

The (Mis) Adventures of Dr. Marcel Golay

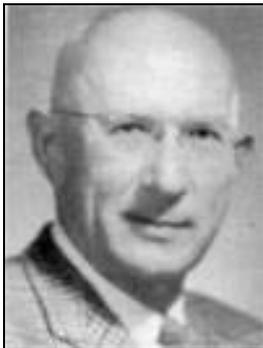
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This article appeared in the Monmouth Message on 24 September 2010.

Do your coworkers ever confound you? Even brilliant scientists can have silly arguments.

Dr. Marcel J. E. Golay earned his PhD in physics from the University of Chicago, and had a thirty year career as an Army scientist. He spent many of these years working at Fort Monmouth. As serious as his job was, though, Golay wound up in a few funny situations.

Golay, a Swiss native, was a naturalized citizen. And as good as he was as a physicist, he was not very good at United States geography.



Dr. Golay spent many years as the Chief Scientist at Fort Monmouth.

An officer who served at Fort Monmouth the same time as Dr. Golay was LT Bixby. Bixby was a bit of a joker, and approached Golay with a request: conduct a harbor defense study for Chicago on Lake Michigan.

This was the 1930s, and with the nation gearing up for war, so he went to work researching. Golay looked at water temperature, depth, and contour maps of the coast. He brought his findings to Bixby on where he recommended the placement of underwater tracking devices for the defense of Chicago.

Dr. Harold Zahl reported in *Radar Spelled Backwards* that Bixby laughed. “Marcel,” he said, “this is a joke. Lake Michigan has no entrance to any ocean. Harbor defense against what? Milwaukee’s navy?”

Golay was ready with the response, “I knew that all the time. Just wondered whether you did.” Zahl speculated that both men wondered who was playing a joke on whom.

It was not just Lieutenants who Golay joked around with. Zahl wrote about an unnamed Captain in *Electrons Away* that also didn’t see eye to eye with Dr. Golay.

This Captain was the executive officer of the laboratories. Zahl wrote of him, he was “an excellent soldier, was somewhat lacking in technical training.”

Of course, most people would be considered to be ‘somewhat lacking in technical training’ when compared to physicists like Zahl and Golay who earned their doctorates at prestigious universities!

The main quality of the Captain was that he was a stickler for details and military precision. Most of the lab members were more concerned with laws of relativity than the good conduct code.

Golay found himself in trouble because of a messy lab. He failed an inspection report “for having wires running all over the place and dust on the floor.” Zahl said this caused Dr. Golay to scheme for days looking for a way to get revenge.

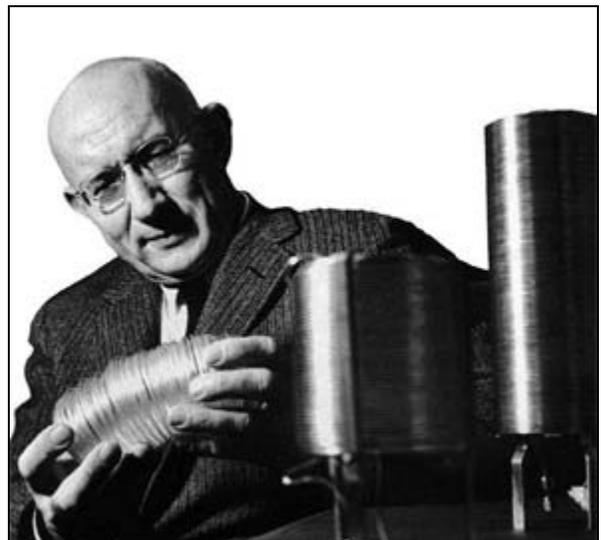
Or at least as much revenge as a scientist can get when enacting it in a technical report.

Eventually, Dr. Golay was called to report immediately to the Executive Officer.

When Dr. Golay entered the Captain’s office, the Officer was annoyed. Zahl wrote that the Captain found an error, and told the physicist, “You say certain measurements were made at minus forty degrees. You fail to say Fahrenheit or Centigrade. If I let this report take its normal circulation, it would seriously reflect on the technical competence of our laboratory.”

Golay started to speak when he was admonished by the Captain, “You should have done your thinking when you wrote the report!”

According to Zahl, Golay replied “Captain, what I want to say is that it doesn't make any difference—at minus forty degrees Fahrenheit and Centigrade are the same. Take your choice, and write in which ever one you like best... either will be correct!”



Brilliant with science, but not always so brilliant with social interactions, Dr. Golay is the protagonist in minor laboratory feuds during the 1930s.

What happened between the Captain and Dr. Golay allowed the two to each make a point. From then on, Zahl writes, the two could be friends.

To read more about Fort Monmouth’s scientists, the CECOM historical office archive has copies of Dr. Harold Zahl’s books *Electrons Away* and *Radar Spelled Backwards*. To make an appointment to read the books in the archive, contact the historians at cecomhistorian@us.army.mil.