

Life

By Lt Col Brian Mullin, Ramstein AB, GE

passing Before My Eyes

did drop, and I, without thinking, pulled off my two T-shirts and attempted to snuff out the flames engulfing his lower extremities. As a trained safety professional, I knew how Bob got himself into this mess — but I was not prepared for extinguishing a flame-engulfed, fuel-soaked individual. Other bystanders came to our assistance and we were

“shocking” each other when conditions are right. Any high school class can learn about the scientific background of the static-electric phenomena which has been well understood since Benjamin Franklin’s time — and before. What isn’t well understood are the hazards from static electricity when the general public uses self-service gas stations. Unfortu-

and devices provided by the station. Are there fire extinguishers and where? Are there universal graphics or a written laundry list of “Do’s and Don’ts”? Where is the emergency fuel shut-off button? Once you have a feel for your surroundings — follow the rules you’ve just reviewed! In the unlikely event you find yourself in a service station that has no



This series of photos shows how the fire, caused by static electricity, progressed — seriously burning Mr. Bob Clewis.

The day after Thanksgiving, 2002, began ordinarily enough for me — but became nothing less than extraordinary. That was the day I watched as a man saw his life literally flash before his eyes — and mine! At the Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) main service station on Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, just before 1400 hours on 29 November, everyday, ordinary static electricity ensured I (and that man) would never forget that day.

Robert ‘Bob’ Clewis, a 58-year-old retired Air Force Technical Sergeant, was at the service station for gas that day. Like most “self-service” fuelers in America, Bob had little knowledge of or training in refueling operation safety. Unfortunately for Bob, that day he received safety training the hard way — under fire.

Bob was refueling several external 5-gallon fuel cans for

use in his farm tractor and riding mower on his 8-acre farm in Natalia, Texas. When I arrived and parked in the adjacent refueling bay, I barely noticed the man up in the back of his pickup truck, but when I turned to begin filling my own vehicle, I faced Bob across the roof of my car.

In the 1 or 2 seconds I faced him, I was forming a statement in my mind to tell the man not to do what he seemed to be doing — refueling external gas cans from inside his pickup truck’s bed. Worse yet, the truck had a polyurethane (plastic) bed liner. As a trained safety officer and Air Force pilot, I recognized a recipe for disaster, and disaster is exactly what ensued. Before I could speak, I saw flame — not the flash that others saw in the video tape of this incident — but an ethereal, dancing, fluid-like substance. In anyone else’s reality — it was a FLASH!

At that point, things began to click quickly in my brain. In the

pilot world, we call it temporal distortion — time seems to slow down as the adrenaline expands all your senses. The next 57 seconds were surreal for me. I yelled at the man to jump — “GET OUT!” Instead Bob, who was probably in shock, danced wildly in his truck with the fuel hose still in his hand as he attempted to beat away the growing flame. I yelled, “Jump!” again, but Bob, instead of jumping, dropped the hose, picked up the last-filled can (the one he thought was the source of the fire), and threw it about 15 feet off the back end of his truck. That movement caused the growing inferno to spread dramatically to the rear and almost explode over the just-thrown metal jerry can. It was 2 to 3 seconds from the initial flash when Bob finally responded to my yells and jumped from the side of his pickup truck bed.

We both moved forward, away from the refueling islands, and I yelled for Bob to drop and roll (more about that later). Bob

able to extinguish the flames — but it took nearly 1 minute!

As I write this article, I still can’t believe that this extraordinary event took place right in front of me. As an Air Force pilot, I can’t help but review and second-guess my every move — especially in light of facts that have surfaced: the existence of a video (for AAFES surveillance) of the event; the possibility that some fire extinguishers may have been available on scene; and the fact that this event was sensationalized in the national media. My review brings me to the glaringly obvious point: This tragedy was 100 percent preventable!

Contrary to some of what the media reported about the “unknown, extraordinary and freak” nature of this accident — static electricity is none of the above. We all know about static electricity because we all have experienced it firsthand through childhood antics of

nately, this event is not an isolated one either — it’s just that this one was caught on video.

Despite the safety education efforts of petroleum companies and various state and federal regulators, the average person filling up at a gas station is not aware of the potential danger in refueling operations. To move from the sensational to the education arena of this story — I’ll cover just the most obvious safety precautions for refueling. My colleagues in the Air Force safety profession will have

safety information or devices — follow these basic rules provided by the National Fire Protection Association.

So what are the other lessons I learned from this intense event? I learned that fuel-immersed individuals (or objects) tend to immediately re-ignite unless oxygen is completely and continuously eliminated from the fire triangle equation. To review: heat, oxygen and fuel are required to sustain ignition (flame). Unless there is a suffi-

Don’t underestimate the dangers of static electricity ...

cient, large amount of water or other agent available to snuff the oxygen or cool the area enough, water alone won’t put out a petroleum fire. That’s why most service stations have [dry-chemical] extinguishers or other

When pulling into a refueling station — do as you do when taking a commercial airline flight — review the safety information

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