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The Birth of Skipper

October Sky author tells the story of his role in the creation of Tech's cannon

by Homer "Sonny" Hickam '64



The idea for Virginia Tech's Skipper cannon began with an ill-fated trip Butch Harper and I took to VMI in the winter of 1963. Suffering from some delusions of grandeur, Butch and I decided to extract revenge on the Keydets by posing as two of their number and "recovering" the Highty-Tighty baton, which had been wagered and lost by the band at our losing Thanksgiving football game.

On a previous visit to Lexington, we had "liberated" a VMI uniform from the second-hand shop on campus. Because it fit me best, I wore the uniform, and off we went. Naturally, we didn't get the baton, as it was locked in a case in the VMI bookstore, but we did manage to pick up a large quantity of hats, jackets, and other paraphernalia, all of which I am certain I have atoned for over the years.

Butch was bug-eyed over VMI's cannon and declared we had to have one for our campus. He found out that the Virginia state government had given VMI some old cannon and that we could probably get one, too. Our VPI administration wasn't interested, however, so Butch decided that--by God--we'd make our own. Moreover, ours would be made to be fired during football games.

Cannon materials and funding

The first problem was to design and build the cannon barrel. Somehow we got hold of plans for a Civil War style cannon. The industrial engineering department took it on as a project, I think, and made the wooden mockup and the mold. The carriage was donated by the state. The ROTC brass shell casings and "rat belt buckles" we collected only amounted to about half of the total metal needed for the barrel. My Dad came up with additional metal by donating some large brass gears from the Coalwood coal mines. Now it would make sense that the foundry might



substitute their own brass if they needed to, but I'm certain that good old West--by God--Virginia coal mine brass got into the Skipper. When the metal was carted off to the foundry, we heard stories of cartridges exploding as metal was melted down.

In a later newspaper story on the cannon, the commandant, General M.W. Schewe, said he knew nothing of the project. That was true. Butch Harper ran this project out of his hip pocket. It was a corps project, conceived, designed, managed, produced, funded, and delivered entirely by cadets. The money all came from donations.

How the name Skipper was selected

I was in Butch's room up at the corps staff area a few days after President Kennedy had been assassinated, going through all kind of gyrations trying to think up a proper name for our new cannon. There had been suggestions to name it after old corps war heroes--"The Major Williams Memorial Cannon" and the like--but nothing really appealed to either Butch or me. We felt if anyone was to name the damn thing, it should be us. We were feeling low about Kennedy, and suddenly it came to me that we should name the cannon "Skipper." The name would honor Kennedy because he had been the skipper of a PT-boat during World War II. The name would also adapt the traditional corps title we used for a senior private in those days. A senior private had to be proud and independent to ever reach that exalted rank. That's the way I saw the cannon. Butch thought about it for maybe a millisecond and agreed. It was perfect and that was it.

Testing of the cannon

We had the cannon. Now how to fire it. I was a pretty proficient amateur rocketeer after working with black powder and the like building rockets in high school, so I agreed to take on the task of test firing the cannon. I knew absolutely nothing about putting in a charge, tamping it down, placing the fuse, and everything else required. Moreover, there was no fuse hole anyway. None had been drilled at the foundry.

What I did know, however, was how to make a pretty good bomb from black powder. I bought every plastic ketchup and mustard squeeze bottle I could find in downtown Blacksburg. We filled them with black powder and popped in a fuse. The first test of the cannon should be on the golf course, Butch decided, so we met him there and threw the first of the bombs down the muzzle. It worked great! The sound was good, the smoke satisfying, and it looked like we had a good system.

The Skipper at the Thanksgiving game

I took the assignment as the Skipper's first "commander." I was in charge of all of the loading and firing at the Thanksgiving game. It was a very high scoring game. But before the game, the announcer asked for a minute of silence for President Kennedy. I can remember how completely silent that big stadium became. I could hear the chains on the flagpole clinking softly on the far end of the stadium. After that, the team came running in and I decided to fire the Skipper. We popped in one of the mustard bottles. What a blast! The enclosed stadium concentrated the sound, and football players nearby were practically bowled over by it. The VMI corps stopped cheering and just gaped at us. We had a winner.

Near the end of the game, our team made a touchdown, and I threw a charge down the barrel. I was not prepared for what happened next. The resulting blast sent a shock wave across the field and through the stands, literally smashing its way through the press box, cracking the glass plates, and snapping reporters' heads back.

Immediately, a policeman came running over. "Aim that thing in another direction!" he yelled. My ears were ringing so much I could barely hear him. We did turn Skipper around, however, and aimed it toward the end zone.

On the next firing, one of the VMI football players was about 20 yards in front of the cannon when it went off. I didn't see him until it was too late. When the smoke cleared, he was gone. I guess I would've heard something if the Skipper had actually blown him away. Wherever he went, I'm certain it was a moment he has never forgotten.

Homer Hickam '64 is working on a sequel to October Sky that will take Sonny to Tech, so look for this escapade on the large screen. George E. Fox '64 and Alton "Butch" Harper '64 contributed their memories to this story.