

Peace Dividend

Fiction by Seth Emerson (circa 1994)

Nobody really knows what happened to the Fish carburetor. Maybe that's a good thing, too. Ron told me about a "cousin" to the infamous Fish tale over a few beers at the Tied House last week. Ron had bounced around the Silicon Valley for a few years, putting in his time at most of the aerospace houses. He knew where many skeletons were buried. Hell, he'd buried dozens of them himself. Usually the project used up the funds, Ron would update his resume, and move along. In the early Reagan era, when the money was flowing fast and furious, Ron (not the Reagan), had just hooked up with a small theoretical physics house. He was a jack-of-all-aerospace-trades kind of guy. He could price a prototype from the back of a napkin, machine the close tolerance bores, fit the parts and even do the computer analysis of why the damn thing failed.

This physics house was based on the idea of one of its founders. I guess this guy had fallen in love with Star Trek (the old generation) back in the 60's and had never let go. He had no love of space travel, he just liked the gadgets. He had spent some time floating around the perimeter of the Stanford Accelerator, but seemed too action bent for the longhairs who ran the place. He didn't want to just study phenomena, he wanted to make it do something useful. Items like the phaser seemed too warlike but the transporter really intrigued him. This guy's background in particle physics told him that it would take all the computer power in the world and then some to plot the makeup of an insect and then try to reconstruct it. But he still harbored the desire to do it.

In the mid-80s the Star Wars program hit the scene like a rich uncle bent on spending money. Actually, exactly like a rich uncle bent on spending money. No scheme or possibility was too far out for the feds to investigate. With a plan to use earth fired particle beams to alter rockets in flight, this guy solved two problems. One, how to spend a few million dollars of Uncle Sugar's money, and two, how to find a way to design a real Star Trek-style transporter on someone else's nickel. (Actually lots of nickels.)

The company, BEMEUP Industries, had only the one idea. They never even pursued any other avenue. In a remote area of Milpitas, they spent their days running computer simulations and their nights running up the largest PG&E bills known to man. I guess it is obvious, they never got the transporter built. If I were a cynic, I'd probably guess that Amtrak or American Airlines would have bought them out of the transporter business anyway, but it didn't happen. They actually did make some hardware which worked, though they didn't even know it at first. They would aim the prototype "Dissembler" (their name for it) at an object and shoot 10 bazillion volts/amps/watts through the mechanism. No smoke, no flame, just a little zip, sort of like a bug zapper sending a moth to that great flame in the sky. But it looked like nothing had happened - the object looked just the same. It took a few solid weeks of examination to find out that each zap had taken away, or converted, a small percentage of the molecules in the object - a little tiny bit of shrinkage. And it was focused, you could zap one part and leave adjacent parts, even surrounding parts, untouched. According to Ron, this was interesting to everybody but the Feds. How could you knock down a rocket with that, not to mention that in the prototype, even with the power of PG&E, the range was only about 80 feet. With a vision of the world's most costly, energy intensive EDM (Electric Discharge Machining) prototype sitting in front of him, the physics guy decided to pull the plug, both electrically and financially. Ron updated his resume, and put it on the street, soon to follow.

One of Ron's buddies on the project convinced the physicist/partner to give him the prototype in lieu of a couple of month's wages. As the beer flowed, so did Ron's story. Ron's friend was also a car nut. He had bounced around the local SCCA series' from Road Racing through Solo II. He had even crewed on a Trans-am team. To tell the truth, though, he had never mastered the ability to drive fast for more than two corners at a time. But he was a mean wrench. Like a lot of us, he spent his days working for the bucks, and spent his bucks working on his cars. When Ron's buddy had wrestled this zapper gun home, he went into his Manufacturing Engineer mode. How could he make this into something useful and still pay his light bill, which was getting heavier by the minute? He tried the bright idea of using an MSD ignition to trigger the gun. This could run up the speed of firing. Believe it or

not, it worked. It slightly overtaxed the MSD. After third warrantee replacement, MSD suggested upgrading to an MSD-7. It took the burn just fine.

Ron had suggested he try a commercial application for his gun. He could pin fit rods to pistons, taking out just enough material to affect the fit. The neatest thing was he could do it from 50 feet away. He also tried removing material from main bearings journals, this worked as well. With the focusing option he could even do it without taking the engine apart. Of course, more clearance eventually caused the engines to lose oil pressure and fail, but it was the ability to do it that counted. Ron said the guy even demonstrated it to him one night on an engine stand. With that MGB motor cranking over at 3000 RPM, they just took out more and more material from the front main bearing journal. At about 3 psi of oil pressure the bearing failed, with the crank not far behind.

Ron's story got a little blurred at about that point, as did Ron. He mentioned that his friend had decided to get back into the racing arena, in one way or another, but he had only seen him once in the last three years. The guy had pulled up to Ron's house in his Renault R5 Turbo. He was certainly dressing better than he ever had before. After a short discussion about things in general, he headed back east to attend the Canadian Grand Prix. Ron noticed a special black box sitting loose on the passenger floorboards. He hadn't seen his friend again since then, at least not in person. He had been amused, though, to see Derek Daly interview him on ESPN at the German Grand Prix. He was identified as an engine development technician for Frank Williams Racing. Ron wondered whether his friend had anything to do with the stunning successes of the new Renault V10, or maybe the unexplained multiple failures of the rival McLaren Honda engines.

At this point, I felt obligated to help Ron get home. It had been a long evening. I wondered again what had happened to the Fish Carburetor. Maybe, like the legend said, it had been bought up by those with the most to gain or the most to lose.