

# Know What Assume Means?



Photo by PH2 Matthew J. Thomas

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**H**ave you ever had one of those adrenaline rushes after you realize you were in danger, and then you immediately realize you're out of danger? You were in peril and didn't even know it. I had one of those moments yesterday morning.

I had a simple home project—change the location of the two light switches in the wall box at the base of the basement stairs. The switch for the light on the stairs, and the one for the light in the room had always seemed backward. With the holidays here, I finally had time to do something about it.

I grabbed a medium screwdriver for the wall plate. My plan was to run a droplight and extension cord from upstairs because it would be dark when I flipped the breaker for the basement lighting.

The droplight was in place, so I threw the breakers. The light went out.

Off came the wall plate. There was the three-wire feed for the stair light and a two-wire one for

the room light. Lots of slack, no splices; this was going to be easy. All I had to was grab each switch and shift their positions.

That done, I pushed the wires back into the wall, reattached the wall plate, screwed the switches to the wall plate, and screwed the wall plate to the box. Then I turned on the switches to make sure there was no binding when I turned on the power. The stairway light went on.

I stared at the light as I realized I had unknowingly worked on a live circuit. My second thought (the first was addressed to the Almighty) was about how much fun (?) the person who writes the Safety Center's message would have had with this report.

I've served as an electrical officer, chief engineer and executive officer. I've given and sat through numerous electrical-safety lectures. For years, I've supervised and monitored electrical work. I probably could list all the electrical-safety requirements by memory. What had I done wrong? I had

made false assumptions.

I now know what people mean when they say, “Assume makes an ass of you and me.” I assumed the circuit was de-energized without verifying it. I assumed the box had only one power supply; I didn’t even think it might have more. I had even received a new digital multi-meter for Christmas, and it would have been the perfect time to use it.

I assumed I knew what I was doing and didn’t need to stop and review the work. I had done similar work in the past, so I thought I didn’t need to really think about this easy job. I never asked myself the operational risk management (ORM) type questions as to what could go wrong and kill me.

I didn’t stop to think about what I was seeing. I expected the job to require working around splices (those cumbersome wire nuts) and was so happy that they weren’t there that I didn’t stop to ask

myself why. Why had I expected to see splices? Because in order for the hot lead from the circuit breaker to feed both the stairs and the room, there should have been one. The absence of the splice should have told me that the light on the stair had a different power supply.

What kept me from touching the hot lead? I don’t know. Since I “knew” the circuit was dead, I don’t know how I could have manipulated the switches without touching a lead. Maybe some subconsciously applied training that taught me never to touch wires kept me from touching the hot lead. You know—the same training that makes you step over shore-power cables and welding leads without breaking your stride.

Whatever the reason, I don’t plan on relying on it in the future. This was a cheap lesson for me as to why the Navy requires all those precautions. ✘

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