

AN EYEFUL OF HAZMAT, BUT NOWHERE TO GO

By HMCS(SW) Richard Bulgin,
Naval Safety Center

A seaman is mixing paint in the paint-issue room when the ship takes an unexpected roll. As he steadies himself, he turns around just in time to see an open can of paint thinner defy the law of gravity. He throws up his hands, but mist nevertheless hits him in the face. He bolts for an eyewash station in the space but can't reach it because boxes and paint cans are stacked in front of it. A shipmate finds and escorts him to medical, where he is treated and returned to duty.

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While a PO3 is moving a large can containing a corrosive from an upper shelf to a lower one, the lid comes off, and the corrosive empties on his head. Immediately, his eyes and face start burning, and sheer panic, like he's never known before, sets in. Knowing an eyewash station is mounted on the starboard bulkhead of the next compartment, he dashes for the watertight door while screaming like a banshee. Because his vision is clouded, he trips on the door and falls headlong into a rack of compressed-gas cylinders in the next compartment. Shipmates eventually find him semi-conscious and bleeding profusely from cuts on his face and mouth and take him to sick bay. A corpsman sees an

opaque film forming over the PO3's eyes, a sign of possible severe tissue damage, and calls for an immediate medevac.

Days later, while lying in a hospital bed, the PO3 asks himself, "Why me?" He begins to dissect the whole stupid situation and how he almost blinded himself. He remembers some things he and his LPO had heard during the ship's latest safety survey. "You have unsealed containers of hazmat, and the emergency eyewash is blocked," the surveyor had said. "The eyewash station meets the distance requirement of no more than 10 seconds to reach, and it's no more than 100 feet from the hazard," the surveyor continued, "but all units must be available in easily accessible, unobstructed locations." The PO3 immediately thinks about the watertight door.

He also remembers the surveyor touting the virtues of a process in which you identify the hazards associated with a task, assess the hazards, consider possible controls, implement controls, then decide on and supervise a plan of action. "The process applies to even the simplest of jobs," the surveyor had said. "It's called operational risk management, or, as most people prefer, ORM."

The PO3 thinks to himself, "Moving cans of hazmat is about as simple as you can get, but look at what happened to me. When I get better, I'm gonna look into this ORM business a little further, while I still have both eyes." ❁

The author's e-mail address is rbulgin@safetycenter.navy.mil.



What are the odds of someone getting to the emergency eyewash station at the back of this space? Navy photo by HMCS(SW) Richard Bulgin

Author's Note: These accounts are based on facts. Simple things can become extremely complex in a matter of seconds. From January 1998 to October 1999, I counted 68 cases of obstructed eyewash stations during shipboard safety surveys. Add in the many cases I also found where people used the wrong type of PPE or none at all and had poor housekeeping habits, and the stage is set for disaster—one that easily can be avoided with a little ORM. Don't let the world of living color you enjoy today become a world of total darkness tomorrow.