

Captain Jack L. Rhea, Centuryman and Scouter

by William F. Cass

The most eloquent spokesman for the value of experience as a Boy Scout to a young recruit arriving at Fort Jackson in the autumn of 1942 would have been the late Captain Jack L. Rhea. After graduation from Infantry Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Jack joined the Century Division in mid-November 1942 and spent most of the war as the S-3/operations officer of the 398th Infantry Regiment's 3rd Battalion, although he briefly served as the battalion's Company K commander in 1943 and was offline for several weeks during Ranger training in mid-1943.

Jack possessed many, if not all, of the practical outdoor expertise and leadership skills needed for coping with the demands of bivouac experiences and later combat in France and Germany. That is not surprising considering the fact that he had been an Eagle Scout, class of 1932, and his joining the Army after employment with the Boy Scouts of America as a field executive in Wichita Falls, Texas, and Des Moines, Iowa. He also had other significant outdoor experience, having been a fishing guide and horse wrangler near Gunnison, Colorado, in the late 1930s. Jack never admitted to what was an occasional, humorous first manifestation of a previous Boy Scouting experience which occurred when a brand new recruit tried to salute for the first time—using the Boy Scout salute with the thumb and little finger touching!

Having been a junior field executive with the Boy Scouts, Jack had several years of teaching first aid, camping, cooking, survival skills, hiking, orienteering, tracking, physical fitness, leadership skills, and the value of the patrol method. He also had significant experience motivating volunteers and working with both young Scouts as well as the older ones, the latter being only a year or so younger than many of the Century Divisions youngest recruits.

The retired English Army general, Lord Baden-Powell, Scouting's founder, was frequently criticized for creating an organization that supposedly pre-conditioned British kids for a pipeline leading directly to the British Army. He had in fact based his bestselling book, *Scouting for Boys*, on one of his earlier books, *Aids to Scouting*. The latter book was essentially an Army primer on skills useful in scouting, or more precisely, reconnaissance. *Scouting for Boys* essentially took the latter book's techniques and turned them into games that British youth could enjoy in small groups.

At first, he was probably bewildered by the extraordinary popularity of his book and how it served as the genesis of a prominent, world-wide organization. He always countered his critics by saying that Scouting was first and foremost a world peace organization, which explains his zeal in traveling the far ends of earth in the 1920s to set up Scouting in all lands, including each of the World War II Axis powers. Although the latter powers all banned the Scouts, the movement was resumed in each country at the end of World War II.

When the 398th's 3rd Battalion was located in Esslingen during the Occupation, Jack resumed his ties with Scouting in two ways. He began working with German youth in order to get Scouting started in Germany again. That was not a formal program complete with uniforms. Germans in mid-1945 (and still many elderly Germans today) did not react well to seeing kids in uniforms. Rather it was the camping, hiking, and competitive games that Jack organized in Esslingen. That activity put Jack into the forefront of one of the Occupation's goals: rehabilitation of the German people.

Jack also used some of his leave time during the Occupation to study Scouting in France, Belgium, and especially England where his wartime photo album strongly suggests that he visited Brownsea Island (near Bournemouth), the birthplace of Scouting, for a full day in July 1945.

Jack returned from Occupation duty in Esslingen as a major with a Silver Star, three Bronze Stars, and a Purple Heart; by February 1946, he had his old job back as a field executive with the Boy Scouts. His career with the Boy Scouts was identical to his assignment in the Century Division: training and operations. Jack spent eight years in the Army reserves while he was living in Des Moines and Fort

Dodge, Iowa, and later in Chicago. His reserve duties were largely of a training nature in subjects which he first learned in the Boy Scouts: map reading, use of compass, and scouting.

Following service as the council executive in Fort Dodge, Iowa, he became the Assistant National Director of Volunteer Training, based in Chicago. From 1954 to 1962, he was Director of Camping at the BSA's famed National High Adventure base, Philmont Scout Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico. Then it was back to the National Office in New Jersey for a series of jobs including, Director of Professional Training, Director of Personnel and Training, and lastly, National Director of Field Operations. He retired in 1975 following service in one of the top operational jobs in Scouting: Assistant Chief Scout Executive. After a long and very productive retirement, during which he became an authority on Native American cultures, Jack died in 2010 at his home in Allentown, Pennsylvania, at age 95. Among those members of the Philmont staff who worked at the Ranch during the Jack Rhea era, Jack is remembered as a very decisive leader, an innovator, and a man with a boundless commitment to American youth.

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Holiday 2011 Association Newsletter