

It's Always the Little Things

By Lt. Kris Reid,
VAQ-139

Like most homeowners, I have an addiction to improving my little, personal “kingdom” at every opportunity—perhaps my compulsion is worse than most. In the slack time between deployment cycles, I had redone flowerbeds, planted new trees and trimmed the old ones, and repaired my deck. My greatest achievement, though, was to put down my own flooring.

Each of these jobs had required increasingly more powerful and dangerous equipment. But what greater feeling is there than walking out of a local hardware store with your very own miter saw and pneumatic nail gun?

My latest project required the greatest tool I've had the privilege of using thus far. My neighbor and I each own half of a large strip of land zoned as wetlands, which had been allowed to grow wild for years. We were faced with removing knotted blackberry bushes 10 feet high and covered with thorns. No one had been able to use this land for years. Deer wouldn't even walk in this stuff.

After I had spent a few hours trying to clear a spot with a machete, so I could dump grass from my mower, my fiancée said she thought the thorns had damaged me worse than I had them. Her comment was depressing, considering I only had opened up a 10-foot-by-10-foot hole. I realized this job was going to require more than machetes.

I drove to the nearest heavy-equipment rental shop and quickly signed papers to rent the largest Bobcat tractor on the lot—one that had a monstrous brush hog attached. This thing was bad. It was, by far, the biggest Bobcat I ever had seen. It had huge hydraulic arms that could raise the brush hog 20 feet into the air to smash down whatever brush wouldn't fit under its mower deck. The giant piece of machinery rode on a set of tank treads worthy of an M1A1 tank. The operator had plenty of luxuries, too: an enclosed cockpit nicer than that of the Prowler, a stereo system, and air conditioning. After all, who

wants to sweat while doing yard work? Clearly, we had our machine.

I know what you're probably thinking now: What kind of disaster befell the goober while operating this beast? The answer is nothing. My neighbor and I used it safely, and absolutely no harm came to anything, other than the blackberry bushes, and we actually had fun in the process. Another neighbor who had spent months doing the same thing by hand was almost overcome by grief as he watched us take just hours—in air-conditioned comfort, no less—to clear the bushes. Trees stayed, but everything else was turned into nice, little, mulched up pieces.

The only remaining task was to fill the tank with diesel fuel before the rental guys returned Monday morning to pick up the Bobcat. Here's when I was reminded that even the simplest task can pose a risk. My neighbor and I had filled a few empty tanks with diesel fuel to bring back to the Bobcat. While carrying one of the five-gallon containers from my pickup, I managed to drop the tank on my foot—protected by only a flip-flop. The fuel tank managed to do what chain saws, miter saws, nail guns, and sundry other equipment had failed to accomplish: make me bleed—a lot. Fortunately, no bones were broken, but walking the rest of that night was nearly impossible. Putting my flight boots on the next morning was agony.

Up to that point, I had been proud of myself for considering all the hazards involved. I had worn goggles, gloves, and long sleeves during the “dangerous” part. I never thought once, though, about wearing shoes while handling heavy, slippery containers of diesel fuel. Thankfully, no long-term harm came from this lesson. Instead, I just got a reminder that ORM must be applied continuously. It's not always the big, dangerous tools that cause the most damage. ■

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