Misfire

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The Crew Commander grasped the loading lever on the left of the breech block and unfolded the handle. With a well-trained shift of weight to the right shoulder he pressed the lever down, energizing the torsion bar that closed the breech block when a round is placed in it. Twisting his body in a contorted angular action, he grabbed a shell with his left hand from over his right shoulder, and swinging it around in a seemingly impossible action in that confined space, he swung the projectile to the front. Placing it in the opening of the breach block he rammed the shell home with a trained flick of his right hand, keeping finders clear as the breech block slammed shut in an aggressive exclamation of readiness.

He gives the order sequence to acquire the target and fire, but with a dull metallic click nothing happens. The round is a dud. Contemplating his options he declares a misfire over the battle comms. Re-energizing the torsion bar he orders a second attempt. Again the round remains impotently silent in the breech of the gun. This is not good. Ordering the driver to find a covered position to at least protect them against possible incoming fire as he deals with the misfire, the Crew Commander sets the sequence in motion. Standard drill is to wait 30 seconds after the second attempt has failed and then to open the breech block, gently removing the shell and passing it to the gunner on the outside.

Finding a place with some protection, the vehicle stops. Thirty seconds has passed and the Crew Commander gingerly opens the breech block, ordering the gunner out of the turret. If it detonates then at least the gunner will be protected outside the armoured steel. His heart races as he gingerly removes the misfire. Keeping it level and avoiding rapid movements that might set the mechanism off, he passes the shell up through the hatch to the Gunner now outside. He first wipes the perspiration from his hands as he grasps it, gently placing it on the ground. Once safely there, the Crew Commander makes a note of the batch number and covers it with a white cross made of toilet paper so the Combat Engineers can later render it safe by destroying it in a controlled detonation after the assault is over.

The Gunner gets back into the turret and the Crew Commander orders the driver to move to a new position so the assault can proceed as planned. He slams a new shell into the breech, silently praying that the misfire is but a singular aberration rather than a faulty batch of ammunition.

The margin of error is so small in combat and life and death can hinge on such minute variables as the failure of a detonating cap to ignite on command. Operational success is a chain event of cause-effect linkages that few ever ponder over for long, if at all.