

Hydrogen Dioxide

This is **not** hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2). This is one atom of hydrogen bonded to two atoms of oxygen: and, yes, that's impossible by the laws of chemistry! Well-spotted. Or perhaps *not* well-spotted, as chemists who contemplate hydrogen dioxide for too long can end up needing a nice rest cure for a while. Or else, possibly trepanning: our 'colleagues' behind the Iron Curtain have some alarming techniques for combating acute cases of paradigm discontinuity syndrome.

Oh, right! You're probably wondering why you've never heard of hydrogen dioxide. To which we can only say: because we're *good* at covering up this sort of thing. It helps that it's so absurd, too. And believe me, it's **difficult** to keep the world thinking that it's absurd.

Anyway: hydrogen dioxide is the secret ingredient of Red Mercury. Well, more accurately Red Mercury is what the Soviets came up with to keep hydrogen dioxide kind of, sort of stable. Hydrogen dioxide is not actually *volatile*, because the word 'volatile' implies that there is a natural state where the substance in question is stable. Hydrogen dioxide, being profoundly unnatural, blows up almost

before it is formed; it takes quite a lot of effort and frankly dubious practices to successfully suspend it in a solution that can **keep** it from exploding. And even then the stuff is starkly dangerous.

But! My goodness, but how the stuff *moves* when ignited. You can't use it in Earth's atmosphere, of course; it's as energetic (and as toxic) as Hell. But when you're launching stuff out of the Darkside Moon bases for the Deep Run from cislunar space to the Europa Skunkworks, adding a little hydrogen dioxide to the Orion Drive gives it that special kick.

That's why we stole it from the Russians, who of course stole it from the Germans, and only God knows how the Germans figured it all out. And that may be literal: a mere one out of fifty in the Nazi *Schwarzeforschungszentren* projects managed to survive spiritual degaussing after the war, and none of them happened to know who among them summoned hydrogen dioxide in the first place. Though fairly solid rumor does have it that 'summoned' was the right verb to use in this case; whether or not this has been confirmed by the relevant scientific authorities is on a need-to-know basis, and at this time you do not need to know.

What's that? Oh, no, that new Apollo Program will have **nothing** to do with any of this. We're going to be doing Apollo with strictly mundane, off-the-shelf technology. It's safer that way, although explaining exactly why is, again, on a need-to-know basis, etc. etc. etc.

No, your team just needs to know the basics about the stuff, just in case you have to deliver some, pick up some, steal some, prevent some from being stolen, and/or of course fake some up and then sell it to credulous idiots in order to muddy the waters. That last one can make for a fun mission: you're not only allowed to just make stuff up to tell conspiracy theorists, you're *expected* to. The crazier, the better. Bonus points if you can weave in aliens, somehow. That wheeze never gets old.

I mean, seriously. *Aliens*? Next you'll be believing in Santa Claus.

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