

# The High Cost of an Unthinking Request

*In organizations, pressures to improve things (e.g., productivity, quality, accuracy, etc., are unrelenting. I made several improvements to the gun systems on which I worked and once, I managed to greatly improve the accuracy of the gunfire we were delivering in Viet Nam. However, improvements have costs and the costs of improving the accuracy of my ship's gunfire were unbelievably high. During my tours on the gun line in Viet Nam, I regularly felt guilty that my part of the war was so safe and clean and for so many others it was anything but. This story will illustrate just how guilty I once felt and why.*

During my second tour on the gun line, I suggested to the weapons officer that if we could get a beacon – a transponder device my radar could track – set up at known coordinates in the DMZ, the accuracy of the *Waddell's* gunfire could be greatly improved.

A week later, a tough, gruff old Marine gunnery sergeant, straight off a recruiting poster, and three teen-aged Marines were on board the *Waddell*, meeting with the officers to pick a location for the beacon. The gunnery sergeant and the three teen-agers had drawn the unenviable assignment of physically lugging the beacon into the DMZ, setting it up, and of then making their way back out.

When I learned that the Marines would have to "back-pack" the beacon into the DMZ, I tracked down the gunnery sergeant to apologize.

"Jesus Christ, Gunny," I said, "I didn't know you guys were gonna have to lug that fuckin' thing in there or I wouldn't have asked for it."

The gunnery sergeant shrugged. "That's what we get paid to do, Chief. That's our job."

"Bullshit, Gunny! That's maybe true for you and me. We chose this way of life. We're pros. These fuckin' kids didn't ask for this shit."

I felt especially guilty that the dangerous assignment those young Marines were about to undertake was the result of my unthinking technician's request for a beacon. I had given no thought to what it would take to get a beacon in there or I wouldn't have suggested it.

To assuage my guilt, I made it a point to ask the three young Marines if they needed anything from the ship's store – cigarettes, soap, socks – anything at all.

They shook their heads no, saying those items were in abundant supply where they were stationed.

"This ain't World War II," one of them said.

But, after thinking for a moment, one of them changed his mind.

"Gedunk, Chief. Can you get us some gedunk?"

"What's 'gedunk'?" I asked. It was not a term I knew.

The young Marines laughed. "You know, candy bars, gum, lifesavers, stuff like that; anything sweet."

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I rounded up the ship's serviceman, browbeat him into opening up the ship's store, and bought every piece of candy in it. The "gedunk" filled three small overnight bags which I also bought. I gave one bag to each of the three young Marines.

The gunnery sergeant, examining his young cohort's loot, laughed, saying, "You better watch out, Chief, them boys' mommas are gonna be all over your ass for fuckin' up their teeth."

The beacon was installed about a week later and the accuracy of the *Waddell's* gunfire improved considerably. But the improvement lasted only two weeks – the amount of time it took the Viet Cong (VC) to locate and disable the beacon.

I learned not long afterward that only the gunnery sergeant came back. All three of the young Marines were killed; one on the way in, the other two on the way out. More than their teeth got fucked up. Cost: three lives. Benefit: two weeks of improved gunfire. Was it worth it? I didn't think so then and I still don't think so now.

## Afterword

As this year's Memorial Day approaches, I find myself thinking about those three young Marines and the price they paid for my unthinking request.

## Note

This story is from my 2016 book, *Sea Stories: Tales about Leadership, Morale and More*, pp.75-77. The book is available on Amazon.

## About the Author

Fred Nickols served 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring in 1974 as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. He was a Fire Control Technician, charged with operating, maintaining and repairing complex, shipboard weapons systems. He was also trained as a classroom instructor and an internal organization development (OD) consultant. After retiring, he took up a career as a consultant and held two executive positions with client firms. He maintains a web site at [www.nickols.us](http://www.nickols.us).