NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND
SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH SA 26-28

Off-Duty Fire Injuries

Every year, as autumn comes around, the chill of October also brings awareness to the heat with Fire Prevention Month. Established to commemorate the Great Chicago Fire of October 1871, this month is a prime time to highlight real world stories and events to peek behind the statistics and safety codes. The stories of those who have faced the flames are not merely cautionary tales — they are blueprints for resilience, prevention and collective survival.


File photo, not associated with mishap

The Only Way Out

A service member and his family were getting ready to go out to dinner. Out of nowhere, they heard an explosion downstairs. Thick black smoke and flames poured through the lower level of the home. Being on the second floor with a young child, there seemed only one way out — down the stairs and through the flames. The service member grabbed the child, holding them close and shielding them to the best of their ability. Child in hand, the couple ran through the flames to make their escape. In the end, the service member suffered severe burns to 50% of the body due to shielding the child and was admitted to a hospital burn unit. The spouse suffered burns to the face, but the injuries to the child and spouse were deemed non-life threatening. *— No one expects a fire to break out in their home, let alone an explosion. Due to rising smoke, the family had to quickly evacuate the residence or risk suffering smoke inhalation or suffocation. Sadly, the only way out from upstairs is usually downstairs. While an argument could be made that you could jump from a window, we don't know the exact circumstances of the home (landing conditions, floor level, etc.). But, if a window is closed, never open it. Oxygen fuels flames; opening a window introduces a new source of oxygen, which causes the flames to reach for that new source. The cause of the fire (explosion) is still under investigation. Bottom line, the service member did what was necessary. Sometimes, the best course of action is to take the hit, and this service member took the hit for a loved one. Thankfully, the member has been moved from the burn unit and is recovering.*

Aft Galley Flambe at Home

One day in January, a service member was preparing a charcoal grill *(not the usual time of year, but who are we to judge)*. The service member added lighter fluid and went back inside. After a brief "intermission," he lit the briquettes with a long-barrel lighter. Upon igniting the grill, the flame blew back toward the Sailor causing second- and third-degree burns and singeing their hair and eyelashes. The service member went back inside to ice their arm before being taken to the hospital by their spouse. *— Without being there we don't know all the specifics, such as the person's position over the grill, but we can make a few assumptions based on what happened. It's highly likely the service member added too much lighter fluid – that much is obvious. What may not be obvious is the service member likely closed the grill for about 10 minutes before returning, trapping the fumes inside. When the lid was opened and a flame quickly introduced, the cloud of highly volatile fumes explosively ignited. Nearly every bottle of lighter fluid states to light immediately after adding the fluid to charcoal. The service member needed to exercise a bit more risk awareness, then they would've been fine to grill outside in January.*

All Amped Up

A service member was driving home from an auto shop after getting a new stereo system installed. As they were driving home, components in the vehicle started shutting down and lights started flickering. Understandably concerned, they pulled over to investigate before realizing there was a fire brewing under the hood. The driver attempted to put out the flames by using their shirt; unfortunately, they burned their hands in the process. Emergency responders were quick to arrive on scene. While the service member was having their vitals checked by EMTs, they passed out and had to receive oxygen before being taken to the hospital and treated. The cause of all this: improper installation. The amplifier wire installed by the shop hung too close to the exhaust manifold and caught fire. *— It's horrible when someone falls victim to another's critical failings and disregard of safety protocols. When we have something that we hold valuable and that thing is at risk of being lost or destroyed, it is common for our first instinct to save that thing, but risk needs to be assessed. A vehicle contains combustible and flammable parts and fluids. If a vehicle catches fire, do not attempt to put it out; instead, quickly exit the vehicle, get to a safe distance and call for emergency responders. While the fault of the fire falls on the*

shoulders of the auto shop, the injuries sustained fall on the service member.

Rapid Fire Stories


File photo, not associated with mishap

While a service member was prepping chicken, they heated a pan of oil for frying. A piece of their cabinet then fell onto the burner, catching fire and igniting the grease. The service member grabbed the pan to prevent the flames from spreading to the cabinets; however, some grease spilled onto the service member's foot, burning the skin. They sat the pan down, attempted to remove the grease on their foot and put out the fire with an extinguisher. *— Fires rarely happen when you most expect them. Outside of spilling the grease, the service member responded accordingly and had the good sense to call EMS after the event.*

While attending a beach bonfire, a fellow attendee threw gasoline onto the fire near a service member. The service member suffered burns to both legs as well as their arm and received two weeks hospitalization and 30 days of unwanted "vacation." *— There are some things that will never change, and people acting irresponsibly around a bonfire seems to be a mainstay. The answer to this puzzle is simple: don't throw gasoline on a flame, especially when people are standing near it. I'm sure alcohol consumption had nothing to do with this lapse in judgement. If you didn't catch it, that was sarcasm.*

While setting up a fire pit in their backyard, a service member used brake fluid as an accelerant *(seems the member didn't "stop" to think beforehand)*. They were too close to the pit when they ignited the fire causing it to flash and burn them on the right side of their face and right arm. After reporting the emergency and being admitted to a burn specialist, treatment involved a skin graft. *— Oh boy, where to start? Don't use brake fluid. It's highly toxic, can be explosive, and produces black, poisonous smoke. Once you have applied a proper accelerant, do not stick your face near the source and use a proper igniting technique.*

While grilling, a service member placed the meat primarily on one side of a grill with legs unevenly placed, adding to the already unbalanced grill. The grill, of course, tipped over causing hot charcoal to spill onto the ground, burning the service member's left ankle. That's three days of LIMDU without combat boots. *— Take an extra second to make sure the equipment you're using is without defect and properly set up. Then there's the loading of the meat completely to one side. We don't know how large the grill was or how much food was being cooked, but the general rule-of-thumb is to separate the meat. While it does have its cooking benefits, such as allowing even airflow to the food, it also has its safety considerations.*

Key Takeaways

It's unlikely that a fire will break out when you most expect it. Even in times when you are intentionally dealing with fire on a grill, its behavior may not be what you expected. For this reason, we need to always be prepared and know how to respond.

Fight or Flight: When an unexpected fire breaks out, knowing when to fight it or retreat to safety is paramount. It might be our first response to try to salvage something we love, but doing so might put ourselves or others in harm's way. It's generally advised to only fight the fire when it's small, contained, within a safe area and when you have access to the proper equipment to put it out. If there's even a question that not all this criterion is met, retreat and call for help. There are so many factors, a clear mind will know when it's time for fighting, so if you are in a panic, leave immediately.

Informed Decision Making: Our first line of defense is to think about what we're doing while we're doing it. "Does this equipment meet all applicable safety standards?" "Should I throw gasoline on an open flame?" While they may seem like ridiculous questions, had someone asked themselves these questions, they or another person may be spared a burn unit. Between bonfires, grilling and fire pits, recreational fire use is frequently combined with alcohol. Make sure that alcohol doesn't end up becoming part of the fire report. Make smart choices to prevent dumb things from happening.

And remember, "Let's be careful out there"