

"Fire in The Hole"

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Spring was inching north into their Virginia peninsula that April 1945 sunless day as the class of thirty was introduced into another chapter in the life of new Navy Mine Disposal personnel. They had been studying the disposition of munitions four months, had never heard an explosion louder than the 45 cal automatic each was issued. Today were guests at this isolated Navy facility at Indian Head Md on the Potomac River opposite and south of Mount Vernon.

Today's training began with analysis of a German 2200 pound bomb that could be adjusted to explode in the air, on contact, or on delay.

Later, students were to detonate the bomb. Boom!

The site for the disposition had been used previously; a crater of fresh dirt was as deep as they were tall. Earlier it had been suggested that very large unexploded ordnance would likely be found on a level surface. If the explosive could not be moved, don't take the time to dig a hole; instead with heavy equipment build a six foot dirt barrier around the explosive. Then detonate it. Everything not technically involved in the explosives, simple, made sense.

Preparations complete, each step double checked, questions asked and answered, many times. There would be no repeat of this training.

To avoid complications, the detonation was to be done electronically, not by burning a time delay fuse. Wiring began at the bomb, ended at the bunker command 50 yards away. At the bomb, all watched as a team of three connected the wiring to the bomb's booster; the booster's protective lid had been removed. Last the detonator was connected to the wiring, inserted into the booster pocket.

Back to the bunker. The wiring was connected to the hand generator.

Then the mandatory calls, "Fire in the hole", and from these responsible, "Clear on the Left, Clear on the right. All clear on the firing line."

The youngest was given the privilege of detonation. With the final command "Fire", his vigorous twist of the generator's handle, the response roared.

In the bunker all seemed instantly tossed a few inches into the air. Everything loose was strewn elsewhere. Immediately ear drums annoyed, eyes semi-blinded

by dry dust everywhere, while simultaneously overhead metal shards of the bomb's steel case whistles as they raced to follow the explosion.

For all, the five senses were instantly engaged.

The cone of the blast, well over their heads, cleared that air. In the bunker immediately, they'd spat out dirt, coughed, gasped for clean air.

Their first reality was the Training Officers' query,
"Wha'd you think"?

Responses lacked all cheerfulness of the earlier training.

While not an open response then, older personnel decided it would be a cold day in hell before they exploded anything without a great deal of thought;
better to dump the threatening ordnance at Sea,
in spite of the logistics and coordination required.

Thankfully, for most this would be the only ear-drum-shattering event of their Navy life.

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Across the Potomac, red cardinals contrasted the greening slave-built lawn, shrubs, trees, sheltering singing Meadowlarks. Animals, guides and guests at Mount Vernon hearing that explosion, paid no attention. But veteran guides did recall that these incidents were a fraction of 1944's activities; that spring tourist visits were doubling, gas rationing or not.

In quiet, their instinct;
the war will end this year,
not their ten year estimate two years ago.

