

Rosarito

SPRING 1969

Everyone jeered and applauded loudly waiting for the last large bottle rocket to be launched. Someone in the dark inadvertently stepped on the rocket's long stem breaking it and leaving it dangling a foot from its red paper-wrapped body. One of the students yelled, "Just break it off and shoot it!" The ignorant chaperones did just that.

As soon as launched the rocket's trajectory went array. It flew erratically amongst the group of spectators. Students were dodging and diving to the ground desperately avoiding its unguided path. It hit a young man's arm and continued on careening off the next chest before powering into my eye. Instantly my eye swelled shut. The rocket finally hit the ground a few yards from me in a deafening explosion, leaving my ears ringing.

The concerned counselors sweep through the group asking if everyone was all right. I moved in quiet agony away avoiding embarrassment while trying to nurse my wounds and retrieve my bearings. In the dark, they never saw me.

Previously, right before Easter break, during my sophomore year in high school, I attended a Campus Life's Christian student association meeting and handed a flyer denoting a new offshoot organization name Alpha Chi. This was a San Diego countywide boy's only club. The flyer announced the club's first three-day retreat to Rosarito Beach in Mexico. I immediately paid the fifty-dollar fee and signed up for their weekend trip scheduled in the upcoming May.

The day arrived and I excitedly drove to the designated meeting place at the old College Avenue Baptist Church. It was Friday morning and the parking lot was filling with anxious teenage boys. I was the only guy in attendance from my school.

Around nine o'clock the forty-six male teenagers and two adult male chaperones boarded the outdated school bus and drove off to Mexico. An addition two more chaperones drove their personal vehicles and met us on the beach.

We arrived two hours later. Rosarito is thirteen miles south of Tijuana on the old road leading to Ensenada. It's was a small roadside community consisting of a dilapidated gas station and a bar and a small market-souvenir combination shop surrounded by scattered shacks and sub-par dwellings.

Directly across the road from the businesses was the pristine desolated Rosarito Beach. Just north of the beach was nothing but sheer coarse sand and dirt bluffs and plateaus. We set up our camp on the largest plateau overlooking the massive Pacific Ocean filled with non-stop roaring waves breaking upon the sandy beach.

We spent the afternoon mingling with newfound friends. A couple of the guys brought surfboards and made the short hike down a slippery sand trail to our private beach area. I wish I had known to bring my board.

Late afternoon two counselors announced that they when going to the market to buy penny bottle rockets. Everyone started scrambling through their backpacks searching for dollar bills to purchase their personal stash. Figuring a couple hundred-penny rockets would suffice I forked over two crinkled one-dollar bills. They returned an hour later and divvied up the highly prized treasure. What they spent an hour doing in Rosarito is beyond me?

For dinner, we each received a portion of a delicious fire-roasted chicken with an abundance of potato chips coupled with a Shasta soft drink of our choosing. It proved difficult balancing my chicken dinner on the thin paper plate. I ended up with many gritty sandy bites.

Penny rockets are designed to shoot and explode. The red paper, gun powered filled fuel unit is attached to a stabilizing straw guaranteeing a straight line of flight. After lighting the fuse, the firecracker becomes airborne and flies fifteen to twenty feet before exploding.

After dinner on this dark new moon night, the fireworks came out. The chaperones had also purchased half a dozen large rockets attached to four-foot stems. With everyone loosely gathered around them, they commenced shooting the rockets out over the ocean. The rockets' fuses would crackle and sparkle while burning towards the propulsion unit. A few seconds later the rocket shot, whistling loudly through the quiet night air. Seventy feet or so later the rocket exploded with a thunderous bang and brilliant flash lighting up the night sky and ocean below it.

Following the final large rocket's catastrophic flight, the time arrived for the bottle rocket war. Reeling in all the excitement no one seemed to notice the continuing swelling of my one-eyed contorted face.

We split into two groups. My group scaled a small plateau and the opposition assembled in the flat below us. We were set to fire our penny rockets at each other. The war started!

My team was lighting and raining rockets on them as fast as we could while they were trying to do likewise towards us. We had a distinct advantage. They couldn't escape the longer range of our rockets downward flight while most of their rockets couldn't reach the height of our position.

You need two hands to fire a bottle rocket, one hand holding the ten-inch straw stem while the other hand lighting the fuse. I laid my excess inventory on the ground in front of me but most of the others, not wanting the chore of reaching to the ground to retrieve their next missile, stuffed them in a top front pocket of their shirt. Not a good idea!

During our barrage, one rocket accidentally landed in an enemy's filled pocket. All his rockets started exploding at once in a massive display of light and noise during which he frantically tried to tear off his shirt. His personal calamity continued until everyone decimated. This scenario repeated twice more before our defeat. Their team was made up of slow learners.

We were defeated for one reason, Counselor Ray. Ray was huge at least six foot four and weighing three-hundred-twenty pounds. Before his retirement and subsequent move to San Diego, he had previously been a profession football linebacker for the Green Bay Packers.

He witnessed the demise of his team and decided to take matters into his own hands. As soon as someone in our squad noticed him scaling the cliff to our plateau every one of us lined the edge and commenced our attack solely on him. Unfazed or deterred, Ray crested the top and entered our domain. We scattered!

Ray, convinced he had the upper hand, fearlessly walked up to one of my teammates. He lit a bottle rocket, grabbed the neck of his victim's t-shirt, and ripped it down past his chest, exposing skin while leaving the remainder of his shirt still encompassing our soldier's abdomen. Using the attached half-shirt handle he held his victim captive and with increasing pressure pushed the exploding end of a bottle rocket hard into the bare chest until it burst. Exploding gunpowder on your bare skin hurts!

Counselor Ray went through our unit repeating the torture. We could not stop him. He declared himself the victor and we agreed.

The evening's excitement wasn't over. We maintained our groups and set up to play capture the flag. Their team was shirts and obviously, our already half-naked team was skins.

This is a game where each side tries to infiltrate the opposition's territory and snatch their flag before returning it un-captured back to their side. When an opposing team member tackled a foe, the tagged person is out of play for the remainder of the game.

Our flag, someone's destroyed t-shirt, placed on the edge of a cliff overlooking the beach and theirs somewhere high on one of the plateaus. We met in the middle and Ray declared, "Game on!" Both groups scattered across their respected territories.

I stood at the edge of a dirt cliff somewhere between the flags trying desperately to see through the darkness with my one good eye. I suddenly heard two sets of runners approaching me with their feet crunching in the hard course sand. I never saw them but felt the wind as they both ran close past me; one after the other straight off the cliff.

A while later one of my teammates came up to me and said it was my turn to guard the flag. I asked him to point me in the direction of it. I eventually found it unattended lying on the ground overlooking the ocean. Guard is the worst position in the game with very little action. I stood bored over our flag for the longest time. My head pounding like an old one-lung steam engine.

I finally started to wonder if someone would take the time trudging to the shoreline and following the beach ending directly below our base position; eventually finishing by scaling the cliff and seizing our flag. I wandered to the cliff's edge and strained my one eye trying to detect any movement.

Unbelievable! Counselor Ray was crawling up the steep loose sand cliff on his hands and knees ten feet below me.

I was half his weight and stood five foot eight inches high. I hadn't a hope of capturing the huge man but without hesitation, I jumped onto the monster yelling, "You're captured!"

As we were sliding down the embankment Ray retorted, "The hell I am" and reached around with a huge hand. He grabbed me and threw me towards the beach. As my body passed him, I managed to latch onto one of his feet and repeated, "You're captured!" Instead of acknowledging, Ray grabbed me and tried again. For the second time, I clung to his foot.

I climbed up his body. As previously, we started sliding, further down the bluff. I continued yelling, "I got you! You're captured!"

Disgusted, Ray managed to turn over knocking me off his back and said, "Enough of this shit!" He picked me up threw me to the beach. I landed hard in the sand thirty feet below.

Ray got our flag and headed back for the win. Laying there in the dark I heard a few faint voices crying out, "I got you." "You're caught." "You're out." as Ray bulldozed over my teammates on his final touchdown run.

Counselor Ray stood in the middle of the battlefield waving our piece of t-shirt and declaring victory. The game was over!

The following day was uneventful. Groups of students stood around most of the day swapping stories and better getting to know one another. Not that anyone could overlook it; no one asked about my obvious swollen out-of-shaped face and closed eye.

In the early afternoon, a nude woman showed up down the beach to sunbath. Even though she was too far away to see clearly, we all wasted an hour gawking.

After another fine camp dinner, we made a huge stacked-pallet bonfire and sat around discussing Christ, and the way good Christians should talk and present themselves to prospective converts.

I silently reflected on my previous night's battle with the linebacker on the cliff. How ironic his locker room language had been.

By the time, I got back home the next day my face was turning a multitude of red, blue, and purple colors. My Medal of Honor did not reopen for a week.
It had been a glorious trip.