

The Militia, Where I Learned to Fight with an Axe

Bork (Jim Lande)

Fall, 1969. We sat at the table on the right side of the Student Union lobby. Political organizations- Young Republicans, SDS, whatever- used the table to hand out flyers and sign up new members. The groups had more in common with each other than with passersby- shallow, unsupported opinions and an inflated sense of importance. Therefore, many of us sat at the table regardless of which group had rights to it that day. We pretty much owned the space.

Al Geraldi and I once used the table to recruit mercenaries for the Nigerian army. The Nigerian army was suppressing a revolt by the Biafrans, one of three principal ethnic groups. News analysts said that two million Biafrans would starve to death. The thought horrified most people and many students were aghast that we would recruit students to help with murder.

Al and I explained that the revolt would be over before there was much starvation. (Coincidentally, this turned out to be true.) We argued that it would be stupid to fight for a loser and prolong the suffering. And, we added, we had been very well paid. I knew nothing about things military, so I claimed that my stint mostly entailed driving a tractor. I said that I never heard a shot fired in anger. Al was more forthcoming about exploits. He looked over our potential recruits and explained that our employers wanted white men with guns. It was a local tradition.

A few guys signed up for additional information. Many people got upset and that night the black student association held an emergency meeting to pass resolutions about us. We met them the following day with a new sign- collecting floatable material to save California from sinking in the Pacific. We lost our table for a couple weeks. We recouped by getting hundreds of signatures on a petition to return the campus to the Indians.

So there we were, Fall 1969. Al dropped by and said that he was going to the South Chapel lawn. He wanted to get in the big fight.

"What fight?"

"A bunch of guys are going to fight. Big knives, axes, the works."

"Come on, Al," we all said. We knew better.

"Stay here if you want."

"Why are you going?" we asked. "What's this got to do with you?"

"I've always wanted to fight with an ax."

"Come on, Al, you're kidding us. What are they fighting about?"

"What difference does it make?" Al shrugged his big shoulders and knew we'd follow him. We walked to the other side of the Chapel. Students played ball, walked to classes, and sunbathed. A small group watched

two guys with swords and shields. Bruce Blackistone, CC Nucker, Greg Canter, Earl Stromberg, Jim Cooper, and Bill Marlow were organizing a reenactment of the battle of Hastings.

They represented the part of the fencing club that craved more action and fewer rules. Bruce envisioned a few dozen people with tunics, swords, shields, axes, bows and spears. We learned the essentials. Whack the other guy on the shield and then hold your shield forward to make a good target.

The organizers began showing up in the Student Union, wearing black capes and masks. Running sword fights threaded through the halls and stairwells. The loser would crumple with a scream. The winner would sneer and stomp off. This was supposed to recruit troops.

The mob assembled on a Friday morning in mid-October. About two dozen participants, mostly male, met at the top of the hill. We wore burlap tunics over our blue jeans. Greg- forevermore Barchan- brought a dozen plywood circles with some straps stapled on. The Saxons defended the hill at Hastings with "similar" Viking style shields. The Norman shields had been cut from ornate wooden campus parking lot signs. They looked neat, but weighed a ton. The Normans got most of the swords. We Saxons mostly got clubs.

The best costumed guys got the speaking parts- William the Conquerer, Harold Godwinson, and the Bishop Odo. The battle opened up with the principals shouting speeches at each other. Then the Normans charged up the hill. We heaved our throwing axes. These cardboard and duct tape jobbies flew like wadded up paper. A few archers shot padded arrows. Shields clashed as the lines met. The lines backed away a step and the fighters began whacking weapons on shields. A few people screamed as they died. The Normans retreated in good order.

The shouting resumed and the archers scurried to recover arrows. They had to- they had started the battle with three each. The Normans came again, and then made a ragged retreat. The right side of the Saxon line- Al and I- charged after them. They turned and slaughtered us. We lay where we could see Harold take an arrow in the eye. The Normans quickly overwhelmed the remaining defenders.

The battle lasted fifteen minutes, so we did it a second time. That finished off most of the shields and weapons. The small audience applauded. We congratulated ourselves. We later discovered that the padding fell off of many of the arrows.

That Monday, the campus newspaper ran an article titled "South Mall Maul". The paper covered the event with a matter of fact tone. This gave the event some legitimacy. Besides, I liked pretending to fight with a club and shield. Bruce- Atli- established the Maryland Medieval Mercenary Militia as a campus club and appointed himself Warlord. He solidified his power by handing out a variety of offices- chief wench, armorer, scribe, etc. He said that we would recreate a battle every month or so.

We began a cottage industry of scavenging junk and creating costumes and weapons. Barchan took me to the machine shop in the Physics building to make swords and knives. He and Jim Cooper- Ragnar- found cloth and wood in the campus dump. I sewed a tunic out of a canvas tarp and covered it with overlapping tin squares. It jingled a little too much. We knew that some of our efforts looked silly, but we pretended that no one would notice from a distance. Fortunately, costumes and weapons didn't last long in battle reenactments. Our techniques improved. Ragnar figured out how to turn heavy gauge wire into chain mail. It took hundreds of hours, but looked great.

Someone discovered that the grand stairway in front of Frances Scott Key Hall contained 5 storage cells. Each cell had a steel door and about 100 square feet of floor space. The ceiling sloped from 3 feet high in the back to 12 feet high in front. A single bare bulb lit each cell. Three cells were locked. The other two were used for storing furniture and junk. We kept the best of the furniture and pitched enough stuff to clear one cell. This became the catacombs, our clubhouse and recruiting center right in the middle of campus.

The room was small and dark, almost a hidey hole. With so little space, the wenches generally sat on laps. The chamber became familiar, cozy and a fun place to hang out.

We wanted to look more authentic- to seem more authentic. We wanted to become rabble from 1066. We wanted to smell like rabble and act like rabble. Actually, we wanted to act like the Marx Brothers acting like rabble. Rehearsed fights could include long series of puns and insults. Some would end with a sudden thrust or slash. Some would end with a kick to the groin- the victim puffing his cheeks and falling over sideways. Perhaps both swords would break and the fight would continue in pantomime.

Somebody discovered the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) and got us invited to a tournament at the Shoreham Hotel. About a dozen of us marched through the lobby. We carried two cow skulls on poles and clanged our weapons against our shields. The manager rushed from an office. "What are you doing?" His voice was edged with panic.

"We're going to the tournament?"

"Put away the swords. What tournament?"

We explained that the SCA was somewhere out back, holding a medieval fair. He attempted to ease us out of the lobby.

"They're somewhere out back," Ragnar said. "Can't we just walk through the lobby?"

"Put away the weapons. Wrap them in something. No noise, no noise," he implored.

"It's like a theater group. The weapons are just props."

He looked at the swords. "You can't hold the weapons. Go quietly." He waved us through the lobby, looking around nervously.

Once we got on the lawn, Ragnar noted that there had been a lot of hotel security. He said there were at least six men in the lobby wearing sports coats and sunglasses. They were all short, dark, and strong looking. They watched us from their positions without moving, smiling, or talking.

It turned out that the Shah of Iran was staying in the Hotel. Fortunately, the Shah was not in the lobby. His Savak body guards had a reputation of shooting anything that looked like a threat.

We found the fair. We threw our stuff in a pile and then spilled on top of it. Ragnar prowled in the vicinity, obsequiously begging for scraps or gnawing on one of the cow skulls. He chased one apple core as it arced into the bushes, retrieved it, sat on his haunches, and happily consumed the prize. He also appeared to catch and eat flies. The rest of us ate soup with our fingers and wiped our paws on whatever was handy. We leached over their ladies, hoisting some over our shoulders and running off. Our wenches pulled knives when approached. We pointed to anything that looked valuable and whispered to each other. We laughed at the tournament combat. We were not invited back.

Atli once appointed me champion, apparently because he thought I might be plotting a coup. As champion, Atli noted, I would have to fight any of his enemies- myself included. My title evaporated, and I never held another position in the militia. I did, however, represent the militia in the student government elections. It turned out that the student government doled out money to campus organizations. One day I found Atli and a few others preparing our proposal. This struck me as a waste of time. I couldn't believe that they would give us any money.

"Where have you been?" Atli asked. "They gave us a hundred dollars for this year. I bet we can get twice as much for next year. We've got twice as many members."

"Really? Why'd they give us money?"

"Because they're stupid. They give money to all kinds of stupid things. We're just one more, and peanuts at that."

"Where's the money come from?"

"Activity fees, the \$45 they add to tuition each semester."

I had never thought about that fee before, because my father paid it. I pondered a moment, and then said that I didn't think it was right to get that money.

"Why not? We contribute to campus life as much as any of these other activities." Atli listed several dubious clubs and events funded by activity fees.

Barchan cut in. "Think of it as five bucks from each student in the militia- and it's money that they have to pay anyway."

"This whole business seems screwy. Why should a bunch of frats-" I quickly did the math. "Good Lord, there must be a quarter of a million dollars a year."

"Well," said Atli, "run for SGA president and change the system."

I didn't take this seriously. Barchan, however, immediately noted that he and I had some experience. We had successfully rigged the homecoming queen election in the fall. I don't know if Stu Robinson, the SGA president, appreciated our efforts on his behalf. The sorority girls who ran the event openly wept when the officials announced Stu's election. The school administration canceled the homecoming queen that year. The campus would have to wait for Madison Jones to see a male SGA president in a dress.

I suggested that Barchan ran. When I arrived the next day I found that people were already planning my campaign. I thought about backing out. I liked attention, but I also worried about looking too silly. Everybody pounded me on the back and congratulated me.

Atli explained that the campaign would have to be separate from the militia. Otherwise, the militia would no longer get any SGA money. Our fully separate vehicle would be the Monarchist Party. Everybody who wasn't an officer in the militia became a candidate.

Ragnar ran for vice president. Thorgood the Nude- a store dummy- ran for Treasurer. Interestingly, we had the only three candidates running for one office. Thus, we legitimately claimed to be the only party offering a choice.

The militia has never been a political organization. Our wide diversity of opinions and weapons argue against political discussion.

But that's politics and this was student government.

Our platform called for reducing activity fees and removing bailing wire from campus bushes. Yes, the bushes on campus were filled with bailing wire. The University of Maryland campus features a central mall crossed by numerous dirt paths [paved in 1990]. Legend says that the whole campus was a cow farm and

that the buildings were placed where the most cow paths converged. This might explain the buildings, but not the sidewalks. Rather than put sidewalks where students actually walked, the grounds crew attempted to control traffic by planting hedges. This didn't work, so they ran bailing wire across the gaps. I wrecked a knee when I didn't notice some newly installed wire. I hated that wire. Our campaign developed somewhat like smog. Lots of people made campaign posters and put them wherever they wanted. Slogans included "Vote Monarchist or you'll wake up screaming," "Vote Monarchist AND you'll wake up screaming!" "Divine Right," "Corruption you can trust!" "The peasants are revolting- vote Monarchist," and my favorite: "Vote Monarchist and you'll never have to vote again." Proclamations were issued challenging other candidates to single combat. Barchan obtained dozens of black crayons and supervised a campaign to write "Vote Monarchist" in every bathroom stall in campus.

The campaign took a funny turn. Madison Jones and several other campus radicals wanted to use the student government and the activity fees to oppose the war in Viet Nam. Madison resembled Rasputin and liked to kick any hornets' nest he could reach. He ran against the fraternities and galvanized a large commuter turnout. I voted for him and he won easily. As SGA president, he once wore a dress to a meeting with the board of regents. He said that he did this to support gay rights.

Madison did not have a true successor. I ran again the following year. Our whole slate ran again. Our campaign promises increased, including longer slower roaches and a fleet of Viking ships to protect the campus.

Tom Conroy thought we could draw a crowd in front of the Student Union if he hit me with his car. This wasn't any stupider than rolling down two flights of stairs, which I did at a party, just to see what it was like. Tom and I went to practice in parking lot #1.

I went over his front hood twice without breaking anything. The second trial run looked good enough to get lacross players to come running off of the practice field. Tom yelled that I was all right and gave me a solid kick to prove his point. I was pretty bruised and decided not to become a stunt man.

I didn't think that we had much future as a political party, either. The registrars finally struck Thorgood from the ballot. Still, we gathered a few hundred votes and didn't finish last.

The fleet of Viking ships was no idle promise. Campus organizations were allowed to obtain material from the state surplus warehouse. Somehow, this was parlayed into a twenty-five foot navy surplus whaleboat. The hull was double ended, and resembled a cross between a Viking ship and a bathtub. It cost a hundred dollars, which was recouped by selling the engine. A campus parking lot became the Sven Forkbeard boat yard.

I doubted the ship would ever leave the parking lot and contributed nothing to the effort. I was stunned to learn that the ship was in the water in late October. Atli announced that the maiden voyage would be from the Severn river down to Annapolis, then down the Chesapeake bay to St. Michael's Island. Atli had some sailing experience and he assured us that a fairly big ship would accompany us most of the way. We'd meet the big ship just outside Annapolis and they'd tow us if the wind wasn't right.

We assembled at Bill Marlow's parents' place on the Severn. There were nine of us, including three wenches and one younger brother. Atli assured us that we only needed four oars at a time and could put out eight in a sticky situation. Annapolis was about seven miles downstream. We shoved off at dusk with the current, tide, and a slight wind aiding our rowing. We made fairly good time running six oars as we passed under the various bridges crossing the Severn. We had one mishap. An oar got pinned back, cracking a strake and mashing Gandolf's hand.

The wind picked up and we raised sail. We were looking for a marker light called the spider, placed at the confluence of the Severn and the Chesapeake. There were lights in all directions. The wind increased some more and the waves began to rock us hard. We quickly slipped out of the river into the bay. It began to rain.

The wind and waves picked up some more, ripping away most of the steering board and causing cracking noises in the mast. We pulled down the sail and tried lashing an oar to the stern. The running lights went dead. The boat began to swing around. The waves slapped spray over the sides and through the oar ports.

We tried to regain control by rowing. Atli's intuition was to turn starboard and hope to gain the South river. This risked running into rocks, but Atli was more afraid of drifting into the shipping lanes.

Tankers were not going to notice a black wooden ship with no lights. By one o'clock in the morning, Atli, Marlow, and I were on the port side facing to bow, rowing backwards. The rest were sea hurt, sick or exhausted. We slowly crabbed the boat sideways into the South river.

About three in the morning, we spotted a 60' cabin cruiser a short way up the river. The mouth of the South River was sheltered by the point and calmer than the Bay. We maneuvered over to the large ship and grappled to the side. Ragnar was in favor of storming the vessel. Their deck was about six feet higher than our gunnels. To Ragnar's disgust, we settled for banging on their side and pleading for help.

I don't suppose the three people on the ship were expecting company at that hour. They were guests and the owner was somewhere else. They carped about us scraping their side, but reluctantly allowed us to tie up. C.C., Celeste and Christi climbed up and slept on board. The rest of us tried to stay out of the wind and above the water sloshing in the bilge.

The Coast Guard arrived after dawn and towed us to the nearest dock. Our boat looked like the inside of a dumpster. Paper bags holding clothes had dissolved. Gloves and food had been dropped into the bilge as people slumped off the oars. Bill Marlow discovered that someone sat on his duffle bag while they tried to pee in a cup. We hauled everything onto the dock to dry out. We again tried to rig one of the oars as a steering board, but that was hopeless. Bill called his dad, who came down to tow us back. We sat on the dock, wondering how we could have such hangovers without drinking anything.

The tow back took an hour or so. We began to feel better. Nobody cracked under the pressure, we functioned as a team. And, we could poke at our friends and say "Oh Boy, you should have been there, it was something."

The ship itself was in good shape. It was a while before we ventured far from the Marlows' dock. The Marlows were very good about bailing the boat after storms and hauling us out of trouble. We never did enough to deserve their kindness.

The ship was not much of a recruiting tool, however.

Worse, we were thrown out of the catacombs. This was a temporary setback. Barchan discovered a basement room in the armory that was empty, save several thousand ROTC coat hangers. Well, a coat hanger could be turned into two dozen links of chain mail. We moved in, exploiting this natural resource.

The campus ROTC used the Armory and there were a few general purpose classrooms in the basement. The building was, however, used for class registration at the beginning of the semester.

Students went to their departments to start the process. Advisors would create tentative schedules. Students would then get appropriate signatures and go to the main floor of the armory. Each department had a table with a big box of computer cards, each card representing a slot in a class. The department table would run out of cards as the classes filled. Students had to go back to their advisors if they couldn't get the classes on their tentative schedules. It took hours to work out a complete schedule. Students were then shunted to the basement for a series of stations that gave out parking stickers, collected survey information and checked various things. The last station took the course cards and collected tuition and fees. There we were, right in the middle of a stream of students who had been numbed by the process. We set up our own check points.

One line handed out blue slips. A second crew collected the blue slips. Another crew stopped students who had paid tuition and stamped their bills with "This Is A Waste of Time" or "Go to Hell." Some students questioned us and a few got really mad. We'd shrug, and tell them to go find our supervisor upstairs.

The lair in the Armory lasted through 1972. We played bridge and hall hockey outside the classrooms. Too many instructors complained about the noise. Sometimes we'd put Thorgood's head in a boot, tie fish line to the toe, and make it hop down the hallway. This cracked up students who could see the thing hop past the doorways.

We were finally booted up to the Student Union, to share space with other campus clubs. I guess that made it full circle, of course. I graduated about then.

The militia has survived and the annual battle of Hastings attracts a hundred of so people in costume. We didn't maintain the whale boat and it fell apart. Amazingly, a bank lent us money to build a bigger ship. The monarchist party may still exist and actually won a few SGA elections. That, however, is somebody else's story...