

As I Did It

by JERRY COWLE

BEFORE HITLER ABASED THE SWASTIKA, BOYS TOOK ON AN ORDEAL TO WEAR IT

Scrub pine, aspen and khaki army tents covered the hillside that sloped down to a blue mountain lake. Midway up the hill stood a flagpole, with 100 uniformed boy scouts surrounding it. Old Glory had just been raised. Suddenly, the scouts came to attention again and extended their right arms, palms outward, in a salute. The bugler triple-tongued a call. Up the pole to a place just below the Stars and Stripes went a black flag with a white swastika.

This was in the mid-1930s, when I was 17, and most of us, in our youthful innocence, still regarded the swastika as an American Indian symbol. The emblem of the Order of the White Swastika was the equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor for the scouts who went to Camp Russell in Woodgate, N.Y. A scout had to be somebody special, to do something truly outstanding in the judgment of his leaders and his peers, before he was voted into the order. When a boy had proved himself, and had gone through the order's solemn initiation, he felt that he had accomplished something really worthwhile.

Then, invariably, he would aim for something even more worthwhile—elevation to Second-Degree White Swastika. Second-degree scouts were a proud breed; they were the doers, the ones we all knew would be leaders in college and in later life. To join them, a scout had to go through an entire summer of sacrifice. My buddy, Gene Palmiter, and I picked as our second-degree project the carving of a pair of totem poles. We called them "Hippocrocolions," because each had the head of a hippopotamus, the body of a lion and the tail of a crocodile. For hours each day, while other campers swam, played ball, hiked or loafed, Gene and I went at two big logs with mallet and chisel. One hot, mosquito-infested afternoon, I said what we had both been thinking, "Suppose after all this, we don't get voted in?"

"That's not the point," Gene said.

"We're supposed to do something that'll benefit the camp. Whether or not we get in, we've done something."

I agreed with him. But there were nights when I lay awake and wondered if I could survive such a disappointment.

Finally we finished our Hippocrocolions and learned that the second-degree braves were in council. The next day, a counselor named Frank took me aside. "Be at your tent after retreat," he said. "Don't tell anybody, even your partner." I nodded, wondering if Gene had made it, too.

When Frank came for me, the scouts I lived with were at a songfest in the mess hall, and I was alone in the big conical tent. "Just your blanket and moccasins," he said. "Strip down and put away your clothes." When I was ready, he blindfolded me and led me down a hillside trail. I could hear water lapping when we finally stopped. I recognized the camp director's voice. "From now on, candidates, you must observe the silence of the Indian brave," he said.

I felt something greasy being applied to my face, then someone guided me out onto what seemed to be a wooden dock. "Step down," Frank said, "and grab the gunwales." I stumbled blindly into a canoe, almost upsetting it, and crouched in the bottom, feeling water against my heels. Frank climbed in after me.

Ten minutes later, he beached the canoe on sand. Once more he led me along a trail, this time for about 20 minutes. Then he took off the blindfold. We were in a clump of aspen; I could hear their leaves rustling in the breeze. There was a trace of purple in the western sky, but otherwise it was dark.

"Listen carefully," said Frank, who was now wearing a blanket, moccasins and an Indian headdress. "You will stay here until the sun makes one full circle. Tomorrow at this time, we will come for you."

I nodded, careful not to break silence.

"You will sit beneath this tree," Frank continued, indicating a large paper birch that towered over the aspen. "You will not stand or lie down. You will not sleep, eat or drink. Is that clear?"

I nodded again.

"If anyone should come, you are not to speak to him under any circumstances. If you disobey any of these

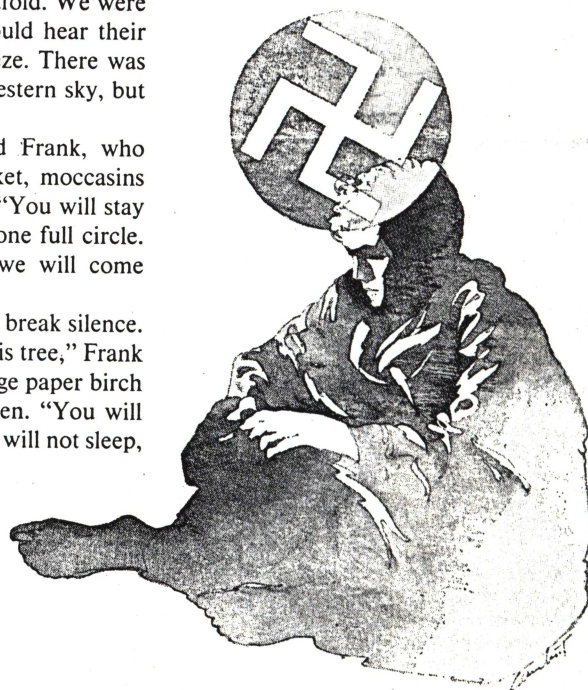
conditions, you will find your own way back to camp and disqualify yourself." Frank drew his blanket tighter around him. "There are no exceptions. Let no threats or coaxing influence you." I nodded again. He raised his hand in farewell and walked off through the woods.

I sat under my white birch and studied the terrain. To my left was an open meadow, where in the twilight I saw a grassy knoll that looked like a ghostly Indian burial mound. To my right, the ground sloped down to what must have been a stream. I leaned back against the tree, then pulled away as if it were red-hot. There was no point in taking a chance on dozing off. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps someone was watching me from a concealed vantage point. It gave me the creeps.

They could not have picked a more uninteresting stretch of woods. Obviously, there had been a fire here years ago, and the birch was the only tree that had survived. Afterward aspen and bracken fern had taken over, as they do after conflagrations in the Adirondacks. No doubt there were blueberries too. Then I remembered that I had not eaten much dinner. The cook's meat loaf was never one of my favorites, and I had planned to buy some candy at the canteen, but I had forgotten to do it.

I tried not to think about food, but my salivary glands wouldn't cooperate.

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In self-defense, I forced myself to dwell on the story of my life, starting with the first thing I could remember—the time, at age three, when my father and I had our tonsils removed at the hospital together. When I got to the present, I estimated that half an hour had elapsed.

It was pitch black now. No moon or stars. And quiet. I heard a branch snap, and the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I froze, hardly breathing. Probably just the wind. Or maybe a bear. Or a man. I couldn't see a thing.

It was quiet again, and I resumed breathing. I thought about Gene. What a great partner he'd been. He'd done more than his share and kept up my spirits. Many times I had been sure that we'd ruined our totem poles. But Gene, who had the vision to see them as they would be, refused to concede failure. Was he too sitting out a lonely vigil? I hoped so.

There was a crashing and stomping off to the right. This time it had to be a bear or something just as big. What would it take to scare me away from my post? I

didn't want to die for my second-degree. Someone coughed behind me, and I almost jumped out of my skin. It was Frank. "Scare you?" he asked.

I shook my head. He wasn't going to trick me into talking. He sat down next to me and took a sandwich from beneath his blanket. I watched him bite into it. "Hungry?" he said.

I nodded, and he took out another sandwich, neatly wrapped in waxed paper. "Here, this one's for you."

I shook my head, and he looked at me strangely. "Look," he said patiently, "I'm offering it to you. It's O.K. to take it!"

I shook my head more decisively, and he stood up, saying, "You stupid fool! You don't think I'd squeal on you?"

I shrugged.

"Then go to the devil!" he snarled. He threw down the sandwich and stalked off through the trees. It was the first time I'd ever known Frank to lose his temper. But I knew that if I had taken the sandwich, it would have been all over.

The sandwich lay within reach. I

wouldn't have had to move from my sitting position to pick it up. That reminded me that my buttocks were beginning to hurt, particularly where an exposed root was digging into them. I shifted position a little, and it helped. It must have been a salami sandwich, because I could smell the garlic. My mouth watered.

I attempted to force myself into a state of torpor. I had already counted to 1,000, named the starting lineup of every team in the American League and tried to remember the capitals of all the states. Now I simply didn't want to think any more. But how did prisoners pass the time? They slept, read, ate, drank, walked, talked, all things I was forbidden to do.

Finally, long after I had despaired of ever seeing daylight again, the sun came up. Thanks to the clearing, I'd soon be able to estimate the time. Back at camp, the other scouts were probably having bacon and eggs. I was starving. The sandwich lay where Frank had thrown it, ants swarming over the waxed paper. I turned away, my stomach doing flip-flops.

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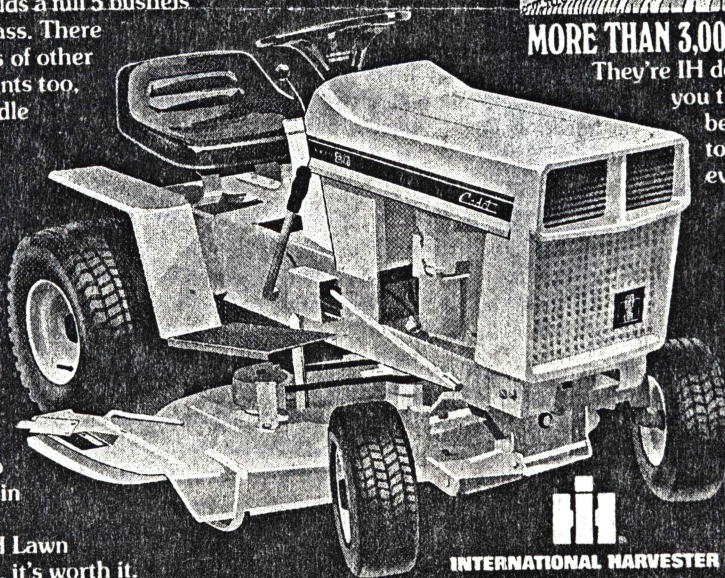


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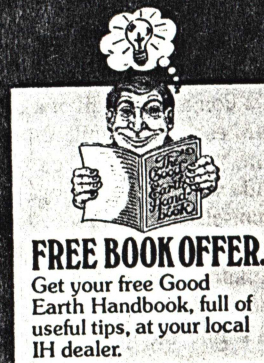


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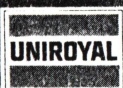
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At about noon, I promised myself that if I ever got through this day, I'd never be alone again, never complain about food and never go to bed late. Staying awake was getting to be an ordeal. I couldn't stop yawning. Despite my best efforts, my eyelids were starting to close. I very likely would have dropped off to sleep, if it hadn't been for a terrible crashing and swearing in the underbrush that jolted me.

A burly farmer walked up to me, carrying a shotgun. "What in hell are you doing here?" he yelled at me. His little pig eyes burned from one of the fleshiest, reddest faces I'd ever seen. I huddled there, wishing I could disappear into thin air. He leaned his gun against the tree, then stood over me, massive legs apart, callused hands on his hips. "Don't you know how to talk?" he asked. "Are you crazy or something?"

I looked at him imploringly. But he shook his head and said, "Half naked, sitting here all painted black and red. You got to be some kind of nut!" He grabbed his gun. "Get the hell off of my property right now, and I won't turn you in to the state troopers. O.K.?"

I felt my face and looked at my hand. Black and red. I must look weird. I looked him in the eye and shook my head. I was scared, but I couldn't take the chance of being tricked. "I ought to fill you full of buckshot right now!" he said roughly. "But I'll be back with the troopers, and they'll take care of you. The judge'll make you talk all right. Now don't you move from this spot, or I'll shoot you, sure as I'm standing here." Then he went crashing off through the woods.

I spent the rest of the afternoon fearing that the farmer would return, but he never did. Finally the sun set, and I knew the end was near. Right after dark, Frank came. He smiled, held out his hand and said, "Shake, you made it!" I remained seated.

"Come on, you can get up now." This time I believed him and stood up. We shook hands, and I felt very proud of myself. I had endured. I had passed the test of Indian manhood.

Frank blindfolded me, and we went back to camp. There followed a session in an authentic Indian sweat lodge, with hot stones and cedar branches, with cold water poured over the rocks to make the most fragrant steam I had ever smelled. I was still blindfolded, but I could sense the presence of my fellow initiates. The

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ceremony was simple and touching. Now we were second-degree members of the Order of the White Swastika.

Off came my blindfold, and I saw Gene grinning at me from across the fire. One of the leaders painted swastikas on our chests so the whole camp would know about us tomorrow morning. Then we feasted on sandwiches and cocoa and filed silently back to our tents.

Camp closed down three days later, and we all went home. Gene was nursing a cold he'd picked up. A week later, I started my senior year at high school and noticed he was absent at roll call. His mother phoned to ask me to visit him in the hospital. The cold had turned into a sinus infection.

I went down to see him, and we spent an hour recalling the summer. "See you back in school," he told me as I left.

But I never saw him again. A week later, I came home from school to be met by my mother, sad-faced and troubled. "Gene died today," she said.

Antibiotics were unknown then. Gene's sinus infection had spread to his spine. It was hard to accept, and doubly hard to tell his parents what a real friend he had been. So I just choked up and shook hands with his dad and put my arms around his mother. I went to his funeral, puzzled that God had chosen to take one so happy and promising.

Four decades and three wars have passed since Gene and I carved our Hippocrocolions and sat out our lonely 24-hour vigils. Yet our accomplishment remains fresh in my memory. I still feel proud that I had measured up as a second-degree brave. Soon after I was initiated, the Order of the White Swastika had a new name, because the Nazis had debased the old one. Sadly, the noble Indian symbol will never have the same meaning again.

Why do I, at this late date, break silence on our ritual? Partly in tribute to Gene. And partly because I believe there is a precious ingredient missing from the life of today's American boy. Amid the television sets and comic books, too many cars and too few chores, teen-age pregnancies and drugs, just plain decent kids do not have enough to strive for. It may sound corny, but there were good old days when a boy was proud of what his body and spirit could endure. I'm proud of the guts and idealism that got me into the order, and I wish there were more of it in today's youth.

END

