

Camping - The Easy Way

By Joan Black

We were 17 and had just graduated the accelerated course to complete high school and we planned a fortnight vacation before starting our wartime job in the Chief Accountants Office of The Great Western Railway. My friend Theo's uncle owned a small sheep farm on the Dartmouth Downs in Devonshire and he invited us to spend the two weeks camping on a small island – about one acre – in the River Dart which ran through his land. Over the years his four sons had 'improved' the island when they had camped there in their teens. They had banged together a small wooden building divided into two parts – half was a storage area the other half a primitive loo. It did have a wooden seat but no door – brothers camping together did not need privacy. They had also dug a fire pit for cooking and hacked tree stumps into chairs and stools. Quite luxurious. Theo and I had spent years as Girl Guides and had numerous badges to prove that we were qualified campers.

Uncle Giles let us use his sons' canoe to make the trip up river to the island. We dragged a two-man pup tent from storage but decided to start a fire for the evening meal before erecting it (this was before pop-up tents). Despite our Girl Guide training we just could not get a fire started – even with matches, let alone rubbing two sticks together or striking flint. I stuck with trying to get a flame going while Theo struggled with the tent – neither of us making any progress.

Just as it was getting dark and we were getting desperate we heard a deep male voice enquire, "You need some help Miss?" Standing at the edge of the clearing were three young men dressed in khaki coveralls and bearing military insignia. "Permission to step forward Miss?" asked the one with Sergeant's stripes. We nodded. The Sergeant introduced himself and his fellow corporals. In a matter of seconds they had the fire ablaze and the tent up. I have long forgotten their names, but this Tom, Dick and Harry informed us they were with a Sapper (Royal Engineers) squad, on maneuvers and camped across the adjacent field, on the other side of the hill. Having helped us set up camp they jumped into a small row boat and took off. About 45 minutes later they came back – carrying a large pot filled with delicious stew, fire baked bread and a pudding for desert. This time they were accompanied by a Lieutenant who informed us, "My chaps here said there were maidens in distress in the vicinity – we come to the rescue!"

At dawn the following day the faint notes of Reveille echoed across the fields and while we were still struggling to get a fire going, along came the Lieutenant and different Tom and Harry with mess kits overflowing with bacon, scrambled eggs, sausages and toast.

Theo and I spent the next 14 days bicycling around all the quaint local villages, exploring old cemeteries and walking the sandy beaches. The Sappers disappeared to do their maneuvering or whatever, but every evening and every morning they would show up at our campsite with wonderful hot meals and all kinds of nifty innovations to make our camping experience more comfortable. Some evenings they rowed us over to their camp where they entertained us with

skits and songs and harmonica music around their campfire.

Surely this was every teenage girl's dream vacation – a squadron of young men eager to cook for and entertain them!