

Downwind Merit

Five of us march across the hardwood floor and then turn to face the guns.

The Boy Scout Merit Badge ceremony is a rite of passage from little boys to ... bigger boys. Merit Badges are for manly things; archery, rifle, map and compass.

First in line is Jimmy. Jimmy's merit badge is cooking. Jimmy grows up to be the butcher at Safeway. He dies from brain cancer a week before Christmas, 2003.

Next in line is Paul. Paul's merit badge is hiking. Paul steps on a mine in 1970. It didn't kill him outright, but he was never the same. Paul drank himself to death in '86.

Next is Jimmy's cousin, Banjo. Who would name their kid Banjo? I couldn't make this up. Brain cancer, three weeks after Jimmy.

Next is Robby. Robby is short, has an attitude, is an overachiever. Robby has six or seven merit badges but the paperwork is faked. In a year Robby's family moves to Utah, but for Robby there is no escape. Pancreatic cancer, June 2002.

Last is me. My merit badge is music. Music is not a manly thing, the others giggle, their parents smile. But when the ceremony is over and, when the boys are laid to rest, only one of us can play taps.