

An Experienced Rudyard-Kipling-Moment of Heroism

(overcoming a William-Golding-*Lord of the Flies* evening of pelting)

*I shan't forget the night
When I dropped be'ind the fight
With a bullet where my belt-plate should 'a' been.
I was chokin' mad with thirst,
An' the man that spied me first
Was our good old grinnin', gruntin' Gunga Din.*

From Rudyard Kipling's poem *Gunga Din* (1892)

If only he hadn't bought the red one. That was my first thought when receiving the red sash, but, on reflection, after the character-confirming experience that would follow, I was glad he did.

As an eleven-year-old Boy Scout on my first camping trip, I experienced the crazy and often humorous absurdity of the difference between adult intentions and the behind-the-scenes reality of the challenges of youth to the boundaries of civil propriety. The red sash symbolized that contrast—experienced first as embarrassment, but later, appreciated with pride.

The cliffs of Calvert Cliffs State Park on the western shore of the southern Chesapeake Bay were famous in southern Maryland for offering remarkable treasures—mostly shark teeth that had been sitting around for tens of thousands of years waiting to be found and carted off to distant suburbs.

Over the Friday evening through mid-day Sunday camping trip, I collected over 40 shark teeth, including one prized monstrosity of an incisor-like cutting tooth the size of the upper half of one of my thumbs. The set of shark teeth plus written descriptions of the Calvert Cliffs' unique geographic and geologic past served a science project in my later school years.

No, the shark teeth and geographic-geologic uniqueness of Calvert Cliffs are not why you're reading this. You're reading this because of the consequences of perfectly moldable (read "toss-able") clay and human inclination for warfare-like sport, particularly among boys able to break away from the watchful eyes of adults.

There were strangers nearby that weekend—scouts from another troop at a campground separated from us by thick woods.

It seemed that everyone other than the few hosting adults discovered that the perfect clay of the cliffs could be hand packed and tossed without inflicting great harm, but enough sting. This discovery inspired a collective will for night-time, jungle-like warfare between the two "strangers" camping within a quarter mile of each other in a pine tree forest at the top of the 50-foot sloped cliffs.

By late Saturday afternoon, every Scout had become quite familiar with the whereabouts of the good, moldable clay and had tossed clods among friends. Inevitable contact among the members of the two troops sparked the urge for war games. They were similar but unfamiliar to us, thus,

the obvious focus of the inclination of youth—our desire for playful conquest and affirmation of status, inspired by moldable, toss-able clay.

As I write this over five decades later, I can appreciate the adult cluelessness that contributed to the riot that waited in the woods shortly after dusk. The few adults responsible for the approximate 50 boys among the two troops likely had a vacation-like mindset, regarding the weekend camping trip as a bonding experience with their sons and sons' peers. Also, the calm serenity of woods and gentle shoreline breezes provided an escape from adult lives consumed by jobs and work. Thus, the few adult dads present were more inclined to sit or recline and talk absentmindedly among themselves.

The boys, in contrast, were practiced, inspired, and adrenaline charged.

Both camps emptied of boys by 7:30 p.m. nightfall, with the adults likely assuming (or hoping) the “boys” would engage in “scouting” and “exploring” as “emerging, able young men” of these United States during the Vietnam War era of the late 1960s.

Shouts about spotted enemy or yells during clay-clod skirmishes soon filled the woods in the dark territory between the two camps. The pine forest and cliffs contributed to the sport and clay-clod warfare. In the darkness, it was safe to assume that the tall, similar-width, immobile dark objects were the forest trees. All knew that the 50-foot cliffs were within about a football field's distance to the east, and the top of the cliffs provided the abundant clay.

The great challenge quickly became evident: How to detect friend from foe in the dark woods. The safest assumption was to throw at anything that moved. When discovering—with clay-clod ready to toss with force—that someone near you who you first feared (and hoped) was “foe”—was in fact “friend,” quick chat served to confirm status as friends, with ready boasts of successes or of having heard of some great offense by the “foe,” such as hearing that a foe had achieved the hated (yet admired) feat of hitting a friend in the face with a clay-clod, or of having heard of some hilarity such as a troop member having attempted to tackle a suspected foe only to have encountered a stiff, unforgiving tree.

What seemed a joyful, energized season of sport to an eleven-year-old was perhaps only an hour or two on the wristwatch of the adults responsible for my troop.

Evidently, by 9 p.m. the adults of both troops realized that the shouting and yells in the woods were not the joyful noises of young, emerging men discovering woodcraft and expressing gleeful joy from seeing the night sky of constellations or the discovery of an owl perched in a pine. Scouts chased into their respective camps, often with clayclods flying in pursuit, revealed to the adults the real goings-on in the woods.

Our troop’s Scoutmaster regrettably could not join us on this trip. As a calm, unflappable leader, consistently able to keep the troops under his charge within reasonable check, he would have known how to broker peace between the two troops. Our Assistant Scoutmaster was not prepared for this unruly chaos. As a child of the Depression, having experienced years of disciplined deprivation, followed by the patriotic, World War II-dominated 1940s and post-war,

communism-paranoia-dominated 1950s, he seemed mostly inclined to count on the boys' patriotic duties as Boy Scouts, per the Scout Oath to "*On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; to help other people at all times; and to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.*"

Our Assistant Scoutmaster seemed to want to remind the unruly combatants in the woods of their oath and duty as Boy Scouts. Thus, he called-out for the red-sash-wearing bugler to play *Taps* to re-connect all to oath and duty and to declare day's end.

His pre-camping-trip purchase of the red sash to designate me as troop bugler and his decision to yell loudly, "Red Sash! Red Sash!" to call me to bugler duty, and for what then happened, led to why this experience remains indelible for me as novice Scout camper and troop bugler.

Likely in the eyes of my family, I had downgraded in musical status after having started piano lessons in the footsteps of my concert-caliber pianist brother and prior to my younger sister taking-up piano, too. We were each taught by the same piano instructor. We each practiced on a stand-up piano at our home. For reasons I cannot recall, I transitioned to the accordion, then to the trumpet, and by the time I entered Boy Scouts, I was somewhat proficient with the bugle. Note that no one should tell my mom that my musical decline would hit rock bottom in my later teenage years when I discovered the kazoo.

So, on that frenzied night of clay-clod battle in the woods, I was the red-sash wearer called upon to play *Taps* and, in theory, calm down all combatants in the woods and inspire retirement to tents and sleeping bags.

My memory leaps from running, tossing and dodging clay-clods, and yelling in darkness, to standing solemnly with bugle in the glow of the light from my troop's campfire.

I commenced the notes of *Taps* that put brass-sound to the Civil War lyrics of Butterfield's

Lullaby:

Day is done.
Gone the sun,
from the lakes,
from the hills,
from the sky.
All is well,
safely rest
God is nigh¹.

Well, from my perspective and for what was soon to happen, God seemed to be not nigh for me that night, since I quickly learned that all scouts of both troops heard the clear bugle call of *Taps*, and, at first, it seemed the Assistant Scoutmaster's intention was being achieved, as the woods quieted.

¹ Rukard Hurd, Pennsylvania Military College, formalized in 1878 as *Taps* lyrics from the Civil War.

The Assistant Scoutmaster asked me to play *Taps* twice to ensure its impact, which I quickly discovered was not the impact he intended.

Clay-clods first starting arriving near me sporadically. Within a few seconds, and early during my second rendering of *Taps* the clay-clod pelting became steady and on mark—mostly hitting me in the back and legs and at least three times on the bugle itself and a couple of clay-clods tossed from the surrounding woods delivered jarring blows from direct head shots. Shouts of “Red Sash!” “Red Sash!” mocked me from the woods and accompanied the barrage.

Only a few weeks before, I had seen the televised release of the movie *Sergeants Three* based on Rudyard Kipling’s poem *Gunga Din* starring Sammy Davis Junior in the Gunga Din role. Thus, with the image of “Gunga” (Sammy’s) heroic sacrifice in mind—and, more-so, the heroism memorialized in poetry by Rudyard Kipling—I felt the challenge to withstand the barrage, and mockery-yelling of “Red Sash” just as Gunga Din held true to duty until succumbing to the onslaught of gun fire while dispensing water to the wounded against impossible odds at a remote fort.

Thus, while under the clay-clod barrage and while bugling *Taps* in that remote-outpost-like camp in those darkened woods with battle-spirit all around, the Rudyard Kipling sense of heroism was more meaningful to me than what I had experienced that night during joyful play and clay-clod combat with similar-age friends and strangers.

I later learned that scouts from both troops felt that the red-sash-wearing bugler became the common target for all, since the bugler's (my) whereabouts as a clay-clod target was very evident—easy to hear and quite visible in campfire glow. Also, many of the boys later admitted that they believed that if they could somehow shutdown the bugler, the evening's war-waging in the woods could go on all night.

Despite the great fun and nervous excitement of running, dodging, and tossing clay-clods in the dark woods—a frenzied time of seemingly out-of-control chaos with shared purposes—being called from that reverie by the Assistant Scoutmaster's yelling of "Red Sash!" followed by my singular experience as bugler in withstanding the clay-clod assault and taunting, brought a greater sense of fun and pride.

I had stood before many as the common target of their clay-clod tossing and jolly insult yelling, did my duty, persevered and, in so doing, experienced some form of revelation of self as if I had leapt from the pages of physical-prowess-driven, chaos-inclined boys described by William Golding in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) to the poetic heroism of stalwart soldiers described by Rudyard Kipling in his many poems.

Eventually, the clay-clod warrior Boy Scouts in the woods tired and retreated to their camps with their own sense of accomplished adventure and heroism, as they recounted at their evening camp fire.

I joined my troop members at our camp fire and enjoyed the laughter and shared experiences, with many references to my steadfastness as visible clay-clod target as red-sash-wearing bugler fulfilling the Assistant Scoutmaster's command against their barrage. I recognized in their eyes what I sensed in my own self-reflection, a lasting sense of true self.

And it all commenced with the Assistant Scoutmaster's purchase of the red sash.