



JUGGLING

pineapple

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Like most parents, I tend to lecture my two teenage boys. It usually starts out something like, "Remember, the trouble with trouble is that it always starts out as fun." But like most people – young people in particular – they need a "For instance ..." type of story to get the point across.

For instance ... when I was 15, I used to help my brother-in-law, Gordy, do odd jobs around his family's farm. Gordy had all of the "big kid" toys that every teenager wants: rifles, hand guns, remote control airplanes, four-wheel drive trucks, and muscle cars. He was fun to hang with; but despite being 10 years older than me, he never really acted like an adult. That tendency almost got us both killed one day.

It was the day Gordy and I were cleaning out his mother's attic. We had squeezed through a small door to get into the attic that was barely 10 feet wide, 4 feet tall at its peak and over 20 feet long. There was a small four pane window covered by a storm window at the end opposite the door. Half-way into the attic, we found his father's Army footlocker. Gordy's father had served in Patton's Third

Army as a tank mechanic during the race across Europe. After the war, he joined the local National Guard unit, retiring shortly before passing away.

The footlocker had an old brass "US" lock holding it closed. Gordy kept trying different keys on an old key ring until he hit the right one and the lock popped open. We pulled the footlocker into the middle of the floor and turned on the light. Opening the footlocker was like opening a WWII time capsule.

Lying on top of the footlocker were two Nazi battle flags. One was like new, while the other was singed and had several holes in it. Along with the flags were several German and American uniforms, pictures, hats, insignia, and other mementos from his father's trek across Europe. Under the last uniform, wrapped in oil cloths, were several bayonets, a German officer's 9 mm Luger pistol, and a Colt semi-automatic pistol in its holster. Both pistols were unloaded, but the footlocker also contained several boxes of ammunition for each weapon. I could tell by Gordy's reaction that he either didn't know the footlocker existed or had never seen the contents.

I was still looking over the Luger pistol when Gordy pulled a short, black cardboard tube (like those used to mail posters) from the floor of the footlocker. Other than "Mark IIA1 10 Sec Fragmentation" stamped on the bottom of the tube, there was nothing to identify its contents. Gordy twisted the top off and dumped the contents into the palm of his hand.

To our amazement, a blackish, green WWII "pineapple" style hand grenade slid out of the tube and into Gordy's hand. It looked just like the ones in the old war movies. The spoon shaped arming lever was held in place by a metal pin that passed through the arming lever at the top of the grenade. One end of the pin was bent over the side of the grenade to keep it in place and there was a metal ring large enough to put your finger through at the other end. Gordy excitedly said, "My dad used to bring these home from the Guard all the time, it's a smoke grenade ..." Before I could stop him, Gordy had hooked his finger in the ring and pulled the pin out.

My short 15 years passed before my eyes as I reached forward and grabbed his hand holding the grenade to keep him from releasing the arming lever. "Gord, don't let go, I think it's real. Why would a smoke grenade have '10 Sec Fragmentation' printed on the tube?!" Gordy's eyes got large as he realized what he had done. His first reaction was to drop the grenade like a hot potato, but I kept a firm grip on his hand and the grenade until he calmed down.

Right at that moment, I realized how hot and small the attic was. Both of us were sweating profusely, adding another



element of concern about how good Gordy's grip was on the grenade. As long as he didn't release the arming lever, the grenade wouldn't explode.

We quickly assessed our escape options. If he dropped the grenade, arming it, we wouldn't have been able to scramble across the 10 feet or so to reach the door and exit the attic before it exploded. The odds were also pretty slim that either of us would have been able to throw the grenade through the four pane window and storm window that was about 15 feet away without hitting one of the cross braces and having it bounce back into the attic.

"I wonder if you can put these things back in?" Gordy asked slowly. The ring of the arming pin was still wrapped around his index finger. The two piece, cotter key style pin had straightened out enough to be removed from the grenade, but was

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bent apart just enough to not allow the pin to slide back into place. After several failed attempts, we realized the pin had to be straightened more before it could be replaced.

"Hang on Gord, I'll go get some needle-nosed pliers and be right back," I told him as I squeezed out of the attic and went downstairs. I covered the hundred or so yards to the ma-

chine shed in seconds, but felt like I had spent an hour frantically searching through several unfamiliar tool boxes before finding the right pliers. When I returned, Gordy was soaked with sweat and looked a few years older.

I took the pin from him and bent it back into shape. Using the pliers to keep the two pieces of the pin from springing apart, we were finally able to slide the pin into place after about three tries. Once the pin was in place, I bent it over to keep it from coming out.

We then both started to breathe a little easier.

We put the grenade back into the tube, exited the attic and called the local police.

They, along with the local National Guard Explosive Ordnance Disposal team, took custody of the grenade and performed a standard de-arming procedure to render the grenade safe. The chances of us escaping the attic unhurt, much less

alive, had been small. It was plain dumb luck that the grenade hadn't exploded on its own or that my brother-in-law hadn't released the arming lever.

Each year there are news stories about people putting themselves and others in danger by mishandling "war souvenirs" that later turn out to be live munitions. As time wears on and veterans become fewer in number, there's an increased chance of more war era footlockers being found in other attics, basements, and garage sales. Although the majority of items found in these will be harmless, it just takes one to maim or kill a friend or relative.

Treat all munitions you come across as live. If you are not 100 percent sure about what something is, take the following actions: Don't touch it, mark its location, evacuate the area around the munition, and report the discovery to local authorities. Remember, what you don't know could kill you. 

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