“Herding Cats”

By: Bob Lawrence

30 years reenacting
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My years of reenacting

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“The Beginning”

I started reenacting in 1979 with the fame 2nd Wisconsin Civil War reenactment group. My interest in military history, like many of us, started when I was about 8 years old. During my time in High School I was fortunate to have history teachers who help foster that love for history. While reading CW magazine in the back were ads for CW reenactment groups. So I look for and found people who reenacted CW. At that time you were on your own. I had a few people tell me where to buy my clothing, gear and rifle but had to find out the majority of what I needed on my own. Well after a while “I was ready”

On my very first event I was geared up and ready since childhood to do this. At the first event my thoughts were of sleeping like the soldiers, eating like them and of course battling like the real CW soldiers did. Well at the first event I ended up sleeping in my car since my group had no camp and most just showed up for one day. Many in the group were eating “Pop tarts” since that kinda looked like hard tack and at the end of the day I was the only one left who stayed over and so I slept in my car once more. I got home and found out that my new group broke up. I decided that I would personally contact each member get them to agree to keep the unit alive and I volunteered to do the work to bring this all back together. So this began my journey into “Herding Cats”.

I stayed active with CW reenacting and had left the 2nd Wisconsin when my experience with the “Ugly Head” of politics arose and started to give us fits. I was amazed that everyone was loosing sight of what was important and the bickering back and fourth became totally unacceptable to me personally. We had too many “mailmen” (no offense to mailmen) who wanted to be Generals and all they wanted was to order people around cause in their “real” lives for the most part is humdrum but in reenacting they can think they are like GOD but it was off the field politics that made me crazy. I recall spending many hours on the phone “putting out fires”. This guy doesn’t like that guy or this guy is a farb. IF we don’t get rid of that guy the group will go down the tubes. When you add women in the mix holy crap things went from bad to worse. It got to the point where it “wasn’t fun any more” so I opted to go with what was considered the most authentic unit in the hobby “The 5th NY Zouaves”. After leaving the 2nd Wisconsin they continued for a year or so longer but the politics drove it into the ground and people either joined other units or quit the hobby altogether.
The 5th NY was different. They were large, established and well organized. They aided me with getting my uniform and all that I needed to complete my impression. So it was off to my first event. I was overjoyed in the thought NOW I’m going to do this right. I had spent a large amount of time, money and effort to get my details right. Then I went to the first event. We gathered at Ft. Frederick and my first battle with the 5th NY and I died at 2nd base of the baseball field we were defending. The manicured lawn was a far cry from what was in my mind on how it would be. Here we go again. I found their camp to be segregated into two. One camp was all of the old vets who knew each other and who ignored the newbie’s. I have an outgoing personality and went to hang out amongst them but you would have thought I had lice and was ignored. I found that if I wanted to be with the “in crowd” I would have to brush up on “Monty Python” routines as this seemed to be the common thread with “in crowd”. Despite never being an “in crowder” I stuck with it and eventually started to enjoy my time with the 5th. Then the old “ugly head” of politics arose like a phoenix once more but this time with more vengeance and determination. I was looking for an out.

Why German WWII?

Again since the age of 8 like I said I developed the fascination with all things Military. I am a son of a WWII veteran who fought in the Pacific and my biggest hero growing up was General MacArthur. I use to cry to my mother that I wanted to be like General MacArthur when my gear won’t fit. She would say “why not wear it like Poncho Via (slung over my shoulder so I could wear it)”? “No I want to be General MacArthur! So between Civil War history and WWII history I loved them both equally.

Then one of my uncles gave me his “war souvenirs” from Germany. A helmet, couple of metals and small German flag. I found something very strange in my reaction to seeing the flag. This made me want to know more and became even more fascinated with German side of WWII. The more I looked at pictures and watching “World at War” series on TV the more and more I got involved with the German side. We played Army endlessly as kids in the woods and I was always the German. The uniforms, flags, armbands, helmets, rifles, machineguns, marching, singing and all that I came across I was hooked. Again at that time I never harbored any anti Semitic feelings just fascinations with the German Army of WWII.

After reenacting with CW for a few years I was at the battle of “New Market, VA” in 1983. In the parking lot I was speaking with a guy who was in a Gebirgsjaeger unit. He had his kit in his car and showed me it. I said to my self that’s it. I asked how to join. He went on to explain the joining process and I thought this is what I want to do. This then brought me to talk with Dave Delucia who was in my CW units. He said nah don’t do Gebrigs do Grossdeutschland with me and my brother. I said where do I sign up? Dave is really a great leader he helped me with getting my gear. At that time you had to go to many gun shows, you had to do a lot of
research, books and more books were needed to get the correct equipment and gear. At that
time there wasn’t a lot dealers. Not many people making uniforms so you either wore original
uniforms, Marine Corp or Swedish Conversions. So I was still doing both impressions CW and
WWII. Eventually for me at about 1989 I began my full time impression doing WWII German
with Grossdeutschland 7th Kompanie.

“Strange Friends”

While doing different time periods you will create friendships and these become your
inner circle. Since the common dominator is “military history” we tend to be all the same kind
of people. Regardless of what you are in real life you come together as amateur historians and
we all got along. So you start to do other time periods with the same groups of friends.

With this circle of friends I’ve done WWI US and German, WWII; CW was looking into
doing Zulu War, Rev War and almost anything to do with all time periods. I would tell my
future wife that we are going to do this impression or that impression and she said to me “it’s
the same group of people wearing different uniforms you have some very Strange Friends”.

But in all of these years I only have one friend from school that I still see but I literally
have hundreds of friends in reenacting and really good ones to boot. I am blessed and
appreciative.

“Grossdeutschland”

I started with GD in 1983 joing the ranks and became active. The unit did about 3 events
a year which left me time to get to CW events and other activities. By 1989 Dave Delucia was
winding down as unit commander because of school, marriage, jobs and all things like “Life”. I
became more and more involved with this great unit. By 1991 I had my first of three cancers
which, obviously I survived. This also afforded me time off from work to immerse my self totally
into the job of running GD. I thank God for my family and GD for giving me something to do
besides feel sorry for myself. So I jumped in all the way. The one thing about me is that I never
“just join” I’m part of it or not. I guess again it’s my personality that makes me shoot my mouth
off especially if I see something wrong.

GD was always a large group. Thru Dave’s leadership and with original member Stu
Bryant we were and still are considered to be very authentic. Things were very loose back in
the beginning. Dave would come up to you after a few events and say “ok put on obergrenadier
pip” that’s how you advanced. Now with the unit numbering over 120 we have a
comprehensive guide to rank, and metals. You can’t wear a metal cause you want to you must earn it.

Starting in 1990 I became the unit “Hauptfeldwebel” or Kompanie spiess. I took on the role of organizing, contacting, recruiting and the daily running of the unit. This freeing up Dave to lead the group. I did and continue today do this on a daily bases. Of course it’s become much more involved but always have my finger on the pulse of the group.

“How to Herd Cats”

There are two ways to lead people. You must remember this is an all volunteer group of people who want different things from this hobby. They spend “their” money, time, gas, vacation days to come to events. The two ways to lead is thru “Intimidation” the other is thru “Cooperation”. My way was always thru “Cooperation” because this is NOT real; we’re really NOT in the military. I can give orders but really if you give an order the person does it or not. But if you’re here to play the game then cooperation is best. I’ve seen others try to intimidate people and it always falls flat. In a volunteer situation, whether reenacting or a bowling league, you as the volunteer choose to come to events or not, to spend the time and effort or not but in the end it’s up to the commanders and staff to make each event “FUN”.

After years of leading my group I found that when you do have a person who doesn’t want to conform to your policies the best way to handle it is thru “peer pressure”. Example is in 1986 we decided to shave our faces completely. Why? Because of the thousands of photos you would look at only a few showed soldiers wearing mustaches and or beards. So we made a unit policy to be cleaned shaven. Of course we heard “my family never seen me without my mustache” or “The Germans wore mustaches” and finally “I’m joing the Gebirgsjaeger s”. We had a few quit, but the majority stay. What happen was at a GAP event one member came into the barracks with his kit and started to set up his bunk. He had a mustache, and goatee. While he was there setting up people came up to him to say hello. Everyone who came up to him said “Hey man you know you gotta shave”. After about the 10th person saying this to him he turned and announced to the group “Guys please I’m going to shave don’t worry”. It was thru peer pressure that the policy was upheld and he did shave and this has worked many many times after.

Choosing key players

The average person joins a group and within about 5 years quits the hobby altogether or joins another unit. Sometimes “Life” gets in the way. A member joins then might get married, goes to school, looses his job or falls on hard times. So as a unit commander you must commit to the “long haul” of leading the unit.
Turnover of members is high. We were sitting around the camp after a battle and one of the members said to me “man I miss the old guys”. I said yeah I do too, but I looked around and the faces might be new but I was surrounded by a sea of cuff titles. Different names but truly the same kind of people. If you look to see the old faces they will change. You can’t stop the inevitable people will lead.

In the beginning and for many years I did it all. My role was unit commander on the field, contact people for events, produce and write a monthly newsletter which would take about 8 hours of work writing, printing folding, and mailing. I would arrange all events meaning getting paperwork out to everyone, collect registrations, mass mailings. Make sure guys had rides to events basically anything to have to do with the unit and or events “I DID IT BY MY SELF”. I’m not looking for a gold star but it really burnt me out. The amount of time and effort each week that was needed to make things happen really started to take a toll on me which of course took a toll on my family. I needed help.

Picking out people that will help is daunting task. I found I have two time frames yours and mine. When I want something done I want it done now and not two weeks from now. So instead of asking someone to do it I would end up just doing it myself. This was wrong for me to do but things got done and the unit grew. The people you choose can not be elected into the position. They don’t have to be old veterans members; they must be people who are willing to go the extra distance to do what needs to be done. This has taken me years to find the right crew to work with. I’ve picked people and they have let me down then there are others who can’t do enough and think of GD full time. You always accept anyone who is willing to help. The turnover for these helpers is high as they soon learn that leading a unit is not all that it’s cracked up to be. They don’t have the stamina to keep doing this year after year. There are a few and I’m lucky to have them on my staff. There are some that I had great expectations for but after a couple of years was let down.

So what is really important is that you find people you can have frank and honest dialog with. That you can say what’s really on your mind and these people have the units’ best interest in heart. In the end the satisfaction comes not from how the battle went but how the event was. Did we do authentic and cool things and in the end the question is “how do we improve for the next time?”. 
It's not a democracy guys, get over it. NO voting

Voting has cause more groups to split then any other democratic device. Why? Because people are not mature enough to handle voting. Two people have an idea for the unit, a new policy. These two people are exact opposites of the ideas and are very passionate about their idea. So they say “Ok let the unit vote on it’. In most units they gather guys at an event and say here’s the proposal. Let’s vote! The unit votes. One side wins and one side looses. Normally you would think “ok the votes over this is how it will be” and the group goes on. Well that’s a fantasy. After the vote has been cast the looser “ALWAYS” gets in touch with people who vote with him and say “that’s bull we lost the vote, hey lets start our own group”. So a major split occurs, half going with the guy who lost the vote and half who stay with the guy who won.

It’s been my policy to hold NO voting. That doesn’t mean I make each and every decision. I have a group of advisors I go to. A few of veteran members, some are new others are guys who are in the ranks with no desires to lead or leave. If it’s an important decision like kicking a guy out of the unit, or a new uniform policy we discuss it and discuss it till we work out the situation then bring it to the members letting them know of this new policy. I have never made a decision or new policy that has EVER effect the unit negatively or caused the unit any embarrassment. All decisions are made for the benefit of the unit and not to me personally. Generally it goes thru without a problems. So don’t vote.

No Begging

Simply put if a person wants out of the unit, fine. If you say “No please you can’t leave we’ll do what ever you want to keep you”. Trust me it’s a Huge Mistake. If you beg a person once you’ll beg him time and time again. He has the advantage over you and the unit. They figure out that all they have to do is whine about this or that and tell people there leaving and we bend over backwards. I finally realized this after quite a few mistakes that it’s best to let the person leave. Keeping them around for few more events is not a good idea as well. IF he leaves he goes now. I have found that many who leave do come back. They go and find out that the other great units are not so great and that they have too many friends and good times with us. So if a person says I’m thinking of quitting your answer. “I’m sorry to hear that good luck”.
Two biggest Problems

The hobby in the 21st century has turned the technological corner. In the beginning we would communicate via letter (snail mail), newsletter once a month, and or phone. Now we communicate 99% of the time via Email, forums, pro-boards, websites, Facebook and I phone. Email has become one of the worst/greatest things to have happen to our hobby. Email is best way to quickly communicate with all of your members with one push of a button, but when the reader reads his computer screen it’s cold without a face or inflection of a voice Email is interpreted by the reader and not the sender of the email. That is one reason why there are so many new abbreviations that is needed to make your point and not to get people pissed off. If I send you an email and say “The hell with you” then you read it you can respond back “Yeah the hell with you too”. But if it’s a JOKE it would be “The hell with you LOL, hahaha” Then that person knows it’s said in a joking way. Well that is good in the real world but not in reenacting. I have put out more fires because of Emails more than any other form of communications. What gets people crazy is politics, religion and your personal believes. We have conservatives, we have liberals, we have every type of person in our groups and everyone has an opinion. Remember I said no voting well Email is just as bad. A person will type something in an email in his mind it was a joke well the reader didn’t think it was funny. Then the flaming war begins, name calling, people quitting, units falling apart all because of an email? A lot of people have what I describe as “Key board rage”. On the internet they become tough guys who write scathing emails with personal attacks but in reality in person they would be meek and mild and not confrontational. Answer? You as a unit commander MUST monitor the email traffic and when someone starts up you must imminently stop the dialog or it will get out of hand. Remind them that the purpose of the email list is to discuss reenacting if you want to talk about religion there are many forums where you can vent your opinion just not on our list. What is worse is when people write emails when they’re drunk. This brings me to the second biggest problem.

Alcohol!

All reenactments end with the guys relaxing and having a few beers. For some it’s more then a few. This is when things start to happen that you normally see in bars at 3am. The Kameradschaft becomes livelier with each drink a guy takes. But there is a time in the evening when there is just too much Kameradschaft or in other words too much drinking. Then someone starts with politics, and or religion and that’s when all hell brakes loose. How to avoid this is a very hard problem but we instituted curfews. Lights out on Friday at midnight, and Saturday night no later then 1am. If people still want to party they have to take it away from the rest of the group. Making it hard to party or at least making it difficult to find a place to party will usually solve the problem but if a fight happens it must be resolved the next day when heads are clear and hands can be shook no harm done.
So the inevitable is Email and Alcohol will be part of the hobby for now till something happens in the electronic field to changes things, but Alcohol even when it’s banded people will find a way in.

The Best Excuses

My phone rings.

(me) “Hello”
(caller) “Hi Bob it’s Fred”.

(me) “Hi Fred what’s up? You ready for the event tomorrow. I’ll be by to pick up around 7 is that ok?”

(caller) Well that’s the reason why I’m calling. I can’t make it”.

(me) Why?
(caller) “Well the cat died and my wife is freaking out”.

(me) “So sorry to hear that. I didn’t know you had a cat”.

(caller) “No it’s not ours but my mother in laws and my wife is really broken up about it”.

(me) “When did the cat die?”
(caller) “Two weeks ago”.

(me) “What?”
(caller) Yeah the families really upset and so is my wife.

(me) Where does your mother in-law live?
(caller) Idaho

(me) What are you doing sitting shiver? Must have been a hell of a cat.

(caller) yes my wife loved that cat very much.

Call ends.

Phone Rings

(me) Hello

(caller) Hi Bob just calling to tell you I can’t make the event this weekend

(me) Why?
(caller) Well on Saturday my wife is getting her nails done and I have to watch the kids for the hour while she’s getting them done
(me) laughing Ok have a great weekend.

**Phone Rings**
(me) Hello
(caller) Hi Bob. I can’t print the registration forms for the event so I can’t go.
(caller) Can you print them out and send them to me?
(me) Why you don’t have a printer?
(caller) No I have two printers
(me) and ?
(caller) they don’t work in my bedroom
(me) why?
(caller) My room is too hot and the printers ink dries up so I can’t print anything
(me) why don’t you hook the printer up for a few minutes print the forms out then disconnect the printer?
(caller) well it’s too much trouble to do that
(me) well how do you print pictures?
(caller) I don’t I just look at them on my Iphone
(me) well how do you print anything?
(caller) I don’t
(me) so you want ME to print the forms up send them to you because you’re room is too hot to use your printer, is that right?
(caller) yup.
(me) ok let me ask you this, can you print anything in the winter, spring or fall when it’s not too hot?
(caller) no my printer is not hooked up.
(me) ok I give up.
EMAIL (yahoolist daily we have over 120 members on our email list)

To the list: Sorry I couldn’t make the event but I had help drop little explodey things on naughty guys with bath towels on their heads and the grass doesn’t seem to grow very well here but I continue to watch and wait. So I just couldn't make it this weekend.

These are just three of the hundreds of calls I’ve gotten over the years where you want to pull your teeth out with people. I could go on but most won’t believe these....... I’d rather the call be “Bob I can’t make the event because the “weather babe” on TV said it’s going to rain, or snow, or it’s too hot and that’s why I don’t want to come. Instead of fantastic excuses.....(Herding CATs)

Cradle to the Grave

During the years we have celebrated many of the members having families and especially children. This is a great part of the hobby. To share this joy with the rest of members is something I really like to hear. The standing joke when a member has a baby or when they get married we always ask “So got anything for sale?” Great banter an old joke but always gives me a laugh.

During this time as well we have to deal with death. I have two members commit suicide. One of them very young in his twenties and the other in his mid thirties. They say suicide is a very selfish act for the person to do. I don’t know anything about that but do know it hurts the family both his real family and his GD family. I went to both funerals and man was it ever sad. The younger member had all of his friends and family at his funeral along with others from different reenacting groups. The older member when I went was even sadder because he left behind a wife and two small children. His daughter no more then 8 years old just stared at his coffin and kept asking why. I don’t think she’s over to this day.

The good times out weigh the bad and this Kameradschaft that we have developed is, in my opinion is as real for us as it was for the Germans who fought and died on the Easterfront. In reenacting terms we’ve come together to create this kompanie to reenact situations in war time. Although we will not suffer the death on a battlefield I do find that we all gather to protect and help one in other when we are in the field and off. I get the biggest kick out of all of you when the squad list comes out and the emails fly about who’s bring what food and other items to make your weekend better not for you but for your Kameradens.

The great poem that speaks to this is:
“Kameraden”

If one of us becomes tired,
the other watches out for him.
If one of us has doubts,
the others laugh reassuringly,
If one of us falls,
two will take his place
For God gives every warrior a Kamerad.

I don’t have a degree
(but I play a psychiatrist on TV)

Because this is a hobby is an all volunteer hobby we get people from all walks of life and we have gotten in some people with real emotional problem. I’m not saying the kind who will take real bullets and shoot people but some of them are emotional cripples who are socially inept and have a hard time finding real friends and or girlfriends in their real lives. Most with these problems mask them at first. But the common thread is they always seem to have a problems either with their real lives or with the hobby. It can be a variety of problems they have with either this guy or that guy or with what we are doing for this event. Usually it’s the smallest irrelevant problem but for them it’s huge and now it’s my problem to solve. Some go so far as wandering around not being social at all. (a few things to watch for)

Then there are the ones whose lives are so bad and that they don’t get any recognition from their families for anything they do or accomplish, these people usually go over board trying to do things for the group always looking for the “pat on the back” or public “atta boy”. They need to be stroked for each and everything they do but if you don’t then you’ll get “look what I do for this unit, look how hard I work and I get nothing for it?” (this is typical)

Since I don’t have a degree in Psychiatry at first when a member would come to me with his complaints I was trying to fix most of these people’s problems. I’ve made mistakes with giving some of them medals and or positions because of their lack of self esteem. But it always comes back to bite me in the ass. No matter how hard I would try to work with these people the end result is always the same, complete failure. I have found no matter how much you give back to them the need and want more and more. It becomes tiring and in the end they leave the unit anyway but there is always someone else to take their place.

There are other people who like to argue and fight. You make a statement and boom they always take the other side of the issue. You’ll find these people will do this all the time. They stir trouble up and constantly whine about this and that. They’ll call me and tell me there
are a bunch of people who agree with their point of view. I’ve learn and I always ask when this is said to me “well who are the other people?”. The truth is there is never other people it’s only him. When he won’t tell me who the others because these people are in fear of retribution I say “well if you won’t tell me then its lie and no one else agrees with you”. For the most part I’m usually correct 99% of the time.

So many types of people are involved with this hobby and for the most part I’d say the problem people are about 1% with 99% being as normal as I am what ever that means. We go thru life paying our bills, raising our families, having careers and enjoying this hobby. I’ve had members say to me “I’m always going to do this and always be in GD but the truth is sometimes “Life gets in the way” which can cause a person to leave. The one thing you should never do is sell your kit. Always keep the basics because there is a better then average chance you will return.

As long as you keep your values intact you’ll be fine but like I said I don’t have a degree although at times I wish I did.

Rules that just must be.

I’m never big on rules and or unit policies. I’ve read other units handbooks that are so heavy with rules, subparagraphs and policies that I wonder when there is time for the fun of it.

A couple of rules or policies I’ve enacted that seem to work. One is; if you do other time periods and especially if you do another German WWII unit that is in direct conflict with us that you must attend as GD at all GD events that we go to. Meaning if your other unit is attending an the same event as us you MUST attend with us and not them. What this does is eliminate a guy “Cherry Picking” us, meaning he thinks well for this event I go as GI and that event I’ll go Russian then this event I’ll do GD. What this does is deplete our ranks and cause the unit problems. If you go to an event and you’re with another unit those people end up in our camp which cause a moral problem. It also doesn’t help this person to develop a good relationship with his squad and the unit in general. I know of a group whose policy is “Cool man any impression you want to do for this event do it”. So when you join you join to participate with us. This does not stop them from doing other impressions or other time periods it just I need you loyalty towards GD for the sake of morale and the group.

The other policy is a no tolerance for anything political, anti Semitic or racist. We walk a very fine line wearing the uniform that once fought against America. That we know the history of the politics that drove the German nation and there trying to eradicate a race from the earth. If one believes that the fourth Reich will happen or that Hitler will come out of the grave then this is NOT the unit to be in. We have members who are Jewish and or are married to Jewish
gals. We let a member go once when at a living history show when someone from the public asked him “hey why did you loose the battle?” He said right back the person “Not enough atrocities”. When we go back to camp I pulled him aside said pack your stuff and go home. I can not be tolerant for these kinds of stupidity.

For the most part common sense prevails. Do we really have to say “don’t bring live ammo”? No illegal drugs? These are things that shouldn’t be and are common sense. Other issues like Authenticity are covered later.

Authenticity

(what a concept)

Farb, Authentic, Stitch Counter, Posers these are just a few of the terms we use. Farb is someone who just doesn’t get it. He has no idea of what is right and wrong but for the most part doesn’t care. Stitch counter is someone who goes full tilt down to his correct authentic underwear. Authentic is somewhere in between. He will buy the right kit, he will period wrap his food but in his gas can is a bottle of Gatorade. He will rough it but won’t do total immersion events as it’s too cold or uncomfortable. He’s a good member not the best but reliable and enjoys the hobby being in it for the long haul. Posers are someone who likes to wear the uniform get his picture taken but doesn’t really like anything else. They generally won’t stay the weekend and do the bear minimum for the unit but he “sure looks good in a uniform”

Let me say this you can wear all original gear, the perfect kit, nothing wrong but when it comes to going out to the field this person might be a “lone wolf” not listening to commands and ignores them at best well this person is a “FARB”.

It’s the detail that makes a good kit great. Dump out the contents of your bread bag what do we find? Car keys, cell phone, wallet anything period? A great authentic member is one who looks for and finds the small items to carry with him in his impression. It’s the stuff that’s not seen that is most authentic. He’s developed a great “persona” knows his local and historic background of where he comes from in Germany, his education, what he did for a living, and where and when he joined the Wehrmacht. All of these things make for a great presentation of a Soldat in Grossdeutschland.

In the end I would rather have a person who is 85% correct then one that is 100%. It’s not that hard to do. You need to make sure that what you have and are carrying is something they would have. You don’t need the perfect set of clothes but you do need to know how wear them as they did. This will be enhance your persona and your impression. “Wenn schon, denn schon” (if it’s worth doing it’s worth over doing).
One Campfire

There is a lot to be said for smaller units. When you’re in a 10 man division you as an individual will know each and every member in that group. The intimacy within a small group is generally greater then that of a large group like GD. Generally the smaller groups will have a devoted leader and will do what ever is needed for the group, but once that person decides he’s burnt out or not having fun anymore and moves on that will generally end that unit. I’ve said that I’m the only one in GD who knows each member. You can go for years and not know everyone. The people who show up all the time or the ones that post to the list all the time are the ones who are generally known to all. The guys who come out to one or two events a year, who for the most part are quite and unassuming will be the guys that are not as well known.

During the years GD has developed many specialty impressions and permanent squads. This is a good and bad thing. The good is that it gives consistency to your membership knowing you’ll be with the same group of people at each and every event. That like the real GD you foster a stronger Kameradschaft for that squad. That you will try and become more active not wanting to let you squad mates down.....BUT it also has its negative side. Since there is a strong relationship within your squad they have a tendency to isolate themselves away from the rest of the unit. They will pick a place to camp that is no where near the rest; they are off and separate from the rest. They also do not socialize with the other squads. This sometimes is perceived as being “elite” or that squad is “snobs”.

I once made a comment to a member “Isn’t it amazing with all of the new members we have?” he said back to me “well if they’re not in my squad who cares!” that’s the problem. The one consistent thing in all hobbies is inconsistency meaning that even the most permanent squads will change in time. That member will come and go or want to go to another squad. If for no other reason this is one reason why being social with all members is important because one day those new members might be joining your squad. So it’s best to make sure you know who’s who in the zoo.

I make a concerted effort to bring all around “one camp fire”. Not allowing people to isolate themselves, create a bonding and Kameradschaft for all. A simple game of “kaputski” (dice game) will have all members compete for the championship, singing, and the greatest investment we’ve ever made the “Field Kitchen”. The kitchen, like in our homes, is the one gather place for all of the members. Food is a natural draw. Feeding everyone out of the kitchen foster this community and besides makes for good eating.

It’s not perfect and some will never socialize but you have to try to avoid the clicks because this can and will cause people to leave the unit in one big group. It’s something that
must be watched to make sure it doesn’t happen. In the 35 years we’ve been in the field we have never had a major split occur within the unit where as most groups usually do within a few years of their existence.

I’m not perfect

I’ve lied to get off from work to go to an event. I told a boss one time that a great aunt of mine died and had to go to Pennsylvania for the weekend to attend her funeral. I worked retail which meant that I had to work every weekend. Getting a weekend off was very hard so I became ingenious with excuses to get the time off. I even said that my ex wife got arrested and I had to pick my daughter up and take care of her till her mother got out of jail. I really didn’t think I was doing anything wrong but in hindsight I do see this as one of my major faults.

I also want things to be perfect and would go and spend what ever is needed to assure the event goes off without a hitch. I’ve taken money without my wife knowing and spent it on the unit always telling her that it will be replaced which of course it wasn’t. In the first years I was running GD on my own, I would have a deficit of at least $1000 at the end of the year. I would, as the saying goes, rob Peter to pay Paul. Then I would justify it to my self.

I have also not been around for many Home Family affairs. Weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and once did miss a funeral. Now I can look back and know I shouldn’t have but can not change anything I’ve done. There is a kind of sickness within you to want to make sure you can go to the next event to do what ever it takes to attend. This is wrong but is done. I always tell members to remember that it’s “Family, job then reenacting” I guess I should have listen to myself. I’m not proud of this but this is the truth. I do apologize to my wife and family.

The Greatest Moment

1999 was the greatest moment for me within GD. It was the first year that we attended the Grossdeutschland reunion in Germany. For many years prior I always wonder if we could attend. I knew of another reenactor telling me that while he was stationed in the Army in Germany that he attended a couple of the reunions. I asked him how we could. Basically he said to me “since none of you speak perfect German you would be wasting your time trying to go so for get it”. Of course I never did.

In 1997 a book came out “God, Honor and Fatherland” which was about the Grossdeutschland Division. This was produced by the RZM company out of Connecticut and written by a reenactor friend Remy Spezzano. It was one of the first books using the new technology of photo editing that brought back to life the old pictures in crystal clear prints. Remy had made a ton of connections within the veterans group. He also got many of the vets to
give him copies of pictures for the book. Remy had also attended a few of the reunions in Germany as well. When we bought the book I asked him if there would be a chance we could get invited to a reunion. Remy said he knew Fritz Uhlendorf in Germany very well and would speak to him on our behalf. Fritz was a board member for GD.

A couple of months later I got a phone call from Helmut Ortlepp who is a GD veteran living in Vermont. He introduced himself and the first question he asked me was “So what do you think of Hitler?” My reply was two words “he’s nuts”. We had a great laugh which broke the ice. From what was to be a 5 minute conversation ended up with us talking for hours. This developed into a very long relationship between Helmut and me till he passed away in 2010. At the end of my conversation with Helmut he said “so you want to go to a GD Treffen?” I said “yes we would”. His reply was “well you’re alright I’ll recommend you to Fritz to invite you to the next treffen”. I later found out that I was being interviewed by Helmut and that Fritz told him to call me so he could see if we were radical knuckleheads or what our story was. Thank God I impressed him and so our invitation came to attend in 1999.

To think back prior to 1999 I don’t believe we as a unit were ready to attend. Although we were around for quite a while I feel the guys who came over for the first treffen where the right guys. So in 1999 off we flew to Munster Germany.

Did you know there is two Munster’s Germany? We didn’t. The difference between Münster and Munster was an umlaut and about 4 hours driving distance. From the airport in Frankfurt we got in our vans and went to Münster. Pulled into the town and asked where the Deutsche Haus Hotel was. People shook their heads saying no and finally Richie Althaus went and asked where the “Panzer Truppen Shule” was. They said oh you want Munster you’re in the wrong Münster. So we scrambled looking over the maps and found we were way south of the correct Munster. My plan was for our first meal in Germany to be typical German meal but unfortunately our first meal was McDonalds we needed to move and move fast as we had the board of directors from GD were waiting for us to arrive by 4 in the afternoon.

We rolled into the hotel around 8 pm and Fritz Stephan asked what happened? I apologized and told him we went to the wrong Munster. He began laughing went back into the bar area told the others and they all burst out laughing what a way to start. I had the guys go and change clothes and come back down to meet the vets. We were exhausted from traveling but cleaned up nice and presented ourselves to the vets. Fritz asked me one question “Why GD?” My answer was “GD was the best of the best” in addition “The divisions history and brave men that were in it”. He said “good” lets have a beer. This all started our relationship with the veterans of Grossdeutschland and as they say the rest is history. At the third treffen Fritz Stephan came up to me and said “BoB you’re no longer invited to the Treffen”, of course with horror I said “Why” his reply was “From now on you are Expected to attend, so no more official
invitations just come” what a relief this meant we passed any and all concerns. If they thought we harbored any radical ideas we would have been gone for me this was great news.

I personally have attended every year except one year since 1999 till now. 2011 is the last treffen for the vets. They decided that this will be the last one and that they have been meeting each year for the past 60 years. So it is sad to think that this is the last time I will see many of the vets that I’ve had met and have a relationship with. Over the last years we have had many pass away and this too is sad. The one great man that has passed and was always a great support of ours was “Major Heinrich Hed Gerbener”. With a twinkle in his eye and smile on his face he was our liaison. He passed in 2010 and the last time I saw him he was 94 years old and as sharp as a tack. He is missed.

For me and being part of this hobby I feel this is one of the greatest accomplishments we’ve had. To actual be with the soldiers you portray was inspiring to say the least. Why no other units did this I’m not sure. It took time and effort but the rewards were great. I will think back on this time as the icing on my reenacting career. Organizing and getting 10-20 people to the reunions took “Herding Cats” to the greatest skills I had but we did it…..

There’s always a problem

In 1993 we decided to supplement our hobby with more events so we start our own organization to host and run them. We call ourselves “The World War Two Historical Preservation Group inc. 501(c3)”. This group is separate from GD and is incorporated as a not for profit group. Our original goal for the group was to buy land and create what we call “Wally World” for reenacting. Since then till now we have redirected our goals and purchasing land will not happen but more the likely lead to leasing.

Hosting events has opened my eyes to exactly what it takes to run events. It also brings me to the conclusion that NOTHING goes as planed and there is always a “PROBLEM”. The problems come in big and small types. Things like we can rent the site for the weekend we wanted, or this unit won’t attend if that unit comes. Of course at first I would panic and would loose sleep over an event months in advance. Well I realize that problems are just a natural state of affairs for every event and everyone.

First thing to do is NOT PANIC. Second thing is confront what ever the problem is coming up with a compromise and or solution. Can’t have the date for the event you wanted? Ok no problems do it the following week. What there is a WWI event the following week ok will do it the weekend before, what there is the 900th anniversary of the Romans conquest of Germany ok then how about the next month? This has happened to me. What’s the answer
simple don’t worry about other events do it on the date you want so you’ll loose a few people NO PROBLEM if your event offers different and unique things they will come. Do I really have to worry that our date for the event falls on the same date as “Sailors’ Creek” for the annual CW battle which they’ve been doing for the last 45 years? No if people need to go to the same old thing fine with me. We serve the majority and not the individual.

We do everything for an event from what I lovingly say “From Porto-johns to Parking Lots” there is nothing that can be over looked. After about 10 years you get to understand and begin to have an outline in your head to make sure that all of the logistics are covered that you are in contact with the right people and have your staff doing a lot of the work. All of this is true EXCEPT when you host your event on a Military Installation.

Dealing with a military fort changes yearly and up to the day your there it changes again. There is no rhyme or reason for this but when a new base commander comes in he changes the game that you’re used to doing and change it to “his way”.

Always participate there will be problems and most of all, again, don’t panic because all problems are solvable. While things around you are melting you take a deep breath and get things redone so the event goes on. It’s been like that from the beginning and it will be like that till we stop hosting events. What’s scary is when things go smoothly now would be the best time “to Panic” since now there is NO PROBLEM.

The future

Having dedicated almost my entire adult life to this hobby and mainly to GD. I’ve been thru two marriages, had cancer three times, have a great daughter, two great step sons and now a wonderful grand daughter who calls me Opa. My wife now is one that I’ve been with going on 30 years so we are a couple and for me it’s still fun.

My biggest worry about the future is that once I’m gone all of this must go on. More then once people have said to me “Bob you are GD, without you it won’t be”. In my heart I sincerely hope that it is not true.

I, like some, can be seen as what I call the “Graying of the hobby”. At 58 the old body doesn’t work well as it did in the past. The health issues have gotten worse so the reality is I will be leaving the hobby a lot sooner then I thought. My energy is waning and I see the future for me leaving GD and the group.

What would piss me off more then anything else is to leave the hobby and watch the group splinter into a million little bits. There are few key players that I believe won’t let it happen. The attitude has to be “Ok Bobs gone now let’s get the next event going”. Of course when I go I know a few will follow but that will be up to them but the rest has to keep this going
to not let all of my years of hard work and toil go down the tubes but to keep it going on and on.

Can it go on without me? You bet your ass it can. I have gradually gotten away from field command and have been more involved with logistic side and I have seen some good things and some things not so good but what I do see is the strength and commitment by a few key players who I pray won’t collapse and keep this up and running.

When I am gone I’m still only a phone call or an email away so when at anytime anyone needs my advice they can always count on me. Always!!!!

The End!

On September 15, 2014 I made the decision that this is the end. Over the last couple of years I have developed additional medical issues that have not allowed me to continue. I sent this email to the Stab:

“I got home from my little trip to Boston with my brother. I'm in worst shape than ever. I feel I no longer can attend any more events away from home. My myastima caught up with me big time and was feeling that I needed to go to the hospital.

As you know I've tried and tried but can't do it. I was hoping to attend this weekend but I know if I go I'll only get worse. Being home now it will take a few days to recoup so I just can't do it anymore.

I'm sorry but it has gone from bad to worse. Was hoping with the new doctor maybe it will help but the more I see how I react to my condition the more I have to realize it's just not going to work no matter what.

I will help in anyway I can I will do all I can but for me going away and the stress of events makes it worse for me. I got home tonight and now I can hardly speak, breath or swallow.

So we all have to agree that I've tried but we all have to admit I just can't do it any more. Give me a few days to recoup and will talk to you later. We need to transition people into positions of Hauptmann, and President
Thank you all I know you understand.”

Bob

When I sent this email out no one responded to me for about 2 days. Then a few phone calls. Apparently they were discussing this and finally have accepted my leaving. The problem is who will replace me. After about a week or so it’s being figured out. The one thing I’m most pleased with are the response “I’ll do whatever position that GD needs me to do”. “We will continue”,
“Can’t just let this end”. This is most satisfying that having given more than 30 years of my life that it won’t “just end” that we have people with the same passion for the hobby as me and for their “love” of the hobby and guys. It will continue.
For me I will still be around, I will still contribute, but I have to NOT interfere and allow them to do and or make mistakes. I will be “lurking” on the internet and ready to help with the transition.
Can they do it, can they keep this going? You bet! Most likely even better then what I did. We have solid people with the right attitude who love GD as much as me and will make sure it does continue.
I’m sure there will be some bumps in the road but overall the plans that are being put in place are ones that will assure of the consistencies and smooth take over by the new Stab.
It’s been a joy, privilege to have been part of a life time of fun with so many that I’ve come to respect, admire and love as brothers. It will always be a part of me, I will in the future try to attend some event and am taking my own advice of keeping at least one kit ready to go.
The leaving is enviable and sad but I see that we are in a good place so now it’s time to say “Auf Wiedersehen”. With a tear in my eye and brain full of memories I can’t thank everyone enough. I will be back, I will stay in-touch, and I will always be part of this magnificent group. I will end with: “IN TREUE FEST ZU GROSSDEUTSCHLAND”
Hauptmann (retired) Bob Lawrence aka Otto Lorenz