

Eagle Scout Rose Parade Reflection

After a rather ambitious information meeting, all entered Eagle Scouts were required to attend practice at San Marino High School's football field. At this time the parade was a month and a half away, and those like me, who chose not to carpool, had to wake up at 6:00am or even earlier to arrive on time. 6:50am, I signed in.

It is well known to the scout community that only two percent of all scouts become Eagle Scouts. After all, it is the statistic we use as testament to the discipline and persistence of all those who could bear the path of an Eagle recipient, the hours of the day they must split between school and scouting, the responsibility we put into their hands when they lead. With that in mind, I went up to the football bleachers as directed and saw a number of scouts much larger than previously anticipated. I predicted, and later confirmed with the scout leaders: three hundred scouts total, most Eagle ranked but with a fair number of other girl and boy scouts holding banners. Consider those nearly three hundred Eagle Scouts: three hundred teenagers, three hundred adorned sashes (more than 6300 merit badges!), three hundred successful Eagle Scout contributions to the community, three hundred board of reviews with three hundred stories of boys who, half a decade earlier, were once Tenderfoots! Quite a humbling experience.

The application said only 80 to 110 people would be accepted (but I forgot that my county was not the only one involved); so of course I was curious to learn how the organizers of our parade entry could manage a schedule for three hundred of us, especially when 75% of us looked as if we have never seen morning dew before. Using the few members in our troop (we were called Troop 2010) who were in school marching bands or ROTC, they taught us to march using a recorded sound of a man clapping in rhythm that continued for half an hour. "8 to 5 step" is essentially using rhythm to make eight steps into five yards, or less than two feet a step. Unfortunately, many scouts here have never marched before in their life; even the most enthusiastic marchers were quick to underestimate the organization of matching steps, particularly by overestimating two feet. The more we practiced walking, it became evident that the near six mile march would be impossible to do with everyone in step. While the unenthusiastic walkers made the lines consistently, maybe as much as one-half of the scouts improved significantly with their footwork. My only regret was that we had no system for putting these good scouts together into one marching team to show the effort they put into this practice. Nevertheless, if it was impossible to march without looking like a centipede, we knew that we had to do our best to keep the lines even whenever possible.

Before the end, they split us into those that would carry flowered illustrations of merit badges, those with scout activities, those with flags, and a fair amount that would be on the actual float. Three scholarship winners on the rock, two normal scouts in the botanical kayak, two cub scouts in a small tent on one side and girl scouts on the other, and two or three venturers clipped on wires from tree to tree. This practice was



on December 5th.

December 19th, two weeks later, same time: practice started at 7:00 am and was planned to end at 10:00am, but we stayed longer to march because the scout leaders pushed the training to yield better marchers from the Eagle Scouts. My uniform, military pressed and set in a garment bag, was not accepted because I had to use green scout socks and not my black substitutes. Luckily I dealt with this issue early by asking a good friend days later.

December 28, we practiced marching on a local side street we had the fortune to close off from cars. That is, adults were desperately trying to slow the vehicles down until we finally got a police blockade to permit us to march in peace. We practiced the most difficult maneuver in the entire walk, the 110-degree turn from Orange Grove Boulevard to Colorado Boulevard with fifty nesting cameras. Local residents came out to cheer us on, to see a mass conglomeration of people walking to no music and no drumbeat. As curious as it was, it was reasonable: as we were informed, the parade would have too much cheering and music playing for us to simply march to the music of the Eagle Scout float. It was there we learned how to pace our team of marchers, the backpackers, from the others in front of and behind us.

New Year's Eve, we finally get to use the epaulets, bolo ties and name tags promised to us, pinned them on our uniform and carpooled from San Marino High School to the Rose Bowl for judging. Suffice to say, the floats were all beautiful as we walked past big statues of people, past Chinese themed decorations, ships with sails, planes, and finally to ours, an



entry that in my personal opinion lacked creativity, if only because it stayed close to the scout theme of nature, and because I saw its designs earlier in the year. Its most defined feature in my opinion was a giant spinning fleur-de-lis designed to bend sideways when we would go through the overpass. That, and a whistling song that originated from the war movie classic *Bridge on the River Kwai* that we were supposed to whistle to when we marched. Judging was to last three hours, or more specifically four minutes and two hours and fifty-six minutes of waiting, for the float judges to grade us. I finally got home at 6pm, in time for a party.

Ten hours later, after Truong Son's New Year's Party and a blur of appraisal from peers and parents of peers I felt I did not earn, after getting onto a bus from the Orange County Council, I'm at San Marino, 4:00am in the morning. If America's legacy of living, and our nationalism, is idealized through nature and adventure, then perhaps it was proper that our float had won the national award for the "best depiction of American life, past, present, or future." We changed into our uniforms, headed back to the bus and came to the Rose Bowl area. At our float, I remembered the leader's warning that we had to be ready; we could be told that we will not go for hours and then suddenly be called to march fifteen minutes later. We were, however, part of the finale for the parade, so it was clear we would wait for a while. The troops were ready at the float by 6, but we stayed until it was 9 or so when we started moving to the 110 degree turn.

An Eagle Scout, a former marching band leader, was spouting into a whistle in front of the group I was in, the backpacking group, to keep us stepping in rhythm, and it working until the second street we crossed. Behind us a high school marching turned and tailed us from the back playing patriotic songs perhaps thirty decibels higher than any other sound. As a result, the back lines of backpackers started moving to the beat of the marching band drums.

For half an hour we walked, and the crowds of people I saw at the beginning were the most I have seen since going to a childhood baseball game, and the number of spectators just grew and grew the more we walked. Through the streets, a gauntlet of "Happy New Year", "Go Boy Scouts", "Watch out for the Horse Manure!", "It's Such An Honor to Have You Eagle Scouts March in This Parade" and "Ready for the Big Corner?" came at me sideways, streamed through my head and settled like confetti in the road as I treaded forward. In the crossfire of their cheers, I struggled like the others to the side

and to the front of me, to keep in line and take the horse manure advice to heart. Like the raft heading towards the waterfall, I cringed as we came to the corner, showing not as many cameras as it boasted but instead hundreds in stands that applauded and emitted a sound I would never hear ever again, reserved for gold Olympians and boxing titans. As we came to the corner, I took bigger steps and looked to the pivoting person as in practice, and saw a line of scouts collapsing in formation, crushed by the pressure the crowd could force down in a sustained I thought would never end. When we made it and finally reassembled our lines, my heartbeat attempted to recede to a walking pace rhythm when we heard a spike of sound from the crowd and a rumble in the air that made me feel as if I was walking through a pool of electricity. Above me was the show's climax, three raptor jets that finished the missing man formation to commemorate the deceased president of the Rose Parade. If I could, I would only tell this part of the story to my peers at Gillespie Park; I would ignore the bland practice agendas, the Saturdays I lost when I could have slept in, my newfound resentment of the I-5 North, the hours of idleness at the judging. I would forget the complaining adolescents, who felt complacent with inadequate footwork and made the line messy when so many other well-mannered and patient scouts had hoped to let their parents see their hard work pay off—all of this I wish to erase so that I could tell people how my eyes trailed the jets as they shattered the sky, how they speared the horizon and split the sea of spectators so that we, the avatars of virtuous boys over the century, could stride like champions. Champions out of step and dodging Clydesdale road apples.

And that was it. We walked, cameras flashing and people waving for six miles, and we dropped dead out of formation. I dragged myself to the buses to drop my backpack, crawled back to the endpoint of the parade and got two In-n-Out cheeseburgers (never before have I seen the scouts so quiet eating). Back to the bus, to San Marino, and back to the Orange County Building, all without a compliment from the leaders or even a cheer; they knew that the Eagle Scouts wanted nothing more than to be home.

When people ask me about the Rose Parade, they are mostly curious about the joy of the moment I know I am on camera. I, however, cannot isolate that single moment for my own enjoyment. As an Eagle Scout, I have learned that the best things in life are only worthwhile when you work enough for it. I cannot recall the cheers of men and women or the roar of jets without remembering that my presence there was possible because I had worked with other scouts to match my steps. On a deeper level, it took me ten years to be here, a decade of camping and Lien Kets, of building monkey bridges and merit badges, and all that leading up to my Eagle Scout board of review. Thus, I abstain from negativity now, because it belittles an experience that I cannot forget, a century of American Scouting representing a century of boys who stood in mud and looked to the sunrise.

Christopher Việt Nguyễn
Thanh Đoàn Bắc Đẩu