

Deer Hunting with My Dad and Brother Brian: A Memorable Family Outing

By Bob Steele

I wrote a draft of this story circa 1975. After comparing notes with my brother Brian, we think the hunt took place in October 1973.

I was one of those kids that spent most of his free hours playing in the woods. Our home in Durham, North Carolina bordered a stand of mixed Pine and Hardwood Forest that was about a quarter of a mile deep. My two brothers, Wayne and Brian, were 2.5 and 6 years younger than me. We spent countless hours exploring the woods, playing hide and seek, and pretending to be soldiers.

Our family moved to the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC in the summer of 1969. Dad narrowly lost in his bid to become a congressman. Shortly after Richard M. Nixon was inaugurated as President in January 1969, dad received a phone call from the President's Transition Team asking if he would be interested in serving in the administration. Dad agreed and moved into an apartment in Northern Virginia. I was a senior in high school, so mom, me, and my siblings moved to Alexandria after I graduated.

Shortly after we moved, my mom learned that one of her first cousins, Linda Almand, was moving with her family from Atlanta to nearby Springfield, Virginia. Linda's husband Dave worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He was also an avid hunter. My brothers and I were mesmerized by Dave's numerous wildlife trophies in his home. Brian was especially enamored with the collection and declared that he wanted to go hunting. Shortly afterwards, Brian got his wish and started going deer hunting with dad and Dave. By the time I decided to join them, sixteen-year-old Brian already had three seasons under his belt.

I started preparing to hunt several months before the season opened. The first order of business was procuring a recurve hunting bow and accoutrements. I bought a camouflage suit (pants, shirt, and hat) that was oversized to wear on top of long underwear and a flannel shirt. The hat was reversible camo and blaze orange for use during both bow and gun hunting seasons. My dad was partial to his Shakespeare Archery bow, so I settled on their entry level Sierra Hunting Set, which included the Model X18 52-inch, 45-pound draw bow, four 29" cedar Silencer broadhead and two small game arrows, leather shooting glove and forearm protector, and an introductory archery hunting pamphlet. While at the sporting goods store, I also bought Virginia and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services hunting licenses.



Shopping was the easy part. Archery target practice was enjoyable. But the best part was listening to hours and hours of some of the funniest hunting stories I had ever heard. There's been at least forty hunting seasons between my dad and cousin Dave. Given the six-year difference in our ages, Brian and I didn't spend much time together outside of family meals or holiday celebrations. However, my newfound interest in

hunting bridged the social gap between us. In the weeks preparing for this hunt, I also found an unexpected sense of comradeship with dad and Dave that bridged our generational gap.

Deer hunting can be a very time consuming and painstaking activity, especially when it includes pre-season scouting through wilderness areas looking for deer signs and opportune elevated tree stand locations. Deer signs include scat (aka droppings, poop, turds), faint trail from hoof prints and bent grasses, and tree rubs and scrapes caused by bucks rubbing the velvet off their newly sprouted antlers each year. Deer proliferates across the Americas. White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) aka Virginia deer are found east of the Rocky Mountains. Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) are indigenous to western North America.



Pictures from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White-tailed_deer

The street we lived on intersects with the George Washington Parkway about midway between Alexandria and George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate. The closest public access hunting area is located on the Quantico Marine Corps Base. The main entrance of the base is about 25 miles south of Alexandria. The base straddles I-95 with the preponderance of the Reservation located on the west side of the interstate.

Donning camouflage suits and hats, dad, Brian, and I left at 4:30 AM this morning with the reassuring presence of a gallon of coffee and a dozen and a half sausage biscuits. Given the hour, traffic was sparse. The Marine guard briefly stopped us at the entrance to the Base. When

he saw our hunting attire he asked if we knew how to get to the Game Check Station. Dad told him we knew the way and he waved us through. We pulled into an empty parking lot as we arrived thirty-five minutes before the Station was scheduled to open. Cousin Dave arrived about twenty minutes later. Shortly afterward, a couple of Marines arrived and went inside. They left the “closed” sign on the door. The Station of the Game met up with Dave in the parking lot of the Game Check Station on the Base.

The Base sprawls over nearly 59,000 acres, of which 52,000 acres are deciduous forest composed of Virginia Pines (aka Scrub Pine, Spruce Pine, and Jersey Pine) and wide variety of hardwoods. Virginia is home to nearly 100 species of hardwood trees including Oak (white, red, and chestnut), Hickory, Yellow-Poplar, Maple, Walnut, Sweetgum, Sycamore, and Dogwood.

These woods are used by the Marines for combat training. Before we were allowed to enter the forest, we had to attend a safety briefing delivered by a Marine Corps Sergeant. He warned us that hunters occasionally discovered live unexploded mortar rounds and duds lodged in trees or laying on the ground. As a novice hunter I was already nervous when we got there, and the Sergeant’s warning caused a lump in my throat and a momentary stab in my gut.



<https://quantico.isportsman.net/default.aspx>

The safety briefing took about ten minutes. The Sergeant reviewed the rules and regulations and used a pointer to tap on a large map on a tripod to identify access roads and gates to the hunting areas. As I recall, four or five sections were closed that morning.

The Base is divided into seventeen sections. Sections 1 – 4 were located east of I-95. All but one (Section 13) to the west of I-95 had two or three subsections. Section 16 was the largest and had six subsections (A – G). In our scouting trips prior to the opening of the hunting season, we built four tree stands in sections 8A and 5B. We spotted many other stands built by other hunters. Some of them looked to be old and dilapidated. Regardless of who built the stands, they were open to all hunters. The stands could not be reserved. It was one of the reasons we had arrived very early. As soon as the safety briefing was over, we got in our cars and drove to section 8A. I have included a map at the end of the story. *(I couldn't find one from the early 1970s, but the sections haven't changed over the years.)*

Dad parked beside Dave's station wagon in a level field with knee-high wild grass and weeds. Dad said that he had seen deer feed in this field on previous hunts. Dave quickly gathered his gear and took off on his own. Before heading into the woods, dad reminded us that we would meet back at the car at 10:00 AM to take a break, eat some sausage biscuits, and see if we wanted to move to a different area. This presumed that none of us had shot a deer. We planned to stop hunting by 1:00 PM. By then, we would have had our fill of sitting on makeshift seats up in the trees. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was 5:50 AM. It was time to get this hunt in motion.



<https://www.nps.gov/prwi/learn/nature/naturalfeaturesandecosystems.htm>
Aerial View of Prince William Forest Park adjacent to Quantico MCB Reserve

Dad had his own way to walk in the woods, and Brian and I followed his lead. We traveled slowly, as silently as possible, and with frequent stops to listen and look for movement. It was tough going with the limited visibility in the pre-dawn light. The natural sounds in the mid-Atlantic piedmont forest range from barely perceptible, such as a distant squirrel scampering up a tree and acorns rattling off leaves and branches as they drop to the ground, to the rustling of wind through the trees and the gentle calls of songbirds, and finally to the loud sounds, the cacophonous screeching of a murder of crows in flight or the distinct call of hawks.

About 10 minutes later, dad halted and motioned for us to huddle up. He whispered that we should split up. He would move to the left, Brian would move straight ahead, and I would move to the right. It seemed to take forever to make my way through the trees to my tree stand. It was tough going in with the poor visibility and I had to keep looking up in the trees to see if I could spot the stand and back down to pick my steps through the forest undergrowth and extended tree roots.

The sun was finally rising, somberly peeking through the tip of the vast dense forest of the Quantico Marine Corps Reservation. So far, I hadn't spotted any motion. I did hear an occasional call of a bird to his mate ring out. A crisp breeze blew through accentuating the Fall chill.

I finally spotted a tree stand. It was a simple platform about 30-inches wide supported by a couple of two-by-fours nailed to a pair of tall oak trees that stood about six feet apart. It looked to be about sixteen feet above ground level. I carefully climbed up the access ladder, which was a set of short pieces of two-by-fours nailed to the trunk of one of the trees. I noted that a couple of

the steps wobbled a bit when I put my weight on them. There was no safety railing, so I gingerly stepped onto the platform to make sure it was stable. As I'm writing this, I recalled thinking that I sure wish who ever had built this tree stand and used a wider plank for the seat. It was a short piece of a one-by-eight board and barely qualified as a seat. Perhaps there's a lesson for me here: comfort is not essential for hunting, but it would be a damn site nicer.

Finally, I was starting my hunt in earnest. Before taking a seat, I slowly scanned the woods as I carefully turned around in a circle to view the full surroundings. The ground foliage was sparse in this section of the woods, with a smattering of ferns and small dogwood trees. The builder of this stand had picked a good spot.

My bow had been hanging over my shoulder on my back. I freed it, took a seat, laid the bow in my lap, and tried to relax as best I could. Patience is an absolute must in deer hunting. I figure it's 99.5% prepping and waiting. Every once in a while, you actually see a deer. Even when you do, they are generally out of range or obscured by trees to the point you have no clear shot, especially when bow hunting. The odds of hitting a deer with a long bow shot diminishes drastically beyond twenty-five yards. For rookie hunters, it is less. While some folks might be willing to stand and draw their bow shot, my plan was to use a kneeling position.

As I sat, I wondered where dad, Brian, and Dave were. I figured we were spread moderately far apart, with at least a hundred yards between each of us. I wondered about a lot of things. I had plenty of idle time on my hands.

I had been sitting quietly in my tree stand for a couple of hours. I had my back pressed up against the tree trunk that the pseudo seat was anchored to and had my bow laying in my lap when I heard a faint sound and sensed something was different. I glanced around and saw nothing. Then I looked down and was stunned! A young four-point buck was sitting near the base of my tree. LOL! It had snuck up on me. It was nervous, darting its head around, sniffing, and lifting its tail. Since I was perched nearly twenty feet in the air, it was possibly smelling the remnant of my scent from when I had climbed up the tree. Either way, it was primed to flee.

I very slowly lifted my bow and fetched an arrow from the quiver that was slung over my shoulder. I paused every couple of seconds to minimize sound and movement. Nocking the arrow was the easy part. I couldn't pull and shoot the deer from my sitting position. Moving an inch at a time I shifted forward hoping to get into a kneeling position with one knee on the floor of the tree stand. I was about halfway there when the buck must of heard or sensed my movement. He bounded forward about twenty-five feet and paused to listen and sniff for scents. I moved a little more quickly hoping to get off a shot. But he clearly detected my presence and scampered away. I hadn't even drawn my bow string.

I was left with a sense of frustration, but also relief from the passing tension. I sat there for about five minutes and decided to climb down and go back to the car and wait for dad and Brian. Dad had locked the car, so I leaned against the hood and waited for them. They showed up about 30 minutes later. They busted out laughing when I told them the deer had snuck up on me. Dad finally added, "You should have jumped out of the tree and got it with your hunting knife." That's when I started laughing.

We each ate several sausage biscuits and enjoyed a cup of coffee. When we finished I told dad I was done for the day. I think Brian wanted to keep hunting, but he didn't complain. Dave's station wagon was still parked beside us. He hadn't joined us at our scheduled food break. Dad said he would talk with him later. We packed up and headed home. I sat quietly on the way home and reflected on the day's events. Although none of us had shot a deer, I considered my first deer hunting experience to be a complete success.

Altogether I hunted with dad and Brian five or six times. However, I want to share a secret I've carried for nearly 50 years. After that first time, I was a pretend hunter. I went hunting with zero intent of even taking aim. I simply loved being in the woods and enjoyed the camaraderie of being with my dad and Brian. I especially enjoyed pre-season deer tracking and quiet, intent nature observation.

