

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

3. PREPARATION

At the beginning of my eleventh summer, on a day off, Dad takes 10-year old brother Ray and me for a grand adventure. We walk several miles to the park, past the zoo, to the big swimming pool. He pays the admission; a dime for Ray, a dime for me, and a little more for himself. He shows us how to use the lockers and showers, and demonstrates the basic swimming strokes. That night, despite the family's chronic shortage of funds, he leaves an unheard-of pile of dimes on his dresser. "Every day when it is not raining, take one dime for each of you and go swimming. Go as often as you can! And practice the strokes that I showed you!"

Rain is scarce this summer, so almost every weekday, Ray, John Weiss and I walk to the park, swim and dive from 9 until noon; eat our sandwiches (and sometimes an apple); and walk home by way of the zoo or the boat lake. To my amazement, the little pile of dimes is replenished several times. By the end of the summer, Ray, John and I are good swimmers. It was a beautiful extravagance from Dad; the gift of a skill that has served a lifetime. I remain grateful to his memory.

The day before Easter is my twelfth birthday, the 27th of March, 1937. Easter egg dying is left to my brothers when Grandfather gives me a Boy Scout Handbook. During the next week I read it from cover to cover, at the expense of most other activities, including school. Friday night I go to a Scout Troop meeting with neighbor George Black, the Silver Fox Patrol leader.

Troop 86 meets in a large room in the basement of our Walbrook Methodist Church. Troop officials sit behind a table at one end, two of the four patrols line each side. We visitors sit at the other end. The Scoutmaster, an assistant, or a visiting instructor stands before the head table and conducts the meeting; - the ceremonies, training, and games. Patrol Leader George sits at the head of the Silver Fox patrol, to my left.

I pass the Tenderfoot tests and join the Silver Fox Patrol a few weeks before George is promoted to Senior Patrol Leader and moves to the official's table. Part of the cost of my uniform comes from my earnings (cut the lawn, wash dishes, mind the baby). Scout uniforms are good quality and well made; Mom is not used to spending so much money for clothes. A year later, brother Ray and John join the patrol.

Scouting teaches us to live in the woods, to cook, to pitch and drain a tent.

We carry our gear and food to camp for two or three days in pup tents, miles from a road. We learn to dig smooth depressions for our shoulders and hips, and to use a waterproof "ground cloth" to stop the dampness from the ground.

While camping on Bean Hill over the Labor Day weekend, our patrol competes with the other three patrols. We enter individual events according to our best skills. The new patrol leader, Jack Tschantre, makes short work of the cross country compass course and the map-making events. Tall, broad shouldered and unassuming, handsome Jack reflects the virtues of his industrious Swiss parents. Marion Insley tackles the first aid and signaling events with good results; I win the knot tying and place second in "fire building." We win the competition and are awarded bronze medals on blue ribbons. The medal reads:

"Troop Field and Scouting Champions, 1938."

An old plastic bugle, found in the Troop's camping gear, sparks an interest. I learn to play it, buy my own brass bugle, memorize most of the Army's bugle calls from a record, and become the Troop Bugler. Later, I play my new bugle in the Forest Park High School Drum and Bugle Corps.

Scouting is more than just fun. We learn and grow as our levels of responsibility increase. I advance to First Class, (with one lonely merit badge) and pass through the ranks of assistant and patrol leader, to Junior Assistant Scoutmaster.

The ethics of service to God and Country are combined with the skills needed to survive, to serve, and to lead effectively. We find great adventures, and prepare for those we never dreamed of, in Scout Troop Number 86.

A few years later, Tschantre is killed in Italy when an errant two-and-a-half-ton truck, (the legendary "deuce-and-a-half") invades a blacked-out bivouac area. Insley becomes a medical doctor and serves in the Air Corps. John Weiss joins the Navy, and improbably, beyond my wildest dreams, I become a machine gunner in the Infantry.

Ray and I ride the streetcar three miles from our home in Walbrook, to Garrison Junior High School. When the weather is good, we take our roller skates, and skate home - mostly downhill. We each save the nickel carfare, and the ten cents buys a pound of jelly beans or orange slices or gum drops. Soon enough we move on to separate high schools; Ray takes the accelerated "A" Course at Polytechnic High, a boys school located a half hour streetcar ride from our corner. When Ray graduates, his "A" Course enables him to enter the Army Specialized

Training Program (ASTP) at the second year level. He studies hard and long, and gets good grades.

Life is more fun for me at the nearby high school where there are twice as many girls as boys. Unknown to me, Spiro Agnew graduated from Forest Park High the year before I start; and his wife-to-be, Judy, is already a senior.

One summer afternoon, Bill Wright looms over me, his hands just above my eye level. He seems huge as he shows me again how to fold a newspaper so that it can be thrown from the middle of the street, over a lawn to a waiting porch.

The bundle rides in the strap under my left arm, a small toss frees the newspaper next to my ribs allowing the paper to be pulled out and folded for my first short successful throw. The route that Bill turns over to me takes forever at first; - juggle the route book; retrieve papers that fly apart and search for wayward throws. In a few days I can whip through the route without an error and consult the route book only to make changes - and from the sidewalk, I can land a paper on each porch.

Brother Ray and I have parallel routes. We progress to longer routes, then Sunday morning routes. On Saturday morning we help with the collections. Our incomes rise from the starting dollar and a half to a majestic five dollars a week.

Sometimes we can double our income as we baby-sit, mow lawns, tend furnaces, and shovel snow. Big money for high school boys in the years 1939 to 1943, when a man is lucky to make twenty dollars a week.

The round trip to my high school is two and a half miles, on foot or bike. Every weekday afternoon and Sunday morning we walk some three miles on our paper routes, our straps carrying as much as 30 pounds of papers. Every day there are games on the golf course; football, soccer, baseball - anything except golf. On Friday nights we walk, ride our bikes, or take the streetcar three miles to Scout meetings in Walbrook. Every week, or two at most, we walk or bike two miles to the library. We have no idea of how well these activities are preparing us for the Infantry!

The new income allows me to purchase a used bicycle for two dollars. Dad checks the coaster brake before he lets me buy the old Monarch with high pressure tires. I add saddlebags and a basket to carry books to school and the library, and to fetch groceries. Eventually I replace every part except the frame.

High school college preparation courses are supplemented by shop courses, clubs, and the Drum and Bugle Corps. In the mandatory music appreciation course we rehearse for our commencement and we listen to a lot of good music. I build a crystal radio set, and drift off to sleep, listening to the golden age of the big bands which are still popular, almost seventy years later.

On a bonny afternoon, the first day of September (1939) I crouch, twist the pliers to break the wire from a bundle of newspapers; and scan the big black headlines:

**"GERMANY INVADES POLAND;
BRITAIN AND FRANCE DECLARE WAR!"**