

The Patrol Method—The Only Method

By Bill Nelson, February 4, 2010

Initially the Boy Scouts of America did not utilize the Patrol Method. It wasn't until William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt introduced it in the late 1920s and wrote extensively about it in the 1936 edition of the *Handbook for Scoutmasters* that it became an integral part of American scouting. The BSA has found that the Patrol Method makes for better functioning Scout Troops, and better retention. In short, the Patrol Method is where the Patrols and their boy leaders run the program in the Troop. The adults stand aside and let the Scouts do it all. The Scoutmaster takes upon himself the role of leadership trainer, mentor, safety officer, and guide. The following in compiled form, is some of his Patrol Method wisdom.

At this point--if not before--some Scoutmaster will step forward and say, "That is all right, all you have been saying about The Patrol Method. But I have tried it in my Troop, and it just doesn't work!" And he goes on, "Take last week, for instance. We had our program all outlined, but the boys fell down on it. The Patrol Leaders had forgotten to prepare their Scouts, equipment was missing, our game leader didn't show up. I simply had to take over the meeting myself in order to keep it from being a general mix-up!"

Which altogether proves nothing against the Patrol Method, but on the contrary that the Scoutmaster wasn't using it. He proved it by making the mistake of taking over the meeting. And for two reasons: In the first place, the boy leader will expect him to do the same thing next time they fail and failure under those circumstances will mean nothing to them, will teach them nothing. And secondly, the Scoutmaster by his action showed all the members of the Troop that he had no faith in the leaders they had chosen, breaking down completely the respect for them.

The failure was the Scoutmaster's, not the boys', nor the Patrol Method's. He had failed to apply to himself the "test of the easy chair," and had not remembered the simple formula for success in using his Patrol Leaders: "*Train 'em, trust 'em, and let 'em lead!*"¹

Hillcourt instructs the Scoutmaster to trust the Scouts. Don't hide behind a corner to see if Johnny will do what is right, but trust that he will in fact do what is right. Hillcourt quotes Baden-Powell, "To get the best results, you must give the leader real, freehanded responsibility. If you only give partial responsibility, you will only get partial results." Praise the junior leader when they succeed, encourage them when they fail.

The trust must be within reason. Don't give him a job a Scoutmaster may not even be able to accomplish. Give him easy burdens and increase them as his leadership and Scoutcraft grow stronger.

Let Them Lead!

So again, "Train 'em, trust 'em, and let 'em lead!" And remember that that last point is of tremendous importance. Let them lead in practically everything. Let them work out their own problems, interfere as little as possible but be ever ready to give wise guidance--not when you think they need it, but when they seek it. Keep in mind that unwarranted, ill-advised interference discourages leadership and that those boy leaders of yours are "learning by doing." Mistakes, some of them serious, are bound to be made; therefore, be ever ready with a kindly and friendly spirit to urge them to try again.

Help them occasionally with constructive criticism. *But do your coaching on the side lines always, never in front of the Patrols.*

And then, when the Patrol Leader succeeds in his job, praise him for it. Commendation which is justified and not overdone is an absolute necessity. Such statements of approval

¹ Handbook for Scoutmasters by William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt, 1936, pg 223

should be made occasionally before the interested group. They like it, and so does the leader, as long as it is short, free from "soft soap," and genuine.²

Hillcourt presents some self examination questions that the Scoutmaster can periodically utilize to make sure he is using the Patrol Method to its highest advantage:

- ✓ "Do I *always* think of my Patrols in terms of the leaders? Do I always transmit announcements and information to the Scouts through the Patrol Leaders?"
- ✓ "Do I *always* answer the Scouts' questions about routine details by saying, 'Ask your Patrol Leader; he knows!' instead of giving them the answer myself, thus doing my part to develop in them a certain amount of respect for those leaders, to whom they have to look for vital facts and guidance?"
- ✓ "Do I keep asking the Patrol Leaders for specific pieces of information about their boys, such as advancement, progress, home conditions, finances?"
- ✓ "Do I stick these alleged leaders right out in front at *every opportunity* where they get a *feeling* of leadership?"
- ✓ "*Do I commend* them publicly whenever they show signs of taking responsibility, and do I *always* refrain from criticizing them before their group?"
- ✓ "When something goes wrong in one of those Patrols during a Troop meeting, say a little matter of discipline, do I jump on the boys themselves, or do I *first* call the Patrol Leader aside and point out the situation to him, making him realize that it is his responsibility to handle it?"
- ✓ "Those are *some* of the questions a Scoutmaster may ask himself. If his answer to most of them is "Yes!" then he is truly a leader of boy leaders. But not only that—*he is using the Patrol Method in his Troop!*"

Yes, siree, the Patrol Method does work, but it must be given its chance.

The Test of the Patrol Method

An old experienced Scoutmaster said once: "The test of the Patrol Method is in the easy chair!" His audience looked nonplused, so he elaborated his statement: "Get an easy chair and place it in a corner of the Troop meeting room. If you can sink into it just after the opening ceremony and just sit throughout the meeting, without a worry for its success, without lifting a finger or moving a foot until time comes for the closing-well, then your Troop is run on the Patrol Method—your boy leaders are actually leading."

That indicates the condition toward which you should aim for the future of your Troop. For unless a Troop makes use of the Patrol Method it cannot be considered a Scout Troop, since "the Patrol Method is not ONE method in which Scouting can be carried on. It is the ONLY method."

And the two-fold secret of success is simple:

- I. Make the Patrol the unit ALWAYS, in and out through thick and thin, for better and worse in victory and defeat, in games and on hikes, and in camp.
- II. Train your boy leaders for their positions, place the responsibility of leadership on them and let them exercise it.

Only as a Scoutmaster acts on this principle does he understand—and use—the Patrol Method.³ More on Bill Hillcourt and the Patrol Method can be found here: <http://history.bsatroop14.com>

² Handbook for Scoutmasters by William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt, 1936, pg 225

³ From the Handbook for Scoutmasters by William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt, 1936.