



Captain Guy E. Miller

Murphy's Law states simply, "If anything can go wrong, it will." This natural law is one of the irrefutable facts of life. Murphy is the gremlin present in every human undertaking, always looking for some opportunity to disrupt a smooth operation. The military profession, primarily concerned with administering violence, is especially susceptible to Murphy and his law. In the military, with far more consistency than in the civilian world, when things go wrong the results can be tragic.

If we don't want to join Murphy, we have got to beat him. For this purpose, safety rules have been devised to frustrate his law. These rules have two main origins — experience and foresight. While experience may be the most effective teacher, in the demolition business it is also the most expensive. We just can't afford to let our people learn demolitions by their own mistakes.

In demolition training, safety is always given maximum emphasis. Right from the very beginning, everyone is taught the safety rules, and proper procedures are stressed throughout the training phase. Because of this attention, school and training environments have maintained almost perfect safety records. So our main concern is Murphy's success outside the school situation.

Murphy has two favorite victims for his dirty

work — inexperienced personnel and the very experienced — hence overconfident ones. In the military demolitions field inexperienced personnel are seldom a critical safety problem, primarily because of the tremendous emphasis on safety in their training. If anything, the inexperienced soldier is far more likely to be overly cautious.

However, in the combat support mission, inexperience and unfamiliarity can become a critical factor, not for the personnel handling the demolitions as much as for the troops they support. All too frequently in Vietnam, Infantry commanders, unfamiliar with the dangers of demolitions, failed to brief or account for their personnel properly, resulting in needless friendly casualties.

By far Murphy's favorite victims are the so-called "experienced" personnel. Why is this so? The safety rules are made to beat Murphy and they work. For the most part, everyone knows what the rules are and how to apply them. So every time someone gets hurt unnecessarily it is because an individual who should have known better ignored one or more of the rules.

Safety procedures are made to be completely Murphy-proof, closing off every loophole open to him. As people gain more experience they begin to learn that there is much more safety built into the rules than is required and they start cutting corners. But the often heard words, "It wi

probably be OK," take on a special spine-chilling significance when the name of the game is "You Bet Your Life." The word "probably" announces an invitation to disaster.

If anything can go wrong, it will, but not necessarily immediately. Since Murphy frequently takes his time catching up, the practice of cutting corners grows into a habit. People decide they can get away with ignoring the rules and begin cutting more corners, compounding Murphy's opportunities. And sooner or later he takes advantage of this and strikes.

One particularly gruesome case happened at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, several years ago when a large number of experienced Special Forces personnel were training in a "demo" pit as 40 pounds of C-4 detonated, killing and wounding several men. Although the resulting investigation never conclusively established exactly how the accident occurred, the fact remains that if all the safety procedures had been followed properly, there would have been no such disaster.

The combat experience our soldiers rolled up in Vietnam has provided innumerable examples of the old adage that "familiarity breeds contempt." Many safety conscious, new arrivals, coming in-country for the first time, received the traditional, combat veteran's code from the old-timers. "No sweat. We don't bother with doing it that way here." But with Murphy around all the time waiting for his chance to strike, it is best to play it safe — by the book. For instance, a freak accident happened at a quarry near Cam Ranh Bay during the early years of the war that would never have happened if safety rules had been followed. A trooper was killed by a large rock when he stuck his head up to photograph an enormous blast.

As leaders, how can we go about beating Murphy's Law? Anything we can do to keep the odds in our favor rather than his will help frustrate him. Our first responsibility, obviously, is to insure that safety rules and procedures are properly followed. How many times in a tactical situation have leaders ignored safe principles by carrying caps and explosives together? It is true that usually nothing happened. But considering the possible consequences and the sad fact that Murphy was certainly lurking close by, was this a reasonable side to take?

Some procedures may seem silly in a combat operation but if they can prevent unnecessary friendly casualties there is no justification for disregarding them. For example, shouting, "Fire in the hole!" three times is never wrong.

Getting back to Murphy, another way to beat him is to use systems with maximum reliability. One example is to avoid the use of the time fuse wherever possible to set off an explosive charge.

Numerous techniques are available but perhaps the most reliable is to use detonation cord and electric caps as far as possible from the charge when setting it off.

Probably the most important thing for leaders to do if they are to beat Murphy is to constantly be aware of their troops and what they are likely to be doing or not doing. A good example of this involves an Engineer unit that was clearing a road of mines in Vietnam. As mines were located, they were blown in place and the resulting craters were filled before the unit could continue up the road. After several hours of this tedious procedure, the unit commander was horrified to see one of his men carry a mine he had just dug out of the road over to a vehicle and drop it on the hood, saying "Sir, we're tired of filling up those damn holes."

Not so fortunate was the troop who threw an ammunition crate into a pile of burning C-4. The resulting detonation unnecessarily added more personnel to Murphy's casualty list. Just as in the case of the soldier who was killed while photographing the quarry blast, the lesson shown here is that personnel are likely to get themselves hurt when they are not always made conscious of the dangers of demolitions.

Follow the safety rules and Murphy will never get his chance at you. Many safety rules are so obvious that to disregard them is ridiculous. Example: some time ago at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, a small automobile was damaged when its owner disregarded clearly posted warnings about minimum safe distance from a demolitions demonstration. Result: debris from the detonation crushed the parked car. Fortunately no one was near it when disaster struck.

Demolitions is considered to be a dangerous business. However, if proper procedures are correctly followed, there is no reason why "demo" should be any more dangerous than any other military program. If leaders will enforce established safety rules, employ systems with maximum reliability, and stay one step ahead of the troops, then Murphy will never have the opportunity to use his law to hurt our personnel or jeopardize our mission.

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