

Impressive? Yes

By AE2 Steve Blocher,
NAS Whidbey Island

I've always felt I know close to everything, even though events have proved me wrong a number of times.

As a teenager, I argued with Dad about a number of things I've since learned Dad was right about all along. I've always figured other people tend to be idiots, or they're just following the irrational logic of an overcautious mother who watches too much Martha Stewart. I mean, speed limits are made for those people who are horrible drivers; people wearing helmets while riding a bike are trying to start a fad; and don't even get me started on the new safety devices on lighters.

C'mon, did cowboys in the Wild West wear reflective vests while chasing down outlaws? They certainly didn't have plastic, electrical-socket protectors for kids back in the 60s, and, yet, we survived. So, it must be just a big conspiracy for mass marketing of protective devices to make money. In my way of thinking, the warning sticker on Coke machines—the one showing a picture of a machine falling on someone—is especially hilarious. “Watch out the next time you buy a soda because Coke machines are crushing innocent people all across America,” the sticker would have you believe. Yeah, right...

This kind of flawed thinking got me in trouble, starting with a shopping trip to the supermarket. The weather was warm, despite being the first week in December. I had a day off coming and planned to entertain lots of people at my house the night before. We were having a party in the backyard, complete with fire, music and barbecue—but with no people-crushing Coke machines anywhere in sight.

I was at the store buying my share of the goods, beginning with Mr. Kerosene. The bottle stared down at me from the shelf, looking like one of those kids my parents had told me not to hang out with—the kind that will get you in trouble. Mrs. Lighter Fluid was right next to him but didn't have quite the same *presence*—the “I mean



business; let's go cook something” look. Besides, the charcoal lighter cost \$3 for a small bottle, compared to \$5 for a huge container of kerosene. The economical and smart thing to do was to get the most “bang” for the buck, right? I'd used kerosene before on camping trips and never had had any problems. My rule was simple: Just stand far enough away, and everything will be OK. After gathering a few more items in my shopping cart, off I went.

By the time I got home, it was getting dark, and my roommate and another friend already had arrived. We needed to get a fire roaring in that 55-gallon barrel in the backyard. My two buddies

es. Smart? No!



already had put cardboard and wood inside the barrel, so I popped the lid, doused the contents with kerosene, and made a trail across the grass from the barrel to my paved basketball court. Then, while my two buddies stood a safe distance away, I announced the party was about to commence.

I lit the trail of kerosene and watched as the flames raced across the court, up and into the barrel, where the kerosene-soaked contents burst into flames with a GGWOOOSSH! The fire was blazing merrily. “That’s the way to do it,” I thought to myself with satisfaction. “Instafire—cavemen probably wished they had had this

stuff. Native Americans wouldn’t have had to rub sticks together if they’d just had some kerosene.” The three of us then just stood around the barrel, warming up and waiting for guests to arrive.

Unfortunately, some of the wood must have been damp because the fire soon started to die down. It looked like a mere shadow of its glory just a few minutes earlier. “No problem,” I thought. I told my buddies to stand back as I grabbed the kerosene again and chucked a couple more ounces on the fire. With another GGWOO-OSSH! it was back up to normal but only for a short while. I again told my buddies to stand back while I tried to get the fire **really** going.

This time, I only heard the GGWOO... part of the sound effects when the flame somehow—seemingly magically—shot back out of the barrel and into the three-fourths-full bottle of kerosene in my hands. The fire climbed straight up the stream of kerosene still pouring out.

I just stared at the bottle of kerosene in my hands and the flames spewing from the container’s opening.

At first, I had what I describe as “a Matrix moment,” when everything happened in slow motion but with detail so sharp it was unreal. I just stared at the bottle of kerosene in my hands and the flames spewing from the container’s opening. At that instant, reality set in. Hollering “Holy s..t!” I flung the flaming bottle as far as possible. It landed in my yard, next to a fence, and ignited the grass. The circle of fire grew as more kerosene poured from the bottle.

Meanwhile, I realized I had absolutely no source of water in my backyard, so I told my roommate, who was nearest the flaming bottle, to kick it onto the paved basketball court. The bottle flew through the air, spewing fire everywhere, but, instead of landing on the basketball court, it hit my other friend in the chest. He apparently was too stunned or hadn't heard my great plan. My roommate and I, on the other hand, were too scared and frantic at the time to do anything but get the flames away from the grass and fence. We didn't see him standing in the line of fire.

As my friend caught fire, he had the presence of mind to remember the rule: Stop, drop and roll. He fell to the ground and started rolling around, trying to smother the flames, but these efforts weren't working. His shirt now was soaked with kerosene. I ran over and shouted for him to lift his arms; as he did, I yanked off his flaming shirt as quickly as possible. In the meantime, my other friend finally got the still-flaming bottle onto the basketball court, and the flames died.

My friend escaped with second-degree burns on his arm and first-degree burns on his chest. He handled the pain like a champ, and, after he had soaked his arm in cold water for several hours, we managed to get him to medical.

Thinking back, there are several things we could have done differently to prevent this near-disastrous mishap or to end it more quickly:

- I should have stuck with charcoal lighter; it lights fires just fine and isn't anywhere near as explosive and dangerous as kerosene.
- Bigger fires aren't always better. You don't always have to impress everyone.
- When you have a party outside with fire involved, always keep a lot of water, sand, a fire extinguisher, or all three handy. We didn't have anything close by for use in an emergency.

Finally, I hope others will read this story so they don't have to learn their lesson the hard way, too. I've heard that some people actually use gasoline to light campfires. A few months ago, I might have said, "Cool, dude!" but not anymore. I'm just thankful my friend still is alive—albeit with a scar on his arm—and my garage still is standing. ■

How Stupid

By MR1 John Mapp,
SIMA Norfolk

The Naval Safety Center's "Friday Funnies" repeatedly points out that many of our younger Sailors and Marines seem to think they're bulletproof. I've seen it many times myself and even have been guilty of the same arrogance.

Sometimes, however, the problem isn't youthful invulnerability; it's a basic lack of mental acuity. Let us revisit an old "Rocket Scientist of the Week" winner from the Friday Funnies. We'll call our hero Fireman Bulb. He made the Funnies by zapping himself with an electrical submersible pump while dewatering a flooded compartment. I'm not going to retell that sad story but one that took place about 10 days later.

It was the same ship, the same fireman, and the same Mediterranean. The ship was heading to Italy after a stop in Turkey. Fireman Bulb, after being suitably chastened by the LPO (your humble spinner of tales), the chief, and the ship's doctor for his near-electrocution, had returned to his normal duties in the welding shop. His LPO was on the binnacle list for pneumonia, so the divisional LCPO was running the workcenter.

