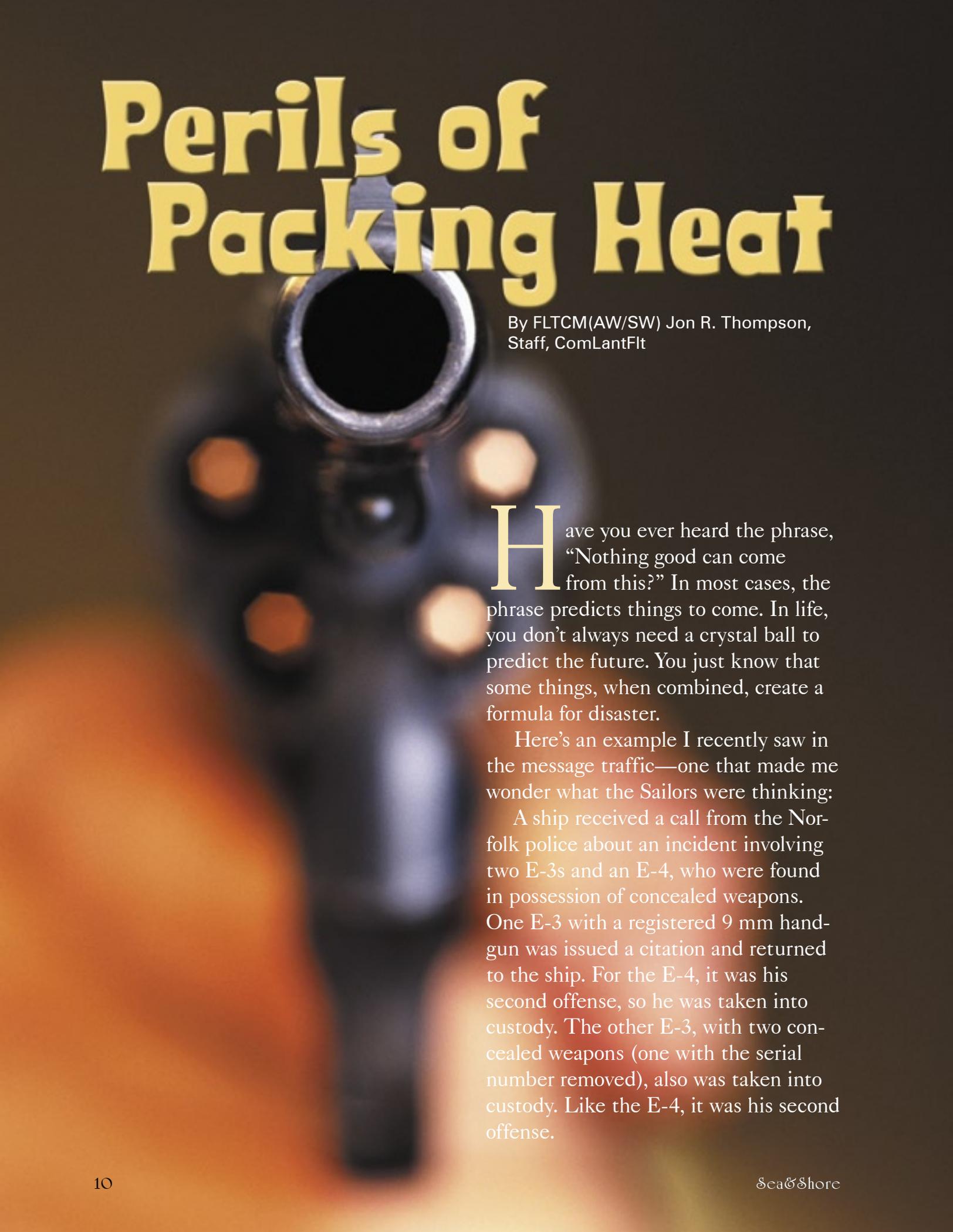


Perils of Packing Heat



By FLTCM(AW/SW) Jon R. Thompson,
Staff, ComLantFlt

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Nothing good can come from this?” In most cases, the phrase predicts things to come. In life, you don’t always need a crystal ball to predict the future. You just know that some things, when combined, create a formula for disaster.

Here’s an example I recently saw in the message traffic—one that made me wonder what the Sailors were thinking:

A ship received a call from the Norfolk police about an incident involving two E-3s and an E-4, who were found in possession of concealed weapons. One E-3 with a registered 9 mm handgun was issued a citation and returned to the ship. For the E-4, it was his second offense, so he was taken into custody. The other E-3, with two concealed weapons (one with the serial number removed), also was taken into custody. Like the E-4, it was his second offense.

If where you go on liberty is so dangerous you feel a need to carry a gun, my advice is to find a different hangout.

Unless you're hunting, your guns should be left at home—incidentally, “home” means off any military base. Federal rules prohibit you from bringing a weapon onto a base, except in a limited number of cases. *[For details, consult pertinent local instructions, as well as OpNavInst 5580.1A, OpNavInst 5530.13C, OpNavInst 5530.14C, 18 U.S.C. 922, USD (P&R) memo of 27 Nov 02, CNO Washington DC 220949Z Apr 98 (NavAdmin 085/98), and CNO Washington DC 201606Z Oct 04. Pertinent local instructions for Sailors and Marines in the Hampton Roads area are ComNavRegMidLantInst 11015.3 and ComNavRegMidLantInst 11015.2A.—Ed.]*

I can see no good reason why a Sailor ever would need a weapon while on liberty. At best, you can be arrested like the Sailors in the previous example. At worst, you can end up involved in a situation where you actually use the gun(s) and either get shot or shoot someone else. Neither outcome is acceptable.

Combining liberty with a gun is a formula for disaster, and, before you think I'm guilty of not supporting the right to bear arms, let me clarify my position. I'm not arguing a constitutional right. However, as a fleet master chief, I'm in a position where I'm obligated to provide advice about how to conduct yourself on liberty, in the United States, as well as overseas. At no time in my career have I ever seen a case where a Sailor with a concealed weapon came out on the right side of the law.

Everywhere I travel, I meet young Sailors who tell me they want to be treated like adults and that leadership should trust them. I agree—the default action should be to trust you. The only time I start doubting that logic is when I read things like the earlier report. Trust works both ways.

If all hands went on liberty and conducted themselves in a manner that brought credit upon our Navy, I would have nothing to worry about. Unfortunately, some shipmates occasionally erode that trust and confidence. The subsequent “cause and effect” is that leaders sometimes need to be more vocal about what's right and wrong, even if it means overstating the obvious. While it may sound silly to have to say, “Don't carry a gun on liberty,” I believe it's sometimes necessary.

Why do I care so much? Because if Sailors are willing to disobey the law, what else are they willing to do? What Navy regulations or orders are they willing to ignore?

Life is about choices. In the Navy, leadership is tasked with ensuring all hands are armed with the necessary information to make sound choices, both at work and at home. Whether you make sound choices is completely up to you; that's the “treating you like an adult” part. But choices have consequences—for you and for others.

When you join the Navy, you enter into an agreement with the service to conduct yourself in a manner that will continue to uphold our longstanding reputation as professionals. No one said living up to that agreement would be easy. I think, depending on your upbringing, some may find this task easier than others.

If where you go on liberty is so dangerous you feel a need to carry a gun, my advice is to find a different hangout.

In my experience, peer pressure can be difficult to manage. Depending on who your friends are and who influences your decisions, you may want to ask yourself some tough questions: What are their motives? Are they encouraging me to succeed or fail? Do they care about me and my career, or do they care about themselves and their career? Do they share my values and goals? If you're drawing blanks—or bad answers—to these questions, I urge you to rethink whom you hang around with. Finding new friends isn't always easy, but following old friends down the wrong path can lead to problems that are extremely difficult to fix.

All hands need to do everything possible to keep one another safe, on and off duty. It's bad enough when one Sailor chooses to do something that could harm someone else. It's twice as bad when the same Sailor convinces shipmates to follow his example. Realize that you hold the key to your success. Sometimes, saying “no” is a very good thing, even if it means parting company with a former friend. The choice is yours, and I'm expecting everyone to make the right choice. ■