



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

In the Wet

In the wet (...) it gets about as wet as it can get.

– Rolf Harris, Australian songwriter

Scouting was important to me when I was in my early teens. I had been a Wolf Cub and graduated naturally from there. Being a Boy Scout was an early identity for me, and I enjoyed the feeling of belonging to such a prominent, highly regarded organization. I gladly attended meetings and camps and gradually festooned my shirt with badges. I particularly liked the idea of being prepared, as Scouts are encouraged to be, and my pockets always bulged with everything I thought I might need if I was ever suddenly—inexplicably—dropped into the wilderness and had to find my way home. I was fourteen and prepared for anything, wishing that something would happen.

One day it did. On the 24th of March, 1959 it started raining all over the country and didn't stop for a month. Rivers were soon overflowing, towns and fields were flooding, and there was an all-pervasive sense of doom that I had never felt before. It was the worst flooding Uruguay had ever experienced. By mid-April the rising waters of the Río Negro overwhelmed the hydroelectric dam at Rincón del Bonete and dynamite was used to release the pressure, flooding the nearby town of Paso de los Toros. The hapless residents, who had been evacuated in advance, gathered at the railway station clutching one bag each. From there they were sent in various directions, mainly south to Montevideo.

To house and feed the refugees, the government created the *Comité Nacional de Ayuda a los Damnificados* [National Committee for Victim's Assistance] to organize and coordinate the care of nearly 50,000 displaced people. A warehouse was commandeered near the Central Railway Station in Montevideo to store the purchased and donated supplies that rapidly started accumulating. The warehouse was open 24 hours a day, with Army conscripts standing guard around the clock under the watchful eye of Emilio Martínez, a young Lieutenant. As tends to happen in times of crisis, there was an outpouring of solidarity throughout the country; people everywhere donated money and volunteered their time. Everyone wanted to help.

The Boy Scouts were volunteered en masse and to my huge delight I was assigned to stand guard a couple of evenings a week and most of the weekend at the warehouse near the railway station. When I say 'stand guard' what I mean is stand around and wait to be sent on an errand by Lieutenant Martínez.

The errand was always the same. "*Che, pibe, traéme un café*" [Hey kid, go get me a coffee]. Black and strong with three sugars. I would trot over to the café at the station and get him a cup. But most of the time I stood out on the loading dock under the tin roof, looking at the wet street and listening to the rain. I stood at ease, hands behind my back, shoulders straight. It was warm and very damp so I wore my khaki shirt with the sleeves rolled up. My green beret, which was also damp, lay limply across my head and drooped down over my right ear. My corduroy shorts were a good fit, not the baggy, flappy kind the British Army wore in North Africa. I couldn't imagine feeling prepared for anything in flappy shorts like that. My boots were my pride and joy, a gift from a friend who was leaving the country and was told by his mother in no uncertain terms to leave the boots behind. They were heavy, made of sturdy brown leather that came up over my ankles, and had thick rubber soles that made me feel invincible. None of the puddles between the warehouse and the station were too deep for my boots.

But those puddles were nothing compared to the Río Uruguay that rose over fifty feet near Salto and Paysandú. Nothing compared to the floodwaters that sucked coffins out of graveyards and swept them downriver. Nothing compared to the devastation that left so many people homeless and dependent on the kindness of strangers. Once, when I was delivering a cup of coffee to Lieutenant Martínez I heard a conscript explaining that not many evacuees had arrived on the train that day because at every station people had opened their homes to anyone who wanted to stay, and many got off the train and accepted their generous offers. The Lieutenant said, "The solidarity is amazing. People really are making room for others in their lives." Then he shrugged. "What a shame that once the crisis is over we'll all forget about our universal concerns and go back to how we were, focused on our own little worlds." Being a rose-tinted-spectacles sort of person, that thought had never occurred to me.

Soon after that it finally stopped raining and Lieutenant Martínez told me they would no longer be needing me. We shook hands out on the loading dock and then stepped back and saluted each other. It was the first time I'd ever saluted anyone like that, officially, but it came perfectly naturally. Then I turned and walked a few blocks to the bus stop and caught the 118 home.

