

## **Brian Mitchell and 'RECOLLECTIONS OF AN EVENTFUL CAMP - AND SOME GOOD SCOUTS' - by Scout friend Paul Fairweather**

In the late 1950's I was Patrol Leader of the Seagulls Patrol of the 67<sup>th</sup> Croydon Scout Troup and late one spring we had made arrangements to carry out a long weekend camp on a farm at Hamsey Green near Warlingham in Surrey. I was fifteen and my Second, Brian Mitchell, known as 'Mitch', would have been a little younger but unfortunately the names of the five others in the patrol are lost in the mists of my memory, although they would have been younger still, between eleven and thirteen.

On the Friday afternoon we had met at the Endeavour Hall, Group Headquarters, to draw our equipment from the stores and load up, after which we were taken by the Troup's battered old transport to a point as close as possible to our proposed camp site. We had left the road at the south-western corner of Wentworth Road and bumped across open country along the rutted track now known as the London Loop until it began to curve in a more northerly direction. It was in poor condition, which worsened as we proceeded and we were bounced around all mixed up with the kit until eventually, roughly west of a feature called Dipsley's Wood, the driver decided that the vehicle could go no further. Fortunately it was near enough to our planned destination to be acceptable and we unloaded, hauling the tent, the patrol box and our personal kit into the field that we had permission to use.

When the transport had left we started to survey the site. Although the ground sloped slightly it was too little to make a difference, and we were more concerned to ensure that we had some shelter from the light wind, as we were fairly high up with a clear sight to the West across the Whyteleafe Valley to Kenley and its aerodrome on the opposite side. Although the field was exposed, the weather was mild and the forecast mainly good, so a pitch in the lee of a hedge was chosen and we lugged everything over and started to unpack.

We were using the standard patrol ridge tent, a heavy canvas Niger, and although some younger members of the patrol were on their first camp, Mitch and I soon had them organised holding the two 3" diameter wooden poles vertically while we bashed in the tent pegs to secure the main guy ropes. Once this was done, everyone joined in unravelling the other ropes and distributing the smaller pegs so that they could be arranged in the regulation straight line and the tent erected correctly. The groundsheets were spread out and personal kit pulled inside. After the allocation of the two places for the senior people, me by the entrance and Mitch at the 'bell' end, there was the usual jostling for the middle positions and as soon as we were all sorted

out, he collared a couple of the first-timers and together they put up the two-man hike tent that we were to use as a larder. He and his team then set off to fill our water containers from the standpipe that our directions told us was back along the track.

Meanwhile after organising a wood party, I started the crucial job of unpacking the patrol box and stocking the larder tent. After a time the three boys dragged in a fair number of sizeable logs, very pleased with themselves having discovered a large dead tree that had fallen in the next field but although these would be useful fuel, they were useless as kindling. We needed thin branches and dry twigs to get a fire started, so they were then sent back to search again and soon returned with much more suitable material. With this lesson learned, we quickly got a 'brew' on and I reckoned we'd done quite well. Preparations started for the evening meal, the inevitable spud-bashing, and the early evening was spent constructing our camp kitchen and getting ourselves generally organised. Mitch had gone off to find a suitable site for our latrine and eventually dug out a good-sized hole well concealed in the opposite corner of the field right up against the angle of the hedge, dragging a log into an appropriate if not comfortable position. Adding a covered waste-pit for the rubbish, he left the entrenching tool in the heap of soil for the use of the visitors to these important facilities.

After a reasonably disturbed and frustrating night dealing with homesickness, bouts of elbowing and various moans and complaints of discomfort, Mitch and I rose early and cooked breakfast for our younger charges and, after arranging for the washing up to be completed, started to organise a map reading session. Demonstrating how to orient ourselves with respect to the OS maps we were studying, we found that in the direction of the valley to our west was an area where cliffs surrounded some old quarry workings and that these were not far away. As we had planned to do a night-hike that evening, this was a serious consideration, and several minutes were spent warning everyone to be very careful about rushing through bushes and hedges in case there was a very long drop on the other side. Suitably terrified, they dispersed, but when we organised some games, were all soon racing about and enjoying them-selves in the warm sunshine.

It was during an activity in the afternoon that the event that was to dominate our weekend occurred. Thoroughly convinced that it would not be a good idea to race through a gap in a hedge unless they could see what was on the other side, they stayed well away from any foliage and ran around happily on the grass, using the dead tree in the next field as an 'off-ground' base, using the tangle of bleached branches as an obstacle to attackers.

One of the younger scouts was being closely chased during a pursuit game, weaving to and fro as he ran around the fallen tree and, in an effort to escape,

leapt right over the tree trunk, landing in a small patch of scrub before running on. He soon pulled up, and sat down holding the back of his foot and yelling in pain. Alerted by others in the patrol, when Mitch and I got to him we found that something had run into his Achilles tendon just above the top of his plimsoll. It was obviously hurting a lot and he could not bear to put any weight on that foot, so between us we carried him back to the tent and brought out our First Aid kit.

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Examining the area above his heel we could see a round thorn about the thickness of the lead in a pencil deeply embedded in the centre of the hard Achilles tendon. The pressure within the sinew was creating constant pain and he was crying freely, so we decided to try to extract it right away using a sterilised pair of tweezers. After cleaning the site of the wound Mitch and I tried in turn to get a grip on the end of the thorn, causing unavoidable distress to the sufferer who had to have his leg held firmly by his colleagues during our repeated attempts at field surgery. The thorn been deeply driven in at an upward angle and it quickly became clear that we were going to fail, and that the boy could not stand any more of our amateur poking and prodding.

A conference concluded that we would have to get medical help by finding a telephone box and calling for an ambulance. I was about to set off to make the call when Mitch correctly pointed out that the vehicle would probably not be able to get to our campsite along the rough and deeply pot-holed track. In those days ambulances were very much road vehicles, comfortable and well-sprung but with no cross-country capability at all. Of course there were no paramedics on motorbikes, no such things as mobile phones and not every house had a telephone, so to locate one of the red GPO telephone boxes was the only option.

There was nothing else for it but to get him to the roadway to meet the ambulance, although a glance at the map showed that this was half a mile away and as the lad could not walk, it meant that he would have to be carried. The decision made, all we needed now was something to carry him on, since just getting him back to the tent had shown that lifting someone over anything but a short distance quickly became uncomfortable for all concerned. As part of our Scout training we had been taught that our patrol staves could be lashed together to make up a rough stretcher, but as it was to be a short camp, we did not have them with us.

One of the younger boys then had a bright idea, and asked if a door would do. He had seen one under one of the hedges back along the track and this seemed like the perfect answer, so while Mitch applied his First Aid skills

bandaging the lad's foot to keep the wound clean on the journey, the rest of us set off to find the door. After walking for quite a distance we finally spotted it and after pulling it from the hedge, checked it out. Although pretty battered and filthy, it was made of solid wood and seemed to be sound so we picked it up between the five of us and started back to the tent, quickly discovering that it was heavy enough even without anyone on it.

Back at camp we found that Mitch had a couple of blankets ready and using our map he had worked out a shorter route to the road. We soon had our casualty on the door, lying on one blanket with another rolled up under his head as a pillow, although on picking him up we found that his small frame added a surprising amount of weight to the load, but we all set off confidently, following Mitch's directions to civilisation. I had decided that we could not leave any of our patrol behind without support and that we would need everyone to take a turn with the carrying.

In the event that we did not find a telephone box, our alternative plan was to find a doctor. Hopefully there would be one in the closest community Hamsey Green, and we decided that to get to a chemist's shop would be our best bet, since they could either telephone for an ambulance or would know of a surgery close by.

By the time we reached the spot where the track met the road all six of us were pretty tired and were dismayed to find that although there was a post box on the corner there was no telephone box, so we had to press on towards the shops almost another half mile away. We were then going past some houses and would have welcomed seeing an adult to ask for help, but for some reason the streets were deserted and anyway we were Scouts and, wanting to be self-reliant, were too independent to knock on a stranger's door. We lurched on, everyone pitching in and doing their bit as best they could but the injured boy was crying most of the time, partly from the pain in his foot but also from the discomfort caused by lying on the door's hard surface and being jolted about by a group of completely inexperienced stretcher-bearers. The fact that we were all of different heights did nothing to make him more comfortable and he had to constantly hang on to avoid being rolled off.

There was no telephone box on our route to the shopping parade, and we had to keep putting our door down and swapping round to give tired arms a rest until eventually we arrived. To everyone's considerable relief, turning the last corner we saw a chemist's almost at once. There were a few more people around by then and they looked curiously at the group of sweaty young boys hauling a door along the pavement, thinking no doubt that if we were silly enough to try to carry such a heavy piece of wood, we deserved to be hot

and tired, not realising that we were actually carrying our injured comrade to safety. In any case, we cleared the footpath quite effectively.

The chemist that we had hoped to find was just about to close when Mitch and I dumped the door and its passenger outside the shop and the youngsters slumped to the ground outside while we went in and breathlessly started to tell our story to the assistant. As soon as she realised what was required she said that as the GP's surgery was very close, it would be quickest to take the boy there and, after giving us directions, offered to ring ahead and let the doctor know that we were coming.

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Back outside and taking up our position to pick our load up again, we discovered that our casualty had decided that he had suffered enough lying on his door and had got off, demanding to be carried between us instead. As we were the two oldest (but in his case, by no means the biggest) this meant Mitch crossing wrists and linking hands with me in a 'lift'. The boy hopped on and clung miserably to our shoulders as we struggled to get him the final fifty yards or so. The surgery had closed but the doctor was expecting us and responded when we rang his bell, allowing us to haul our casualty inside and dump him none too gently onto one of the couches, before being promptly sent out to remain in the waiting room while the thorn was extracted and the wound dressed.

While we rested, it occurred to me that I was very proud of the way my whole patrol had acted as a team under difficult circumstances and I told them so, also congratulating Mitch on his accurate directions, but everyone was far too exhausted to care very much.

Despite having had to endure that much feared event, an injection, the boy was much more cheerful when he reappeared later clutching a small bag containing the thorn, which he proudly showed us. It was not surprising that we had been unable to withdraw it with our little tweezers as it turned out to be nearly three quarters of an inch long. He had turned down the doctor's offer to ring his parents to come and pick him up, bravely declaring that he was prepared to walk back to the campsite with us. It was a slow journey for all of us in the gathering dusk, since he was limping quite a lot and the rest of us were very weary but eventually catching sight of our tents in the distance heartened everyone.

By unanimous agreement we decided that our scheduled night hike was off and so, after a drink and a scratch meal, we fell exhausted into our sleeping bags. No one cried, no one was homesick or uncomfortable, and we all slept

very soundly, even the patient. The next morning's events were necessarily curtailed but the treatment that the doctor had provided proved effective and the injury to our young companion was less painful, so after a short conference, we decided to let him pay us back and allowed him to peel all the potatoes and carrots for our Sunday dinner.

Having eaten, we cleaned everything, packed the patrol box and started striking camp as dark clouds began to gather and a strong breeze got up. Mitch volunteered for the less than pleasant job of filling the latrine and waste pits back in again and I made sure that the fire was safely out, pouring water over the area and getting the unused wood out of the way under the hedge. Soon the larder tent was down and each person's kit was packed and stacked over by the track. All hands were needed to fold the big tent as it flapped about in the wind, tie up the guy ropes and collect the tent pegs and then, after a final walk over the site to clear any litter, we were done, already squabbling over the few coins that we had found in the grass.

It was with a distinct sense of relief that we saw our vehicle arrive, and loading it was faster than the unloading had been, as it was starting to rain and the driver felt that the already pot-holed track would soon become impassable. The lashing rain quickly became quite heavy but fortunately the quality of the surface improved the nearer we got to the road, and when we finally slithered off the muddy track and drove onto the roadway, we all considered that we had made a timely escape. It had certainly been quite an adventure.

Although his ankle was much better, our small wounded soldier was soon practising the considerably embellished story on the driver that he would be telling later on to anyone who would listen, brandishing the thorn under his nose for examination. Hearing him prattle on, the others obviously began mentally rehearsing the heroic part that they had each played in what was clearly becoming his life-and-death rescue! Spread out on top of our kit, everyone gradually quietened down at last, a bit subdued now that it was all over and we must have been about halfway home when Mitch broke the silence.

He started to laugh and when we asked him what was so funny, he said he'd just remembered. We had left the tatty old door propped up outside the shop of the helpful chemist!

Ends.