

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS FRANK PIERCE

By George Hamlin

I met Frank Pierce when I reported to Publications in January 1962; he had already been there five years. I decided early that he was slightly whacked, and never had occasion to change my mind. White Oak had no one else like him, and never got another.

Frank was originally from Princess Anne on the Eastern Shore, a product of Salisbury State. He was in the Navy during the Korean conflict and returned to Salisbury State for his degree. He played sax down there and was front man for a band, and had a brief gig as night man on the local radio station. He had a degree in education and taught in the Montgomery County schools for a while, then joined NOL as a technical writer in early 1957. The profession of technical communication was as green as were the rest of the folks who were slowly accumulating on the third floor over the Captain's suite, and Frank picked it up along with everyone else; there was exactly one degree in technical communication in the whole place, the rest having degrees as diverse as English, Education, Engineering, Geology, and even Theology.

Frank acquired expertise in naval weapons systems and became one of the senior people by the 1960s, expanding our technical manuals horizons beyond the standard Lab products (torpedoes, electronics, degaussing, sonar, fuses, mines, mine countermeasures) into such areas as aircraft tactical manuals and Saudi Navy support. Eventually Publications, through Frank, had technical lead in several such areas. That ended rather abruptly when, via the blessed rotation system for Department heads, we acquired new leadership. NSWC by then comprised two kinds of departments: technical and support. Our department, Engineering, had feet in both areas, and two of its Branches (Publications and Photographic) were in reality part technical, part support. That wouldn't do; in his old Department the new man obviously had thought of the Engineering Department as "support only," and questioned our TUPs and technical leadership positions. He thought of these functions as empire building and role inflation; we thought of them as mission-related activities that we could lead well, and that coincidentally enhanced the Center's position downtown. Unimpressed, he canceled every one of them. Other E Department technical branches, like magnetic silencing, eventually ended up in the new H Department.

Frank didn't stay long after that; he transferred to Al Letow's Tactical Doctrine Support outfit in Building 90 in mid-1981 and took his functions, and some of our best employees, with him. Code TT was outside the Center and reported to Crystal City, so NSWC lost the technical leadership in those areas. Frank went on to be Navy liaison to two NATO groups and retired in 1996.

All that sounds like an almost-typical if remarkably successful career, but it was anything but routine. Frank was the sort of person who, simultaneously with managing a tactical manual project, could create characters like Anton Khropochnik (see *The Leaf*, Winter 2007) and write books in such diverse fields as the history of the Washington Saengerbund and "A Boy's-Eye View of War II," an account of his early years on the Eastern Shore. He was a member of the Studebaker Drivers Club and the Saengerbund, a Teutonophilic group that gathered regularly to sing German songs. He explored and revived the historic area of gum bichromate photo printing, shot covers for magazines, plunked some on the mandolin, photographed models and weddings, and studied (and published works on) genealogy.

All the while there was the Pierce Wit. A succession of managers despaired of figuring out what he would be up to next; only Frank, for example, would have:

--Written a revised family history for Aunt Floss in Saint Louis, whoever she was, when we found the original in the Xerox machine near the elevator - and *sent it out to all the family members over the original signature*. The material left behind in the Xerox room made it quite easy (names, addresses, the works). Our revisions made an otherwise ordinary family history much more, ah, interesting and must certainly have enlivened the upcoming family reunion. Jerry Bruckheimer hadn't hit the scene yet, but if we could have gotten the revised history to him, I'll bet there would be a CBS miniseries out by now.

--Written to the Smithsonian suggesting compensatory payment for the immodest exhibition of a co-worker's mummified "distant relative," Dr. Wilhelm von Ellenbogen (the Smithsonian had someone equally witty on staff, judging from their reply).

--Responded to management insistence that funds be located and identified with a memo averring that "We have been successful in locating these funds...I decided to check the general area between the Capitol and Pentagon and sure enough, I found them not far from the old Resurrection City site. My theory is that they fell off a flatbed truck on the way to the Pentagon...Identification was relatively easy; you

could tell by the size and the fact that there were pictures of Presidents on most. The funds were wet and after drying them over my basement dehumidifier for another week, I should be able to give them to Dave Stack. They are in small denominations, no consecutive serial numbers."

--Beavered away after hours to publish a one-off special edition of a degaussing manual with an outrageous special Foreword, just to see if he could blow any gaskets in the hierarchy of the Instruments Division.

--Responded to management demand for sole-source justification by firing back a memo allowing that the chosen contractor, among other things, had "muddled through the first year and I don't see any reason why they shouldn't have another crack at it," and "There are good restaurants in the area...now this might not seem like a big deal to you, but when they take you out to lunch three, four, five times each week, you rapidly grow tired of eating at the same place." You could just picture the Division Head, face down and cupped in hands, after receiving memos like this. Sure I'm quoting exactly; I kept copies of all this stuff.

So long, Frank, it's been fun and we'll not see your like again. And to Aunt Floss's relatives, if you're reading this, now you know what that family-wide scandal was all about. Never leave material like that in the Xerox machine for wackos like us to find.