

A Fourth of July Story

On the Fourth of July, 1973, I was was working a C Tour, three to eleven, as the station commander at SP Ferndale. After finishing the case book, emptying the report basket, sending assorted teletype messages to Troop Headquarters and doing all the other fun things that came with the job, I decided to go for a ride with no particular destination in mind. On a busy holiday in the Catskills the radio traffic might well decide where I ended up.

I grabbed the keys to R-6120, a CI Car (CI stands for *Concealed Identity*, i.e. unmarked). *Concealed Identity* is somewhat of an optimistic misnomer. Aside from not being black and white, the car was identical to all other uniform state police cars; a state police license plate, fat black wall tires, a spotlight, a five foot radio antenna, not much chrome and a 375 horsepower engine with dual exhausts whose rumble echoed between buildings in suburban areas. John Q. Public did not have to be a rocket scientist to realize that this was a troop car, especially if the car was parked and John Q. was on foot looking at it.

I headed out Route 55 through Swan Lake and Kauneonga Lake. Right around dusk I rolled into White Lake. There were a fair amount of people milling around the custard stand and heading down toward the public docks, so I slid into the parking lot and sat there for a few minutes watching the crowd. As I looked toward the lake I noticed two guys in Bermuda shorts and tee shirts, each with a large grocery bag in his arms. There were kids with them and the guys were probably the dads. I really wouldn't have paid much attention to them, except that when they noticed me sitting in the troop car each one immediately put his bag on the ground and walked hurriedly away in a different direction with his respective kids in tow.

Based on my steel trap mind and state police intuition - and possibly because of Pedro's picture and the *South of the Border* logo on the bags - I immediately perceived that the bags probably contained fireworks. I suppose I could have given chase to one or the other of the guys, but I decided against it. If I did try to follow either one I would have had to leave the bags where they were and there was

a pretty good chance they wouldn't be there when I got back. If I did catch one, was I going to drag him away in 'cuffs in front of his kids? What would I do with the kids? And all for the felony of having fireworks on the Fourth of July? They didn't seem inclined to return to retrieve the bags so after a bit I picked them up, put them in the back seat of the troop car and moved on.

As I drove back to the barracks I mulled over how I was going to dispose of my booty. I recalled from studying for the sergeants' test that the station evidence locker was never to be used to store fireworks, explosives or weapons grade Plutonium. Furthermore, one really couldn't deem the fireworks evidence since there was no one in custody nor was there ever likely to be. Trust me, there wasn't even going to be a blotter entry regarding this evolution.

In the environmentally unconscious days of the seventies, there was a burn barrel behind the Ferndale Barracks. As a matter of fact there had been a burn barrel behind every barracks I'd ever been stationed at. They were used primarily to get rid of cancelled teletype messages, of which there were hundreds every week. The incinerators were fashioned from old fifty-five gallon drums by cutting out the tops and adding a ring of air vents around the bottom with a pickax. Since they rusted immediately after the first fire they had a limited life, but the state DOT guys were always happy to bring us a new one, undoubtedly because they would have to find some more complicated way to dispose of them otherwise. Depending on what originally had been stored in the barrels, the first few fires could be pretty interesting - and probably toxic.

Anyway, I looked in the burn barrel and was relieved to see that it was nearly empty - just a cushion of incinerated teletype messages at the bottom; all the fireworks would fit with ease. I very carefully aimed all the sky rockets and roman candles downward, soaked a rag with a little gasoline from the station gas pump and tossed it into the barrel along with a match.

You might be surprised to know that the resulting display was pretty much exactly as I had anticipated, at least initially. There was a big whoosh of sparks emanating from the top of the barrel, which occasionally rocked from side to side, but the sparks didn't get much higher than two or three feet above the top of the barrel. From time to time there would be a "whump" from somewhere deep

within the barrel and, on a few memorable occasions, a red or blue fireball found its way out of an air vent in the bottom and rolled around the parking lot.

What I had not foreseen was that this particular barrel had apparently reached the end of its useful life, but the timing appeared to be working out OK. With each "whump", a section of metal between adjacent air holes disappeared and the barrel took on an increasing list, gradually changing from the full vertical mode to the "mortar" mode to the "bazooka" mode.

Just as the barrel collapsed to the fully horizontal mode, one of the last surviving items rocketed out of the barrel and across the rear parking lot. It was one of those plastic, propeller like things that whistles as it goes. It maintained a perfectly horizontal trajectory about five feet above the ground and for a minute it looked as though it might clip the south end of the barracks, which probably wouldn't have been a big deal. Instead, however, it just cleared the corner of the barracks and headed across the driveway which led into the back parking lot.

If I had to pick one person of the more than seventy who were stationed at Ferndale whose car I wouldn't want hit by a firework, especially one I was responsible for, it would be "Big George". Guess who was working the A Line? Big George, a zone sergeant, was not a warm and fuzzy kind of guy. Just as his Jeep station wagon rounded the corner of the barracks, the errant propeller struck the windshield absolutely dead center in front of the steering wheel. It then made a right angle turn straight up for about ten feet and did whatever that particular type of firework did as its grand finally - popped or wheezed or whatever.

I watched from the shadows with some trepidation as Big George parked his Jeep and got out. He kind of looked around, examined his undamaged windshield, shrugged and walked into the back door of the barracks. Apparently from his vantage point the propeller had not emitted any visible sparks and he hadn't witnessed the swan song over the roof of his car.

I'm not sure if the statute of limitations has expired, but Big George has, so I think I'm safe.