



THINGS YOU CARRY

FEELING NOSTALGIC

for our brave military in recent times, a reader's roll call saluted a collection of Tim O' Brien short stories of the Vietnam War - *The Things They Carried*. It is an excellent read I fervently recommend to any fellow patriotic American. In addition to a swelling sense of pride and patriotism for my country, the evocative work made me reflect back on my decade of duty as a game warden.

Across the thousands of hours and scores of opening days, only one partner served by my side each and every time I patrolled. This ally was there for me well before I put on the badge and stayed long after the uniform retired. In the face of danger, the trusted friend did not fearfully lag behind, nor foolishly forge ahead. At all times, the sidekick was positioned tactically and tactfully by my side. My reliable partner and sidekick was my sidearm.

In the right hands, an issued sidearm is an extension of an officer's bravery and success. A symbol of patience, practice, and protection. In contrast, a mishandled firearm could sound the loud report of failure.

Stamped across such steady sidekicks are varieties of brands, calibers, and models. From east to west and north to south, issued firearms vary as much as each agency's wildlife and geography. Maine northern woods and pristine waters are protected by a Smith & Wesson M&P45. Texas, boasting more licensed hunters than any other state, issues its wardens a .40-caliber semi-automatic Glock. Personally and professionally, the Pennsylvania Game Commission trusts a Glock 31 .357 semi-automatic.

Every branch of the law enforcement family tree would agree on the importance of getting to know one's partner. While this typically refers to human interaction, spouse's name, how many children and personal interests, so too should the game warden get to know their sidearm on a deeper level, learning what makes it tick. This skill includes the ability to break down, clean and, in some cases, fix a firearm. Wardens should handle their firearm frequently enough it has become part of instinctual

reactions. It should fit the hand as natural as a glove.

Outside of game wardens, I have yet to meet a profession that embodies the standards and ideals associated with stewards of the land. By nature, conservation officers pick up shell casings. This prevention of litter can lead to a delightful hobby. This lofty call summoning wardens above and beyond is just my two cents, but most game wardens save a penny where others spend a buck. Why not recycle brass by reloading?

First and foremost, only factory loads should be in the chamber and magazine during patrol and official law enforcement duties. However, reloads could prove invaluable for target practice, simulated training, and home protection. Tinkering with grains and bullets for optimum performance is another enjoyable facet to owning a firearm.

Practice with our sidearm sidekick is a form of communication. How would a sports team, say basketball, fare if they only shot a couple of times

per year? How well would the players mesh if they did not practice offensive plays and run through defensive scenarios? Consider the ultimate goal. I believe we owe it to the fellow officer with whom we were sworn in as well as the wildlife we were sworn to protect.

Many agencies adopt S.O.P.'s for grooming and appearance of one's face. So too should wardens adhere to sidearm cleanliness. I am not unrealistically proposing to swab the barrel after each and every time one looks at the sidearm. As practical as possible, I suggest to clean the firearm as soon after a qualification or training as possible.

Perhaps the most important and overlooked firearm cleaning is after the many patrols into the fray. On a personal note, aside from wildlife, my sidearm never left the holster during a confrontation, let alone experienced its trigger pulled. It is during these dormant outings in a firearms career it has the gumption to get gummed up or clogged. With highly efficient solvents and easy to use boresnakes making the task even simpler, there is no excuse for having a dirty sidekick.

The things we carry as game wardens vary as vastly as the roles game wardens fill throughout our country. Lengthy list of tools of the trade includes flashlights, handcuffs, OC spray, knives, gloves, keys, Tasers, magazines, masks, radios and, naturally, a sidearm.

Take time to reflect upon and get to know the many things, both tangible tools and intangible skills, you carry afield. One day the things you carry may be called upon to be the things to carry you through a situation. ☺

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