

Remembering Jimmy Russell

I last saw Jimmy Russell forty years ago, when we unexpectedly bumped into each other while performing our annual Army Reserve training at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

It had only been a few years since I had last seen Jimmy, and he hadn't changed a bit. Even if he had gone bald, had had plastic surgery, and had put on fifty pounds, I still would have recognized him from the crooked right forefinger which was permanently frozen into a shallow curve by the scar tissue that formed from the doctor's enthusiastic scalpel work following Jimmy's close encounter with a three-foot moccasin a few years earlier.

I haven't seen him since that summer in Fort Smith, and I have no idea what became of him, where he is today, or even if he is still walking around on this planet.

He is still alive in my memory, though, a quirky, skinny guy with some rather odd interests—which didn't seem odd to me at the time, though, because I shared them.

Our mutual interest in reptiles I have already mentioned. Then there was our nearly suicidal interest in rocketry. Today, when a quick Google search will turn up several detailed plans for producing small nuclear (or, as Dubya would say, nukaler) bombs, it is hard to remember—and even harder to imagine for those who are too young to remember—just how much work was involved in unearthing esoteric information back in the middle of the last century. The information was *there*, you understand; the hard part was figuring out how to find it.

Well, either Jimmy or I had come up with a sure fire formula for rocket fuel, which consisted of equal parts of potassium chloride ($KClO_3$) and sugar. Yes, sugar; that granular stuff on the kitchen table.

The sugar, of course, wasn't hard to come by, but where on earth would you find $KClO_3$? Well, believe it or not, folks, you could actually buy such chemicals at the corner drugstore in the mid-twentieth century.

I'm sure you can imagine the scene: a self-important teen-aged boy sauntering up to the counter at back of the drug store and saying, with elaborate casualness, "Give me a couple of ounces of $KClO_3$."

But let's put that embarrassing image aside. Please.

So we had our fuel, but what were we to do about a rocket? Here, I must confess, we allowed our desire for instant results to overcome the sensible requirement of careful planning, and we opted for a down-and-dirty-let's-get-this-baby-off-the-ground-today approach which involved a discarded TV antenna.

Young folks today—and for me a "young folk" is anyone who has not yet completed his

first half century—may not recall those grotesque aluminum monstrosities which used to disfigure the rooflines of homes which harbored a TV inside, but it was just such a monstrosity, which we found discarded on the roadside, which provided us with our “rockets.”

We took a length of that half-inch diameter aluminum tubing, pounded one end of it flat, filled the tube with equal parts of KClO₃ and sugar, and we were all done except for an ignition device. Once again, down-and-dirty was the order of the day, and we opted to use firecracker fuses.

The routine went something like this: light the match, start the fuse, then run like hell for the corner of the house.

Now, one of three things inevitably happened: 1) the fuse went out, and *nothing* happened; 2) the fuse burned steadily up to the body of the “rocket” and it shot up into the air faster than the eye could follow; or 3) the fuse burned steadily up to the body of the “rocket” and the whole thing exploded like a hand grenade, firing shrapnel out in all directions.

Of the three possibilities, #3 happened far more often than #1 or #2, and it is truly a miracle that neither Jimmy nor I was ever injured, never even so much as scratched by one of our “rockets.”

And before I leave Jimmy Russell behind with a promise never to mention him again in this column, I need to mention one less than admirable aspect of his character. You see, Jimmy had devised a fool-proof technique for never losing a game of chess— which we engaged in regularly when we were not otherwise occupied with poisonous reptiles or lethal explosives.

Jimmy was an absolute genius when it came to chess. To my knowledge, he never lost a game. His technique was brilliant in concept and was simplicity itself in execution, and I recommend it to chess players the world over for whom it is not how you play the game but whether you win or lose. Here it is, folks, entirely free of charge: when you get behind in a game and have no reasonable expectation of being able to make up lost ground, knock over the board.

It’s as simple as that.

This technique is most effective when nobody sees you actually knock over the board, so that you can plausibly claim it was an accident. But even if the suspicion lingers that you did it on purpose, you still have avoided having to acknowledge defeat. Nothing withstands the power of the Jimmy Russell Gambit, and once you get the hang of it you are “home free,” as we used to say back on East Side Street.