

# The Patrol Method

The second aim of Scouting is *participating citizenship*:

- Broadly defined, citizenship means the boy's relationship to others. He comes to learn of his obligations to other people, to the society he lives in, and to the government that presides over that society.

The patrol method is one of the eight methods of Scouting:

- The patrol method gives Scouts an experience in group living and participating citizenship. It places a certain amount of responsibility on young shoulders and teaches boys how to accept it. The patrol method allows Scouts to act in small groups where they can easily relate to each other. These small groups determine troop activities through their elected representatives.

Baden-Powell believed that the patrol method is the cornerstone of Scouting. Read these quotations from B-P:

- "The Patrol (method) is the one essential feature in which Scout training differs from that of all other organizations, and where properly applied, it is absolutely bound to bring success. It cannot help itself!"
- "The patrol system is not one method in which Scouting for boys can be carried on; it is the only method."
- "Unless the patrol method is in operation, you don't really have a Boy Scout troop."

Examples of the patrol method in action:

- Following those ideals, the Brownsea Island experiment was conducted with four patrols, rather than a troop of 20 boys.
- At Brownsea, the boys wore a colored knot on their shoulder indicating their patrol: green for Bulls, blue for Wolves, yellow for Curlews, and red for Ravens. The patrol leader carried a staff with a flag depicting the patrol animal.
- At Wood Badge training, the participants are organized into patrols of six, each with a name and a patrol flag which the patrol members design and make during the course, and a patrol yell they say throughout the course. They perform projects, solve problems, play games, eat, and camp as patrols.
- This is not a coincidence; it is done to show the participants how the patrol method works by having them live it as part of the Wood Badge experience, so they can implement it when they return to their units.
- Boys have the same experience during National Youth Leadership Training.

Benefits of a fully functioning patrol method:

- If the patrols are working well, the patrol leaders are probably being good leaders.
- If the patrol leaders are being good leaders, the PLC should be working well so the boys are leading the troop program.
- If the PLC is working well, they should be developing an exciting program that is keeping the Scouts interested in Scouting.

The *Patrol Leader Handbook* was developed to guide Scouts in understanding and performing their role as the leaders of their patrols, and in the proper implementation of the patrol method. Ask for a show of hands in response to these questions:

- How many of you make certain that every patrol leader in your troop has and reads the *Patrol Leader Handbook*?
- Do you go through the handbook with the patrol leaders so they can ask the SPL and SM questions? This is the minimum training for a new patrol leader.

Ask the participants, "What does the term 'patrol method' mean to you?"

Illustrate the patrol method with some or all of the following questions:

- Does each patrol have a yell, flag, etc., to cement its separate existence?
- Do the patrols work as teams to solve problems, to plan part of an upcoming outing, or to come up with ideas for future outings?

- How does your troop handle elections for new patrol leaders? Who elects your patrol leaders? Just the patrol members? The whole troop? Hopefully, just the patrol members.
- Do your patrols stay together year after year, to build on their camaraderie and esprit de corps, or are your Scouts reshuffled into different patrols every so often?
- If the boys are reshuffled, by whom? If not by themselves, why not?
- Do individual patrols conduct activities and meetings independent of troop activities? (If anyone says “yes,” ask for examples.)
- Does your troop encourage each patrol to earn the National Honor Patrol Award annually? If not, why not? The award was created to encourage patrols to have identity, spirit, be active, do Good Turns and service projects, advance in rank, wear the uniform, be organized, participate with the troop, and grow.
- Show attendees the requirements for the award via handout. Encourage them to implement the National Honor Patrol Award in their units to implement the patrol method.

Ask the attendees some or all of the following questions about their unit’s use of the patrol method during **troop meetings**:

- Are boys directed to “ask your patrol leader” when a boy wants to know what’s on the agenda for tonight’s troop meeting, or what comes next on an outing? The SPL and SM should make sure the patrol leaders know these basic things for every meeting and outing, and the SPL and all adults should send the boys to their patrol leader with such basic questions.
- Is there time in every troop meeting for patrol meeting time?
- Do most or all troop meetings include games or skills contests that involve the patrols working as teams against the other patrols?
- Is there any sort of patrol-based attendance contest, awarding weekly points for having the patrol flag present, for the number of Scouts present, and for the number of Scouts in uniform and with their handbooks? If not, consider implementing such a contest, with candy or some other prize for the winning patrol.
- Consider making this a monthly contest, starting over with the points at the beginning of each month and rewarding the “winning” patrol monthly. That gives a weaker patrol a chance to get its act together and have a chance to win next month, instead of falling behind and never being able to catch up.

Ask the attendees some or all of the following questions about their unit’s use of the patrol method during **outings**:

- Do the Scouts cook as patrols, only for the boys in their patrol and not for the whole troop?
- Do you have different menus for each patrol, selected and planned by the boys in that patrol?
- Does a member of the patrol buy the food for the patrol? Not for the entire troop, just the amount needed for his patrol?
- Do the boys tent only with boys in their patrol, not with whomever they want?
- Does each patrol have a separate camp site—near the others but separate enough to reinforce the patrol identity?
- Does the patrol leader set the chores schedule for just the members of that patrol, and does everyone participate equally?
- Does your troop have skills contests or games that involve competition between the patrols when on campouts?
- How often does your troop have patrol cooking contests, at which the Scouts are urged to “do your best”?
- Do your campfires have skits or songs, etc., conducted by patrols, not by individuals?

“The object of the patrol method is not so much saving the Scoutmaster trouble as to give responsibility to the boy.” — Robert Baden-Powell

“...a Troop is not divided into Patrols. A Troop is the sum total of its Patrols.” — William "Green Bar Bill" Hillcourt

# The Patrol Method—The Only Method

By Bill Nelson, February 4, 2010

Something you might not have known. 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 format, is some of his Patrol Method wisdom.

At this point--if not before--some Scoutmaster will step forward and say, "That's 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!"

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 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.

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.

"These patrols are therefore more important than the Troop. Patrols must be kept intact under all circumstances, which means working, tenting, learning, cooking, so surviving together."

— Robert Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scoutmastership*, 1919, page 49

"In a Patrol, the Scouts learn to work with others, while the Patrol leader learns responsibility for others. Both have to give in a part of their personal interest for this."

— Robert Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scoutmastership*, 1919, page 24

"The Patrol is therefore almost independent, while the Troop is run by the Patrol Leaders in the Patrols' Leaders Council and Court of Honour" — Robert Baden-Powell, *Aids to Scoutmastership*, 1919, page 24, 32

"One of our methods in the Scout movement for taming a hooligan is to appoint him head of a Patrol. He has all the necessary initiative, the spirit and the magnetism for leadership, and when responsibility is thus put upon him it gives him the outlet he needs for his exuberance of activity, but gives it in a right direction."

— Robert Baden-Powell, from *Are Our Boys Degenerating?*, ca. 1918