

CARRY ON UP THE KYBO

John Foster
Auckland, New Zealand

Funny how a single word can trigger a raft of memories that I haven't really thought about in over half a century. I had a look at Waiomu (a New Zealand location) on GoogleEarth and was surprised to see the camp apparently still there although the tents have been replaced with a row of barrack-like buildings which are probably bunkhouses. My intent was to see if I could identify the trails we took on our overnight hikes. I was unsuccessful in this but it now seems to me that we might have been conned into thinking we were a lot further away from the main camp than was actually the case. I remember crossing 2 streams on fallen tree-trunk bridges each time but now wonder if we actually took a circuitous route and recrossed the same stream and finished up alongside the stream that ran past the main camp possibly no more than a couple of hundred metres upstream. I believe that to be logical because one of the newbies from the second intake totally freaked out and had to be escorted back to the main camp in darkness by one of the leaders. His parents came to pick him up and he was gone by the time the rest of us returned. To retrace our steps by torchlight would have been a daunting journey but perhaps such incidents were not unforeseen, to say nothing of possible medical emergencies, and it was perhaps not very far to a well marked short track back to our starting point which we were never told about. I guess I'll never know but I would not have even started wondering if not for KYBO acting as a trigger for old memories.

Recently when talking to Jeff I queried the word KYBO which has been with us since the adoption of Collins Dictionary in 2007. I was not challenging its validity but rather the definition which is given as "Australian slang". I pointed out that I had used this word as a child at a YMCA summer camp where it was the official term to be used for the toilet. Jeff is doing further research into the origin of this word but I thought I might relate how I first encountered it and the conclusions that I have drawn as a result.

It is now exactly 65 years ago, in December 1950, that I arrived with a busload of other 11 year olds to spend 4 weeks at the YMCA camp at Waiomu on the Hauraki Gulf north of Thames. Immediately on our arrival we were shown the toilet block and instructed that we were to refer to it as the KYBO, which was an acronym for "Keep your bowels open" although I don't recall the term acronym actually being used. We were then introduced to our accommodation, a row of tents, each big enough to sleep 12, which had been pitched over wooden floors. We dropped our kitbags and blanket rolls in our assigned tent and were each given a bundle of hessian which turned out to be an empty palliasse which we filled with straw from a heap in another tent. These palliasses, on the bare floorboards, comprised our bedding together with the blankets we had brought from home. We did not use sheets. The first afternoon was occupied in assisting with the "construction" of our ablution facilities which consisted of manhandling precast concrete slabs into the adjacent stream and propping them upright with stones from the stream to create a temporary dam to deepen an existing swimming hole which was used for bathing au naturel as well as recreational swimming when the gulf was too rough for swimming from the beach.

We had a wide range of activities available to us, including most ball games and canoeing and archery which were both very popular, but the highlights were the regular overnight hikes into the bush behind the camp. We would start out mid-afternoon and hike until our adult leader selected a campsite by a stream for the night. A couple of us would be detailed to dig a temporary KYBO with a WW2 trenching tool while the rest of us gathered firewood for the campfire we would use to sizzle sausages for our meal and then sit around singing out of tune and being regaled with ghost stories. When the fire died down we would bed down for the night. No sissy tents and palliasses here, we slept in the open wrapped in a blanket with only a thin canvas groundsheet between us and the bare ground. I admit it was a tad scary at first, sleeping in the open in pitch darkness with the night-time sounds of the native bush all around us, but we adapted very quickly and considered it an adventure and were all keen to go on the next hike. The occasional weta that was found in a blanket and the possum droppings around our sleeping places in the morning were all part of the experience, although it was not pleasant one time when I woke in the night with rain falling in my face, thankfully only a brief shower. The normal stay at the camp was 2 weeks (I was one of a handful doing a double) so when I got new tent-mates in the 3rd week I became one of the seasoned old hands who was called upon to give advice on bushcraft to the newbies. Promotion was indeed rapid in the field. The conditions I describe might seem primitive and I am sure they would not be permitted today but I remember that summer as the most carefree and idyllic of my entire life.

And now to my take on the origin of KYBO. I believe it to be a term deliberately coined by the YMCA hierarchy in the USA and exported along with other protocols to YMCA camps in other countries, including Australia. The Collins dictionary compilers, encountering its use in the Australian vernacular, have simply decided to lump it in with other such genuine Australian slang terms for the same thing such as BOGGER and SHOUSE rather than actually do some tiresome research. Why does that not surprise me?