

The Rest of The Story: Making Lemonade

By CAPT David A. Higgins, SC, USN (Ret.), Member

Just weeks after graduating from the NSCS Basic Qualification Course, I found myself onboard the USS Mahlon S. Tisdale (FFG-27) entering an active Persian Gulf war zone. As a line transferee, I already had four sea deployments under my belt, but this was still my first job as a newly minted Supply Officer. Like all afloat Supply Officers, I was highly motivated to start my new career path on good footing.

It was early January 1986, and the on-going Iran-Iraqi war was still hot. We were part of a three-ship flotilla assigned the mission of protecting U.S. interests transiting the gulf. Naval Intelligence advised us that U.S. assets were not specifically targeted by anyone, but the Iraqis tended to be a bit wild as far as who they shot at.

Our CO keyed in on that, particularly since our AN/SPS-49 air search radar had just gone down that very morning. Understandably, he didn't like the idea of potentially getting shot at without being able to see the air picture. Troubleshooting determined that the radar's klystron went bad, but fortunately I had a spare in stock.

We quickly swapped the carcass for the spare, but to my alarm the spare did not work. A klystron is a highly-sensitive, \$100,000 part—its installation can be tricky, so I wasn't convinced that a shipboard technician somehow didn't screw something up. Still, the onus is back on

the Supply Department as we had to quickly process a high-priority, C3 CASREP requirement. To my relief, the supply system worked as it was supposed to and the second klystron was scheduled pier-side upon our arrival in Bahrain, 48-hours hence.

Coincidentally, I was having my storekeeper inventory the bulk storeroom during that week. As we were pulling pier-side, he approached me with the discovery of a large crate that he thought was another klystron. The

part wasn't in our inventory records, but a subsequent check of part and stock numbers confirmed that the item should be a suitable substitute for our problem. Being less than an hour from loading pier-side stores, I elected not to advise the CO or Combat Systems officer of our findings.

Once pier-side, we promptly located the CASREP part and passed custody of it to Combat Systems. Within an hour, I received a 1MC announcement, "SUPPO, CAPTAIN'S CABIN". Such an announcement is not usually a good sign and sure enough, a humbled Combat Systems Officer and a worried CO inform me that the CASREP part had also failed. It wasn't the Supply system's fault though, as it was further determined that the



technicians weren't following proper maintenance procedures. I was directed to do my best to resolve the situation before the ship left Bahrain the next day.

Wanting leverage with my fellow department heads, I 'shot for effect' and asked the Combat Systems Officer to give me an hour in order to see what I could come up with. With that next phone call, I promptly informed the Weapons boss that I had another klystron, albeit a suitable substitute. Within another hour the part was installed, tested, and it worked.



Now I had the undying appreciation from a fellow department head and the wonderment of my CO. When asked how I was able to accomplish what was perceived as an almost impossible task, I simply told the skipper, "don't ask questions".

As Paul Harvey would say, "And now, the rest of the story". Our air search radar worked as it should for the rest of that deployment, as well as all of our combat systems. The ship's sailors did their jobs, and our crew returned safely home six weeks later. I can't say for sure, but were we lucky? Good at our jobs? Or simply avoided fate? You see, Naval Intelligence turned out to

be amazingly spot-on about their concerns. Iraqi F-1 Mirage pilots were indeed reckless and haphazard as the three-ship flotilla that relieved us soon found out. The FFG that took our place was our sister ship, the USS Stark (FFG-31), and sadly, 37 fellow sailors from that ship would not return home from their deployment to the gulf.