

The Practical Joke

Since the dawn of time, there have been three memorable jokes, the best that I can remember is as follows, the duck billed platypus, the theory of Evolution, and the eight years that Bill Clinton was in office. At this time I would like to add a fourth one.

It was a Friday in April of nineteen eighty one and school had just let out for Easter break. I was quickly walking to the smoking area behind the lunch room when my friend Jim caught up with me, Whatcha doing this weekend, He asked? There really wasn't much going on so I let him know that my weekend was open. "Good", he said, me and a few other guys are going camping and we would like you to come along. Boy was that a no brainer, I loved camping. We rushed to make plans so that I could catch the bus for my fifteen mile ride home.

When I arrived at my home, I immediately packed my tent and the rest of the equipment that I would need for a weekend of camping and fishing. About an hour later Jim and Richard showed up and we loaded up the truck. It was then that I found out the true reason for the trip.

It turns out that the final member of our little group (which we still had to pick up) was joining the Army and he was headed for Basic Training in May. So, Jim wanted to give him a send off that he would never forget. The plan was fairly simple, Richard, who looks older than he is, plays the part of a Vietnam vet who is suffering from Traumatic Stress Disorder and he needs the weekend to de-stress. All should be ok because Richard is on "medication" that keeps his episodes under control.

So we pick up John and head deep into the Ocala National Forest where we set up camp. Jim had done a fine job of setting the trap. John was told all about Richards's problem and he had been warned not to talk about the Army or his up and coming training because we didn't know what would set Richard off.

Dusk was quickly approaching and a huge pot of our famous camp chili was simmering on the fire when Richard said that he had to answer the call of nature. The rest of us sat down to dig into the chili. We sat around the camp fire telling stories and lies and every now and then Richard would pop into camp then he would leave again. About nine-thirty Richard disappeared for good.

The air was cool and the woods started coming alive with the sounds of night. Crickets and a lone Whippoorwill broke the quiet with a melody that I remember to this day. Jim and I told John to stay with the camp while we where going to search the woods for are missing companion.

I can only imagine how John felt sitting there all by himself with the silence pressing in around him. Then all of a sudden the night erupts with the sound of a machine gun on full auto, and then a mad man runs through the camp and lobs a satchel charge into the tent, in which John had taken refuge. It was hard to keep a straight face as John made his own door out of the back of the tent.

Some how Jim held back his laughter and he walked into camp. John needed to be calmed down before they noticed that I was missing. The silence of the night was shattered by a single shot that echoed through the forest for what seemed like an eternity. John was ready to call it quits and head for home but Jim convinced him to help search for me.

The boys headed into the woods down a dark path that wound its way through briars and thickets of scrub oak. When all of a sudden, they came across a body laying face down in the middle of the path. Of course it was me. I was laying there in a puddle of stage blood that brought John to tears. Jim knelt down beside me and felt for a pulse, which caused me to start laughing.

The gig was up. John now knew that it was all an elaborate joke and he was the mark. We returned to camp where Richard was sitting near the fire roasting a marshmallow. When he saw us he broke out in a heart felt laugh that wiped the anger away from John and brought a smile to his face.

John still went into the Army in May and became a Green Beret. Unfortunately We lost touch with John after that and we can only hope that his life was blessed and we hope that our prank brought him some good memories.