

A collection of true events and experiences through the years.

My Call of the Wild and Magic of the Midnight Sun

by Stephen J. Dickey

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My Call of the Wild



and Magic of the Midnight Sun

A collection of true life events and
experiences through the years

Selected illustrations by Christine Buckland

STEPHEN J. DICKEY

**My Call of the Wild
and Magic of the Midnight Sun**

Stephen Dickey

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ISBN: 978-1-63491-703-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dad who has always been my hero, to my mom, and to my sons and their mother, to my brother, and family who all shared so many adventures, and so much life with me. Finally and especially to my military brothers who served on my left and right. I am proud I could stand with you. So much to remember, RLW/DOL!

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Boy Scouts and baseball, school sports, and different community organizations. It was very common and expected of kids and teenagers to be active and enjoy the outdoors. I was lucky and very happy.

My call of the wild changed over time. When I was a kid, I just had fun doing what seemed like a good idea at the time, like chasing skunks or other mischief *like painting what is not supposed to be painted*. Later, it was to feel the moment and to enjoy the adventure, but also to put one step forward to reach the end, and to enjoy the accomplishment. Maybe that was after a long day paddling on the river or swimming the rapids. Maybe it was the relaxed feeling around a campfire at night. Maybe it was sitting at the summit of a high mountain, or back home with my family after a long run down country roads.

Boy Scouts, Order of the Arrow and Preparation for Life

My experience in the Boy Scouts benefited me in many ways. We were never bored with nothing to do. We had many challenges indoors and outdoors. Much of what I did prepared me for life in general, and also for what I was to do later in the U.S. Army. I never had any difficulties physically in the Army. I was used to being in the woods, and I was always ready and physically fit. The *JLTC* training we had was to prepare us for leadership roles in the Boy Scouts and also taught principles important in the military. When I was selected for the *Order of the Arrow*, I was thrilled and very much in awe of the code and guiding principles that directed that organization. It was an honor to be chosen, and it was indicative of qualities that were evident of young men selected. The selection was an honor, but there was an important *ordeal* that was necessary to be a member.

The ordeal into the *Order of the Arrow* included a single night of survival type camping totally alone on the trail, and a full week of work in silence performing tasks for environmental improvements. The night alone on the trail was a test of self-reliance and ability to persevere through hard times. I remember some of these tests we were put through, and I relate to what I experienced later in my training and assignments in the Army. That single night alone on the trail helped set my mind to trust myself in the woods. That became important to me in training I had as an Army Ranger just six years later. I progressed to the Army Special Forces and I always remembered the lessons that I learned when I was young. Prior to my entry to the Army, I went through all of this at the same time with my big brother. We shared so much through the years. Having him close was a comfort to me.

I remember as we labored on the environmental improvements, I was assigned with others to paint and repair a peer at the lake. As I was painting near the end of the peer, we heard the bell for lunch. Most everyone ran for chow and I realized I had painted myself to the end of the peer.

My brother was still there and working hard. We were supposed to be working in silence. Since I was just twelve years old, I suppose I didn't know what to do. The entire peer was wet with oil-based paint and I didn't want to spoil the paint job with my feet in sneakers. I held up my arms to signal my brother and yelled out, "What do I do now?" He laughed and yelled back to me, "Jump, Steve, jump!"

There was a cadre member there watching the comedy. After I swam to shore, he told us both to make our required notches on our arrows that we hung around our necks. Those were considered as demerits and those were the only we received for the week. We ran to lunch together laughing.

A Look Ahead – Military Training

Six years later I went into the military. I went Army and my brother had already left home for the Navy. I learned so much as a soldier in the Army, and in the infantry and later in the Rangers and Special Forces. I was a paratrooper and the excitement of jumping out of a perfectly good airplane made my day complete. Clearly we were always out training on exercises and traveling to remote areas and experienced various terrain, climates and environments. Much of the training was tough and we were in austere conditions. We were challenged physically and mentally. Though there were times in the swamps of Georgia I may have wished to be in some other place, I always had the motivation and drive to press forward.

I remember one night in the mountains of Georgia, I was being tested as the small unit leader and leading my combat patrol to our objective of the mission. This is standard practice in Army Ranger School. I had studied the map and understood the terrain with abundant streams and hills. The colors of the map and the contour lines paint a clear picture of the terrain and how to navigate. Land navigation is a skill that is critical to ground forces of any kind. In Ranger School and Special Forces training, we were taught all over again with advanced techniques to understand how the picture of the terrain is presented on a topographical map.

As I was leading my patrol, we had just crossed a number of mountain streams and were climbing a steep hill to arrive within striking distance of our target. I could see very clearly on the map where we were and what direction we needed to follow. We were wet and tired from the long movement. Some members of the patrol voiced quietly to me, “We are going the wrong way,” or otherwise they thought we were *off target*. I remembered back to that night alone during my ordeal to the Order of the Arrow. I felt self-reliance and

very certain of the route and features I understood on the map. I was certain we would arrive at the correct location.

It was a cold and dark night. My feet were pounding in pain like the rest of my patrol members. We continued up the steep hill for another twenty minutes. *One foot in front of the other*. When we completed the climb, we checked the map again and also saw some lights shining from the target area. We were within striking range and we were exactly where we needed to be. I was proud that I led my patrol and arrived at the expected location.

I received a passing evaluation for this patrol to lead my guys through *recon of the objective*. When we saw the lights shining from the objective, and verified on the map that we were where we needed to be, we set up a perimeter. I went with selected patrol members to scope out the current situation on target, prior to the raid. With *eyes on target* we identified a slightly larger force than we had expected, and additional weapons in their perimeter. The aggressor force was positioned stronger on a different part of their perimeter. With all the new information, we issued a *frag-order* to advise the patrol members and to modify the plan of attack.

After the *frag-order*, the lane grader changed to a new the patrol leader to execute the raid.

I did fairly well through the mountain phase of the training with mostly passing evaluations. We refer to our final pass/fail as *go* or *no-go*. I received a *go* for that patrol, and with each *go*, I felt a success for each step along the way. Land navigation is paramount to success. For certain, if we had climbed that hill, and discovered it was the wrong location, I would have received a scathing critique, and a NO-GO for the patrol.

Ranger School was surely a challenge. It was eight weeks of hell! We were tested every day as we went from a

starting phase at Fort Benning, Georgia, then to the mountains at Dahlonega, Georgia, and finally in December, to the *Florida Phase*, which we also called *Swamp Phase*. Though Florida is a popular state for vacations, I do not recommend beach time in December, anywhere close to Egland Air Force Base.

I thought I had been in deep swamps already at Fort Stewart Georgia. They were sometimes waist deep. But for my first combat patrol in Florida, we took rubber boats down the river. We reached a point where we planned to disembark from the rafts and take a hard right into the swamp that bordered the river. I had a good mental and physical shock in the cold water, and the swamp was chest deep! I remember the raid we performed on the position on the far side of that swamp, and our return through the chest deep water. We returned to the river where the boats were under guard. We made our way down river to our patrol base. The temperature in that Florida swamp, and the river made for a freezing cold adventure. At the patrol base we could change out of our soaking and freezing uniforms. That was the coldest night I had remembered in all my life.

The tests and challenges were intense beyond measure, and I don't have words to describe. I cannot say they were a lot of fun, but once we met expectations, and after the pain subsided, we were all left feeling the thrill of accomplishment, and our call of the wild!

situations and events. Just like my father encouraged me, *I put one foot in front of the other!*

I admit also that in the 82nd Airborne in 1973 life was fairly mundane. There was a level of boredom among the troops in general. We had some challenges, but minimal compared to what I would face in the years ahead.

We participated in large exercises to include work with armored personnel carriers, and also the yearly airborne exercise with the Marines at Camp Lejeune. We marched in road movements that seemed we were marching to hell and back. I say that was surely a challenge. For non-Veteran readers, I have some stories of experiences and memories, and I wonder, how you may compare to what experiences are common for other nineteen-year-old Americans?

I remember my first live fire exercise after artillery had fired and we followed with a combat raid to close with and destroy enemy positions. The artillery shrapnel was still smoking hot and I examined the shrapnel large enough to split heads or sever arms and legs. The chunks of shrapnel were irregularly shaped, rough and jagged. They were stacked with multiple layers of razor sharp edges. That lesson and more opened my eyes, and I felt determined to learn more and train for perfection. I knew that if U.S. artillery produced such lethal shrapnel, so did our Soviet enemy. I have seen that mutual challenges instill *esprit de corps*, pride and reduce boredom that was so common there in 1973.

My First Night Jump

One thing that I can say about airborne operations at Fort Bragg even in 1973, we jumped often and in varied conditions to test preparedness and skill. We jumped in operations large and small. My first night jump was a battalion jump. As the new guy in my platoon, I had been assigned as a

radio operator and that added a heavy radio to pack for the jump and carrying a special container for heavy equipment. I don't think that is used anymore because modern rucksacks can carry most anything including the kitchen sink! The heavy equipment bag expanded beyond the normal load of a paratrooper depending what special equipment you needed to jump. The full bag hangs in front below the reserve parachute. The full bag starts at a minimum weight of "damn heavy" and gets heavier depending on the platoon equipment that is packed for the jump.

I had already taken my *cherry jump* which is the very first jump you have after the first five in Jump School. When assigned to an AIRBORNE unit, that cherry jump calls for initiation rituals. I believe this night jump with the heavy equipment bag and radio was my seventh jump and it was a doozy. I must have had a lopsided and poor door position and bad exit from the aircraft. I needed a shove out the door just because of the load I was carrying. I was on wobbly legs and needed some help. I believe I did not make a strong exit and that resulted in a sloppy deployment of my parachute. The result was that my parachute cords wrapped over my main chute and I had a *Mae West*. That is an affectionate term that describes when the deployed parachute appears as a large two-cup brassiere rather than a full, round, and normal parachute. It is not a good thing at all. The speed of descent is much faster.

I was still just eighteen and a rookie jumper. So young, and just two months out of Jump School. I looked up after my 4,000 count. I saw my *Mae West* and I knew my dilemma. The proper thing is to pull the reserve parachute with certain procedure to bunch together the nylon and to thrust out the reserve so it does not tangle with the poorly deployed main parachute. I was falling fast and remembered a friend in training. He had a *Mae West* and pulled his reserve and had a

tangle with his main chute. That resulted in his accident and a broken back.

That went through my mind as I was falling fast with my Mae West. *I decided not to pull my reserve parachute.* I rode it in and landed very hard. I had read before that injuries are less severe with traumatic events when a person lets out a *holler*, so I hit the sandy drop zone and I hollered! I think that was on the *Salerno Drop Zone*. I laid there for a short moment to survey and felt my body so I could determine if I had been injured. I was surprised that I was fine and not crippled by the impact. I stood up, rolled up my parachute and moved out.

I felt like a cat that had landed on its feet or maybe I had more lives to live. I walked through the dark to our assembly point and my friend had just arrived also. We were turning in our parachutes and I told him quietly with some excitement. “Hey, Willie, I rode down with a Mae West!” He asked if I pulled my reserve, and I responded, “No, I rode it all the way.”

Wow. That is not often that a jumper rides a Mae West without pulling the reserve parachute. I walked away from that jump, and I was happy for that. But as I told my story, who was behind me? The battalion commander was right there. The Lieutenant Colonel was right behind me and gave me a piece of his mind! He was alarmed and direct. He spoke to me in terms of life and death. He explained “Soldier, don’t you know what may happen when nylon cord rubs against nylon parachute? Do you know the friction that is generated? Your parachute may rip wide open and you fall like a sack of rocks from 1,200 feet!”

I never saw the Lieutenant Colonel again, and I never had another Mae West. I wish the incident would have been noted in my jump log, but I’m very happy it is not in my

medical record. By the way—Willie is still my friend after forty years and more.

My first night jump was memorable.

Volunteer as an Army Ranger

Back at Fort Bragg, I continued with the daily routine of training as we prepared for our exercise with the Marines at Camp Lejeune. Meanwhile, I also volunteered for a new assignment. The Army Rangers were forming again as a full battalion. They were taking volunteers from many units. After my time at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, I wanted something new and challenging. Well, I surely found that at Fort Stewart Georgia.

After my first assignment, I had much to learn. I would soon have many experiences I never had in life, or as a soldier. Later, the Rangers gave me a new taste of the Army. I left my comfort zone to face the intensity of an elite unit. I accepted challenges that I never had been exposed to. I learned much of daily life as a man, as a soldier, and I learned what only comes from tough challenges.

This was not an experience like one might have in college. It was an experience of physical challenges and perseverance. Never had I understood the true meaning of *drive on*. I learned that and much more at Fort Stewart and in the First Ranger Battalion.

In early 1974, the 1st Ranger Battalion was still a provisional unit. That meant it had not been activated officially. It was a skeleton staff waiting to receive the full force of soldiers to fill the ranks of three line companies and a headquarters company. I arrived at Fort Stewart in the spring of 1974, still before the battalion had been activated. The battalion was officially activated on August 20, 1974. The headcount of our fully staffed battalion filled quickly with

Our Woods Lost to Islam

Closer to home, and prior to our challenging treks through the mountains and before we started camping on the trails, we found a large rock in the woods behind our house. At that time, I think my sons were not much older than six and eight years old. Maybe they don't even remember. There were acres and acres of forest and we had room to roam for hours. We tied a rope to a tree and used the rock as a launching platform to swing like Tarzan. It was good fun.

We also sat together on that rock and it reminded me when I sat with my father and brother on a large rock that commanded a beautiful view of the lake in Ohio. Dad gave us important lessons from that rock. So many years later, I taught my sons the art of moving quietly through the woods and to speak softly without disturbing the sound of nature and the beauty of our surroundings.

Those woods behind our house were incredible. It was property of a local farmer who had refused to sell the land for development. He wanted to leave the forest untouched and provide wilderness freedom for his family. It was open to anyone in the neighborhood. We felt it would always be protected. Our dog was always roaming and sometimes disappeared into those woods for ten to twelve hours at a time. There was abundant wildlife. The dog was a hunter and sometimes she didn't want to come home. I know she felt the call of the wild, just as we did so often.

I cannot write of our pets on the hunt without mention of the two cats we had over the years. Our cats were special and sometimes followed us like dogs. Gumbo and Misty were dangerous to any mice and moles and birds making habitat in the woods. Those cats were always on the prowl outside if they were not sleeping inside. Of course they left presents for us on

the deck, right next to the door to the kitchen. The moles and mice would be mauled and munched, but the birds would always be mostly devoured. They left a bit of the carcass to share with us! The cats wanted us to taste the call of the wild.

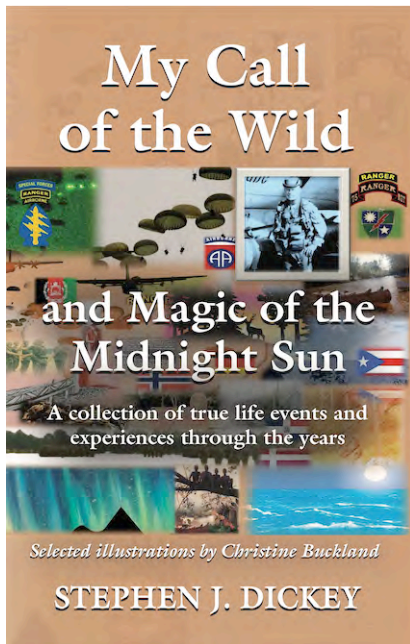
As my sons grew older, we would sleep out in the yard at times, or on the porch. Quite often in the summer, the woods and the whole neighborhood would be visited by owls of some kind and they would hoot in concert, calling to each other. Between the owls and summer crickets, it was musical like an orchestra, or at least like a choir. The crickets sang in soprano. Their song is a screech that I have only heard in heavily wooded areas. It sounds like the spray of a broken water main. The owls made their hoots in baritone. They paused the song of the crickets for just a moment. The crickets resumed and waited again for the owls to *hoot, hoot, and hoot*. From the song of the crickets, there must have been thousands. I imagine at any given time during the entertainment, there would have been two or four owls. We enjoyed musical nights in our neighborhood.

We also heard some animals in the woods that would cry and scream, as if fighting to the death. The screams were almost human. They made an eerie sound and we could only guess what kind of animals were in combat out there in the dark night. Maybe it was not a fight at all, but only baby owls or raccoons and mothers communicating at feeding time. This happened often. We waited awake many nights to hear this drama and the *wild call of the wild* from the forest. I sure hope my two sons remember.

* * *

Years later there was a mysterious fire at the old farmer's home. The old man was killed in that fire and I remember there were suspicious circumstances. I have no idea

what happened in the end. But the many acres were sold, and part of it was used to build a huge mosque and Islamic Center. It is the largest mosque and Islamic Center in the Greater Boston area. The beauty and wild nature of that property has been lost.



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