

# How it all began...

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(By: **Bruce Blackistone, Atli**, as posted in the Winter '99 Plague)

It was A.D.1969, or 903 years after Hastings (or, as is our custom, 903 A.H.). Students were rioting in the streets; there was a war on in Asia; United States Senators were driving off of bridges, the pop music hit was Marrakech Express, by Crosby, Stills, Nash and maybe Young.

Meanwhile, on a soft summer night in Bethesda, Maryland, elements of the University of Maryland Fencing Club were having a party. I had brought along my almost finished broadsword, and the shield I had reworked from scrap plywood. We had been fencing a whole semester, or maybe two and we were looking for something a little less restrictive than moving back and forth along a narrow rubber mat and waiting for someone to blink. I thought something involving broadswords and shields would be neat. I had just finished singing The Highwayman, Alfred Noyes poem set to music by Phil Ochs (by far the best thing he'd done, most of the rest of his work was dreary protest songs). We had moved inside one of the spare houses at Helen Lane's family estate (a few lovely acres of parkland in the rapidly expanding suburbia). There we were, away from the fire and the mosquitoes, but still basking in the candlelight and modest (as I remember it) amounts of good drink. (As well as Birch Beer.)

Greg Canter and Ceecy Nucker, whom I'd met through Fencing Club and Earl Stromberg from my high school, and I were sitting about, when I tossed up the idea:

"You know what would be really neat? We could do a recreation of the Battle of Hastings."

For reasons that still elude me we all thought that this would be a really cool idea.

Now we needed a name. At Northwood High School Earl and some of our other friends, among them Archery Club hangers-on had proposed the Northwood Mercenary Army. MMA wasn't either symmetrical or alliterative enough for the present crew, so we became the Maryland Mercenary Militia. "Medieval" was proposed as an addition, but was dropped as too long, later to be reinstated at the advice of our campus advisor, when we decided to become an official group. (This was a great period for riots, so it was, as much as anything, to provide some historical legitimacy for an otherwise suspicious crew.)

Now we needed names. I was Attila, First Warlord, Greg became Barchan the Kipchak, Vice Warlord, Ceecy became Rhiannon of Laurasia, Chief Wench (Cup Bearer to the Champion, Fire in the Hearts of All True Thanes, etc.), and Earl was promoted to the Earl of Stromberg (of course), Keeper of the Spoils.

So, there was a start. What to do next? Another party was held in the woods near the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River. People had a great challenge getting lost in the woods, but at least no one drowned (still a consideration in the Longship Company), and nobody fell off the cliff where we held the bonfire (a definite consideration, I was to discover much later in life while working for the National Park Service).

Now we needed troops. We set up in front of the University of Maryland's McKeldin Library, in front of the statue of Testudo. (Armored reptiles seem so appropriate.) We picked up a number of fresh fish, some of whom would become old hands. Bill Marlow, fresh back from the Infantry in

Vietnam became Wilhelm Greycloake, and Jim Cooper joined us as Ragnar the Badde. Celeste Barry/Cooper/Yeager came in as Lady Olrun, and others dribbled in as we started rehearsals on the South Chapel Lawn, which, Ceecy assured us (since she had actually been there), was just like Hastings, but smaller. It was at that point that we were joined by Al Giraldi and the ever-impressive Jim Lande, who would be known henceforth as Bork. (For a hysterical alternate view of this period, read Bork's *The Militia, Where I Learned to Fight with an Axe.*) I figured that if we could get a dozen people on each side, 24 fighters in all, we could fill the space on the hill and have enough for casualties, too.

I was drumming up support wherever I could find it, and my Anthropology professor suggested that I talk to one of her graduate students who had some experience in Revolutionary War reenacting. Like the eager puppy I was, I explained to him what we wanted to do. He looked up at me from behind his desk and wire rimmed glasses and with the world-weary air of a man of maybe 25 years he explained that:

"In the First Maryland Regiment we hand-stitch all of our clothes, and all of our equipment is authentic. You all will be running up and down the hill waving fencing foils and wearing pop-top chainmail. You're going to look like a bunch of clowns! It would be better not to do it at all."

Ignoring this sound advice, we proceeded to look like clowns.

The big day came, Friday, October 14, 1969. I was sick in bed with a 104-degree fever. Earl wore my leather armor (the raw material of which was cadged late one night from the dump behind a hippie sandal shop that had gone out of business). We had about seven Normans and five or six Anglo-Saxons. Bill Marlow was the best of the group with silver spray-painted burlap armor, a decent broadsword and a cardboard and papier-mache helm. Bork had a headband with nails sticking out and a suitable club. One fellow wore an Air Force crash helmet. Arrows were tipped with spent model rocket engines to serve as blunts.

A small crowd gathered, our folks fought, the Normans won. The campus newspaper, the *Diamondback*, covered it, and we basked in the limelight of publicity until they wrapped fish in it.

We decided to do another battle. Someone said that the Battle of Maldon took place in January. I read the background (I thought it would make a great movie) and we held it along the Northwest Branch near the "Duck Pond". Armor and clothing got a little better. (A fellow by the name of Will Hilpsey came after getting a description over the 'phone and looked better than any two of us put together. We never saw him again!)

We did Stamford Bridge the next year. We started hanging around each other, first at the Student Union, then in the "Catacombs" under the steps of Francis Scott Key hall and then in the former ROTC offices in the basement of Reckord Armory (where the discovery of many boxes of coat hangars led to the first great outbreak of chainmail). Dr. Fleck became our advisor and started interjecting some craving for actual, solid research.

Raving Mad Thomas the Insane, Mad-Dog Saunders, Richard the First, Richard the Other, Richard the Third, Doc Gandalf, Morgan the Unbelievable, Wiglaf the Wild, Heimdallr were all there those first years. Also, there were a number of lovely women who succored and comforted and fought with us and for us in those early days; Bifrost, Falcon the Short, Astrid, Jorunn,

## Markland Medieval Mercenary Militia

Freothu-Webbe, Blackfox, Good Penny, Judy<sup>1/4</sup>. Who can remember now? (And who would rather forget?)

By the time I graduated in the winter of '72 (undoubtedly needing an extra semester due to "wasting time with that medieval thing" as my parents phrased it) we had the Sae Earn, our first ship. The friends had divided into three inter-linked groups, Maryland, Midgard and the (old) Longship Company, and Markland had been formed, if not incorporated, as a confederation to coordinate our overall activities.

So, big deal! The first three years were chaotic and exciting. Now as we approach 10 times that number, the excitement and chaos hardly diminishes. Over the years we've gained many friends, and lost a few. Some have found other interests, some have found Markland too small for their talent and ambition, and some have moved along as the civilian world has imposed its own constraints. A few, God bless them, have set sail for a further shore, where we'll join them, by and by.

But, like the feudal societies we study, we are bound together by personal loyalties. We study, create, improve, love each other, sometimes marry each other, breed new members, recruit other folks, fall out, reconcile, and never stop learning. Try a web search for "Markland Medieval" and see all the odd places we show up. Look at all the odd people we have touched over the years.

Please think about where we should go from here. It's your decision. It's your duty.

Be safe, have fun, learn something, teach something, create something that will bring the worlds of the past, present and future together. As for me, I am in constant wonder at the many people I never would have known had we few not met one soft summer night almost thirty years ago.

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