Water and Electricity Don't Mix!

Navy photo by Cdr. Nathan Jones

A Sailor works in an engineering space similar to one where a fireman learned an important lesson about spraying water on a casualty-power terminal (see inset).

By Lt. Scott A. Davis,
SupShip Portsmouth, Va.

A fireman doing preservation in engineering spaces during the midwatch is a familiar scene aboard any ship along the waterfront. What may not be as familiar, however, is seeing that fireman suffer first- and second-degree burns to his face and eyes and almost lose his sight.

In this case, the fireman was using a hose to spray down the vertical and horizontal surfaces in one of the main-engineering spaces. Everything was OK until he accidentally sprayed water on a casualty-power terminal. Then he made the mistake of bending over and blowing across the top of the water to keep it from seeping into the terminal. This move proved painful because it completed an electrical circuit, which caused the terminal to explode in his face. His glasses blew off, and he suffered flash burns to his face and eyes.

The temporarily blinded fireman found his way out of the space and stumbled to the central-control station, where shipmates got medical help for him.

No PPE is required for such a routine and seemingly harmless shipboard activity as washdown, but there are some general safety and common-sense lessons to be learned from this fireman's mishap:

- Don't take anything for granted in the dangerous shipboard environment. Supervisors must constantly remind workers about the dangers of letting down their guard, even when doing routine jobs.
- If this fireman had not been wearing glasses, the outcome could have been much different.
- Water and electricity don't mix! A sign posted above the casualty-power terminal stated that it was energized with 440 volts. Even though the fireman didn't notice this sign, he should have realized the dangers of using water to clean around electrical equipment. Anyone who accidentally splashes water on a piece of energized equipment needs to call an electrician's mate to tag out the equipment and remove the water.
- Emergency-egress procedures really work. They helped this fireman get out of his workspace and find help. For Sailors to have a fighting chance, they need egress training from both their berthing and workspaces.

The author was assigned to USS Peterson *(DD 969) when he wrote this article.*
Send comments or questions on this article to afloat@safetycenter.navy.mil.