

HOT DUTY

In 1970, VP-1 deployed to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, in support of Operation Market Time with the 7th Fleet. Iwakuni is cold in the spring, with morning temperatures typically near freezing. At that time, the duty office was a small, wood-framed building sitting on a slight rise next to the flight line. In the spring of 1970, we stood the watch there in tropical white long (today's summer whites) that were plain cotton and not too warm. Jackets were not authorized, so the small pot-bellied stove in the corner of the duty office was an essential piece of equipment.

I was standing the SDO watch one cold March day. A quick check of the stove showed that the flame was out. Lifting the flat cast-iron top by its handle, I peered in and saw that the flow valve had been left open and a small pool of fuel had filled the bottom of the stove. The stove burned JP, fed through a line from a 55 gallon drum mounted on a cradle just outside the building.

As luck would have it, my ASDO that day was an ADJ3 which, in my mind, made him the on-scene expert on propellants. After he advise me that the pool of JP at the bottom of the stove would not explode if lit, I tentatively ignited a piece of paper, tossed it through the hatch, and watched a bit apprehensively as a small blue-orange flame slowly spread across the puddle of JP. A moment later it was clear that no explosion was likely and we both went back to work.

Some time later (I'm not sure just how much time), I realized that I was no longer cold. In fact, I was positively toasty. A glance over my shoulder at the stove made my heart lurch up into my throat. The top of the stove was now glowing a bright cherry red and it was giving-off bundles of heat. The air shimmered and danced between the top of the glowing stove and the ceiling. Making my way quickly (but professionally) over to the stove, I grabbed the office broom and, using it as a lever, lifted the stove lid up by its handle.

As soon as the lid had been lifted, a huge, angry flame roared up out of the opening, reaching almost to the plywood ceiling. The heat was fierce. I felt my eyebrows crackle. The flame was almost instantly accompanied by a tremendous cloud of boiling black ash that fountained energetically out of the stove top, rippled across the ceiling, and then rained down on everything and everyone, billowing out the windows for that special "total doofus" effect.

Being a highly-trained, cool Navy flier, I immediately sprang into my NATOPS training dealing with "Fire, Duty Office Stove, Measures Dealing with Extraordinary Stupidity in Use Of." Releasing the broom handle with a dignified yelp, I nimbly stumbled backwards, tripping over my feet as I turned, and, in my most professional

command croak, yelled “Fire! Evacuate the duty office!” The ASDO and I then hastily exited onto the flight line. From outside, the duty office looked like one of those glass “snow storm” globes you shake to get all the fake snow flying around, except that all the snow was black.

By this time, people were yelling and running from all over, carrying or dragging fire bottles, and I suddenly realized that I was about to have a very bad FITREP day (“LTJG Sherman is a personable young officer whose performance this reporting period would have been even better had he not managed to single-handedly burn the duty office to the ground.”)

Quickly, the valve on the JP barrel outside the duty office was secured, the stove was extinguished, and slowly, Career Suicide Day came to a merciful end. When I was sure all was safe, I dismissed the fire bottle brigade and made a trip to the head. A glance in the mirror showed a young man with all the hair on the front of his head burned off, the end of his nose cooked a crispy second-degree red, and wearing the new Summer Soot Uniform. It was humiliating. I finished my watch and then got the CO’s permission to clean the duty office myself. Completing the day’s log entry presented a bit of a challenge. My whites were way, way past cleaning.

Aftermath. I learned a whole new respect for JP. I learned that heating should be left to professionals. And from that day on, my flight crew refused to let me cook.

-- K.B. Sherman