

You can't bring weapons into a weapons lab. Who knew?

Rick Trebino

I spent twelve years working at a top-secret nuclear-weapons lab with a dedicated force of heavily armed security guards. Of course, security-related incidents were rare, so the guards' main challenge was simply staying awake.

During this time, I traveled to conferences around the world, after which I would vacation in nearby, often much less civilized, areas, where I would buy souvenirs for my group. After a conference in Venezuela, I toured the nearby jungle and brought back souvenir blowguns and darts from the Pemon Indians there.

On returning to work, blowguns in hand, I cheerfully greeted the sleepy guard at the lab entrance. Sensing something out of the ordinary, the guard awoke from his stupor and asked what I happened to be carrying.

"Blowguns," I replied nonchalantly.

His face contorted in an excited manner, and he sternly proclaimed, "You can't bring weapons into a weapons lab."

Intrigued by the apparent meaninglessness of this sentence, I figured he was joking, so I replied, "Not to worry. The darts aren't poison-tipped. And, even if they were, I don't think they'd stand much of a chance against nukes."

Unfortunately, he was serious. "Put the weapons down on the table and stand against the wall," he demanded.

He then telephoned the head of security to report an "incident." Response times were discussed, and calling in the Feds came up. Additional guards began to appear, blocking my entrance into the building and exit out of it, as well as any attempts I might make to grab a blowgun and start shooting—or, rather, blowing.

It had become clear that I was in trouble, and some fast talking was in order. So I suggested that, since the "weapons" hadn't yet entered the facility, technically, no law had yet been broken. And since the blowguns were merely presents for my group members, all of whom would immediately take them home, we could all easily get this ugly incident behind us if we simply called my group members down to the entrance, dispensed the blowguns to them, and sent them home with their deadly gifts.

Some additional discussion occurred among the dozen or so guards and their captain, including such phrases as “make an example of him” and “cuff him.” But when they realized how much paperwork this incident could generate, it was agreed that my plan would suffice. I mean, the “Justification of Use of Lethal Force” form alone could easily suck up several hours of their valuable time.

I was shown to a nearby telephone, where I was given one phone call. I used it wisely and called my lab, where my group congregated. They arrived together, escorted by additional guards who eyed them carefully in view of their newly-revealed association with a dangerous low-life like me. My group—several jovial, unkempt, and not-particularly-hip-looking scientists—looked none too dangerous, so the guards seemed to loosen up a bit.

I handed out the blowguns, one by one, relaxing in the knowledge that the crisis was clearly subsiding, and it was looking less likely that I’d be spending the rest of my days imprisoned in Gitmo.

The last to receive his souvenir was my technician, Len. As I turned to him, he looked a bit confused. Len looked at the guards, the blowgun, and then at me and asked, “Does this mean I have to take home the boomerang you gave me last year?”

“Boomerang!” all the guards bellowed in unison, simultaneously jumping into action, surrounding Len, and reaching for their weapons. The guard captain demanded of Len, *“Sir, you’ve had a weapon on site for a whole year?”*

Len and I were now in serious trouble. It was clear that we were planning a massive surprise attack on the facility with a horde of barbarian spies armed with blowguns and boomerangs, not to mention an as-yet-undiscovered arsenal of spears, atlatls, and maybe even tomahawks. And what kind of research were we doing in our lab anyway? Developing more lethal trebuchets, siege engines, and other primitive weapons of mass destruction?

More fast talking ensued, and, fortunately, we finally convinced the guards that we were all merely clueless geeks, utterly ignorant of the law. In the end, Len was required to take the boomerang home and sign a statement that, under no circumstances would he ever bring it or any other weapon, primitive or otherwise, onto the premises in the future. I had to take remedial security training, which consisted of a security instructor repeating hundreds of times, “You can’t bring weapons into a weapons lab.” Then, when he figured that I had finally absorbed this important point, he asked, “Okay, so can you bring weapons into a weapons lab?”

Unfortunately, my initial response was that this sounded like a trick question, because you could bring in pencils, which could easily poke an eye out. And I didn’t even want

to speculate about the potentially lethal consequences of running with scissors, so I said I'd have to think about it. Whereupon he repeated hundreds more times, "You can't bring weapons into a weapons lab," until I was able to prove to his satisfaction that I had memorized this key commandment.

So I was released to travel another day, this time to a conference in Siberia, near a Russian electronic surveillance research facility, where who knows what fun souvenirs I might acquire?

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