry you were."

Time passed slowly, but we lay there contentedly, though we were starting to get impatient waiting for nine o'clock, thinking about how we would scare the boy scouts.

"Awright, you guys," Tommy announced. "I think we should start getting ready."

We put on our sneakers, Phip collected his branches and red lantern, Tommy took his ground cloth and I took my BB gun, then we filed into the woods. Silent and dangerous, we moved through the forest, making less and less noise the closer we got to their camp. When we reached the clump of trees in front of their camp we stopped for a last check of what each of us was going to do. The general staff was always thorough.

"Awright, guys. Now remember. I go first. Give me five minutes to get into position. Billy. You come next and pick a good tree, an' wait until you hear me growling before you start your attack. Phip. You wait here until you hear both of us, then move towards them slowly. But remember, go real slow an' wave the lantern and moan an' screech a lot. I'll hoot twice like an owl when its time to stop an' we'll meet back here. Don't make any noise comin' back an' don't get lost. Okay?"

Even though I had misgivings, I agreed. Phip was urgent to start.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's get going. Let's do it."

Tommy melted into the darkness and was gone. We waited tense and eager for the minutes to pass and listened to the night sounds of the forest, wondering which, if any, were Tommy.

"I'm going, Phip. Give me enough time to get into a tree."

Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Shove off."

I slid into the dark, eerie shadows, twitching nervously at the sounds around me. I worked my way stealthily through the trees until I reached the edge of their camp. I found a big tree with a good branch and quietly climbed up and got into position.

The night was becoming hazy and clouding over, but it was still bright enough to see clearly. The Boy Scouts had built a huge fire which lit up the whole campsite, but it was so bright that they couldn't see into the woods. It was a sloppy camp, with expensive gear spread all over the place in a real mess. They were lying near the fire talking, and I could hear the sound of their conversation without understanding their words. It was hard to sit still in the tree and not laugh, thinking of the ghosts and bears lurking in ambush all around them, but I held it in and waited.

"Errarrh...."

"What's that, Donny?" the smaller boy asked.

"I don't know, but I'm scared."

"Errarrh...."

"Caw, caw...."

"There's something out there, Donny."

"Grrarr....Grrarr...."

"Donny, it's a bear. It's a bear."

"I'm scared. I'm scared."

"Caw, caw, caw...."

"Errarrh....Grrarr...."

"Donny, it's not just a bear. There's something else out there."

"Ow, ow.... Something stung me."

"Ow.... It stung me too."

"What're we going to do, Donny?"

"Mooooan....Oooohhh....Oouh...."

"Donny. Look, look. It's a ghost, a red ghost. We gotta get out of here."

"Momma. Momma."

"Grrarr...."

"Caw....Caw...."

"Ooooh....Ooooh...."

"This way, Donny, they're all around us. We gotta run. Through the stream, quick. Follow me and stay close."

"Don't let them get me, Arnie. Don't leave me here."

Momma. I want my Momma."

"Come on, Donny, or they'll get us. Hurry. Run. Run."

They raced through the clearing, splashed through the stream into the woods on the other side, frantically fleeing for their lives. The woods echoed with our laughter that sounded almost as horrible as our growling, cawing and moaning. I laughed so hard that I lost my balance and fell out of the tree. I landed on my back and just lay there, laughing and laughing. I finally got up and started towards the meeting place, still laughing. I could still hear the Boy Scouts crashing

through the woods in blind flight, with Donny still calling for his momma.

As we got near the meeting place we announced our arrival with growls, caws and moans, in between gasping with laughter. We fell down in a limp pile, punching and pulling at each other, yelling all sorts of crazy things at each other.

"Holy shit, Tommy," Phip said, "Did you hear him crying for his momma?"

"I guess she don't love him no more, 'cause she sure didn't help him any. What do you say, Billy?"

"Man, I never saw anybody run so fast in all my life."

We repeated our animal noises and quoted the fleeing Boy Scout's last words and laughed and laughed until our eyes blurred and our stomachs hurt. We slowly headed back to camp, stopping often to lean against a tree and giggle, or suddenly slump down on the dark forest path and mimic the Boy Scout who cried for his momma. We reached camp and got right into our sleeping bags, too tired to do anything more than build up the fire. We went to sleep a gloating, victorious army, exhausted from night combat.

Sunday dawned a blazing sphere of calmness. The hot sun made us drowsy and last night's adventure kept us smug and lazy all day long. We just lay around and ate, smoked and talked about how we scared the Boy Scouts. We bragged about how well we imitated crows, bears and spooks. The day passed quickly and late in the afternoon we cleaned up the campsite, burned the paper garbage, buried the rest, packed our gear and headed into the woods, like weary soldiers remembering old battles.

Nothing much happened during our trek through New Jersey and when we got on the subway in Manhattan we dozed until we reached our station. We got off and said so long and I got home just after dark.

My folks asked me if I had a good time and wanted me to tell them what we did.

But all I said was: "It was okay," and went to bed early.

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Gary Beck's recent fiction has appeared in 3AM Magazine, Fullosia Press, EWG Presents, Nuvein Magazine, Vincent Brothers Review, The Journal, Short Stories Monthly, L'Intrigue Magazine, Babel Magazine and Bibliophilos. His poetry has appeared in dozens of literary magazines. His plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. He is a writer/director of award-winning social issue video documentaries.