

## Ish Kabibble, Wrong-Way Corrigan, and the Charge of the Light Brigade

Written by Nick Sanders

Thursday, 12 November 2015 00:00

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My father, who passed away in 2010, used to try to get me to believe the craziest things. He tried to get me to believe that there was once a person with the name “Ish Kabibble.” He tried to tell me that there was a real person with the name “Wrong-Way Corrigan.” He was always trying to get me to believe that nonsense and I learned to be wary of what he called his “facts.”

And yet, in the present day, when Google can lead one on a learning adventure, it turns out that my father was telling me the truth about a lot of things. I was the one who was wrong, not he.



Indeed, there was a person named “[Ish Kabibble](#)” and it turns out good ol’ Ish hailed from Pennsylvania, just like my father did. Ish (real name “Merwyn Bogue”) was a cornet player and a member of Kay Kyser’s popular big band. (Wikipedia tells me that Kyser’s band had 11 number one records in the 1930’s and 1940’s, including a 1943 version of “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition”.) Not only did he play cornet for Kay’s band, but Ish was also the band’s business manager for 20 years. In addition, Ish was a member of

*Kay Kyser’s Kollege of Musical Knowledge*

, which was a television quiz show in 1949 and 1950. My father likely would have watched that TV show. Ish (and Kay Kyser) also appeared together in several films released in the 1940’s. They were comedies and Ish was supposedly a singer of comedic songs, kind of like the Weird Al Yankovic of his day. My father probably saw those films as a young boy. Wikipedia even posits that Ish’s name, roughly translated from Yiddish, was the source for Mad Magazine’s famous catchphrase, “What, me worry?” (But somebody else edited the article to point out that was a very tenuous reach. Want more detail on the etymology of the name? Check out

[this article](#)

.) So yeah, Ish Kabibble was a real person. He was actually kind of famous, once upon a time, even if he was known more for his foolish persona than his musical skills.

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Wrong-Way Corrigan was also kind of famous, once upon a time. He was a real person (real name Douglas Corrigan) and he was a mechanic and helped build Charles Lindbergh's famous plane, *The Spirit of Saint Louis*. Like Lindbergh, Corrigan also wanted to make a daring solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean, but was denied permission to do so. Instead, he "accidentally" flew his plane "the wrong way" from New York to Ireland in 1938, about ten years after Lindbergh's historic flight. Like Lindbergh, Corrigan flew solo and nonstop; his flight took 28 hours (versus Lindbergh's 33-hour trip). But unlike Lindbergh, Corrigan claimed his flight had been a terrible mistake. Although Corrigan's flight plan called for flying from New York to Long Beach, California, he ended up flying the wrong way to Ireland because of "heavy cloud cover that obscured landmarks and low light conditions, causing him to misread his compass."

*Sure*

. And yet Corrigan never admitted to intentionally violating his flight plan. He was a true hero, even if he was known more for flying the wrong direction than for his heroics.

And he was a true hero. Corrigan's heroics were noted by a journalist at the time, who wrote—

*You may say that Corrigan's flight could not be compared to Lindbergh's in its sensational appeal as the first solo flight across the ocean. Yes, but in another way the obscure little Irishman's flight was the more audacious of the two. Lindbergh had a plane specially*

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*constructed, the finest money could buy. He had lavish financial backing, friends to help him at every turn. Corrigan had nothing but his own ambition, courage, and ability. His plane, a nine-year-old [Curtiss Robin](#), was the most wretched-looking jalopy..*

*As I looked over it at the Dublin airdrome I really marveled that anyone should have been rash enough even to go in the air with it, much less try to fly the Atlantic. He built it, or rebuilt it, practically as a boy would build a scooter out of a soapbox and a pair of old roller skates. It looked it. The nose of the engine hood was a mass of patches soldered by Corrigan himself into a crazy-quilt design. The door behind which Corrigan crouched for twentyeight hours was fastened together with a piece of baling wire. The reserve gasoline tanks put together by Corrigan, left him so little room that he had to sit hunched forward with his knees cramped, and not enough window space to see the ground when landing*

I was thinking about these perhaps random, unconnected people recently when I found myself in a heated discussion about the outcome of a very expensive ERP system implementation. I was not part of the implementation—not really. I had been brought in very late and none of my suggestions/recommendations could be acted upon—not because people disagreed with them, but because it was simply too late in the implementation process to make those changes. More to the point, there were a number of suggestions/recommendations made by a number of people that were “deferred” or passed on altogether, so as to move the implementation along. As a result of those decisions, the final ERP product lacked significant functionality. Immediately after implementation, the contractor began to realize some of those suggestions/recommendations by all those people really should have been acted upon, because now that poor contractor was going to have to spend even more time and money to get the ERP system right. The fixes were going to be extensive and expensive. It was almost as if the original implementation was going to have to be redone.

I was in a meeting when some of the post-implementation “fixes” were being discussed, and I made the observation that it was a shame the contractor was, in essence, going to have to do two system implementations, because the first one simply hadn’t done the job. Perhaps undiplomatically, I opined that it was too bad the ERP implementation leadership had placed more importance on achieving the “go-live” milestone instead of achieving full system functionality, and had placed more emphasis on reporting schedule progress than they had on listening to the input of those designing the ERP system. I noted that I thought those designing the ERP system hadn’t voiced their concerns to leadership strongly enough. (I also noted the requirements definition was lacking, as well.) With 20/20 hindsight, it was clear that the company should have postponed the implementation date so as to incorporate all the suggestions/recommendations, rather than proceed to implement a substandard system right on time. It would have meant a bit of embarrassment for those involved, but it would ultimately have saved the company a lot of money.

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To be clear, I was voicing my opinion in the nature of a “lesson learned” discussion amongst people who had spent many long hours, late nights, and weekends trying to do the best job they could in the timeframe they had been given. I wasn’t disparaging their efforts; I acknowledged their efforts but felt they had been wasted to some extent because the objective hadn’t been fully achieved despite those heroic efforts. It was the direction that was lacking, not the execution. They had heroically flown their plane despite the odds stacked against them—*but they had flown it the wrong way*.

My observations really upset one of the people in the room—somebody who was not a leader of the implementation, but was instead one of the crew of people who had worked those long hours and late nights and weekends to make the “go-live” implementation date. He felt that nobody—especially somebody who had come late to the party—should criticize those efforts.

Basically, his point was that any criticism demeaned the heroic efforts of the implementation team. He felt that any criticism, even criticism aimed at leadership and the direction provided, was criticism of the team as a whole. From his point of view, the team was covered in glory because of their valiant efforts, and he didn’t want to discuss anything else about the project. He couldn’t see my point that there was a lesson to be learned about heroic efforts that were largely wasted because they were spent in the wrong direction.

Kind of like the charge of the British Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava in 1854.

(You wondered when that was going to come up, didn’t you?)

The charge, made famous by Tennyson’s poem, combines many of the same elements as I saw in the contractor’s ERP system implementation. (Aside from the whole life and death thing, of course.) The Light Brigade made a frontal assault against a well-prepared Russian artillery battery with excellent fields of fire. The results were not pretty. The British lost about 50% of their force and, although they reached their objective, they could not hold it and were immediately forced to retreat. The Russians were so well situated and the British force so ill-suited to a frontal assault that the French Marshal in the field was moved to say “*It is magnificent, but it is not war. It is madness.*”

” As Wikipedia notes, “The semi-suicidal nature of this charge was surely evident to the

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troopers of the Light Brigade, but if there were any objection to the orders, it was not recorded.”

You see the point here, yes?

As the Wikipedia [article](#) dryly states, “The reputation of the British cavalry was significantly enhanced as a result of the charge, though the same cannot be said for their commanders.” Wikipedia goes on to say that “The charge of the Light Brigade continues to be studied by modern military historians and students as an example of what can go wrong when accurate military intelligence is lacking and orders are unclear.” Or for our purposes, it is an example of what can go wrong when accurate requirements and system design is lacking and leadership direction is unclear.

Finally, let’s get to the lessons-learned aspect. My colleague was convinced that any attempt to learn lessons from the semi-failed system implementation was unwarranted criticism of the team—criticism that denied their heroic efforts. I didn’t agree, believing strongly that learning lessons is what leads to future improvement. How does that disagreement play into the charge of the Light Brigade? Well, the Wikipedia article states—

According to Norman Dixon, 19th-century accounts of the charge tended to focus on the bravery and glory of the cavalymen, much more than the military blunders involved, with the perverse effect that it ‘did much to strengthen those very forms of tradition which put such an incapacitating stranglehold on military endeavor for the next eighty or so years,’ i.e., until World War I.

This has been an admittedly wandering article. We’ve gone from Ish Kabibble—an imaginary figure who turned out to be real—to another real person, Wrong-Way Corrigan, a hero who flew the wrong way. And we ended up with the charge of the British Light Brigade in a war more than 150 years ago. It’s been a long journey. What have we learned from the trip?

It is perfectly proper to conduct a post-implementation “lessons learned” exercise after an ERP implementation. It is perfectly proper to discuss such things as the adequacy of the requirements definition and system design. It is perfectly proper (though perhaps politically unwise) to discuss leadership direction and whether or not meeting schedule milestones was given greater importance than achieving full system functionality.

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Those discussions do not—or should not—be seen as criticism of the efforts of those involved in executing the direction provided. Just because you flew in the wrong direction does not mean you didn't make a heroic flight. Just because you charged into a well-defended position and lost half your troops doesn't mean the troops didn't display heroic levels of bravery.

More importantly, it is more than perfectly proper to discuss those things. *It is vital.* Because a failure to discuss problems and to learn lessons from them means that we will be repeating sub-optimal ERP system implementation in the future.

Even if it's hard to hear, it needs to be said.