

# BURNING DOWN THE

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After a warm, dry summer, the rainy season in Portland, Oregon, returns with a vengeance in October. The cold, wet days of fall are all too familiar by October's end.

One particularly cold night stands out in my mind. Construction workers had been streaming in and out of our home all day as they renovated our kitchen cabinets and flooring. The dining and living rooms bore the brunt of our temporary storage burden. The piano looked like a pantry, covered with dry goods. The dining-room table had become the kitchen sink—collecting the dirty dishes and bits of cut vegetables.

Off the dining and living rooms was our master bedroom, complete with a wood-burning stove. The only problem was that we had burned up all the dry firewood the previous week. Enough dry kindling was left for a good start, but it wouldn't keep the bedroom warm through this night. I decided to start a fire and put some wet logs on top of the stove to dry. I knew they would be ready to burn by the time I went to bed.

Sensing a need for some family time during the chaotic renovation, I uncharacteristically invited our five kids into the master bedroom for a bedtime story at 10 o'clock. By 10:15, it was off to bed. Four kids headed to their rooms, but our oldest son stayed behind. He stood near the stove and dutifully pointed out, "Hey, Dad, those logs on top of the stove are smoking."

I rebuffed his comment with, "No, no, that's not smoke. What you see is just the water evaporating from the logs. They've been outside in the rain all day."

Seeming satisfied with that answer, my son scurried to his bedroom. I closed the door and followed him down the hall. As usual, I ducked into our 4-year-old daughter's room for an extra bedtime story. Unfortunately, I drifted off to sleep, oblivious to the fact my wife also already had gone to bed. She normally stayed downstairs for at least another hour watching the evening news or reading a book in the family

# HOUSE



room, but she—and everyone else—was asleep by 10:30 this night.

Suddenly, I heard my wife’s terrifying screams coming from the master bedroom. “Kevin, Kevin!” she yelled.

“Why is she screaming?” I wondered. Once I overcame my disorientation, I soon found out the answer. Stumbling past the “pantry” and “kitchen sink,” I heard a loud screech echoing from the master bedroom—and it didn’t sound like our alarm clock. I stared into our bedroom in complete disbelief; it was filled with gray smoke. The logs I had placed on the wood stove had dried out and were sending flames two feet into the air.

Still confused somewhat, I had bent down in an effort to lift the three burning logs off the stove when my wife barked, “Fire extinguisher! Get the fire extinguisher!” There it was—three feet to the right of the stove, where we always kept it. I picked up the extinguisher, pointed the nozzle at the fire, and squeezed the handles together. Nothing happened, so I squeezed harder. Still nothing! In my grogginess, I had forgotten the safety pin. On my third attempt, dry chemical powder shot from the nozzle, covering the logs and the stove and arresting the flames.

After pitching the smoldering logs into the backyard, I sat down with my wife to talk about what had happened. I was surprised by

how disoriented I had been. A state of shock had overcome me from the time I heard my wife scream until I finally removed the logs from the bedroom.

As a pilot, I’ve been taught to know NATOPS emergency procedures cold—now I know why. When an emergency arises, it’s easy to think the situation really isn’t happening when you should be taking action to prevent further disaster. Three links in the safety chain were at work that night. One failed, which led to a potential catastrophe. The other two worked, saving my family and our home.

The greatest link in the chain is always prevention. My stupidity in placing wet logs on top of what would become a hot wood stove eliminated that link. Where prevention failed, though, preparation took over. The smoke alarm we had installed for such an emergency woke my wife before the smoke subdued her. It was her panicky cries to get my attention, then directing me to the fire extinguisher that ended certain tragedy.

That’s where my Navy training kicked in. Each year, my squadron talks about using household fire extinguishers during a safety stand-down. Now I know why.

I’ve never been as terrified or as thoughtless since that incident. I’ll never again try drying logs like “chestnuts roasting on an open fire.” ■