

It was loud. It was stressful. It was hectic. I was on high alert, ready to change my strategy in an instant or even admit defeat and order a full-on shame-filled retreat. I repeatedly questioned my own strength and sanity. The logistics involved was precisely why I'd been side-stepping this endeavor for the last two and a half years going so far as pulling back-to-back double shifts and rearranging duty schedules to avoid it. Like countless brave people before me, I reached a parenting milestone. Today, for the first time ever, I took both kids to Walmart.

As we disembarked from our vessel, I assigned an important duty to the crewman who's served with me the longest. "Don't let me forget the popsicles," I ordered sternly. Crewman's eyes widened and she nodded seriously, ego boosted by being trusted with such a vital task.

Luckily, we were able to transfer to a supply cart directly from our craft without marching across the immense expanse of gray concrete. The young girl took the upper deck while the even smaller boy opted for the spacious lower which I retrofitted with a one-inch foam mat for increased comfort. Not many commanders consider, much less provide, such luxuries in my experience. Unfortunately, as my crew is still rather green with years of training yet to complete, I was forced to be the helmsman and this particular supply cart had a significant pull to port side. A minor inconvenience that would grow as we journeyed along.

The crew started off strong and on course, our mission clear. A few minor skirmishes broke out between them but nothing a seasoned leader can't resolve quickly. Our roundabout route through personal care items and housewares quickly depleted morale however, and I had no choice but to alter course for the toy section, costing us valuable time. "Don't forget the popsicles, Mom!" my female crewman reminded me. Good. A little premature but good, nonetheless. Fortified by the acquisition of small trinkets, we pressed on. To keep the team from bickering during the lengthy cross-store trek, we reminisced about the charming adventures of Pete the Cat. Oh, won't it be grand to once again hear the songs of his shoes, buttons, and sunglasses when we at last return home?! RED ALERT! Focused on crew spirits, I forgot about the supply cart's hard pull to port and I very nearly collided with a civilian vessel. Close call.

It didn't take long before the freshest member of my crew developed an energizing game to pass the agonizingly slow minutes. A game he found both entertaining and humorous. The rules were simple, and it was quickly picked up by the more senior member. Just point to an item along our path (or one being transported in the supply cart of another squadron) and shout with vigor,

"PUMPKINS?! WHAT THE HECK?!"

"PASTA?! WHAT THE HECK?!" and so forth. The louder you are and the more attention you attract, the more points earned.

Somewhere between bagged salty snack provisions and dairy rations, the crew decided to swap deck assignments. But, as we were traveling in a hostile part of warehouse space (the floor is lava), this required tricky maneuvering. Change made. No injuries reported. Supply cart operating at adequate efficiency with a significantly stronger pull to port.

"Don't forget the popsicles!"

"EGGS?! WHAT THE HECK?!"

Easily bored and now without the contents of the supply cart cargo hold to entertain him, my youngest crewman needed a distraction. I put him in charge of the list of supplies. This turned out to be both a brilliant and disastrous tactical move on my part. Brilliant in that it did distract him for quite some time! He fashioned the list into a bracelet and insisted I wear it as such for a few aisles. He then held it upside down to "read" it, forcing me to contort my body to get a glimpse at the next item recorded there. I found myself repeating under my breath those entries in an effort to remember as many as possible without having to look again. I softly chanted, "Mozzarella, lunch meat, can of refried beans..."

"CAN OF WEE-FWIED BEANS?!" he matched my natural intonation and cackled hysterically. So... they're mocking me now.

"TOMATO SAUCE?! WHAT THE HECK?!"

By this time, the supply cart main hold was filled with goods stacked precariously and shoved along the bow to maximize leg room for the female crewman. A block of cheese toppled from within the heap,

striking her. She whined about the intense stabbing pain and complained of the cold which, undoubtedly, reminded her of her duty to tell me, "Don't forget the popsicles!"

We continued forward, frequently slowed by cargo vessels blocking our path and large freighters manned by big-box store automatons replenishing necessities such as canned peaches, applesauce, and ding-dongs. My crew was getting restless. They began to argue and fight. The girl, at a distinct advantage, landed blows from the lower deck with both her hands and feet. The boy, once thrilled with his position on the upper deck, soon realized throwing elbows and spitting were his only viable weapons. He kicked anyway, for good measure, landing a multitude of direct hits to my legs and torso. As a visit to the infirmary wasn't immediately possible, I once again altered course to frozen desserts, committing a sizable chunk of my monthly commission to chocolate and crème. "Don't forget the popsi..." The crew, momentarily stunned, were dazzled by the bright colors and vastness of the popsicle freezer. Several tense moments followed as they debated which box to choose. Selection made and crew seemingly pacified, we continued to fresh produce.

"BANANAS?! WHAT THE HECK?!"

The cargo hold was full as was the smaller storage area just above the keel. I'm forced to carry items myself or leave them behind, jeopardizing the possibility of satisfying meals in the mess hall later. The supply cart was so heavy and unbalanced—the pull to port had intensified—that it became a constant struggle for me to maintain course. The crew, now on foot and sensing the tense situation, decided this moment would be perfect for a chorus of "Wheels on the Bus." Are they mocking me again? I fear a mutiny before we make it back to our vessel. I mustn't show them any weakness! Desperate for a few more minutes of cooperation, I promised them shore leave, sweet treats, and slushies.

The departure bay approaches, starboard side. I sped up to gain the momentum I'd need to swing the overburdened supply cart while my two crewmen skipped and sang merrily behind me. Maneuver successful.

Here, my crewmen shine, unloading the cart with speed and efficiency. That done, the boy busied himself ducking in and out of the space underneath the conveyor apparatus while the girl cheered me on with every successful "beep" of the barcode scanner. Supplies bagged, loaded, and payment made, the crew hung on to the cart, one on the bow and one assisting at the helm so we could yet again safely transverse the neutral zone known as "the parking lot."

So, after a stop at Sonic for blue slushies with added nerd candy, six mini-cupcakes, two tubs of playdoh, one container of glitter mermaid pearl surprise shimmer slime in teal NOT blue, and many promises of purchasing baby shark shaped pasta, rainbow unicorn fruit snacks, cream of chicken soup in the blue NOT the red can, carrots but ones that taste like strawberries, and a noisy and embarrassing misunderstanding about containers of dog FOOD instead of dog POOP; mission accomplished.

And to the parents who fight this battle regularly as a matter of standard operating procedure... I salute you.