

With Barbara McMartin's Adirondack guidebook as their bible, this crew's adventures brought them more than 40 years of camaraderie in the wilderness // by Mark Obbie

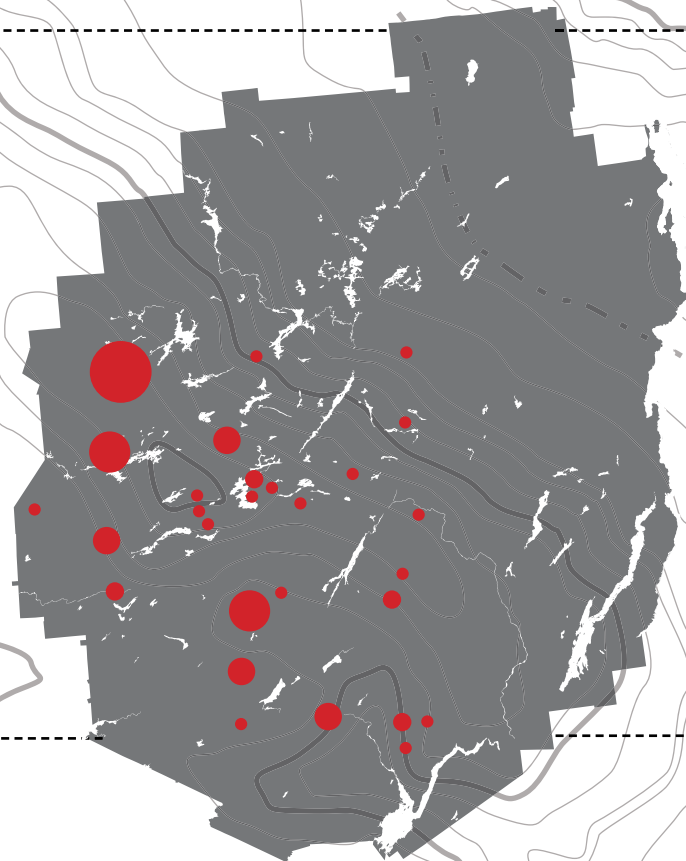
Backwoods Brotherhood



I began to wonder what kind of camping trip this was shaping up to be when the guys I'd met just hours earlier tapped me to play the dog in a fox hunt.

On that muggy June night on the Sacandaga River, the announcement that we middle-aged gents would leave the campfire ring to play games in the nighttime woods landed while I was still trying to gauge my own interest in joining a group of backpackers who called themselves the Adirondack Commandos. At the time, I worked in Manhattan. I had driven from my downstate home to meet my brother Todd and this Rochester-area group he had recently joined. Those attending the trip were an old Scouting friend of ours, Brad, and three of the Commandos' founders—the self-proclaimed Elder Statesmen.

We met at Whitehouse, where the Northville-Placid Trail crosses the river on a picturesque suspension



bridge, for a long-weekend off-trail hike to a spot upriver in the West Branch Gorge. My brother and I had been working toward our 46er patches for a couple of years at that point, with a fair number of backpacking trips under our belts. The invitation to join this separate crew, who'd been exploring the more obscure corners of the Adirondacks for decades while avoiding the crowded peaks, sounded intriguing.

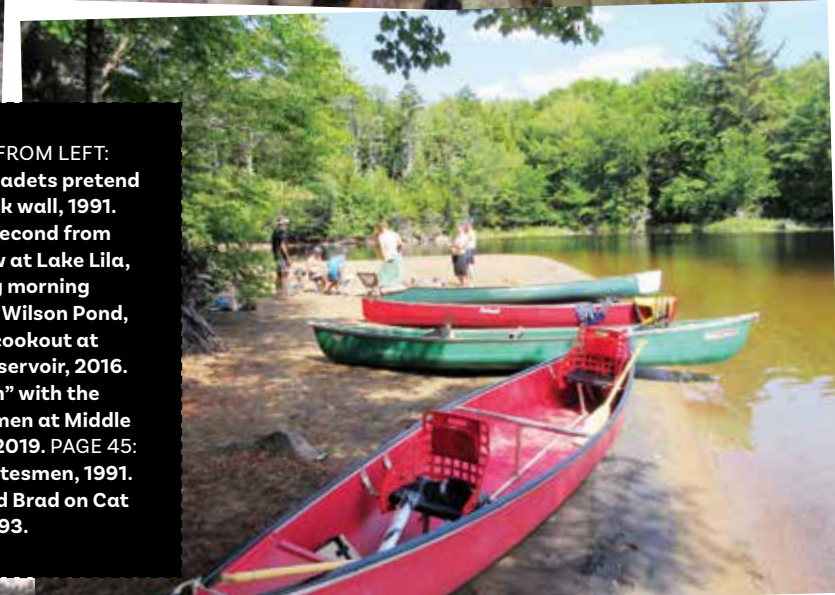
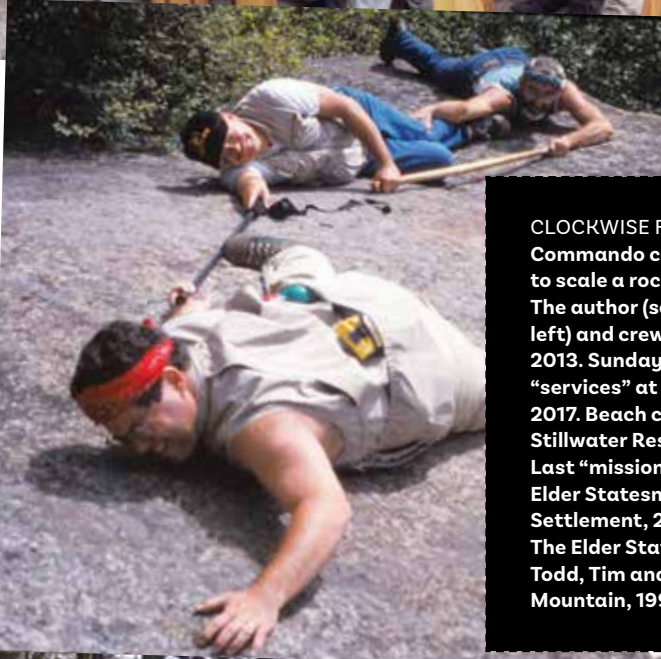
Todd and Brad had warned that Commando "missions," as they dubbed their outings, featured a steady patter of faux military regimentation and some intense forms of play. Now I was learning what that meant, as I found my 44-year-old self frolicking in the pitch-black woods with guys mostly older than me. They were armed with peashooters and divided into teams, the foxes and the hunters, with one "dog" to sniff out the prey. The dog was the only actor allowed to use a headlamp and to make a sound—not in

words, but in the hunting-dog language of the chase. "Ba-OOOOOOO. Ruh-ruh-ruh-ra-OOOOOOOOO."

I threw myself into the role, certain that the hunters would appreciate that I had found foxes in the brush. But one fox, my own brother, decided I would suffice as a human shield. Todd rushed toward me in the dark, running smack into a tree. The after-action report, a standard feature of Commando missions, later summarized: "He got up, grabbed the dog and forced the dog's headlight into the eyes of the pursuing hunters who, blinded, could only fire at the light. The poor dog took about 30 shots."

We collapsed in giddy laughter, then retired to the campfire for more libations and play-by-play accounts of what had just transpired. The next day, with mock solemnity and not a stitch of clothes on any of us save water shoes, the group "baptized" me in the "sacred" but frigid waters of the Sacandaga as the newest Com-

A map of the Commandos' destinations over the course of 60-plus outings. Larger circles indicate repeat visits.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Commando cadets pretend to scale a rock wall, 1991. The author (second from left) and crew at Lake Lila, 2013. Sunday morning "services" at Wilson Pond, 2017. Beach cookout at Stillwater Reservoir, 2016. Last "mission" with the Elder Statesmen at Middle Settlement, 2019. PAGE 45: The Elder Statesmen, 1991. Todd, Tim and Brad on Cat Mountain, 1993.



In the 17 years since that inaugural trip, I attended nearly two dozen more missions, which is barely a third of the treks taken by the group since its founding four decades ago. A map of the Commandos' 30-plus destinations in more than 60 outings plasters the Adirondacks with dots, skewing toward the western and southern regions. The High Peaks, on that map, remain untouched.

This pattern gets at the driving force behind the group: a hunger for solitude and the novelty of discovering new beauty spots. To be called a success, a trip might have featured some (or plenty) of rain, mud, bugs and blowdown—but never, under any circumstances, could it be considered a triumph if too many other people intruded.

The Commandos were, in short, social distancers before that was cool. And their overarching mission, as I was to learn, plumbs greater depths than merely putting dots on a map.

WHEN BROTHERS MIKE AND TIM STARTED exploring the backwoods of the Adirondacks, around 1972, they had designs no greater than to enjoy a more rugged outdoors experience than what they had grown up with: car camping, visits to a family camp or the park's more touristy attractions. (Only first names will be used here, as my half-hearted nod toward the First Rule of the Adirondack Commandos—"What happens in the woods stays in the woods.")

Mike first glimpsed the future when, as a student at SUNY's College of Environmental Science and Forestry, he spent a summer at Cranberry Lake. One overnight at High Falls, on the Oswegatchie River, sent him back to his younger brother Tim, bearing news of his discovery of a very different kind of outdoors adventure. "Most people don't know that's all up there, for free," he recalls gushing. That summer, the brothers returned to the same area. Tim, who marveled at being able to dunk his head into a flowing stream to slurp up a cold drink, needed no more encouragement. "It hooked me,"

Tim remembers. "There was no turning away."

Lacking a personal guide to usher them toward more destinations like that, they were on their own to research the possibilities. In those pre-Internet days, that meant hours-long visits to a public library, where they would spread guidebooks and maps on a table. "We would try to find the most remote spots we could," Mike says. At that point, the only other rule was that the chosen trailheads should not exceed a four-hour drive from their homes on Rochester's east side. Guidebook author Barbara McMartin's Discover the Adirondacks series became their bible.

After a sporadic run of trips, they brought along their first guest, a childhood friend who swore off all future trips after the trio got caught in a springtime snowstorm in the West Canada Lake Wilderness. Next they recruited their cousin Jeff, and a friend of Jeff's. The friend became another one-timer when he discovered his distaste for backpacking. But Jeff was a keeper, and an inveterate joker. He showed up for the trip decked out in camouflage and bristling with comman-

do-style knives. Now the group had its name, on what it counted as its first official mission. The year was 1981.

Busy throughout the 1980s with work and young families, they managed to make only two more trips. Finally, in 1990, they settled into a steady schedule of semi-annual missions, generally in June and September. Mike, Tim and Jeff recruited a fourth member, their long-time friend Ray, who helped spark their realization that managers need underlings. By the eighth mission, in 1992, the four had their first cadet, my old Scouting friend Brad, who the next year recruited my brother Todd.

In keeping with the military theme, cadets would be the peons whose job was to delight their superiors with special food and drink, with a blazing fire and steaming coffee as the elders arose on cold mornings, and with mock fealty to a growing list of rules that Tim maintained with all of the officiousness of a landlocked Captain Queeg. Elaborate memos announced upcoming mission objectives ("mission statistics will be discussed in transit"). Audio recordings of Tim's booming, God-like voice, played on a portable cassette on the trail, revealing what this "elite force" on "a mission from God" would encounter along the way. After cadets made five successful missions, each graded on their performance by their superiors, they became eligible for promotion, complete with a torchlit ceremony.

As the years ticked by, the list of destinations grew: T Lake. Lake Lila. Siamese Ponds. Duck Hole. Puffer Pond. Tenant Creek Falls. Chub, Pillsbury and Queer Lakes. The original inspiration, the Oswegatchie and Five Ponds Wilderness, saw the Commandos eight times over a span of 31 years. Six other places saw us three or four times each. But the longest list, by far, comprises the 18 places we saw only once, as we strove to visit as many spots as possible. It was rare to see anyone else during an entire weekend, just as the guys had hoped.

As the cadet corps grew, so too did the buffet options, with *Continued on page 55*

The Commandos were, in short, social distancers before that was cool. And their overarching mission, as I was to learn, plumbs greater depths than merely putting dots on a map.

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BACKWOODS BROTHERHOOD
Continued from page 17

cadets trying to outdo past feasts with new levels of gastronomic excess—and pack-weight. Stuffed pork chops, ribs and shrimp on the grill, banana s'mores, espresso, champagne (served in proper plastic glasses by a white-gloved cadet), pizza, breakfast burritos, pies and cobbler and many, many steaks. The heaviest cooking implements, like Dutch ovens, were reserved for canoe trips. But, on backpacking trips, some of the cadets' loads might tip the scales at 80 pounds.

I had earned great respect even before my cadetship by pranking the Elder Statesmen, thanks to my connection to Barbara McMartin, whose daughter was a friend from downstate. "To Todd," she inscribed a copy of the Commandos' favorite book, her *Fifty Hikes in the Adirondacks*. "The only TRUE Commando." I cemented my candidacy on my third trip as a cadet, on the south-central string of lakes, Murray, Middle and Bennett, where despite hot June weather I hauled in the makings for frozen margaritas: two bags of ice wrapped thickly in insulation, two liters of premixed drinks, and a 10-pound hand-crank blender, all jammed into my back-breaking pack.

That 2007 trip earned me the trail name Blender. Over the years, others took on names recalling their own memorable contributions to our feasts (Apple Pie, Chef), difficult personalities (Ogre), anti-insect remedies (Zapper), and encounters with nature (Leech). Ray was called Preacher, for his evangelical fervor in leading Sunday morning services, but a typo in an email signature turned into his preferred nom de Commando: Rat.

Less Philosophers' Camp than Blazing Saddles campfire scene, our camaraderie translated into hours of fireside chit-chat. The reading materials I brought usually stayed in my pack as we settled into our chairs or perched on the lip of a lean-to, rehashing familiar stories, telling new ones, grouching about work, bragging about kids, and generally avoiding political fights (partly out of deference to the lone liberal, that being me). Out of those talks, and from the detailed spreadsheet that recorded each mission, I made notes on the places I wished I'd seen the first time or places I hoped to revisit for the

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BACKWOODS BROTHERHOOD

benefit of our newer members, as our ranks swelled to 17 members and cadets.

The “rule of three” dictated that any trip counted as an official mission if three bona-fide commandos attended, and if the outing was properly promoted in advance. A few trips bottomed out with such a small roster. Typically, though, a solid cadre of at least half a dozen, and occasionally up to double that number, attended.

But around 2010, the hikes started shrinking in length. Where 10-mile treks and bushwhacks had once seemed fine, now anything more than four miles caused grumbling in certain quarters. Some trip plans cratered for lack of interest or never even got suggested. The fall outings disappeared after 2016.

Two years before that, the Elder Statesmen started skipping trips. Under pressure, they returned on the June trips in 2017 and 2019, all the while declaring they were quitting. “After 40 years of doing that, I don’t get the same excitement,” Tim admitted to me. Escaping to the woods when his job was intense and family life was demanding seemed essential. Now, that’s all changed. At 66, he worries about getting hurt, and knows he’s out of shape. “I see me as becoming a liability,” he says. Mike, who’s three years older, put it more succinctly. “You get old,” he reminded me. “We’re done.”

FOR WEEKS, MY BROTHER AND I EMAILED the group to push for a June 2020 canoe trip in the St. Regis Canoe Area. It was a new-to-us destination, and we hoped the paddling would attract the anti-backpackers. We got only one taker, Brad, who for the past several years had been joining us on our more ambitious, non-Commando hikes in the High Peaks and along the Northville-Placid Trail. A fourth man, Vern, another member of our separate peak-bagging, long-distance crew, joined us. After paddling across Hoel, Turtle and Slang Ponds, we had our pick of primitive sites on a Friday afternoon on Long Pond. A breezy, pine-covered point seemed just right to keep the bugs to a minimum.

The pond is an undeveloped gem, an irregularly shaped network of coves and

BACKWOODS BROTHERHOOD

points of land. Loons and barred owls serenaded us at night. Forecasted rain held off all day Saturday as we paddled glassy waters and hiked Long Pond Mountain. After the day hike, we commenced cocktail hour, staring out on the pond. The talk circled around our various maladies—thickening waistlines, a bunion here, a strained tendon there. I was 61; Todd, 58. Brad and Vern were coming up on birthdays, at 62 and 68. Where we once talked about climbing career ladders and getting kids out of the nest, now it was all about 401(k)s and retirement-travel dreams.

At one point, the talk headed for deeper waters, based on histories that we knew well enough without needing to mention. Brad lost his two younger brothers in recent years. Our fathers, Brad’s and Todd’s and mine, died within days of each other at ages that sound scarily proximate to us now. “We all have an end date,” Todd observed. “We just don’t know when it is.” He’s made this point to me for years, as his carpe-diem dictates dragged me up and over the 46 High Peaks and on many a grueling hike that violated all the Commando rules for ease of travel. I complained at the time, but I owe him—and the Commandos—eternal gratitude for guiding me to so many places inside the Blue Line that I would not have taken the initiative to see otherwise.

Thanks to Google and Facebook groups, a world of trip-planning advice is at my fingertips, something Mike and Tim couldn’t have imagined when they hunched over a Barbara McMartin guidebook so long ago. If I had the money, I could simply hire a guide. I’d done it instead, and will keep doing it, with the guys I grew up hiking with.

Was this a Commando mission? Officially, I suppose so, since we satisfied the rule of three. But emotionally, no. Our teachers have hung up their packs and boots for good. We’re our own thing now.

The conversation moved on to where we want to go next. ▲

Mark Obbie is a freelance journalist based in Canandaigua, NY, whose work has appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic, Slate and Longreads.

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