

**The Dynamite in the Attic**  
**Richard H. Milburn, Professor (retired)**  
**Tufts University**  
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In mid-1962 we Physics Department members were finally able to move out of crowded temporary quarters in Anderson and into personal offices in a newly refurbished Robinson Hall. Mine was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, with Kathryn McCarthy's on one side and Brenton Stearns' on the other. New laboratories were waiting for us in the basement. Moving was simple for me since I had only come to Tufts the preceding July. The rush to get our courses under way was over. We could now enjoy moments of sociable conversation about more peripheral matters. Thus it happened that on the way out to lunch one day I stopped by Brent Stearns office to inquire about some small problem. This solved, he casually remarked, "By the way, do you know about the dynamite in the attic?"

Surprised, I replied that I had heard nothing about it, and did he mean the 4<sup>th</sup> floor Robinson attic, just above our heads? He nodded, and added that he thought the dynamite had been left over from some WW-II research project nearly two decades earlier. This tale sounded rather improbable to me; what idiot would abandon dynamite to its fate in a school building? I began to wonder whether Brent – a friendly courteous fellow, intellectually sharp with a wry sense of humor – might be pulling my leg. After all, I was the new kid on the block who has to pass basic social tests of affability and capability to fit in. I

made a non-committal remark of pretended interest, went off to lunch, and forgot about the friendly teasing. Returning to my office later in the day I found on my desk an open cardboard box containing crumpled padding on which rested a dusty 1/4-lb chemical bottle containing a blob of gooey material and with the barely readable label “gelatin dynamite.” I was further appalled to note the greasy appearance of the bottle, consistent with its contents having aged to become dangerous old dynamite in which the supersensitive nitroglycerin had separated from the filler clay or other material that Alfred Nobel discovered could make the notoriously tricky explosive much safer to handle. I became a believer!

After gazing at this unpleasant object on my desk for a few minutes, I hurried next door to apologize to Brent for not taking him seriously earlier, and to take steps to get rid of the thing. He was sitting quietly, unoccupied and evidently having heard me come in, was waiting for my reaction. After I had wound down a bit he remarked, “There’s more upstairs.” We went up the flight of stairs to the fourth-floor attic which had not been refurbished. It was a collection of small rooms and open areas under the roof that had previously housed parts of the Tufts Physics Department. These areas had been filled prior to the Robinson refurbishment with left-over files and equipment and miscellaneous odds and ends deemed too valuable to discard from the rest of the building prior to the builders moving in.

Brent took me to a small one-time office room having a single window and sloping ceiling which was largely filled with chemical glassware – retorts and flasks, distillation columns and other serviceable if old-fashioned items, some of them quite elegant. They were on shelves and also in boxes on the floor, not packed but simply dumped in the room randomly and occasionally broken in the process. Brent pointed out one box on the floor as the source of the thing on my desk. Looking in it more closely I saw a second quarter-pound bottle of gelatin dynamite (this one evidently not opened and leaking liquid). Also present was a quarter pound bottle of TNT and a small rectangular box. Inside, laid in a neat row, were about a half dozen little tubes the size of lipstick containers, labeled something like “tetryl booster.” (A booster is a form of explosive used to amplify the effect of a primary blasting cap in detonating a much larger amount of a relatively insensitive explosive.)

The outer surface of the booster box on one side was labeled and carried a number of stamps showing that a decade or two earlier it had traveled as an innocuous package from a US Arsenal somewhere to a Tufts physics professor in Medford via ordinary first-class mail. Times have indeed changed! The name of the addressee I recognized as that of a former department member. An infra-red spectroscopist, he had left Tufts some years earlier for a job in a bigger school in a sunnier climate, with no doubt a rosier salary. One might infer that he must have cleared out in a hurry to leave behind such dangerous items

for others to deal with, and perhaps stumble upon at their peril. I soon managed to forget his name altogether.

Brent and I then faced the problem of disposal. The stuff was placidly lying immediately above a busy student laboratory area. It had not exploded despite indications that workmen had accessed the storeroom to put in wiring for the floors below, nor wherever it had been for the several decades previously. It would certainly be noticed had it done so. Obviously it now had to go. First we called the Grounds and Buildings Department, in charge of the janitors whose job was to take things away. Usually very cooperative in such matters, when told we had high explosive materials they demurred. Then we tried the Tufts Police -- the Public Safety folks who were also responsible for fire prevention and this seemed relevant. Indeed, they were interested, but when I suggested that I needed use of my office and could at least bring the box on my desk across the street to their station they insisted that I not even think of doing that; they would have somebody come to us -- soon. So we waited to learn how long "soon" would be.

An hour or two later a very large man well-dressed in a neat business suit appeared at my office door and said he was from the State Fire Marshall's office. (He appeared to me to be THE State Fire Marshall!) He looked at the package on my desk and said something like "Hmnn." And then asked if there was any more. We told him there was, and watched him with delicate fingers settle the small bottle in its crumpled packing material, and then took him upstairs. He said nothing as he added the remaining

explosives carefully to the box, and then asked whether there was any more. We said we knew of none. He then looked around carefully, said simply “thank you” and went off. We had expected an extensive round of questions and comments to follow – and there were none at all. Looking out the window, we saw the man put the box carefully in the trunk of a big white Buick, close it, and drive off.

That was the last we ever heard of the Dynamite in the Attic! From anyone; if the affair was ever reported to the Tufts administration the knowledge was suppressed at a very high level. On the other hand, a mere pound or so of high explosive, although clearly capable of killing or maiming anyone nearby if it accidentally goes off, may actually have been no big deal to the seasoned fire marshall. It was roughly equivalent explosively to a few military hand grenades or to a bazooka shell brought home by a WW-II soldier as souvenirs, or to a big box or two of ammunition of a practicing NRA member. Such keepsakes and possessions were not uncommon post WW-II (and may still be to this present moment). Perhaps, decades ago, our Dynamite in the Attic was merely all in a days work for a public safety professional who was simply glad to be able to head off yet another after the fact investigation of an actual tragedy. Nowadays, there are federal departments and congressional committees dedicated to searching everywhere for terrorists plotting to blow us up, and the modern media report worldwide on incidents large and small. One can only guess how our little story would have played out in 2007.

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