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Redd Boggs' SPROCHETE

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SCOUTING AND PATROLLING

Springtime in England has been celebrated by many generations of poets, and with good reason. As Coleridge said, the spring comes slowly up that way. But once it arrives -- "Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth inspired hath in every holt and heeth the tendre croppes" -- it comes like a revelation. Shelley sang prettily that spring descends "Yes, like a spirit, like a thought." Wordsworth felt "One impulse from a vernal wood," and Shakespeare claimed that springtime is "the only pretty ring time" -- whatever that may mean -- but it is safe to say that none of these poets ever beheld a more glorious spring day than the one I remember, in May 1945, on the Salisbury plain. Thomas Nashe proclaimed, circa 1590, that spring is the time when "The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet," and it was that sort of day.

Of course those poets never had to contend with a beetlebrowed infantry lieutenant glowering at them on an otherwise perfect afternoon of an English spring. It might have spoiled their pleasure considerably. The occasion I remember was more like that described in Henry Reed's poem "Naming of Parts": You open the rifle breech by sliding the bolt "rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this easing the spring," he says; "The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers: They call it easing the Spring." We were a company of G.I.s arrayed in field gear, sitting in the fresh green grass on a hillside not too far, as we Americans measure distance, from Stonehenge. We weren't going to learn about our rifles today -- our weapons were stacked nearby in configurations like the sticks for a village of miniature wigwams -- but it was a similar military lesson.

Today we were going to learn about Scouting and Patrolling. That's what Lieutenant Brunski told us, while leaning over us suspiciously, as if we were all about to doze off in the warm spring sunshine. The war in Europe had just banged and clattered to an end deep in Germany, almost within earshot, but much farther away, in the Pacific, the war was still clashing on, and some of us from the Eighth Air Force were being recycled to serve as cannon fodder on the beaches of some unknown tropical island. Luckily the experiment was destined to be scrubbed in only a few weeks, and we went back to being a merry band of airforcemen, but at the moment we were infantry trainees at Tidworth Barracks, England.

"Captain Mullins here is gonna give you a lecture on Scouting and Patrolling," the Lieutenant barked at us, which was his usual way of communicating, "and I want you to sit up and listen real good and learn every goddamn thing he says." We didn't really have much choice except to sit and listen. Whether we would learn anything was another matter. (I have wondered ever since whether Lieutenant Brunski knew what he was ordering us to do.)

This golden afternoon we had marched several miles into the verdant countryside to be met by this Captain Mullins who had come out in a jeep and was waiting for us. Why the lecture was scheduled to be presented out here instead of in camp, I don't know. Perhaps it was just to give us some physical exercise

before we cudgeled our brains. But it was pleasant to be out-of-doors in such "dreamy weather" and nobody minded, I suppose. We were sitting on the slope of a gentle hill that made a small amphitheater. Maybe a Roman legion had camped on this very spot, a few millennia ago. It was probably a sheep pasture in more peaceful times.

Lieutenant Brunski, who was our company commander, didn't cut a very military figure. He was stoopshouldered and had a scrawny goose neck. But Captain Mullins looked even odder. He was small and imperially slim, like Richard Cory, and he leaned indolently against the front fender of the jeep, with his hands in his pockets and his garrison cap cocked rakishly on the back of his head. He had a vaguely amused smile on his face. He looked more like an air force officer than an infantry officer, and made me feel nostalgic for my own branch of the service.

Lieutenant Brunski glared at us some more, told us to sit up real straight, and said he would be back in three hours. "Pay real good attention to Captain Mullins," he said warningly. He tossed a soft salute at the Captain, who nodded amiably as he moved away from the jeep, but didn't bother to unpocket his hands and return the salute. The Lieutenant climbed into the jeep and drove away. Captain Mullins watched him till he disappeared around a bend in the little lane. Then he ambled over to the portable blackboard he had already set up against some bushes at the foot of the hill. Lazily he selected a piece of chalk and made a small neat "X" up in the top left corner of the blackboard.

"Gentlemen," he said courteously, nodding at us as if he were very glad to meet us. "I'm Captain Mullins, as the Lieutenant said, and I'm here to give you a lecture on Scouting and Patrolling." He paused, and we looked at him glumly, ready to be bored to death by another interminable lecture on military procedure. Then he said softly, "Did any of you gentlemen hear the story about the farmer's daughter and the chicken-feed salesman?"

None of us had, or at least nobody said anything. We stared at him more warily. The Captain smiled, happy to learn of our ignorance. "Well, it seems that there was this traveling salesman," he explained, and proceeded to tell the story which was of course very indecent, and very funny. We laughed in amazed relief. The Captain looked delighted to have found an appreciative audience. It was a good way to start a lecture, I thought. Lieutenant Brunski didn't have to worry. We weren't likely to fall asleep in the sunshine while Captain Mullins had the floor. But I supposed that the joke was only a curtain-raiser, on the order of "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the sheep pasture," and the serious stuff would follow promptly. Instead, with another gentle smile, the Captain told another joke, and another one. He knew a lot of dirty jokes, and told them superbly.

One of the G.I.s sitting among us on the hillside proved to be another raconteur of great talent. He stood up and said, "Captain, I'll bet you never heard this one," and assuming tacit permission told a joke that Captain Mullins listened to with rapt attention, probably adding it to his repertoire. For some

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reason the G.I.'s joke -- the first one he told; he told quite a few -- is the one that stuck in my mind the longest of all. (I don't remember jokes very well.) It was scatological rather than pornographic, but hilarious when properly told, as it was. After 45 years I've forgotten all but the payoff line, which was something like, "Please, sir, could you *wobble* it a little?" If anyone knows the joke I hope he or she will hasten to whisper it to me in strict confidence.

After that joke the Captain chalked another little "X" in the corner of the blackboard by way of tribute. The G.I. was greatly talented, but Captain Mullins was quite simply a genius. He was by far the greatest joke-teller I have ever heard, and there were many good ones in the armed forces. For all I know, the Chiefs of Staff may have recruited such people into the service especially, for the benefit of army morale. The Captain's supply of jokes and dirty stories was inexhaustible, and one by one they bubbled forth like the warbles of a songbird. Best of all, he told them skilfully, with a pure economy of language that I admired. He must have told the same jokes many times, honing his skill over many years.

Assisted on occasion by the G.I. sitting among us, who contributed a story whenever one of the Captain's reminded him of one he knew, and once or twice by other G.I.s in the company, Captain Mullins kept us regaled for three full hours. We rolled in the grass with laughter. We didn't even get an hourly ten-minute break, as army regulations required.

It was only later that I began to wonder about Captain Mullins. Was he an undetected conscientious objector, who had dropped out of the war (which was still going on, remember), or was he an enemy saboteur charged with the mission of undermining the legendary efficiency and know-how of the American soldier? What about Scouting and Patrolling, after all? What were we to do, in our ignorance, if we were lost in the steaming jungles of Tasmania and didn't know how to find our way out by following a trail of blazes carved on batik trees?

At last we could glimpse the jeep chugging back up the lane. Before Lieutenant Brunski arrived, the Captain told one last joke. Maybe it was the watermelon story, for all I know. But it wasn't quite the last joke after all. There was one more. As the Lieutenant pulled up in front of us, Captain Mullins wiped the "X's" off the blackboard and started to fold it up. "Gentlemen," he addressed us formally for the last time, still wearing his gentle little smile, "that concludes my lecture. Now you know everything about Scouting and Patrolling that I can teach you." We sat there drenched in the mild sunshine of an English spring feeling warm and enlightened as he tossed the blackboard into the back of the jeep, and with an easy nod at the Lieutenant got in and drove away.

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

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Your reflections on skipping in stories [Spirochete #51] reminds me of some comments, no doubt heartfelt, in one of Louisa May Alcott's books (Eight Cousins, I think), about the folly of skipping the descriptive passages in trashy adventure stories, where such passages are probably the only educational element to be found in the whole book. Of course, that dodges the question of whether there must not be some element of merit in trashy adventure stories if they can give so much pleasure. I get the feeling sometimes that when an author does not believe in the worth of the story, there is a tendency to stick in pretentiously descriptive passages. These should probably be skipped on general principles, but perhaps the entire story ought to be skipped in that case. The book that's brought these reflections to mind is a "Star Trek" novel, professionally published, by Diane Duane, Spock's World. My 12-year old nephew Michael recently became fascinated by "Star Trek," and he has been buying the novels. This is one he especially enjoyed, so he asked me to read it too, thinking that as a "Star Trek" fan I would

share his enjoyment of it, but I'm afraid I don't. In a general way I do enjoy "Star Trek" stories, but the ones I enjoy seem to occur more often in fan publication than in pro. The fact that professional publishers think sf, and especially media-based sf, ought to appeal chiefly to male adolescents probably has something to do both with the fact that Michael is enjoying these books and that I'm not.

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Thank you for your thoughtfulness in forwarding to me the information about the death of Edith Ogutsch. She was a member of the Eastern Science Fiction association for at least 15 years and I knew her very well. I lost track of her after she left Newark, but she returned to the New York area in 1970 and I gave her a secretarial job which she kept until she decided to return to Los Angeles in 1971. She was an excellent secretary and stenographer and could have risen further if she had only remained. One of the little-known facts about me is that I have been a publishing executive most of my working life and through the years gave editorial, production, and secretarial positions to at least a dozen fans, many of whom went on to make lifelong careers of the experience they got with me, among them Arnie Katz, Joe Wrzos, Paul Scaramazza, Richard Hodgens, John Giunta, Ross Chamberlain, John J. Pierce, Andy Porter, and even fellows like Willy Ley, Thomas Calvert McClary, Rog Phillips, and others worked for me on a freelance basis.

Edith never recovered from her European experience. She always seemed to be searching for something, even her Los Angeles period being preceded by a sojourn in Mexico and Canada.

I visited Wollheim several months ago in a nursing home. He had a stroke about 18 months ago that paralyzed him on one side, badly affecting his speech, which made it difficult to understand him. His recovery has been slow, but someone told me he may be going home shortly.

On my own part I must use a special device to speak, having lost my larynx, and about a year ago was treated by chemotherapy and radiation for a malignancy that broke out on a rib. This is now in remission and for the time being I am feeling good, though I must be tested periodically.

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[On "I, Rowboat"] I have never been able to skip pages of a story. At least not permanently. If the story is real exciting and I can't read fast enough, then I will occasionally "speed-read" a line. By this I mean that my eyes scan it for vital information, but I don't otherwise read it. However, this sets up an alarm inside me. A "memo to self." The further I get from the line the more often my memo tells me I've not read something. Eventually I am simply unable to concentrate on the story for the fact of being aware of the missed piece. Sometimes I can get one, maybe two pages away. Sometimes I am not even consciously aware of having skipped anything, but the "memo to self" still kicks in. The only thing I can do is go back and find the piece I skipped and read it properly.

So I read a novel from beginning to end. If I get to a part where I am bored enough to need to skip a few pages, then I judge the book or story unreadable and simply put it aside. It took me a few years to learn how to do that: put an unfinished book aside on permanent hold. Time was when if I started a book, I persevered with it until I was through. I wasted a lot of brain cells doing that, I think. I wish I could now recall which story was the one I ever didn't finish, but unfortunately the memory has long since gone. I recall it taking me three false starts to read Dune, and three false starts to read Lord of the Rings, both of which I finally closed with little memory of what I'd read anyway, and neither of which I am ever likely to read again.

I have rarely worn a hat. I had one in The Lifeboys (a protestant church version of Cub Scouts) and I had a purple wooly hat which I took a fancy to once, but which I hardly ever wore because even I recognised that it looked stupid on me. Linda and I bought a flat-cap each, and I wore mine for a season because it matched the jacket I had at the time. I also have a cowboy hat, which I wore a couple of times but gave up doing so because I kept bumping the rim on door jambs and such. My personal bugbear, though, is ties, which I only wear when one is insisted upon (for work, say, or getting married). I'll gladly wear a shirt with a collar, but feel uncomfortable if I have to put a tie with it. I can well understand the feeling you had on skimming your hat into the trash, when I translate "hat" to "tie."

After all, if women are no damn good, what is left?
