

Memories

I have heard it said that when one gets older, he is left only with his memories. I guess I am not that old yet because I have a lot more than memories left at my disposal, but that in no way diminishes the value of my memories. I treasure them, and in fact, often spend time just reliving many of them. The lower-level room in which I hang photos and mounted heads was once briefly referred to as a trophy room, but that was quickly changed to "Memory Room," a term I prefer, because the memories are more important than the trophies, whose main purpose is to bring to the fore the memories that accompany each of them. I will share with you the one memory of the year 2020 that seems paramount.

At 0608 on 13 May (it was a Wednesday, not Friday) I was ambulating in a forest as daylight was beginning, maybe had already begun, when Duck, my canine walking companion, a chocolate-colored Labrador, suddenly stopped in the path ahead of me and was staring back, rigidly fixed in his stance, obviously intent on something off to my left. I looked where I thought he was looking and I saw something gray, moving, and my first thought was young raccoon. That thought was quickly erased when I realized I was looking at a baby owl, a barred owl, that was backed up against the remains of a decaying stump, wings spread wide, trying to appear fierce. It thought its life to be in danger, with a dog standing nearby and this towering giant staring down at it. The thing that brought my interest to bear on the right location was the clicking of its beak, clicking with a rapidity that eventually led me to refer to it as her, because the rapid beak clicking reminded me of my wife when she gets really upset with me. (I am bound to get in big trouble over this, but I deal in truth). I mean words come out like bullets out of machine gun, and the clicking beak reminded me of that. So, I dubbed the barred owlet Sally and from then on referred to her as Saucy Sally.

After clicking off a couple photos, I continued on my way, but my thoughts were on Sally, and my photos. Why had I not used the zoom feature on my camera? That thought prompted me to reverse course and I went once more to see the owlet, who had not moved from where I first found her. She did not click her beak at me, and seemed to have concluded that I intended her no harm. My dog Duck dutifully remained at a respectable distance. In fact, I believe he was intimidated by the fierce appearance and the clicking beak, and really preferred to view from a distance. A few close-ups, and I headed home to share my good fortune with my wife, Barbara. Unable to get Sally off my mind however, and out of concern for her welfare, being grounded on the forest floor as she was, where the first feral cat or raccoon to happen by would kill her, I returned to the site in early afternoon. I had become something of a doting father by then and was greatly concerned for Saucy Sally's welfare.

Upon reaching the site where I found her, I was at first distraught that she was not there. I checked for loose feathers and spots of blood, and was somewhat relieved to find neither. A visual search at first disclosed nothing, and then, much to my relief, I saw her on a tree limb, about fifteen feet above ground, and on a limb too small to be negotiated by a cat or by a raccoon. She was safe, at least for the moment, and I returned home happy.

I returned to the site the next morning and saw her again, in a different but nearby tree, now about twenty feet above ground, and I also saw an adult barred owl, in an adjacent tree, at a higher elevation. This doting father now experienced some real relief, but that is not to say I stopped caring. I returned to that site every day for the next fifteen days, seeing Saucy Sally and one parent every day, not always in the same tree, but always in the same area. The last time I saw her was the one and only day that I saw both adult barred owls. One was perched in a tree near Sally and the other was about one hundred yards away, on a low limb of a small tree, staring intently at the forest floor. I watched for quite some time, until the owl plummeted earthward and came up with something, I could not tell what, and flew away. I never saw any of them again after that, but I know I will hear them calling in the pre-dawn darkness in March or April, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?"

I shared my photos with folks I believed would enjoy them, and one gentleman friend surprised me on Father's Day with a beautifully framed 8X10 photo of Saucy Sally. The photo hangs in a prominent place in my memory room and Saucy Sally occupies a prominent place in my memory. And this long treatise on

owlets arose solely out of my effort to conjure up my best memory of 2020. There are countless other really good memories, too numerous to include herein, but the one that eclipses all others, is my brief relationship with Saucy Sally. Just think about it for a moment – How many people do you know who have found an owl in the forest and got to see it every day after for the next two weeks? For some, it would be a ho-hum experience; for me it is the treasure of the year.

Him or Me (A prelude to “The Rest of the Story”)

I stood by the meadow
As the day dawned clear
Waiting in the trees
For a moose to appear

A glint of colour
across the glen
In the bordering forest of spruce and aspen
At first seemed an antlered head was there
But quickly emerged a humped back bear

I watched to determine where he was bound
When he stopped on the creek bank, I knew I'd be found
So, I moved into the open where I could see everywhere
Determined was I not to feed a bear
I used epithets loudly hoping direction he'd switch
Go on! Go away, you son of a bitch!
He reared up on his hind legs and looked all around
To determine the source of the human sound
Then down to all fours, across the creek he came
Up the bank, too close to my domain
I waved my arms and yelled some more
But undeterred was that grizzly boar

Like a jack-in-the-box he popped up from the grass
Stood there staring and swaying like a dancer of class
Then down to all fours and straight at me he came
My shot must be good or it's the end of the game

Three bounds, then four, only fifty feet was he
When my sight found his chest, I set the bullet free
It flew straight and true and plowed deep inside
And right then and there that grizzly bear died

He was probably okay in his own style of life
And might have lived long and taken a wife
But his decision to breakfast on me raised my ire
He left me no choice but to aim and fire.

The Rest of the Story

An encounter with a grizzly bear can be an unforgettable experience, as long as one survives the encounter. This retired sea captain did survive such an encounter and I will take this opportunity to tell you about it.

The day was 23 September 2002 and the setting was North Central British Columbia, in an area where no car horns or train whistles can be heard. The quarters from a luckless moose that ran in front of a speeding bullet two days earlier were hanging in a cooler and I had time on my hands while I waited for my two hunting partners to hang their tags on a moose. My guide and good friend, Raymond, also had a moose tag and he asked if I would mind staying out in the bush with him while he tried to fill it. I had an unused wolf tag at my disposal so continuing the hunt was more a blessing than a hardship.

I stood just inside the tree line bordering a vast meadow that was bisected by a meandering stream – Farewell Creek. The meadow was formed perhaps a half century earlier by a beaver damn that flooded the broad valley. When silt washed in with each succeeding spring runoff, the flooded area eventually became too shallow for the beavers to winter over. Maintenance of the damn was discontinued, the damn was breached, and the waters receded, leaving an expansive area where grasses flourish but trees do not – a meadow. The damn, to my left, is still in place but the creek flows unobstructed through the middle of it. Where I maintained my vigil, the meadow was perhaps 150 yards wide, fringed by aspens and conifers.

The morning dawned in an idyllic fashion, with the sun rising into a cloudless sky with only a hint of a breeze. The aspens gleamed like golden candles, interspersed as they were among the balsam fir and spruce trees. The temperature was below freezing, but not by much, and I basked in the glory of the beautiful day that was unfolding before me. After a short time, I saw movement among the trees on the opposite side of the meadow, low to the ground movement that could be a wolf. When I saw a glint of golden orange, my thoughts turned to moose antler, recently divested of velvet, but that thought dissipated quickly when the movement materialized into a humpbacked bear. Up to then, I had never in my life seen a grizzly bear but I knew in an instant that that was what it was. I felt my heartbeat quicken as I assessed the situation.

The bear was moving from right to left, just inside the tree line on its side of the meadow, toward the defunct beaver damn. I believed that it would cross to my side of the meadow at the beaver damn and then be, not just in my part of the forest, but between me and the camp from which I hunted. I did not relish that eventuality and I thought that if I moved out into the meadow, the bear would then see me, and flee into the forest on its side. I moved out several yards into the meadow, about half way to Farewell Creek, but, alas, the bear did not see me, and it did not flee. Instead, it came out of the forest and sat down on the edge of the meadow, above the creek, looking very much like a big dog – I mean a really big dog! Since bears are supposed to run from humans, I decided to make my presence known by yelling at the beast. I talked a little about the bear's ancestry using words that rhyme with ditch, telling it to go away. The net result of my yelling was that the bear then stood up on its hind legs, front legs hanging limply as it swayed this way and that, looking everywhere, but without seeing me. I decided that I would have to shoot it if I were to survive. I shouldered my rifle and tried to train the cross-hair on the bear but I could not do so. My right knee was quivering more than the aspens and the rifle sight was sweeping out figure eights that only occasionally caused the sight to land on the bear. I lowered the rifle and had a conversation with God, reminding Him that now seemed like a very good time to send in a brigade of angels. Next week you can read what the angels did.

After I hunkered down in the meadow grass, trying to still my racing heart and steady my quivering knee, the bear dropped down to all fours and padded down the bank on its side of the creek and crossed over to my side. Now it was really close – a scant 100 feet distant, and once more I yelled at it, using much the same vocabulary as before. The bear stopped and again reared up on its hind legs, swaying and looking, testing the air with its nose. Once more I raised my rifle, but now the angels had arrived and I was as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar. I planted the crosshair on the bear's chest and started to squeeze the trigger. With only ounces of pressure left, the thought crossed my mind: "How do I justify killing this beast? It is not attacking me so I cannot claim self-defense. Maybe if I don't do anything it will all end peacefully." I was considering an alternate course back to camp as I lowered my rifle.

The act of lowering my rifle caught the bear's attention and its reaction was instantaneous. It dropped to all fours and came directly at me in huge bounds. Three such leaps had it less than fifty feet away with a

murderous look in its eye. My rifle came up, the crosshair found the center of its chest, and I touched off the round. Forward progress stopped and the bear tipped over into the tall meadow grass, out of my sight. Once again, I made a quick assessment of my situation. The bear could be wounded and in a terrible mood. From where I stood, it could not get within 25 feet of me without my seeing it so I opted to stay where I was and await developments. I had chambered another cartridge and I was ready, should the beast resume its attack. Also, I knew Raymond was near enough to have heard the shot and he would be on his way to investigate the outcome.

After what seemed an interminably long time Raymond did appear on the edge of the meadow, upstream about 150 yards. He inquired by sign language if I had shot a moose for him and I shook my head "No," and tried unsuccessfully to convey what had received my bullet. It was only after Raymond reached me that I was able to inform him that I had shot a grizzly bear. When he asked where it was, I indicated where I had last seen it.

Being no dummy, Raymond said "You know where it is, so you go ahead and I'll be right behind you." I strode confidently to the spot where the bear had tipped over but it was not there. Raymond immediately rang an alarm bell and sounded off with some unprintable language about how we had a wounded grizzly bear on our hands. I did a mental replay of the sight picture I had when I pulled the trigger and I assured Raymond that we did NOT have a wounded grizzly bear; we had a DEAD grizzly bear, and we had only to find it. I soon spotted a matted trail in the grass and followed it to the creek bank where the bear lay dead. It had belly-crawled about 25 feet before it died.

I breathed much easier after finding that murderous brute lying dead, thanked God that it was him and not me that came out on the losing end, and then set about getting a few photographs. It was a truly handsome bear, a male, or boar, with black paws and lower legs, golden upper legs and a tawny light brown body. The decision concerning disposition of the handsome beast was not mine to make; I was the foreigner. If we turned it in to the authorities, my rifle would have been confiscated and I would have been charged with killing a grizzly bear without being licensed to do so. Eventually an autopsy would disclose that I killed only in defense of my person, my rifle would be returned to me, and charges would be dropped. All this would take a lot of time and in the end, we would not be permitted to keep anything but the photos which we already had. Raymond said the best thing to do would be to leave it and go on about our business.

Most of the wind was taken from my sails and I did not sleep well for several nights following that encounter. Raymond never got a moose and only one of my two partners did so.

I traveled the 1,000 miles back to my home with lots to think about. I still think about it.

Freedom Is Not Free

Frenchy Sends with Warm Regards

Submitted by CAPT R. Claude "Frenchy" Corbeille, USN RET