



By AD2 Luciana Erdmann

It was a late, dark, desert night on the Fallon flight line, and the hangar was a good distance away. We were well into a month-long air-wing detachment, and the op-tempo was beginning to take its toll on all of us. We had flown three weeks straight without a single day off and were scheduled for a

squadron picnic the following day. I was tired to say the least and looking forward to the end of this shift, so I could enjoy some well-deserved liberty. That was the plan.

The power-plants workcenter had been troubleshooting a fuel-system discrepancy on one of our jets for several hours. We eventually changed out a main



Photo modified

fuel control and an auxiliary-power unit, and then towed the aircraft to the line for an engine turn. While waiting for the turn-man to do his preflight, we looked over everything one last time before proceeding.

The time was about 0200, and the temperature was as cold as I ever can remember. The engines fired up, and, once online, the APU shut off. We then opened the engine-bay doors. The plane captain was waiting for my LPO to signal for a power increase. I was under the jet, looking for leaks with the LPO and a QAR. We needed the power

advanced, so the LPO signaled the PC with three fingers sideways, meaning advance the engine power to 80-percent rpm. This action would allow us to check other fuel lines. I moved a little to get into position for the leak check. I knew the APU was close but didn't realize how close I was to its exhaust pipe.

The plane captain misunderstood the LPO's hand signal, and he gave the cockpit three fingers down,

meaning fire up the APU. My LPO and QA tried to get the PC to stop, but it was too late. The APU came online, and a big ball of fire engulfed my upper body. I ran out from underneath the jet, and a chief from a sister squadron came from nowhere and scooped me up like Superman. I was taken to medical, and they said I had first-degree burns over my entire face and neck. Besides looking like I had a good sunburn, my nose hairs and eyebrows were singed, but it could have been worse. I suddenly realized, after the fact, that in the cold, dark night and in my exhausted state, I had forgotten to put on my cranial and goggles.

I learned a tough lesson. We broke several rules, and our hand signals needed work. Our squadron has a very strict policy on using PPE, and pre-turn briefs are part of SOP. The steps leading up to my injury were a good example of how the holes in Swiss cheese must align for a mishap to occur. One simple change, and I wouldn't have been hurt. I also learned how important the environment, op-tempo, personal distractions, and other human factors are to safe maintenance. They should be acknowledged and even briefed before we "light the fires." A little ORM would have gone a long way that night.

I'm thankful I wasn't injured more severely, and I'm grateful for that chief petty officer who carried me to safety. Experience is a powerful teacher, and I hope my lessons won't have to be re-learned. 

Petty Officer Erdmann works in the power-plants shop at VFA-15.

Ouch! I appreciate the honesty in this story, but I can't help thinking about leadership, or the lack of it in this incident. I know how fatigue can set in after a long detachment or after long hours on the flight deck, but where were the supervisors? We never will reduce mishaps when Sailors or leaders lower their standards. Why did an LPO and QAR allow another worker around the aircraft without a cranial or goggles? The aircraft was going to be turned. This one was easy: noise and eye hazard, and now hair and face hazard! The PC should not have started the aircraft with people not wearing PPE. It takes only one person to question something that doesn't look right. We blew this one...it wasn't even close. I hope the readers and leaders will learn from Petty Officer Erdmann's mistake. It's time for supervisors to step in and to keep this or similar incidents from ever happening again.—Ed.