

TEN-DAY SCOUT ADVENTURE 1988

Scouting was strong in South Africa, after all, it was the country where it all began. For many years I was part of it, though only on the lay side, and it gave me a great deal of interest and pleasure. Every two years the Cape Province Division organised a Senior Scout Adventure held in the Cederberg mountains, 240km from Cape Town, during the summer holidays soon after Christmas 1988.

On this, Patrols of boys in their late teens under a Patrol Leader, who was usually a young Scout leader, camped and hiked in the mountains for ten days soon after Christmas. Bases would be set up staffed by Scout Leaders and experienced Lay Members, and the boys in the Patrols would every day hike in the country between bases, and camp out overnight.

Preparations for the Adventure began in the preceding year and I was invited to the preliminary planning meeting. About fifteen Scouters and Lay Members were gathered around the long table, while the man in charge was the Chief Scout, Colin Inglis. He lived in Cape Town, was a member of the Mountain Club, and I had climbed with him often.

After a few minutes spent reading the supplied information pack, the meeting began. Soon came the important matter of deciding who would run the various bases and many of those who had done it before volunteered again. Then came 'rock climbing,' and Colin looked straight down the table at me. I had anticipated this.

"Colin" I said, "I enjoyed handling the base last time even though it was the most isolated and uncomfortable of them all, but I am now two years older and not so fit these days so although I will help you in some other capacity, I don't want to do the Rock Climbing base again." Colin appreciated my point of view and did not try to persuade me, he said he was sure that they could make use of my experience in some way and as soon as there was something definite they would give me a ring.

The ring never came. The months passed, and after I had spent ten weeks on a trip to England and Europe, had missed two meetings and heard nothing more, I thought I was off the hook. Then on the evening before the Adventure came a phone call. It was Mike Case who was a Professor at Stellenbosch University. I knew him slightly, and remembered that his eleven-year Scout son had been killed in a fall on Table Mountain.

He told me that he had phoned me often without reply. He wanted me to help him at headquarters on the Adventure by buying food and distributing it to the Patrols as well as help cook for the dozen or so staff at headquarters. After quickly deliberating, I told him I would do it and he said he would arrange a lift. I then began frantically to sort out and pack my gear.

My lift arrived early next morning, a new air-conditioned Lancia with two fellows I knew well. After 150 miles, over three mountain passes, we left the gravel track and arrived at Driehoek farm and our headquarters. Mike Case met us and took me to the camp sited under Oak trees along the banks of a stream. He showed me the square army tent where I would sleep, another next door for the cookhouse, while a marquee stood nearby as a mess-tent.

We had many comforts. Outside the cookhouse was a water tap on a hose run from the farm, and soon some fellows came and ran electric lights into each tent supplied from a generator. I met a lot of chaps I knew, but they soon departed for the various bases. Later a helicopter from the Air Force came to pick up all the food and equipment for the rock-climbing base. A great improvement from last time when my team carried up everything on their backs. Also in the helicopter was a Scoutmaster we called 'Buzz' Macey who was the radio expert.

He would be dropped on Tafelberg, the highest mountain in the area, to install a radio antenna, a repeater, and two big batteries. In the afternoon the weather became worse with heavy cloud, and the helicopter could not make the return trip to collect him. This put 'Buzz' in a risky situation. He was only lightly dressed, had no extra clothing or food, and the temperature there at 6,000 feet dropped rapidly to four degrees. He could only wrap himself in a camouflage net and curl up in a crevice out of the wind.

He must have been pretty miserable but he was not forgotten. The rock climbing base was at the foot of Tafelberg, but their radio was on 'receive' only at certain times to preserve the battery and was normally used only for transmitting, so they could not be called. A runner was sent four miles and 4,000 feet up to where they were spending the night in a cave. Then the two men who had given me a lift, climbed Tafelberg in the mist, located the by then, well-frozen 'Buzz,' and brought him down to safety.

I was up first next morning and lit the gas burner under the oil drum which was our hot-water boiler. I soon discovered that far from helping, I was to become the chief cook. Later I went with Mike Case thirty miles away into the nearest town, Clanwilliam, where we bought food supplies. On our return we passed several busses, and back in camp there was a frantic rush to prepare a snack meal for the 510 boys and a hundred base staff gathered at headquarters. There was an opening ceremony and camp-fire that night.

Unless I arranged a day off, I was invariably the first one out of bed to light the gas stoves and make tea. Inevitably the cookhouse became a focal point, people drifted in for tea or hot water, and although they got in the way sometimes, it was a happy congenial atmosphere.

Apart from the Scout Patrols, there were teams from several colleges. Visitors came from Germany and Switzerland, there was a lady Scoutmaster who had come from Alaska where it was 25 deg. below freezing, to our camp in the Cederberg where it was a sizzling 35 degrees. With everything going well, I took a day off and set out with a companion to visit the mountaineering base at the foot of Sneeberg and went on to climb to the peak at 1924m. We ate our lunch at the hut on top and as we descended later, we met a party of Scouts from Namibia, dressed rather strangely as they always were in khaki boiler-suits.

Next day, I again drove to Clanwilliam for supplies. On the way back we stopped at Uityk farm which had been taken over by Forestry. Here was the base known as Handicapped Awareness. The patrols visiting were disabled by being blind-folded, had their ears covered, walked using crutches, or had one arm trapped in a sling. They then had to struggle to carry out tasks which they would normally perform easily.

This base was run by 'Bloem' Flowers, and two other old stagers, and they had certainly set themselves up nicely. They had a well fitted kitchen, several bedrooms, and a luxurious bathroom. They showed how the other half lived and we often called in for a snack.

Next day I met again, Professor Mick Leary, who was a pediatrician at a children's hospital and was serving as the camp doctor. His services were soon needed, and the following day went off to collect a boy who had fallen and needed stitches to a head wound. Another familiar face was Mike Cohen, the Jewish cantor, who was in charge of transport. I had known the camp chief, Colin Inglis, a long time. He was always busy visiting the various bases, often taking visitors or media representatives.

When I did not go out, I had hours of leisure time in which to wash my clothes, have a shower, and chat to other people. The nearby stream provided good swimming with a fallen tree trunk making a diving platform. Some of the bases were within walking distance, one was Dutch oven cooking using three-legged cast-iron pots. They turned out delicious cakes and scones.

Also set up not far away was what we called a 'fufi slide.' A rope was stretched from a trestle set up on a slope to a distant point near the ground. The traveler would grip a bar attached to a pulley at the high end and descend at a fast rate to the ground. When I tried it one day, being fairly heavy, I careered down it at a dizzying speed and at the end demolished a patrol of Zulu Scouts placed there to catch me.

Far enough away from the camp lights was the Astronomy base. I would stroll down there after dark, listen to the lecture given by the experts, and then take my turn at peering through one of the telescopes. It was fascinating gazing at those far-off planets.

On one occasion when returning from Clanwilliam, we stopped at a base called officially Ultimate Challenge, but known to us all as 'splat.' There we donned overalls and a visor and armed with pistols which fired die-filled pellets, we stalked each other through the bush. We finished well splattered, but it was a lot of fun. This base only operated in the mornings since later on, the heat made the wax pellets melt and jam in the gun.

Another day we looked in on Water Activities situated on the Clanwilliam dam. Angling is not my style and I did not want to look a fool board sailing or water skiing, but I did have a swim, went out in a canoe, and sailed a dinghy acting as crew for the Camp Chief who was also visiting the base.

The radio repeater set up by 'Buzz' Macey was not working properly, and bases thirty miles away by road could not be contacted. He had prepared a replacement and I was asked to go with a party to deliver it. A radio operator and the other camp doctor came with me. The repeater was like a giant sized video recorder and very heavy, mine was the only pack large enough to take it and I was stuck with it, though the others helped out too.

We climbed the rock pitch the Scouts were using and replaced the repeater, but tuning it was a slow job. It was a hot day, there was no shade so I abseiled off only to find that those below had drunk all my water, but a girl from another party gave me some. It was late afternoon before we set off back. We picked up a visiting Anglican Minister on the way down, but he went very slowly and it was dark when we reached level ground. The radio operator had a transmitter, he called camp and a truck came to collect us.

I slept well that night and awoke full of vigor. I washed down tables, sliced tomatoes, and whisked up 24 eggs to make omelet's. I heard someone say, "You can see that Jack's back in the kitchen," which I took to be a compliment. That night a gale-force wind swept through the camp with heavy rain. We all turned out to secure the tents and bring vulnerable stores under cover. Rain, wind, and lightning raged all night. Early next morning trucks brought into headquarters boys who had been camped out without shelter. We made soup and coffee and supplied breakfast for some Patrols, and for a fresh group of media people who had arrived.

Tafelberg was hidden by mist and it was cool after the normal heat. Rock climbing, activities on the dam, and mountaineering had all been stopped. Patrols were still hiking, but camping at the bases overnight. The weather was still uncertain next day. I had arranged to go walking with the Deputy Camp Chief, but he had to stay to take care of the media, so I went alone, but took a radio. It was great to be out in that wild country with its constantly changing scenery, strange rock shapes, wildlife and flowers. I lunched in the shade of a huge rock enjoying sandwiches made from last night's chicken, washed down with pure water from the stream.

I reported back at the radio shack and found that everyone seemed to be out, so it fell to me to issue supplies to the Patrols. The Black Scouts liked coarse Bran meal and ate it straight from the packet. One item in great demand was 'Angels Delight' instant pudding, it went so fast that we kept it 'under the counter.' On this day two boys came asking for it and I turned them down, but relented when they told me it was a birthday treat for one of their number.

It fell to me to make dinner again as well as a rice pudding for the patients in the hospital tent. Six boys were there, most suffering from stomach upsets. Some were dehydrated and had to be given frequent drinks. So I found myself acting as nurse too. I had barely served dinner when a call came from the mountaineering base at Sneeuberg. A Scout had injured his knee and his Patrol had carried him two miles. I made ready to go out with the doctor, but they were able to get a helicopter. Space was always limited so only the doctor went to bring the boy in.

Then it was the last operational day of the Adventure, and although I had enjoyed the experience, it seemed as if I had been away for ages and I was looking forward to returning home. The Bases closed down, and all the staff moved to headquarters so that every tent filled up. This was going to be a busy day.

Among the visitors that day was Kevin Wall, who lived currently in Johannesburg, and had made a special journey to attend. He

thanked me for the letter I had sent, when, while I was in the UK, both his parents had died within three weeks of each other. He had come to lead the Camp Fire entertainment. After breakfast we started to prepare for the mass supper, and every utensil we had was pressed into service. Apart from the Scouts, there were the staffs from the other bases, and as they were all old hands, we wanted to put on a good show. A party was busy cutting wood for the many fires we would need.

The main meal would be Potjiekos, which was a sort of stew of meat, and several vegetables, cooked in cast iron cauldrons. The Dutch Oven Base fellows using the same sort of pots, baked apple pies, while we made custard to go with them. I also made for the VIPs (and us) a tasty dessert of jam tart, peaches, and melon. This was topped with ice cream bought as a final item from Clanwilliam that morning, rushed to camp in a cold box, and stored in the fridge at the radio shack.

We left the mountain of washing-up to attend the Camp Fire ceremony. It was held in a natural rock amphitheatre just behind the farm. In the centre was a huge pile of logs, fuel for the camp-fire. Occupying a row of chairs at the front were the visiting dignitaries, farmers who had allowed us to occupy their farms, and cross their land, and Forestry officials.

Colin Inglis gave a short welcoming speech and thanked the many people who had made the Adventure such a success. He then presented prizes for shooting, angling and sailing. The camp fire was lit with due ceremony and blazed up fiercely. Kevin Wall, with his usual expertise led the singing which began as always with 'Camp-fire's burning' and went on for two hours. Some Australian Scouts performed a comic sketch, as did some other Patrols. One did the Gum-boot Dance, while the Black Scouts from the Transkei and Kwazulu received applause for their songs and dances. At the end, Scouts with lighted candles filed away singing 'Taps'. It was a really memorable occasion, and people hung around until midnight.

During the night I felt someone crowding against me, and found a chap squeezed into the narrow space beside my bed, the whole tent was packed. One chap on the staff left early to drive the 600 miles to Kimberley, everyone else remained in camp until all was packed, and the area left perfectly clean. There was frenzied activity, tables and forms were whisked away, and tents were collapsing all around us. The farmer's tractor and trailer took loads to be packed on to Army trucks standing on the road. The Deputy Camp Chief lived near me and had offered a lift, so I said my farewells, and by noon, began the long journey home.

JACK PITTER 05.02.2004