Murphy's Law

by Staff Sgt. Matthew Rosine

Airman's safety concerns become cultural phenomenon

Anything that can go wrong will.

That's Murphy's Law. Everyone knows it. But few know this widespread cultural expression began in the Air Force, the brainchild of no-nonsense, by-the-book Maj. Edward A. Murphy.

"My brother, Edward, was a quiet genius," the major's sister, Bee Barmann, said. "He never wanted notoriety or fame. He simply loved his work and was passionate about success."

The phenomenon that is Murphy's Law began while the major was the development engineer for the Air Force's MX981 project, which tested human tolerance to G-forces during rapid deceleration. The test used a rocket sled on railroad tracks. A series of hydraulic brakes at the end of the track rapidly decelerated the "pilot" inside the sled.

During testing, someone raised a concern over the accuracy of the instruments used to determine the amount of G-forces the sled's pilot, then-Capt. John Stapp, was feeling during a sled run. Drawing on his experience of using high-speed centrifuges to generate G-forces, Major Murphy recommended using electronic strain gauges attached to Captain Stapp's restraining harness to get the measurements.

Major Murphy's assistant wired the sensors into the harness. Then the test team did a trial run using a monkey.

Enter Murphy's Law. The sensors gave no readings. During an inspection the major discovered the assistant had wired the sensors backwards. He was a bit upset.

"If there is any way that guy can do it wrong, he will," Major Murphy proclaimed.

Murphy's Law was born.

But it wasn't until a few weeks later, during a press conference, that Captain Stapp introduced Major Murphy's edict to the world. A reporter asked him about the project's amazing safety record. He said it was because of Murphy's Law that the team's efforts were so successful. He then summarized the law and how it applied to their work.

Within a few months, Murphy's Law spread like wildfire. It was in headlines, like in the May-June 1955 issue of Aviation Mechanics Bulletin. Even NASA's Mercury astronauts recognized Murphy's Law in 1962 in a Navy training film.

Today, the major's enduring words live on — in the Air Force and around the world. So does his message: Careful and deliberate preparation will help protect against catastrophe. And that people should always assume the worst-case scenarios will happen, and then prepare for them.

"It is not pessimism at all. It is just like Edward always used to say," Mrs. Barmann said. "There is no on or off switch. The switch is always on. When you are designing something where human lives are on the line there is no alternate to success."

courtesy photo

Edward A. Murphy before he had graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He conducted stress tests on the human body and established his now-famous law.