

Assault and Batteries

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few months ago, I got my new smart phone. As I've written in several previous articles, I absolutely love it and I bring it with me wherever I go. Unfortunately, I may have set a bad example.

A month back, my kids were off from school, so I took a day of vacation. We went to Badger Sports Park, where my kids like to win tickets playing skee ball and I like to play the Star Trek Voyager video game. On a lark, my son dropped a token into a crane machine and caught himself an MP3 player. He hasn't put it down since.

When we got home, he had me load it with all his favorite songs. It makes me smile to see him walk around the house with his headphones on while singing along with Hall & Oates. Fortunately he has great taste in music. Unfortunately, he considers Hall & Oates songs as "oldies."

As we gear up for our Disney vacation next month to celebrate my parents' 50th wedding anniversary, I will be sure to have my phone fully charged and ready, and no doubt my son will have his MP3 player safely packed in his carry-on. We're excited about jamming to "Private Eyes" and "Family Man" on our flight, and we may even bring our portable DVD player so we can watch them in concert. While we'll be enjoying our electronic devices in flight, starting this week, however, not every plane will be allowed to have smart phones, MP3 players or portable DVD players on board.

The United States Postal Service announced that starting May 16, they will be banning all international shipments containing lithium ion batteries, which are found in many electronic devices, such as smart phones and MP3s. This list also includes video cameras, walkie-talkies, GPS devices, radio-controlled toys, digital cameras, scanners, Bluetooth headsets, laptops, tablets, e-readers, electronic shavers, and power tools.

The USPS restrictions define lithium-ion batteries as "dangerous goods," under the International Civil Aviation Organization Technical Instructions. If lithium ion batteries are fully charged or not correctly stored or packed, they can ignite or spontaneously combust, which is not good, especially on a plane in flight. Accordingly, the Postmaster General said "I Can't Go For That" and imposed the ban.

Last April, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill barring President Obama from imposing limits on shipments of lithium-ion batteries by air. Likewise, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration and the FAA introduced a rule that would have eliminated exceptions for small lithium batteries, classifying them as "Class 9" hazardous cargo, and requiring a number of labeling and other safety regulations.

The PHMSA and the FAA explained the need for the rule, indicating that 23 out of 44 incidents involving lithium batteries since 1991 on U.S. flights involved cargo aircraft, presumably in pallets of batteries being transported by air. In November, an Australian flight crew extinguished a smoking, glowing iPhone after a REX flight from Lismore to Sydney had landed. Also, according to Fast Company, lithium ion batteries are believed to have caused "at least two fatal cargo plane crashes since 2006, including a UPS jet in Dubai."

After hearing of the ban, our men and women serving in the military overseas exclaimed "Say It Isn't So." While private carriers, like UPS, FedEx and DHL, ship internationally, that may not help. Just like the USPS's monopoly on mailboxes, private shippers are not allowed to deliver to troops' Army Post Office and Fleet Post Office mailboxes.

All hope is not lost, however. The USPS has had discussions with the ICAO and the Universal Postal Union about lifting the ban on January 1, 2013, to allow customers to mail certain quantities of lithium ion batteries internationally, including to APO and FPO locations, provided "the batteries are properly installed in the personal electronic devices they are intended to operate."

So the Postmaster General has told the military to "Wait for Me." If the ban is lifted by January 1, there may be a "Kiss on His List" after all.

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