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2020

## Unintended Consequences

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My sleep was shattered by pounding on the hooch door. I jerked erect and grabbed my Car-15 rifle, still unsure what was happening. My roommate, Pat, had likewise wakened.

“What the hell? We’re off today!”

The raspy voice of Captain Double D, our platoon leader, barked, “Everyone up.”

I opened the door. Double D and several other Cobra pilots stood in the quadrangle outside our row of hooches. Nobody except our leader looked alert or happy. Last night’s blowout at the club had ill-prepared us for an early wake up.

My Seiko aviator’s watch said 0730. A late hour by flight standards, but unforgivably early for a down day. “What the ...!”

I hurriedly dressed in my Nomex flight suit and fell in, becoming part of a group of ten pilots. Absences represented those currently flying.

Double D, displaying his normal lack-of-command presence, droned out the orders. “Everyone back here in 30 mikes, prepared to visit the rocket bunkers.”

Our leader’s words caused double takes among all. This activity represented some heretofore unknown duty, not covered in the AH-1G Operator’s Manual.

Major Hunch, the troop commander, strode onto the scene, wearing his customary Stetson Cav hat and yellow scarf. He appeared somewhat comic, but his snarling demeanor was nothing to ignore.

“Detail, Attench Hut!”

We stiffened into a sullen proximity of the required stance. With the C.O. propping up the fragile authority of our platoon leader, we listened to his orders: Uniforms on; breakfast at mess hall; Operations for briefing; Transport to re-arm point; assemble rockets.

The Major bellowed, “You are expected to assemble a load of 2.75-inch rockets. You are giving your crew chiefs (CEs) and armament specialists a break.”

A normal break for the enlisted men consisted of supplying them with a couple of cases of Carlings Black Label beer. That we, and they, could understand. Physical labor other than helping paint new “Shark’s Teeth” on the Cobras or giving the CE a ride in the front seat when test firing the guns were normal perks. Assembling rockets were not.

Muttering was rife, but its volume was subdued. With Major Hunch present, no one wanted to be noticed or remembered. Hunch was known to administer an Article-15, non-judicial punishment, or assign any of the dozens of additional duties available to off-duty aviators at the drop of his black Stetson Cav hat.

Having recently experienced several unpleasant nights acting as Airfield Duty Officer for a minor episode of dumb insolence, I kept my trap closed.

Fed, dressed, and awake, we climbed into the back of two ¾-ton trucks and bounced our way down the rutted path to the Ammo Point.

The shipment of rockets had been unloaded 100 meters from the bunkers where they would ultimately be stored. A large number of heavy paperboard tubes, like giant postal mailing containers, were strewn in disarray. Each container appeared to be 4 inches in diameter and 50 inches long. It contained one rocket motor for a 2.75-inch Folding Fin Aerial Rocket (FFAR).

Pallets carried wooden ammo crates of 17-pounder warheads. Warheads had to be manually mated to a rocket motor via a quick twist of the wrist.

Fuses for the warheads came in other sturdy boxes and also needed careful attachment to the rocket assembly. The completed three-piece projectile required careful transport to the bunker for storage on racks for quick availability.

Double D asked, “Has anyone done this before?”

A newbie W01 timidly raised his hand, unaware he was branding himself as the platoon leader’s toady.

“I did it once at Cobra Hall in Savannah.” Cobra Hall comprised the AH-1G transition school at Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia.

Double D immediately tagged the hapless “Rocket Man” to take charge of the group to get the projectiles assembled and stowed. He ignored all military protocol, placing the rookie in the untenable position of directing Captains, Lieutenants and experienced CW2 pilots to do what he wanted.

“I’ll be back in an hour to see how you’re doing.” Double D mounted his jeep and sped away.

The temperature was already unpleasant, and the surroundings were devoid of any shade or vegetation. The Ammo Point looked like a municipal dump in any state in the Southern U.S. The ruddy soil, with its mixture of petroleum products, roiled with humidity and acrid odor.

The first half-hour passed with the unfortunate newcomer attempting to tell his betters what to do. He was roundly ignored. Finally, CPT Friendly took pity and began to assemble a

rocket. Others grudgingly followed suit. As rockets were mated to warheads and fuses, they were carried to the bunker and inserted into the storage racks. Each rocket weighed 30 pounds. Most were carried singly while the muscle-heavy members of our team carried two. After an hour, a good number had been assembled and stored.

Double D returned. "Everyone load up. We just got some new missions and are needed to fly." Nobody complained about the change.

I grabbed a couple of the empty wooden crates and tubes. The empty ammo boxes made great construction material for walls and shelves in our hooch and I thought vaguely that I could use a tube or two. I noticed that the printing on the motor tubes said, "US Navy."

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The afternoon missions kicked off immediately following a brief tepid downpour. My Pink team of an OH-6 Loach scout ship, an AH-1G Gunship, and a UH-1 Huey departed for an area about 20 KM north where an ARVN recon company had spotted some unusual tracks and wanted help to check it out.

We climbed to 2000 feet and headed for our visual recon (VR) location. After contacting the ground element on FM radio, Centaur 13, the loach piloted by CW2 Boomer called for clearance.

"Centaur 49, 13. Request entry into approved area."

"Roger 13, Centaur 49. You're cleared."

13 began his descending spiral and started a zigzag to cover the VR box, doing a quick check before settling down for a thorough examination. Almost immediately, he reported recent activity and asked for permission to conduct a recon by fire.

His request was relayed to the ARVN commander. He gave the OK and I passed it to Boomer, who responded.

“Centaur 49, 13. Understand cleared to fire. I have an area of old bunkers I will use as my target.”

“Roger 13. Have you in sight.”

13 began his firing pass. As he triggered his minigun, a stream of orange tracers poured into the old bunker area. He broke right as a secondary explosion erupted near his target. He cleared the area and called me.

“Centaur 49, can you drop a couple of 17-pounders near that explosion?”

“Roger 13, the ARVN like it, stay well clear.”

“OK, Jimbo, I warned my front seater. Clear to fire your turret on my break off-target.”

I rolled the Cobra into a steep wing-over and dove toward the smoke-shrouded area. As airspeed began to build, I carefully aligned the gun sight, depressing the trigger to fire a pair of rockets.

As the rockets cleared their pods, they began an oscillation that quickly turned into erratic directional shifts. They did not fly straight but zoomed up and out from my gunship. I had no control of their path.

“Holy Crap. Cease Fire.”

The rockets veered away from the friendlies and the loach, after creating explosive excitement. I breathed again. None of my training had prepared me for that event and I had a sick electric current running through my nervous system. “Anyone hit?”

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Our immediate alert to Centaur Operations caused all missions involving Cobras to be aborted.

“Centaur 49, this is Centaur 3. Return to base at once. All flight ACs report to Ops for debrief with Centaur 6. Do not rearm, I say again, do not rearm.”

Centaur 3, Captain Graph, the Ops officer, did not normally call aircraft nor did he involve us with Centaur 6, Major Hunch, the C.O. Someone had stepped in it this time. Hopefully, my name did not appear atop that list!

Not rearming was also ominous as unit Standing Operating Procedures (SOP) required that aircraft visit the ammo bunker and replace any expended armament before proceeding to the flight line. I relayed Ops instructions to Boomer, our loach pilot and to the Huey crew on our mission.

Entering the briefing room, we were met by the Troop headquarters team: the C.O., X.O., Ops Officer and all three flight platoon leaders.

Major Hunch immediately took charge. Red-faced and pacing, the Major growled, “Who have you told about this incident?” He stared straight at me.

“Sir, I alerted Ops and our flight.”

“Did you alert Squadron?”

“No sir.”

Now I saw how this was going. A classic case of cover your ass. If our higher headquarters, 3/17 Cavalry Squadron stayed unaware of our armament problem, Major Hunch could control the narrative. He turned to CPT Graph.

“How about you, Captain?”

Graph, visibly rattled, said, “Sir, I called the squadron safety officer on the land line per SOP. We needed to alert all units about the same potential rocket problem.”

Deflating somewhat, Hunch turned to me. “Lieutenant, explain what happened.”

I carefully listed the morning’s events, including the description of our rocket assembly work party. I did not speculate, nor did I utter a word about his or our other leaders’ actions.

“Any additional comments?” he directed to the other ACs.

“No sir,” they said in unison.

“All right, you ACs are dismissed. Ops, get the Colonel on line. Order all Cobras grounded pending inspection of the rockets.”

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A team of armament specialists from 3/17 CAV Squadron in Phu Loi arrived that evening and began a check of all the rockets in Cobras on the flight line. After inspecting my Cobra and

its partially fired rocket load, they knew what had caused the errant rocket problem. They left the ammo point for the morning light.

Apparently, there are at least two different 2.75-inch rocket motors in the supply system. The type required for firing by slower-speed aircraft like Army helicopters use a MK40 rocket motor that has its exhaust nozzles cut at an angle. Referred to as a “scarfed nozzle,” it is configured to induce spin on the rocket during flight, ensuring a straight flight path. High performance Navy jet aircraft use the MK66 rocket motor with nozzles cut differently.

We had been issued a batch of Navy rocket motors. They fit in our rocket pods but were wildly unsafe for helicopter use.

By giving the CEs and the armament personnel the day off and failing to properly supervise untrained pilots to assemble rockets, the law of unintended consequences almost got some of us killed.

Shit flows downhill. W01 Rocket Man, our foolish volunteer, received an official reprimand. Major Hunch spent an hour with the Squadron Commander. He emerged red-faced and abruptly left our unit for a logistics slot in Long Binh. No other officers were disciplined.

Our rockets were swapped for the correct MK40s. A theory persisted among some of the more credulous that the Navy had deliberately sent the wrong rockets to the Army. Cooler heads recognized it for a resupply foul-up.