

More Flame Than a Jason-and-the-Argonauts Tale



Photograph by PH2 Chuck Dutkiewicz
Modified

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Our squadron was on detachment in NAS Fallon for SFARP. I was the safety observer on the starboard side of a Hornet that was ready for an engine cross-bleed start. Little did I know it would be the most remarkable event I've ever witnessed.

The power-plants LPO was on the port side, and the maintenance crew just had finished replacing the starboard case-drain filter for a popped delta "P" button. As the starboard engine started, a long and spectacular flame shot from the tailpipe of the FA-18. Suspecting a tailpipe fire, the plane captain followed the procedures in the MIMs (A1-F18AC-LMM-020) and signaled the pilot to windmill the engine.

Twelve maintainers and a pilot manning up a nearby aircraft for the next sortie saw the flame and signaled an engine fire, using the "lazy eight." The bystanders' action effectively overrode the plane captain's signal for a windmill. The pilot in 405 saw his fellow pilot signal a fire, so he followed his training and reached out to press the fire-warning lights. The PC thought he had made a mistake and joined the

crowd by giving the incorrect hand signal. The power-plants LPO and I saw the problem and tried to stop it, but we were too late. The pilot fired the engine's fire extinguisher.

Many lessons were learned: The PC lost control of his aircraft by not asserting himself and by not trusting his training. He simply went with the crowd. Everyone ignored the power-plant LPO's frantic pleas. He was a qualified low- and high-power-turn operator and an instructor but couldn't stop the pilot.

We found a definite training deficiency in how to identify engine fires. People were not familiar with NavAir manual 01-80T-113, Chapter 2, which states the "lazy eight" signal is for information purposes only and that the correct steps to follow depend on the situation. The flight-deck chief was busy with a maintenance problem on another jet, and no one took charge to make sure a nearby fire bottle was manned.

The engine fire bottles will not extinguish a tailpipe fire; they are designed to put out engine-bay fires. This was an easily preventable mistake had everyone stayed calm, followed emergency procedures, and thought about the problem. 

Petty Officer Morrison wrote this article while assigned as the safety petty officer at VFA-147.