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Kaho'olawe

Harry Mayer

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Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

The island of Kaho'olawe

6 miles SW of Maui

Latitude 20.5551453 N/Longitude 156.60545 E

December 1987

The sky is nearly black from heavy cloud cover. It has been raining constantly for two days. It's unseasonably cold, and my clothes are soaked. The heavy rains and high winds have grounded our search and rescue helicopter. Range clearance operations have ceased until the weather breaks.

I'm anxious; this is my first time conducting real-world explosive ordnance disposal operations. The senior and master EOD techs refer to my team as a gang of "slick bombs," implying that we're unproven, basic EOD techs with only schoolhouse knowledge. We are on the island of Kaho'olawe, a small uninhabited island six miles southwest of Maui. No one lives here except for feral goats and birds. This is a barren place, not like the other islands in the Hawaiian archipelago. Kaho'olawe is a rocky, sunbaked island littered with unexploded bombs, missiles, rockets, and projectiles. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the navy turned the island into a bombing range. Thirty-five years of unexploded ordnance lies beneath the red earth, their explosive fillers becoming more sensitive with time.

Our base camp at Kanapou Bay is spartan. We have no showers because there is no freshwater source on the island; we bathe in saltwater at the beach. Our generator is broken, no chance of getting repair parts until flight operations resume.

Thick red mud flows down from the hills. The mud clings to everything. I put off going to the field latrine until I can't wait any longer. Then, I make the long trek through the torrential rains to the pit toilet. Rather than spending the rest of the day cleaning caked red mud from my

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

jungle boots, I decide to go barefoot. I look like a hobbit when I return, with large, oversized feet encased in the thick red ooze.

At the rear of the hooch, the range chief, Chief Petty Officer Jones, is standing in the rain; he is completely naked except for his jungle boots and a camouflage flop hat. A lit cigarette hangs from his upper lip below a thin black mustache. His skin is tough, tanned, and wrinkled, with large ship's propellers tattooed on his butt cheeks: the one on the left says port, the other starboard. His eyes have a vacant stare. His face is weathered with deep wrinkles. Years of heavy drinking, smoking, and combat duty in Vietnam have taken their toll. He rarely speaks; most of the time he just stares and smokes.

Ensign Mike Spott is the officer in charge of the Kaho'olawe detachment. Mike is just an ensign, but he is also a limited duty officer, which means he had years of experience as an enlisted master EOD technician before he was commissioned. Mike's the guy in charge—he's our master blaster. He turns to me and says, "Tomorrow, if this damn rain ever lets up, we're gonna start sweeping around Pu'u Muivi. The archeologists were up there a couple of weeks ago and found some ancient relics. They think that the early Hawaiians used to mine volcanic glass in that area. This rain is gonna uncover a bunch of UXOs, so I think we're gonna be busy."

"UXO, what's that?"

"Christ, you're a slick bomb, aren't you? A UXO is unexploded ordnance, don't they teach you greenhorns anything in the EOD Basic Course anymore? Don't worry, this island is the best damn training ground in the world for new techs."

Mike's face has a horrific "Y"-shaped scar that travels from the top of his forehead, over the bridge of his nose, where it bifurcates across the rest of his face. Last year while excavating an unexploded 2.75-inch rocket, he triggered its base ejecting flare. It caught him directly

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

between the eyes, opening his face like an oyster and collapsing his sinus cavities. Miraculously, he returned to full duty.

The sun sets and a blanket of darkness covers the island; still no lights, so I just lie on my bunk, listening to the rain pummel our steel hooch. I lie in the dark, filled with anxiety, fear, and trepidation, but more than anything else an overwhelming sense of excitement. This is the job I volunteered for. What will I do when I confront my first UXO, can I overcome fear and prove that I'm worthy to wear the EOD crab, the breast insignia of every EOD technician?

By morning, the rain has stopped. We are up before sunrise. The thunderous surf has returned to a gentle, almost peaceful cadence as it laps the shore.

Chief Jones shouts to the sweep troops and EOD techs, "OK, assholes, pack your shit and be ready to board the Gama Goats at 0700. Bring plenty of water, we're not coming back until sunset. EOD techs, draw your C-4 and time fuze from the demolition lockers. Ensign Spott is the range safety officer and will hold the blasting caps.

"For you sweep troops, we are going to be sweeping an area of the island that hasn't been cleared before. When we get to the operating area, you're going to be walking in a line abreast ahead of the techs. There's a lot of duds and other hazardous items out there. Whenever you see a piece of metal, raise your hand and one of the techs will come and check it out. Under no circumstances will you touch anything unless directed to do so. Once an EOD technician tells you it's safe to handle, put the scrap metal in the retrograde pile so we can pick it up at the end of the day. We want everyone going home next week with all their hands, feet, fingers, and toes.

"Now, for you new EOD techs, this is going to be the first time many of you encounter live unexploded ordnance. We're not here to be heroes. If an area can withstand a high order detonation, we're goin' to blow it in place. Always better to BIP when possible. Another thing,

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

for you senior techs that were in Vietnam, remember this is an American bombing range, Charlie ain't modifying or booby-trapping anything, so don't waste time overthinking the problems. For the most part, this is a blow-and-go operation, if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it ain't a fuckin' chicken.

“We are gonna be workin' at Pu'u Muivi today, it's going to be a hot day, no shade, bring plenty of sunscreen. Petty Officer Sanders, you're not going, today's your duty day so you will stay behind as the 'Hut Slut. “You're going to cover the radio, and when flight ops resume, coordinate the delivery of the repair parts so the Sea Bees can get the goddam generator fixed. It's your ass if I have to spend another night without a hot meal. Let's go to work. Hoo Yah.”

I tramp my way through the red mud and climb into the trailer behind the M561 Gama Goat. The Gama Goat has a 454 big block chevy engine, six wheels, and is semi-amphibious. It's the perfect all-terrain vehicle to take us to our operating area. It plows through the mud and climbs the gullies with little effort. The landscape is barren, most of the island's vegetation has been consumed by the feral goats that eat everything in sight. If it wasn't for a few thorny Kiawe trees and some dry brush the landscape could easily be mistaken for Mars.

Upon our arrival at the site, Chief Jones starts organizing the junior enlisted sweep troops into a loose line abreast. An EOD technician is assigned to every five sweep troops and they walk twenty-five feet behind them. After about an hour of sweeping, one of the techs yells, “We got a live one, I'm going to blow it in place.”

Chief Jones yells, “Everyone take cover in that gully, make sure you have adequate frontal and overhead protection.”

The EOD Technician makes up his explosive shot and places it on the UXO, then yells, “Fire in the hole ... Fire in the hole ... Fire in the hole.” Then he pulls the M-60 fuze igniter and

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

takes cover with the rest of us in the gully. Five minutes later, there is a loud BOOM. Ensign Spott gives all clear and we resume sweeping. Today has been a series of blow and gos; we find UXOs and we blow them up in place. My jungle boots are giving me blisters, and my face is red from sunburn.

By late afternoon Mike signals me. "Hey Harry, come here. What do you make of this?" The rain has caused a deep gully in the middle of the archeological site. Embedded in the red mud is something that resembles the bark of a tree. It's about six inches long and four inches wide, as if a log may have been buried for some ancient purpose, but that doesn't make sense. There are no trees in this area.

"Harry, go down in that ravine and check that out."

I trudge through the mud and climb up on the side of the ravine. I'm careful about not touching anything I can't positively identify as I make my climb. To discharge static electricity built up in my clothing that could inadvertently cause a detonation, I touch the ground before touching the item. I gently pour a little water from my canteen on this unusual-looking branch, washing away the red mud. I soon discover that this is not a branch; it has rough olive drab alligator skin. This could be an unexploded bomb. The first thing I need to do is to determine if it is a bomb and if it's armed.

Slowly, methodically, I remove the red dirt from around the mysterious olive drab item. The more dirt I remove the larger the item becomes, it is large and cylindrical, tapering at one end. I take a closer look at the tapered end and I can make out a yellow-painted band, the color code for high explosives. It's now obvious, I've uncovered a 250 lb. general-purpose bomb, but is it armed? I brush away more dirt until the nose of the bomb is revealed. In its nose is an armed fuze. This is a live bomb; God knows how long it's been buried.

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

I make my retreat and tell Mike, "Hey, Mike, it looks like a live one. I think we ought to blow it in place."

Mike says, "I wish we could, but it's right in the middle of the archeological dig. The area can't withstand a high order detonation. A 250 lb. explosion is gonna rock the dig and who knows how many relics will be destroyed in the process. A professor from the University of Hawaii was out here last week and told me some of that shit is over 2,000 years old. Man, if we have trouble with the local heritage activists now, think what will happen if we blow up their artifacts. We only have one option, were going to have to render it safe and defuse the bomb. So, Slick Bomb, you're going to get your first render safe procedure. It'll be dark soon, but tomorrow we'll take care of it first thing in the morning."

Back at basecamp, the generator is running. We have lights in the hooch. We even have a hot meal from the galley. Chief Jones, Ensign Spott, and I gather outside the hooch and sit on the metal folding chairs. The smoke from the Chief's cigarette is drifting into my face so I move to the right.

Mike begins, "OK, Harry, tell us what you saw on your recon."

"Well, it looks like we have a buried old air-dropped bomb with an armed fuze. It's been buried for a long time."

"What about the surrounding area?"

"Nothing except the archaeological dig."

"Did you look up the RSP?"

"Yes, unfortunately the primary render safe procedure calls for a specialized tool kit to remotely disarm the bomb, but we don't have any on the island."

"Is there an alternate procedure?"

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

“The alternate procedure calls for a hand removal.”

“What are the hazards associated with this bomb?”

“Well, all high explosives are susceptible to heat, shock, and friction, but I'm most concerned about the age of the bomb. There's the possibility that picrate salts may have formed in the fuze threads, and if stressed they could cause a detonation. I'm also concerned that high explosives, particularly the lead azide and tetryl in the booster which are extra sensitive, may have become more sensitive with time.”

“What's your plan of attack for tomorrow?”

“I guess the logical thing to do is to follow the alternate procedure and do a hand removal of the fuze.”

Then Chief Jones deeply inhales on his cigarette and says, “You volunteered for this, Lieutenant. If you're gonna draw gunfighter's pay, once in a while you're gonna have to get in a gunfight. Just don't turn yourself into a pink mist. I'd hate to send your mother a shoebox with some of your hair, teeth, and bone if you fuck it up.”

I toss and turn in my sleep, I can't stop thinking about doing a hand removal, a render safe procedure of last resort. Many EOD technicians go their whole career never removing a live fuze from a bomb by hand, yet I would be doing one on my first RSP. It's all about physics. If I violate the laws of nature, I will cause the firing circuit to actuate and I will become the pink mist, as the chief so eloquently reminded me. My soul may rest in God's hands, but my fate most certainly resides with physics.

The next day at Pu'u Muivi I return to the gully where my enemy has been waiting for me. Of all the tools available to me in the EOD arsenal, the most important ones today are a plain old pipe wrench and a footlong piece of pipe. My mind is racing, my heart pounding, but my

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

breathing is slow and deliberate. I quickly dismiss any thoughts of refusing to do the procedure, cowardice would be worse than death, I could never face my comrades again.

Today is the day I earn my gunfighter's pay. Out there buried beneath the red dirt is a sleeping beast, waiting for someone to wake him from his slumber. I have one purpose, one focus: defeat the beast so he can no longer kill or maim.

I retrace my steps and I'm careful not to stray from my previous path. Yesterday, I thought I was just checking out a buried log. Today, I know what I'm facing and each step I take is filled with dread. Climbing up the side of the ravine I slip in the red sludgy earth, stumbling, I catch myself before falling face first into the muck. The beast is where I left him, arrogantly protruding from the bank, claiming his dominance over this ancient site. One of us will emerge this day the champion, the other the slain.

Time slows with every step I take. I arrive at the bomb and remove my helmet and flak jacket so I can work. They won't save me at this distance. I reexamine the bomb. Every breath I take is precious. I open the jaws of the pipe wrench, tenderly placing them on the fuze. I'm afraid to pull, but at the same time a euphoric feeling of adrenaline runs through my body. I pull. I pull again with slow and even pressure, but the fuze is stuck. I place the pipe on the end of the wrench to increase the torque and pull with all my might, fearful the force may stress any picrate salts that could have formed in the threads and trigger a high-order detonation. However, this time, the fuze breaks free. I remove the wrench and gently unscrew the fuze and booster from the bomb. The brains and heart of the beast have been removed, and today I am the victor.

I'm excited, the adrenaline rush is intense. A craving has been ignited that can only be quenched by defeating more hazards. I'm on a dangerous path. I'm confident that if I do this again nothing bad will happen to me. It's irrational. None of this makes sense. This is the most

Kaho'olawe Harry Mayer

alive I've ever felt. Once I broke the fuze free, I wanted to do it again. I don't understand these feelings; isn't a rational person supposed to be afraid to disarm a bomb? But I want to do it again, and again. What is it about an adrenaline rush that makes me thirst for greater risks? I must accept the fact that my feelings are irrational, as is the act of disarming live bombs. I must also accept the fact: I am no longer a rational person.