



Throw Another Thumb on the Barby

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One of my favorite pastimes, regardless of the time of year, is cooking on a barbecue. I not only grill during warm months, but I've been known to cook on a grill with snow or rain falling all around me. I feel that I am an expert at this craft, but that wasn't always the case.

Early in my Navy career (I was an AT2 at the time), my wife and I were on leave in the San Francisco Bay area. We had been invited to a barbecue and were enjoying the sun and suds. It wasn't long before I felt the urge to try my hand at cooking a few of the "pig cicles" being thrown on the grill.

The host had covered the grating with aluminum foil to prevent the fire from burning the meat. Being a novice, I thought this was a good idea. A lot of meat had already been cooked, and grease had puddled on the foil and covered everything, including the utensils.

Because the grating was covered, the wind was fanning the flames through one end. Air entering the slit on one side of the grill was pushing the flames out the slit on the opposite side. These flames were, in turn, being fed by the pooling grease, which was now dripping through the slit on the same side the flames were exiting. We had the fire triangle: heat, fuel and oxygen.

With all that action, it wasn't long before my grease-covered tongs and right hand caught fire. I tossed the tongs and batted my hand against my clothes to put out the fire. My fingers extinguished quickly, but the thumb took a little longer. My wife drove me to a dispensary, where the docs treated me for second-degree burns on my thumb.

If anyone tells you that burns don't hurt, they're full of it. The only time a burn isn't painful is when it's bad enough to destroy the nerve endings. Then you've got even bigger problems.

When I returned from leave, my senior chief called me into his office to ask about the medical-treatment report he had received. (It had beaten me back to my duty station.) After a one-sided discussion about the dangers of dipping my hands into fire, he sent me back to work. I had to write with my left hand for a few days, but my thumb finally healed enough that I could use my right-hand again.

In retrospect, I learned a lot at a reasonably cheap price. I've learned never to cover my grill with aluminum foil. If I want to use foil, I wrap it around the food. When I grill food that is going to drip a lot of grease, I don't put it over the open flame. Instead, I put it to the side or set a drip pan under the meat to catch the grease. I clean my cooking utensils as I use them, and if I have to get my hands anywhere near the fire, I wear a cooking glove. 