

FILE CABINET SURPRISE.

By James Collins.

"Collins, there are 20 file cabinets belonging to your group across that far wall. I want you to personally go through each one of them, save the files on the need and scrap anything that is obsolete. You're one of the few managers going to New Hampshire and you have a stake in maintaining the company. The others here have all indicated they are going to take a layoff so I don't trust their decision process. I want all a cabinets cleaned out within 48 hours."

It was late afternoon so I figured I'd use a remaining hours in the day to prepare for this boring task. I contacted maintenance and have them deliver up the huge rolling garbage bin to hold all the unwanted materials. I had a secretary collect markers, pens, tape and tags as each file cabinets had to be marked and organized. I selected a technician and a junior engineer to assist me in the task, informed them what they were going to do and sent them home.

Early the next day, we started on the task. Initially we started on the far right and planned to work towards the left. We learn to start at the top drawer and work our way down so that as the drawers were emptied, we did not make the file cabinet top-heavy, and permit it to topple over.

The majority of the drawers in the first cabinets had drawings were dated 20 years previously for projects that were long since completed and considered obsolete. All the drawings were blue lines, which meant they were copies of the originals held in the records retention area. These were all discarded and the garbage bin rapidly started to fill. By lunchtime, we were on our third garbage bin and encountered two or three drawers filled with hardware. These were spectacular. They were small, 4 inch high conical sections made from brass, steel, copper, bronze and aluminum. Each was a different color, gold, green, beige, brown, red, silver and blue with engraved numerical scales of contrasting colors around the bodies. I thought they would make a marvelous display of the products that the company had made in the past. I took them all to my desk and lay them out covering the surface. I then went back to the task at hand and we finished the job about three in the afternoon.

One of the World War II vets identified the devices as nose fuses for artillery shells. During the war, the company had manufactured enormous numbers of these under various government contracts. We all assumed that these were models off the manufacturing floor. Being very curious as all engineers are, I got a set of tools and started to take one of the devices apart. As I came into the middle of the fuse, I encountered a one-inch thick, three inch diameter piece of soap. At once, I was suspicious, cautious and concerned. I got on the phone and sent for the company chemist. Bob showed up with the ever present cigarette dangling from his lip. Bob never seemed to show any emotion, he was one of the survivors of the Battle of the Bulge and nothing ever fazed him. I told Bob the story and showed him the soap and asked him what he thought it was. Bob never said a word. He reached into his pocket, took out a pen knife and opened it. Then he picked up the piece of soap and skimmed a thin sliver about inch-long off the circumference. He placed that in a glass ashtray, took one step back, removed his cigarette and touched it to the fragment in the ashtray. A flame jumped eight inches and white smoke covered the ceiling.

"Jim, you got enough high explosives on top of your desk to blow the top off this building and kill everybody in this room. How long have the fuses been there?"

"According to the dates on the drawings 25 years. Most of the drawings, in the drawer these fuses were in, are dated 1952."

"That was the Korean War. That's not good. Those file cabinets have been in the sun for, more than 20 years and these explosives are old and unpredictable. We have to get rid of them, now."

I immediately went to the director of engineering and told him, "We must call the bomb squad to get rid of these explosives."

"Not on your life! If we report these explosives, we will put our security clearance at risk, all of our contracts at risk and all of our jobs at risk. We have to get rid of these ourselves in a safe manner without notifying any officials."

An immediate impromptu meeting was held with all the managers the chemist and the director. We had a contract with the Navy where we were mapping Long Island sound 12 miles from our office using a motor launch that we purchased for the contract. The chemist agreed that if these were put in salt water they would deteriorate in approximately eight years. It was agreed that we would transport the explosives as quickly as possible to the motor launch take it out on the sound where the depth was in excess of 120 feet, and gently lower the fuses over the side. Someone came up with a Macy's shopping bag and we carefully placed the fuses on a cardboard base in the bag. This was quite heavy and weighed in excess of 20 pounds. A young engineer working on the Navy contract was in the building. He was drafted to transport the fuses to the launch at its mooring. He was literally shaking the entire time he was in the building. Another engineer was the designated driver and the two of them took the explosives to the launch. The manager of the mapping contract was a former merchant Marine officer who was also totally fearless. He drove the launch out to the designated drop area, and the young engineer gingerly lowered the shopping bag over the side. He let go, they counted ten seconds and slowly started the launch. When they were 25 seconds out, they gunned the engine and got out of there as fast as possible.

After an event like this, the company always initiated an investigation. Something like the Army does, an after action report (AAR). Word of the event flew around the company and a couple of the old-timers remembered a German engineer, Otto, formerly a Wehrmacht Sergeant in World War II, who worked with fuses. Redstone Arsenal was one of our major customers and the newest fuse designs were tested in Huntsville, Alabama. All the German rocket engineers, their Wehrmacht engineers and technicians resided at that facility. When Otto wanted to create a modified design, he would contact his old comrades at Redstone and they would take a number of new fuses out of artillery shells and hand them to him. He would put them in his luggage and fly back to New York. These ex-German soldiers all fought together in Russia and were used to handling live ammunition all the time. They thought nothing of it.

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