



TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

by Jim Stiles

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MY 'ALMOST-FERGUSON' MOMENT...
Rangers Should 'Range'---
But Fear & Adrenalin Can Be Deadly

PREFACE: The events in Ferguson, Missouri remind me of a moment in my own brief career in law enforcement, as a ranger with the National Park Service at Arches NP. I wrote this account in 2005, years after the confrontation and in response to a fatal shooting that had occurred earlier in the summer at a state park in New Mexico.

When Chief Ranger Jerry Epperson hired me to be a seasonal ranger at Arches National Park, so many years ago, I wasn't even sure what my duties were supposed to be. So it seemed like a good idea to ask. Epperson smiled wryly and said, "A ranger should range."

And while all of us endured the other Park Service chores like collecting fees and working the visitor center information desk and cleaning toilets and admonishing the tourists for their often almost unbearable ignorance, we still preferred to 'range'—to get into the backcountry and explore—any time the opportunity allowed us to. To know a piece of land, for no other reason than the intimacy between you that it provided, was the greatest reward of all. We didn't range for profit. We did it for our hearts and our souls. Not to mention our soles. My "rangering days" are still filled with fond memories of unforgettable beauty.

The fee collecting was always the least pleasant of my duties and I did them reluctantly and with little enthusiasm. Its only advantage was the opportunity it provided to occasionally meet beautiful single women camping alone who were in desperate need of a bath and who found my invitation for a hot shower and a cold beer almost irresistible. I was no chick magnet but my running hot water was.

But fast forward 20 years and employees of the various federal agencies collecting land use fees are

showing a zealotness in their work that is almost incomprehensible. It's not as if they're working on a commission. Yet, I continue to read stories of park and forest rangers and BLM staffers who spend most of their day looking for fee violators... even to the point of searching once empty dirt roads, watching for visitors without the necessary proof of payment taped to their windshields or stapled to their foreheads.

I took a step backward and placed my thumb on the keeper of my gun holster. The young man saw the move and stopped. Then he screamed at me, "You take that f—king gun out of that f—king holster and I'll take it and shove it up your f—king ass!" We stared at each other for five long seconds.

The almost fanatical quest for fees turned to tragedy in New Mexico a few weeks ago at Elephant Butte State Park when a state park ranger shot a tourist to death during a dispute over a camping fee. According to a story in the Las Cruces Sun-News, the victim, apparently a tourist in his 50s from Montana, became belligerent with Ranger Clyde Woods, a three-year veteran of the parks department when he refused to pay a \$14 camping fee. Woods attempted to arrest the camper for trespassing and the man put his hands in his pockets and refused to remove them.

According to a spokeswoman for the parks division, Erica Asmus-Otero, the man "acted in a manner that our officer is trained to respond to," and said he was "aggressive and verbally abusive." So Ranger Woods shot him dead. The dead man was NOT carrying a firearm or a knife of any kind.

After the shooting, Parks Director Dave Simon said, "Deadly force is always a last resort" and added

that the "vast majority of park users comply willingly with park fees."

FOR A FULLER ACCOUNT OF THIS TRAGEDY READ: "THE INCIDENT AT ELEPHANT BUTTE LAKE" <http://rangergord.blogspot.com/2006/10/incident-at-elephant-butte-lake.html>

I have my own deadly force story.

While I always preferred to range than collect, sometimes the non-compliant camper can get under a ranger's skin. One evening when the Arches campground was full, a couple of young men, perhaps in their late teens arrived after dark and tried to camp illegally in the picnic area. My first encounter with them was civil enough and I told them they needed to leave the park. Twenty minutes later, I caught them again, when paid campers complained that they'd moved into their site. This time I was firmer and their attitude was icier. They left, muttering as they went, and I knew we'd meet again. A few minutes later I could see their headlights creeping down the Salt Valley Road in search of an illegal campsite.

My self-righteous indignation has always been a quality I needed to work on, and on this evening it was in full bloom---after all, how dare these jerks defy the order of a ranger!---and I went after them. I found their vehicle tracks in Salt Valley Wash. They'd driven off-road and were somewhere ahead of me. It was 11 PM, I was out of radio contact, but determined to confront and cite these violators.

At the time, rangers had not yet become full-time cops but even then we were required to carry our sidearms during night patrols. So I walked into the darkness with my maglite and service revolver snapped firmly in its holster to confront and punish these noncompliant campers. I found them a hundred yards down the dry wash, already wrapped in their sleeping bags and drifting toward sleep. My arrival was totally unexpected and when I brutally advised them that they not only would be required to leave immediately but that I was also issuing them a federal citation for driving through a natural area, the two young men came unglued.

Both leaped from their bags, screaming. They called me every unkind word imaginable and in such a hysterical manner that I wondered if I was about to lose control of a situation that was barely 30 seconds old. One of them was particularly rabid and finally, as the encounter intensified, he moved toward me in a way that definitely felt threatening.

I was, in fact, scared to death.

I took a step backward and placed my thumb on the keeper of my gun holster. The young man saw the move and stopped. Then he screamed at me, "You take that f—king gun out of that f—king holster and I'll take it and shove it up your f—king ass!"

We stared at each other for five long seconds.

And I reflected on his words. And I decided that, in fact, he was absolutely right. If I took my gun from the holster I believed I could never shoot the man dead for illegally camping in a national park.

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But could I be sure? And on the other hand, this young fellow, in his current frenzied state, might very well take the revolver from me and kill me. I could almost see the headlines in next week's Moab Times-Independent:

SEASONAL RANGER AT ARCHES NP SHOT
BY ILLEGAL CAMPER...
FUNERAL SERVICES ON FRIDAY

"OK," I said, taking a deep breath. "I'm going back to my patrol cruiser. I want both of you out of here in 30 minutes." Retreat seemed like a viable option. I backed off slowly, turned and walked back to the road. Had they been running up behind me I would never have heard them—the sound of my heart pounding in my ears was deafening.

I sat in my patrol car for 20 long minutes, still shaken but happy to have my ass intact. Finally, incredibly, here they came, packed up and in their car. One of them had calmed appreciably and I handed him the citation. He actually thanked me. His friend, however, was still out of control and kept slamming his fists into the headliner of his friend's roof. I imagine damage to the vehicle surpassed the \$50 fine.

I drove back to the Devils Garden, to my residence, slept poorly and wondered if I'd done the right thing. Had I been a coward or a wise man? I decided that for once, I'd been the latter. I never again came even close to a confrontation like that. Life, whether theirs or mine, was not worth the risk over an illegal camping infraction.

I don't know all the facts in the New Mexico shooting but I would guess that fear and adrenalin and the rapid way uncontrolled events can unfold had more to do with the shooting than the character of the man who pulled the trigger or the man who allegedly provoked him. But a tragedy resulted that didn't need to happen. There's more to Life than collecting fees or paying them...I suggest we all range a bit more and fret a lot less.

POSTSCRIPT: This story was not intended to pass judgement on anyone in the Ferguson case, including Officer Wilson. Had one of the men I confronted attempted to take my service revolver from my holster, I cannot bear to imagine what the outcome might have been. My point here is only that a seemingly benign situation can escalate into a horrid nightmare in seconds. And we can spend the rest of our lives wondering how those few moments changed—or ended--- the course of people's lives...JS

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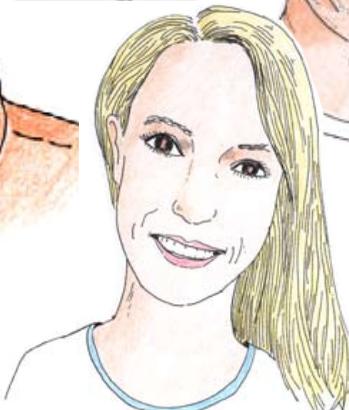


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