

From Fire Drill

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Our squadron just had arrived in Sigonella, Italy, a few days before, and I had the “privilege” of being one of the first duty officers in our new deployed spaces. It was three days after the celebration of our nation’s birthday, and the War Eagles still hadn’t seen one sign of fireworks, but we soon would put on a late-night display that none of us ever will forget.

At 2300, the fire alarm sounded. As is sometimes the norm, many of us in the topside office spaces pondered the validity of the alarm. However, through a window in the duty office, I looked down upon the hangar deck and quickly learned that this was no drill.

A group of Sailors was double-timing out to the flight line. Although this behavior might seem somewhat normal for a fire alarm, I can tell you that the blast of water shooting across the hangar bay confirmed that it would not be a quiet night of duty. The actuated AFFF system below resembled a collapsing water dam, as it rapidly covered everything in sight with a sea of white foam (*see accompanying photos*).

During post-incident interviews, we learned that the talented group of VP-16 maintainers had had quite an interesting night, as well. Because it was the night before the first formal zone inspection, night checkers were busy cleaning and organizing their spaces. No stone was being left unturned—even the painted bulkheads were getting a fresh scrubbing. One industrious airman from the line shack was washing the bulkhead adjacent to an AFFF manual-release handle when he inadvertently knocked the handle and actuated the AFFF system.

The airman immediately told his senior chief what had occurred. The senior chief’s focus now shifted to finding a way to secure the AFFF, instead of worrying about a fire. He and a PO2 quickly found and secured the system’s supply valves, but the damage already had been done. Three feet of foam now blanketed the deck. More than 100 Sailors spent the next few hours cleaning up the mess.

According to a manufacturer, AFFF is a specifically formulated, synthetic, aqueous-film-forming-



to Foam Party



foam concentrate. It smothers fires, thus preventing air from reaching the flammable materials and lowering the heat of combustion by its cooling action. Another positive effect—though not advertised by any manufacturer—is that AFFF will give you the cleanest hangar around. On the following day's inspection, the skipper didn't find a single hit.



While AFFF prevents fire from spreading, it can be corrosive if you don't immediately rinse exposed aircraft and equipment with fresh water. Luckily, no aircraft were in our hangar that evening. Although the events of that evening were strange, many, including me, found the most improbable part of the night to be an empty P-3 maintenance hangar.

Sailors in today's Navy frequently alter their operating environments. In the final analysis, learning about the ever-changing work environment should be a top priority for every squadron. My duty-office staff was unsure of the proper phone numbers for the base fire department—we later learned the numbers were 114 or 911.

We also learned that all squadron personnel should be more familiar with the AFFF system. The fire department briefed us the following morning.

Finally, all fire equipment needs to be labeled properly. Personnel from the safety office put up placards after our incident.

The squadron duty office, our safety office, and the maintenance team all learned valuable lessons—the biggest one being to know your surroundings. With the help of all hands, we hopefully can keep the “foam parties” to a minimum. ■

For more info, go to: <http://www.dcfp.navy.mil/library/dnews.htm>.