

## RANDOM HALLUCINATIONS

### **The Spud of Sound: Nothing can ruin our excellent working conditions faster than our own juvenile antics.**

**BY NICK BRUNACINI**

*B SHIFTER Buckslip, July 23, 2024*

**A** mother brings her young son by the local firehouse so the tyke can see the spectacular red fire engines and meet the firefighters. One of the firefighters shows the little boy a rig when the kid tells him, "I want to be a fireman when I grow up." The firefighter replies, "Kid, it looks like you have a decision to make because you can't do both."

I had an associate who was briefly engaged to a girl whose mother was a psychiatrist. The mother was never fond of my friend. She used to tell her daughter that firefighters were borderline pyromaniacs who suffered from the Peter Pan complex. Their relationship hit rock bottom when the mother unexpectedly showed up one day and caught her other daughter giving her future son-in-law a bath. (It was a love that was never meant to be.)

My friend was a fine firefighter and a great American. He had the intuitive ability to quickly exploit any situation to his benefit. This is a quality one looks for in a workforce that responds to life-and-death emergencies. You want workers who can quickly make sense of chaos, develop a sane and lucid plan, and take quick, definitive action. One of the beautiful things about our work is that when we win, the customer wins.

The Phoenix Fire Department hired many nontraditional firefighters. Often, these hires abandoned good careers in favor of starting over. These professions included lawyers, stockbrokers, bankers, fighter pilots, accountants, concert pianists and cops. It was common to see 40-year-old recruits going through our training academy. The reason is simple: We have the greatest job on the planet. When I was with the PFD, about 3,000 people showed up every few years to compete for a hundred or so firefighter positions. Our Personnel Section claimed it was more difficult to gain employment as a Phoenix firefighter than it was to get accepted into the University of Arizona Medical School. Our job is so good, sometimes we forget it's a job. In most cases, this is a good thing. But one of the pitfalls we face is the lure of inappropriate antics. We've all seen or heard about things getting out of hand and the antics blowing up in our faces. A group of firefighters will generally cube the effect of a stupid antic gone wrong; a group contains much more stupidity potential than a single person. Looking back on some of these things, one can only wonder how we could have been so stupid.

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**A potato cannon fired from 15 feet away crushed the [trash] can in half. ...It became troublesome when the members of the station began to build their own potato guns in hopes of besting the next guy's.**

The first time I ever saw a potato cannon was behind Fire Station 11. We had finished up with the dinner ritual and were out back playing horse-shoes. One of the guys assigned to the ambulance walked over with a black piece of PVC pipe. It was 2" in diameter, around 4' long and open on one end. The other end had a 6" cleanout attached. The end cap of the cleanout had been drilled out, and an igniter from a gas barbecue had been installed in the hole. To load the potato cannon, a potato is shoved into the open end of the pipe and tamped down with a broom handle. Once the potato is properly loaded, the end cap is unscrewed, and a 3-second blast of hair spray is directed into the cleanout section of the device. (I'm told Aqua Net is the preferred propellant.) After the end cap is screwed back into place, the apparatus is shaken to achieve the proper fuel-air mixture. When the cannon is fired, it sounds like a mortar going off, and the potato is quickly hurled farther than the eye can see.

We didn't have a care in the world while we launched potatoes that evening; it was loads of juvenile fun. I wasn't concerned until the next shift when I saw that one of these devices had the power to leave something much more significant than a welt. Someone taped a bull's eye to the side of a 40-gallon, galvanized steel trash can. A potato cannon fired from 15 feet away crushed the can in half. This wasn't a toy one would give to a child. It became troublesome when the members of the station began to build their own potato guns in hopes of besting the next guy's. A couple weeks later, with no high-velocity potato mishaps (yet), the other station captain and I decided we were all pushing our luck. The B Shift crew had built an arsenal of cannons that could launch a potato nearly half a mile; we had to stop the madness. We quietly put a moratorium on potato cannons and returned to more mundane pursuits.

I'm sure some of you are shaking your heads in disbelief—the professional guardians of a community engaging in dangerous and sophomoric antics? Guilty as charged, but it's important to note that none of us ever fired a potato in anger or with bad intentions. It wasn't a very wise pastime, but hiring a group of people who willfully run into burning buildings comes with some management challenges. Our little firehouse family was fortunate that we stopped our illicit hobby before something dire happened. It's always better when we wise up and cease the silly antics on our own, as opposed to pressing forward, blowing up the apparatus bay and having to explain why a firefighter requires medical attention. It is generally painful when the fun and games go public.

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tasty working conditions faster or more completely  
than we can. The siren song of silly antics is strong,  
but for our own good, we must resist.**

It had been more than a decade since I had seen my last potato cannon when I heard an unsubstantiated rumor. In the interest of decorum, let's just say the incident allegedly occurred somewhere in the Southwestern United States of America and leave it at that. This is the story as I heard it: A group of young firefighters was experimenting with potato cannons. One of the more inquisitive members of the tribe had an idea to get more oomph out of his launcher. After he packed a specially selected spud down the barrel, he filled the combustion chamber with 100 percent oxygen before giving it a 3-second blast of hair spray. He screwed the cap into place and prepared himself for taking the shot heard around the neighborhood.

In hindsight, it was fortunate the crew took some precautions. They knew that adding pure oxygen to the potato-launching formula would increase the force of the blast to the highest levels. According to the legend, some type of blind shielded the cannon master from his weapon. A small hole in the shield allowed him access to the igniter. The remainder of the crew took refuge behind solid objects. The stage was set, the weapon primed. The crew was about to make history. They were firing the cannon from the sanctity of the apparatus bay. The rigs were parked on the front apron; the front doors were closed. The rear bay doors were open and provided a shooting alley into the large parking lot, where potatoes met a grizzly death as they kissed a block wall after traveling at speeds in excess of 100 mph. Our hero depressed the firing mechanism, giving spark to the supercharged fuel mixture. If I had to guess, I'd say the potato came apart around the time it hit the speed of sound. Something certainly broke the sound barrier because the dozens of fluorescent lights and the window glass in the bay doors all exploded into tens of thousands of tiny shards of glass right after the doomed cannon blew into bits. When the glass settled, the only injuries were ringing in the ears and a small laceration received by our misguided potato master.

Like all really good legends, this one has its share of unanswered questions. I don't know how the crew explained the hospital visit required to close up the small head wound. All the broken glass also presented a sizable problem. Did anyone get shifts off? I honestly can't answer that. None of this matters anyway. Like any event that turns out badly, we can all learn from this incident. We have fabulous careers. Three-quarters of those who do it do it for free. No one can ruin our tasty working conditions faster or more completely than we can. The siren song of silly antics is strong, but for our own good, we must resist. I always cringed when my bosses ended long paragraphs with, "Where was the captain?" It's even worse when they replace the word "captain" with "chief."

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Self-destruction is never pretty. Like most stupid things, there isn't a problem the first 100 times we do something idiotic. In almost all cases, the problem bites us in the ass the last time we do it. (For most reasonably intelligent people, when an activity leads to harm, we cease doing it, hence, the last time.)

This group of firefighters wasn't the first to fire vegetables out of homemade mortars, and they probably won't be the last. Education is the key. By sharing lurid tales of mishaps, we can all learn. We should never undertake any activity that has the potential to cause structural or biological damage. **BS**



Nick Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) in 1980. He served seven years as a firefighter on different engine companies before promoting to captain and working nine years on a ladder company. Nick served as a battalion chief for five years before promoting to shift commander in 2001. He then spent the following five years developing and teaching the Blue Card curriculum at the PFD's Command Training Center. His last assignment with the PFD was South Shift commander. Nick retired from the PFD in 2009 after spending the first 26 years of his fire-department career as a B-shifter and the last three on C Shift. Nick is the author of "B-Shifter—A Firefighter's Memoir." He also co-wrote "Command Safety." Today he is the publisher of the B Shifter hazard zone periodical and a Blue Card instructor.



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