

Norman Clyde's Favorite Norman Clyde Story
by
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It was August in the late 50s. My brother-in-law, Bob, and I were hiking up the north fork of Big Pine Creek on my second backpacking trip - ever. We came upon a strange procession descending the trail. A group of eight military men, Marines as I recall, in fatigue uniforms were bearing a litter with a black plastic bag – a bag we realized probably contained a human body.

One of the litter bearers with three stripes on his sleeve asked as we approached, “You guys going as far as Third Lake?” We replied in the affirmative and he asked if we would be willing to share some of our food with a guide that was camped there. Sure we would! He then explained that, yes, indeed, they were carrying a body - a person who had been missing for a week and had just been found the day before by the guide camped at Third Lake. The deceased had been discovered in a couloir near the base of Temple Crag. The sergeant threw in a little aside that sort of caught our attention – the guide found the body by listening for the buzzing of flies.

As Bob and I approached our proposed campsite at Third Lake an old man wearing a funny hat - an old campaign hat – came bounding out to the trail. “Would you fellas be willing to share some food with me?,” he asked. Realizing this must be the sergeant’s “guide”, we said we’d be happy to. He explained that he was expecting an air drop that afternoon, but if it didn’t happen he would be hard pressed for food. We reassured him and he disappeared back to his campsite.

We set up our camp just above him, just off the trail, next to Third Lake. We had camped in this same spot the prior year on our first Sierra backpack trip. We liked the site because it was next to a rock outcrop that jutted out into the lake allowing one to sit on its top, thirty feet above the lake’s surface, and stare directly across at Temple Crag’s north face.

Late that afternoon, we heard the drone of an airplane ascending the canyon. A single-engine Cessna appeared in front of Temple Crag. We figured this must be the old guide’s airdrop coming up. We stood on top of the rock outcrop and watched as the plane circled in front of Temple Crag and then, quite abruptly, turned and headed straight toward us. The pilot had descended to about 100 feet off the lake’s surface and as he reached our perch, he cut the engine, opened his door and yelled at us, restarted the engine and banked around - headed back to the other end of the lake. I didn’t quite get it all, but Bob figured he had yelled, “Did they get the body out?”

Okay, they did, but how the hell do we tell the pilot? He headed back straight at us again. This time he cut the engine, opened the door and flipped a piece of paper out.

Now, get this. It was an 8 ½ by 11 sheet folded in fourths and it fluttered down directly into Bob’s hands. Again, the plane restarted and retreated to the end of the lake. The note read, “If they got the body out, hold hands, if they didn’t, wave.” As the plane approached us on its third pass we were holding hands and the pilot wagged his wings indicating he understood. Now what?

Here he came again. This time quite a bit higher off the lake and he kicked out a small red parachute with a pack dangling from its shrouds. Down it came directly into the top of the highest pine tree in sight, right next to the trail. As we stood staring up at it, our brains still a little rattled from all the aerobatics, when up the trail at an accelerated pace came the old guide. “Hey, that’s my food! One of you young fellas want to scramble up there and get it?”

Bob was already checking out the lower branches and immediately started up. He cut the shrouds and the pack dropped to the trail. “That pilot was Bob Symons, a superb bush pilot, thanks boys”, the old guide yelled over his shoulder as he hustled back down to his camp. I stood staring up at the chute, still draped over the top of the tree, and decided that it would be a great souvenir. So up I went. After a long struggle, I managed to untangle the shrouds and returned to the ground with my red nylon/silk trophy and enough pine sap to last Mickey Mantle two seasons.

We didn't see the old guide again that day and he was gone the following morning before we had our campfire lit. Remember those days, when you could have a campfire at Third Lake?

In 1963, after having been introduced to mountaineering and having read everything I could on the subject, I realized "the old guide" was the legendary Norman Clyde.

Thirty years later, having moved to Bishop, California, I attended the first annual Norman Clyde birthday gathering at Bishop's Mill Pond Park. These were potluck affairs to honor the memory of Norman Clyde. At this first meeting, of the only three we held, the custom developed for those with fond memories to stand up before the crowd and relate their favorite Norman Clyde stories.

It was at this first gathering that I told my airdrop story - my favorite and my only Norman Clyde story - and after the telling, a young man walked up to me and asked if I knew the name of that bush pilot - I hadn't mentioned his name in this first telling. I told him, yes, it was Bob Symons. He blurted out, "I thought so. He was my grandfather!"

I told my favorite story again the following year at the second Norman Clyde birthday gathering, and again, as I finished, I was approached - this time by a fellow high school teacher. He said, "You know I used to invite Norman over for dinner about once a year in his later years when he was barely existing at Baker Creek. He really appreciated those dinners and he loved to tell stories. In fact, the one you just told was his favorite! He would chuckle throughout especially when telling about the tree climbing. He was 73 years old when that took place. He couldn't have climbed that tree to save his soul. Thank God for the boys."

At the third gathering, and regretfully, the last, I stood up when my turn came and announced, "I'm not going to tell MY favorite Norman Clyde story this year. I'm going to tell NORMAN CLYDE'S favorite Norman Clyde story." And then proceeded to tell the airdrop story again.

Years later, another colleague at the high school asked if I would help his wife with a computer installation. I taught computer science at Bishop Union High School and was often asked to help people with computer problems. I agreed and when I entered their apartment I was astonished by the plethora of airplane photos that papered the walls. I asked if she was a pilot. "No, but my father was", she answered, "He was a well known bush pilot around here."

"His name wasn't Bob Symons was it?" I asked in disbelief. "As a matter of fact, yes it was", she answered. That initiated an immediate retelling of the 1958 airdrop. She was not at all surprised by his cutting the engine and yelling at us. She said when she was about nine years old she used to fly with him and he would often use that tactic to communicate with the ground. She said it used to scare the hell out of her. Bob Symons was killed in a glider accident only a few years after he dropped that pack for Norman.

I visit that Third Lake campsite every time I hike Big Pine Canyon and tell the story to anyone willing to listen.