

Oh, What a Flash!

[The author asked to remain anonymous.—Ed.]

During the war in Afghanistan, long before you were born, I was assigned to a special-operations unit. Our mission was to clear the many mountain caves used as hiding places for terrorists like those who crashed planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

We had been in country for eight months and had captured many. I was on patrol when we saw some of the “maggots” run for their caves. After calling for reinforcements, we charged after them. I was dragging one Al-Qaeda piece of scum from a hole by his dirty, puke-stained beard when a flame-thrower attacked from the right side.

Anyway, that’s the story I’ll tell my grandchildren. The real story is far less glamorous and isn’t fun to tell a child.

I grew up outside a small town in Oregon, where hunting and guns were a large part of my everyday existence. I got my first .22-caliber rifle at age 12 but had been target shooting and squirrel hunting unsupervised since age 9 or 10. At age 14, my birthday present was my first deer rifle—a .270 pump-action. Within six months, I was allowed to reload my own rounds and reloaded most of my older brother’s rounds, too.

I was meticulous with the amount of powder that went into each round. I even shaved the bullet itself for exact weight. I could go into a lot more detail about loading ammunition here, but, the point is this: I was trusted with many volatile and dangerous things at a young age.

I quickly learned the difference in burn speed between rifle and pistol powders. In my 20s, when I got into black-powder rifles, I learned that black powder burns much faster than smokeless rifle powder when uncompressed. Smokeless powder burns fast, but, unlike black powder, it won’t explode or “flash” without being compressed. Perhaps all this early exposure to different types of

gunpowder led to a sense of complacency—or even careless disregard for the dangers related to such volatile substances.

At 10 a.m., May 17, 2004, I got my wake-up call. I was walking around the house, getting my surface shipment ready to drop off on base where I would pick up all my medical and dental records for an upcoming deployment aboard USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74). I was the assigned petty officer in charge of a 25-man detachment from NAS Whidbey Island’s AIMD. I had my things packed and was ready to go, except for my Navy ball cap—it was missing.

While going through the house looking for my cap, I discovered, to my dismay, I had forgotten to lock the gun cabinet, and my 5-year-old had dumped about a half-pound of black powder on the floor of my closet. I hastily cleaned up the mess, but, not wanting to dump it in the garbage, decided to light it off on the back patio. That decision quickly led to some extreme pain.

At this point, most people are thinking, “What an idiot!” and I agree—now. I was in a hurry then, though, and the reality of what would happen didn’t fully occur to me as I picked up a barbecue igniter to light the pile of powder. A consideration for my personal safety flashed through my mind for just an instant, but I dismissed it. I knew from childhood that smokeless powder will not flash unless compressed—have you caught my mistake yet?

I clicked the igniter and stuck the little flame up to the pile of powder, but nothing happened. “The contamination in the powder is making it hard to light,” I thought. I was stirring it around a bit with the igniter, trying to get it to light, when it suddenly went “Whooooff!” As I came running and dancing into the house, through a cloud of smoke that filled the backyard, I could see the shocked and frightened look on my wife’s face.

She soon realized that I wasn’t in any mortal danger, and her concern became a mixture of

amusement that her husband could be so dumb, concern for my well-being, and anger when she saw the scope of my wounds [see accompanying photos]. I had a 3-inch-long piece of missing skin that the blast had taken off my arm. I also had third-degree burns on most of my right hand and



second-degree burns extending up to my elbow, which my now-charred uniform sleeve covered. The burns started again on my neck and continued up the right side of my face to my forehead. I had lost most of my hair that the ball cap didn't cover—including mustache, eyebrows and eyelashes. I would have been blind in one eye if I hadn't been wearing my glasses, instead of my contacts.

My wife rushed me down the hall and helped me get into a cold shower. Four or five minutes later, she helped me dry lightly—that's when the skin wiped off a large section of my face and the rest of my right arm. The pain already was bad, but the water made it worse.

Once I was out of the shower, my wife covered the wounds with a burn ointment. Then we waited a half-hour for our child to get home from school so we could go to the base—I needed to tell my command what had happened and to finish preparing for the deployment. The severity of my wounds didn't sink in until we visited medical to pick up my records. I decided the pain was just too much to stand and walked into ER. The doctor said I wouldn't be deploying because my right hand and arm needed skin grafts.

During the next two weeks, I received four prescription painkillers and went through the extremely painful process of changing dressings twice a day. On two separate occasions, burnt skin had to be removed, which was excruciating. Sleep became a distant memory.

My right hand still is healing, and most of my right arm is scarred. I won't need skin grafts on my hand, after all, but may require surgery in the future as the scars become thicker and begin to decrease in flexibility.

Here are the mistakes I made:

- ✦ Rushing the cleanup of volatile material;
- ✦ Unsafe disposal (burning piles of any gun powder);
- ✦ Not inspecting the situation sufficiently to realize what I was dealing with—black powder, not smokeless powder;

✦ Delaying medical attention.

Here are the lessons I learned:

- ✦ Double-check locks for safety.
- ✦ Research safe disposal procedures for hazardous materials.
- ✦ Wear protective clothing. 📺