

The History Of The Sea Scouts



Scouting was founded in England by Sir Robert Baden-Powell, an army officer who had a love for the outdoors. As a boy he used to go boating and camping on the islands of England with his brothers. In 1876 he joined the British Cavalry. He became a self taught army scout when he was assigned to Africa. It was there that he learned many different ways to scout and live off of the land. He soon started to teach his fellow soldiers some of the skills that he had learned. His knowledge and teachings earned him rapid promotions to a colonel.

He was given command of an army outpost in the small town of Mafeking, South Africa. It was there that he decided to write a manuscript called *Aids in Scouting* for his fellow servicemen. In the year 1899 just after he mailed the manuscript out to England, the tiny outpost of Mafeking was attacked and besieged by the Boers.

The small tin-roofed town of Mafeking stood 650 miles north of Capetown. It was surrounded and routinely bombarded by the Boers who out numbered the British seven to one! This desperate situation caused everyone in the town to be put to work defending the army outpost. The youth were no exception.

A group of young boys led by a boy named Goodyear were organized into a messenger service. Baden-Powell watched facinated as these boys rode about the town delivering messeses on bicycles during heavy shelling attacks. This is when he found how boys could be just as valuable and as brave as men in an emergency. He kept that image in his mind for later use.

The Boers expected the Mafeking outpost to last only a few weeks and then fall. After holding on for 217 days against all odds, the British Army broke through the Boer lines and relieved Mafeking. Baden-Powell went home to England as a national hero.

Along with his surprise of fame came the surprise that his manuscript had been published into a book and that the book had sold over 50,000 copies. Another surprise was that most all of the books had been bought up by English boys!

It seems that a popular game of "Mafeking" caught on like wildfire with English boys during the long siege of the outpost. His "scouting" book was an essential

tool of the game, thus the record sales. Along with those sales and fame came many inquiries.

Boys all over England constantly wrote to the newly promoted General Baden-Powell for advice on how to be a better "scout". The General wrote back to his boy fans and told them to try to do "good turns". The letters kept coming in ever increasing numbers. The entire situation made him think of those brave lads at Mafeking. It was then that he decided to take a more deliberate role in shaping the character of these boys.

He decided to set up a national scouting organization for boys, but first he would have to test out his idea on a much smaller scale. In 1907 he wrote to the parents of 22 boys. He invited the boys to a cruise and campout just as he liked to do as a boy. He instructed them to wear khaki shorts as a uniform and bring camping gear of knives, hatchets, matches, and ropes. The boys also had to learn how to tie three knots. He drew the knots on the margins of the letters so that they could have a reference. The three knots that he mandated are still required knots for all Sea Scouts today. They are a reef knot, clove hitch, and a sheet bend.

Brownsea Island, England was the location he chose for the first campout. Brownsea Island is a small island situated in the middle of Poole Harbour, Dorset. Around a mile long, it is now owned by the National Trust and much of the island is a Nature Reserve. On the south-west corner of the island an area of 50 acres has been set aside for Boy Scout and Girl Guide camping on the original site that Baden-Powell chose back in 1907. It is a great island, but first they had to get there.

"On 29 July, 1907, Bill Harvey, one of the local boatmen, was waiting at the Customhouse Steps in Poole to take Baden-Powell, his nephew, and some of the boys from London out to Brownsea. They boarded his motor boat *Hyacinth* and set out on the two-mile crossing to the island. Bill Harvey landed the party on Seymour's Pier on Brownsea and returned to Poole, while Baden-Powell and the boys made their way the half mile along the island shore to the camp site."

The very first Boy Scouts were trained as Sea Scouts as well as campers. They were required to help with the lines and with other aspects of vessel operations. Some were required to stand watches as lookouts and man the helm while others were instructed in navigation skills.

Once on the island the boys were divided into four patrols- Curlews, Ravens, Wolves and Bulls. From the 31st of July to the 9th of August 1907 the boys

learned about camping, hiking, stalking, life-saving, boating and many more of the activities that Scouts still do today. After teaching them these basic skills, General Baden-Powell gave his "scouts" tasks to perform. The campout was a great success; it proved that boys could be trusted to organize and lead themselves and be put "on their honour". If that sounds familiar, it's because it's still in the Scout Promise.

On return from this first campout, Baden-Powell offered his ideas to existing youth organizations, but none of them were interested. So, he wrote "Scouting for Boys" in 1908 as a weekly pull-out in a boy's magazine. This became very popular, and all over the country boys began forming themselves into "patrols". After publishing some more notes for adult leaders, patrols joined together to form "troops", and "Scouts" as we know it was organized. A stone has been erected on Brownsea Island to commemorate the 1907 camp.



This rare photo shows Robert Baden-Powell instructing the first Sea Scouts on board Bill Harvey's boat the *Hyacinth*. You can also see the first Sea Scout helmsman at the wheel.

Even though the first Scouts were both Sea Scouts **and** Boy Scouts in 1907, the actual Sea Scout organization was chartered in England in 1910. We know that Bill Harvey was the first Sea Scout skipper, but General Baden-Powell wanted a separate branch of Scouting devoted entirely to the teaching of nautical skills. He asked his brother Warrington Baden-Powell to head up the first specialized branch of the Boy Scouts. Warrington Baden-Powell agreed, and Sea Scouting was officially organized in England in 1910. Warrington then wrote the first official Sea Scout manual. It was called *Sea Scouting and Seamanship for Boys*. The manual sold well and Sea Scouting flourished. It was in that same year that Boy Scouts was organized in the United States.

Boy Scouting was brought to America by William D. Boyce. He discovered Boy Scouting while visiting London on business in 1909. Being new to the city, he became lost in a thick London fog. A lone Boy Scout spotted him wandering about obviously lost. The boy approached Boyce and set him in the proper direction.

Boyce offered to tip the boy for his help, but the boy would have none of it. He told Boyce that he had to do his "good turn" for the day. When Boyce asked about this "good turn" requirement, he was informed all about Boy Scouting. Boyce was fascinated by Boy Scouting. Even though he had missed his business appointment, he was determined to bring Boy Scouting to America. As he turned to get the Scout's name, the boy had mysteriously disappeared back into the fog just as mysteriously as he had appeared. A statue in London of the unknown Scout stands today.

Boyce did in fact bring Boy Scouting to America. He got his fellow business men to sponsor the new organization, and the Boy Scouts of America was officially chartered on February 8, 1910. Sea Scouting soon followed as BSA's first branch just as it did in England. It was organized in the U.S. in 1912- two years after the Boy Scouts of America. It took just about the same length of time to be officially recognized in America as it did in England.

Occasional acts of Sea Scout heroism in America were soon noticed. A Sea Scout wireless operator sailing on the schooner *Eastward* saved a score of lives by not abandoning his post. The ship began to sink fast, and he was ordered to send out a distress signal. He kept sending the distress signal while waiting for a response. Meanwhile, all hands and passengers were abandoning ship. Finally, just as he received an acknowledgement of his S.O.S., the ship went under with him still manning the radio. His body was never recovered. The public mourned his loss and recognized his bravery. In February of 1913 Secretary of the Navy G. V. L. Meyer issued an official order recognizing and endorsing the Sea Scout program.

The Sea Scouts soon played a key role in public service to the United States. They were heavily involved in scrap metal and rubber drives for both World Wars. During World War I Boy Scouts sold 200 million dollars worth of Liberty bonds and war Savings Stamps. They also distributed over 30 million pieces of government literature. The Sea Scouts had a role in these great accomplishments along with all of America's Boy Scouts, but it's in England where the Sea Scouts had a more direct role in the war. English Sea Scouts actually participated in the civil defense of their country by patrolling the dangerous waters around Great Britain.

Another mile stone for Sea Scouting came in 1927. Commander Richard Byrd organized an expedition to the South Pole. He was a supporter of the Boy Scouts, so he decided to take a Boy Scout with him on his expedition. A national essay contest was held for all Boy Scouts.

Paul Siple lived in Montpelier, Ohio and had earned just about every award that

Boy Scouts had to offer. He had over 60 merit badges and was an Eagle Scout. He had then become a Sea Scout on the Sea Scout Ship *Niagara* of Lake Erie. He wrote about his achievements and adventures in Scouting. He also pleaded to Byrd in his essay for more adventures. Paul Siple made it as one of the six finalists.

The six finalist were brought to New York amidst heavy publicity. Over the next ten days each finalist was interviewed by expedition officials, Scout leaders, and by Byrd himself. Not everyone could agree on who would be chosen, so Byrd came up with a plan. He asked all of the finalists to pick one of the other finalist that he would want to go on the expedition with. All of the other five finalist chose Paul Siple. The decision was final; Paul had won.

Sea Scout Paul Siple soon left for the South Pole with Commander, later Admiral, Byrd. Before Paul sailed away his mother said, "If the Lord wanted you to be selected to go to the South Pole with Commander Byrd, then the Lord will bring you back safe." Paul not only came through it all safely, he was a credit to the expedition. The newly promoted Admiral Byrd wrote, "Paul Siple took up work in the expedition as a man among men. He stood regular deck watches on shipboard and turned himself into an able-bodied seaman on a full-rigged sailing vessel." He went on to write about Paul's accomplishments as a zoologist and scientist.

Paul Siple was a hard worker and a great team member on the 14 month long expedition. Siple went back to the South Pole in 1939 as the leader and chief biologist of his own Marie Byrd Land Exploring Party expedition. He was in charge of the U.S. Antarctic West Base for two years. He returned to the U.S. in 1941 with newly discovered lichens and mosses for further scientific study. His services and expertise were called upon to properly equip U.S. troops for climate extremes- both deserts and polar regions. He was given a commission as a major in the U.S. Army.

It was in the years leading up to World War II that the Sea Scouts developed their current ranking system for the program's youth. The person primarily responsible for developing that ranking system was Commander Thomas J. Keane, USN. He served in England during World War I where he received the Order of the British Empire award. After WWI he served as the National Director of Sea Scouting in America. That's when he created a uniform ranking system for all Sea Scouts. Although the requirements for achieving each rank has changed throughout the years, the ranking system has remained the same. The ranks for the youth are as follows:

Apprentice- teaches basic safety and seamanship.

Ordinary- teaches advanced seamanship skills.

Able- teaches leadership and advanced seamanship skills.

Quartermaster- teaches everything needed to lead in all aspects of the program.

The Sea Scouts came to the aid of our country again for World War II. The U.S. fleet was at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, and the Navy scrambled to mount a Pacific defense. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox had Patrol and Torpedo Boats mass produced as a Pacific defense until we could get the larger ship yards into full production. Knox also put out a call for 5,000 experienced officer recruits to operate the new PT Boats and teach the inexperienced crews. They were thankful that they had been promoting the Sea Scouting program, because an officer read the request and immediately flew to Washington, D.C. to talk with Knox. He informed Knox that the U.S. had over 27,000 fully trained and experienced boat operators. They were an organized nautical training program with their own ranking and advancement system with their own training vessels. They were the Sea Scouts! He knew, because he was once a Sea Scout himself. Knox was flabbergasted, and said that they were a "God Send". He wrote a letter to the Chief Executive of the Boy Scouts of America Dr. James E. West. He asked West for his help in recruiting the Sea Scouts into the Navy. In his letter Knox wrote, "They have earned this good reputation, because those who are already in the Navy have shown that they have been trained in two of the most important essentials of the good sailor- character and seamanship." Knox went on to write, "The type of training the Sea Scouts have had peculiarly fits them for a new type of service for which the Navy is now in the process of procuring officers."

Dr. West responded to the Secretary's letter by writing his own letters. Dr. West wrote to all of his Sea Scout skippers asking for their best Scouts for a special Navy officer program. Over 8,000 Sea Scouts applied. Nearly all were accepted and put through a highly condensed officer training program, the emphasis was placed on Navy regulations rather than nautical training. The recruits were commissioned as Naval officers in a fraction of the time as the other officer training programs. They were then immediately assigned to the PT Boats and other various vessels.

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz later in 1947 said that Boy Scouts represented 40% of the one million men in his command, however they had won 60% of the decorations for valor. The Admiral said, "I am happy that Secretary Knox lived long enough to see full justification of his faith in the Sea Scouts."

The Sea Scouts that were too young to join the service stayed home to help sell



war bonds and collect raw materials as they had in WWI. In addition to those activities, they also took on a more direct role as the English Sea Scouts did in WWI. They patrolled the harbors and coastlines both on land and asea.

After WWII ended the Sea Scouts were renamed Sea Explorers in 1949. As part of the Exploring program they participated in a national reforestation project. In April of 1954 the Sea Exploring Ship *Ithica* planted the 1 millionth tree of the project. It was a White Spruce planted in the honor of six former *Ithica* Sea Scouts that were killed in action during WWII.

In 1964 the Sea Exploring program was revamped to appeal to the more modern lifestyles of teenagers. A new *Sea Exploring Manual* was published in 1966 to go with the new program. An additional manual entitled *Handbook for Skippers* was rewritten and published in 1971 to support the program's leaders as well. In 1971 girls were officially allowed into the Sea Exploring as part of the new program.

The program gained more interest from young women, and soon the number of female members overtook the number of male members. Most of the ships are now co-ed. The ships that are all female generally have more members than those of the all male ships.

The Sea Scouting program has changed again. On August 8, 1998 Boy Scouts incorporated the Sea Scouts into a new program known as Venture Scouts. The name Sea Explorers was dropped and we were officially renamed as Sea Scouts again. Venture Scouting encourages more controversial issues to be discussed in an ethical group study setting. These ethical discussions specifically deal with it's membership requirements. The old ridged rules of membership requirements, or some might say membership barriers, have been removed from Venture Scouting. This new classification of the Boy Scout program allows the Sea Scouts more independence than ever before. It also places more responsibilities on all of it's membership.

The Sea Scouts now have the world's seventh largest fleet of vessels. They range from a 200 foot permanently moored ship in England and our own 180 foot fully operational vessel to the smallest rowboat. The vessels vary in type as well as size. They are sailboats, power boats, and canoes. Some are moored at large piers, floating docks, at anchor, or trailered. Some are even chartered for cruises. Regardless of the type or size of the vessels, they are the pride of each Sea Scout ship.

The Sea Scouts have a rich and varied history, but they have an even more promising future. They adapt to change and can therefore last for many more years to come. There's room for many more young men and women to register with the program as well as adult leaders. Today the program has over 6,500 youth and over 2,200 adult leaders. Although these numbers pale in comparison to the pre-World War II numbers, it is the fastest growing program of the Boy Scouts. Maybe it's because Venture Scouting is opening the Sea Scouts to a more diverse membership. Maybe it's because there's so many different types of ships, or maybe it's just because people love boating.

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