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*Ottawa Outlook, nee North Hero News and World Review …. ……. Mostly stuff no one else would print.*

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**TNT**

Your staff recently went to a birthday party at daughter Linda’s. Quite the erudite gathering, two professors, a grade school teacher, a French Emersion specialist and a *“Noted Speaker”* were among those in attendance. The honored B’Day guest taught chemistry. Much *‘Shop’* talk. At one point Ken was tempted to relate his participation in an after school chemistry experiment which resulted in a vial of Tri Nitro Toluene, aka TNT. However, … feeling in a bit over his head he wisely followed the old Chinese proverb. *“Tis better to keep mouth shut and appear fool than open it and remove all doubt.”* (Conversation out of our league, but the food was delicious.)

Back home , mulling over the afternoon, Ken thought back to the TNT caper. It would have been late, late 1943, his colleague in crime was Art Ward. The very same Ward who brings up the rear on the alphabetic *“Ottawa Outlook”* distribution list. Good Grief!!! 67 years ago. Hmmmn, … a delve into the distant past might make an interesting *‘letter’*, … and if a doubting Thomas questions the *‘Outlook’s’* veracity, we’ve got a witness. Thinking of those days, one wonders how we ever survived in the first place. No seat belts, no bicycle helmets, no organized play, sandlot games where you played and took your chances and then on the side, weird things like homemade explosives. Oh well, … here goes.

We were both taking H.S. Chemistry and thought it was a neat subject. Why did we decide to make TNT? No idea. Where did we get the stuff? Can’t remember. How did we get the formula? Goodness only knows (no Google). However, … the formulation is crystal clear in memory. We had; sulfuric acid & nitric acid, one of them ‘fuming’, glycerin, ice, beakers, water, stirrers, vial, sawdust, and were down in Art’s basement on Bedell Ave in Hempstead, L.I. We followed the instructions explicitly. The beaker was placed in a big bowl of ice water. We filled two pails with water. Instructions cautioned that if the solution were to start turning red, to immediately slow down the reaction with lots of water. We agreed to initiate this action at even a hint of pink. The specified amounts of acids were mixed. Then one gently stirred while the other gradually added the required drops of glycerin. We ended with a thick milky precipitate which was carefully isolated and put into a vial. Were we nervous? You bet! Art sr. had a woodworking shop in that basement. Two grains of sawdust were moistened with the precipitate, put on the cement floor and hit with a hammer. POW! Blew a small hole in the cement floor. Now we were really nervous!

The ‘Mad Chemists’ had succeeded in making an explosive, … but what to do with it? The first night, Ken believes he took it home, put it in the refrigerator and taped a note on the outside of the door. “DO NOT SLAM THIS DOOR, …TNT INSIDE. Funny, … don’t remember this even drawing a comment from the rest of the family. Ken’s memory phases out at this point. How long he kept it and when Art got it back, he has no idea. These were not really normal times. The very first part of 1944, Ken reported for duty in the U.S. Navy. Art, a bit younger, had a little more grace.. Now, with curiosity piqued, Ken contacted Art as to what ever happened to the TNT.

Here is his reply.

*“If you would have been around when I decided to find out if your experiment worked you would have been there with me.  But you weren't.  I kept the vial hidden for quite a while but finally decided to see if your experiment worked.  One day, when I was home alone I took a drop and placed it on the concrete floor in the basement shop area and gave it a whack with a hammer.  It sounded like a small paper cap so I knew I had to get rid of it.  After all, that was just a small drop.  Soooooooooooo, one sunny day I took one of my balsa model planes (the one with tissue covering that was made to fly via the rubber band inside and the propeller) and went across the street to the lot area, dug a trench, set the plane in the ditch and arranged a mini firecracker with a long fuse and attached it to a paper matchbox full of powered clay which I had saturated with your "nitro" juice. (Wasn't that the way Nobel made his dynamite?)  Then I lit the fuse and scooted back across the street and behind the large maple tree trunk, peeking out quickly and often to catch the results.  Well everything went as planned.  The fuse burned down and the firecracker went off, but I couldn't distinguish any added power from the nitro.  It was all a small flash and the plane blew up and burned.  I don't remember if I wrote to you about the results.  Probably didn't want to disappoint you or have you feel I ruined the home made dynamite.  But I was glad I was no longer the keeper of the stuff.”*

The TNT was gone, but not quite forgotten. What would Ken have done if he knew any of the his kids were making TNT in the basement? Probably gone through the roof sans the aid of any explosives. In the interest of veracity we will pass this by the Chemistry Professor at Algonquin College. Perhaps the *‘Life’* of TNT may have saved Art from a more violent result. A very interesting critique may ensue.

Final thought, our *‘Mad Chemists’* could be lucky in that this was 1943 and not 2010, they could be *‘water-boarding’* in Guantanamo. .

Till August,

From Ottawa, Lucile, Bailey & Ken

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