

How I Almost Burned Down My House

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I was watching TV when my wife asked me to come upstairs because she smelled something burning. We traced the electrical odor to a washing machine.

Although no smoke was visible, and a smoke alarm only five feet away hadn't sounded yet, I immediately unplugged the machine. Its control box—that part with the knobs and buttons—was hot. I decided to keep an eye on the machine, but when 10 minutes had passed with no smoke or flames, I went back downstairs. "I'll get someone to repair or replace the machine tomorrow," I thought.

When another 20 minutes had passed, my wife told me the control box still was hot, which seemed odd to me, so I went back upstairs. I tried to turn the big knob on the front, and it felt mushy. I soon discovered it had melted. Because an electrical odor still lingered in the house, I decided to investigate further.

I had removed two screws that attach the control box to the body of the machine and was lifting the control-box housing when I heard crackling and popping sounds—like a fire makes! Luckily, my wife had brought a fire extinguisher upstairs, and it was ready to go. I flipped the control box on its side, and it immediately burst into flames.

I grabbed the extinguisher, pulled the safety pin, and tried to pull the trigger. In a couple of seconds, my wife snatched the extinguisher from me and put out the fire. She had read the instructions a couple of minutes earlier and knew you had to push the handle—not pull the trigger.

With the fire out, I ripped the control box off the machine and threw it out a window. I wasn't leaving that thing in my house overnight! Later, I reflected on what had happened and realized we were lucky. Several things had worked in our favor:

- We had a fire extinguisher, which, fortunately, was an ABC model (one that can handle all types of fires). Without it, we would have been in big trouble.
- My wife had read the instructions for using the fire extinguisher; I hadn't. A few more seconds and



everything on the shelf over the washer would have ignited, and then who knows what would have happened?

- We were smart enough to take the fire extinguisher upstairs when we suspected a fire. If we had waited, the fire would have been out of control.
- Even though we hadn't seen smoke or flames, I decided to investigate further. If I hadn't, the fire probably would have continued to smolder until we had gone to bed, then ignited and burned down the house.
- Although our smoke alarm didn't activate during this incident, it did go off at 3 o'clock the next morning. How's that for a delayed reaction? I now have a new one that works. I also have three new ABC fire extinguishers in my home—one for upstairs, one for downstairs, and one for the garage—and I know how to operate them.

Are you ready to fight a home fire? Do you have working smoke alarms? Do you have an escape plan? Do you have fire extinguishers, and do you know how to operate them? In a matter of seconds, a home fire can be out of control. Now is the time to answer those questions. ■

A couple of weeks after the fact, the author penned this story for use within his command. His CO suggested he share the experience with Sea&Shore readers.—Ed.