My memoir is just about a specific event, to set the stage for this one night in May 1981 when my ship and her crew fought for our survival against a fire that raged following an aircraft landing accident. Fighting a fire at night, responding with a new crew just starting their training, and most of those being woken at midnight makes the situation even more complex. The lesson learned is that every sailor is a fire-fighter.

The background for this event requires some perspective of the Armed Forces during the post-Vietnam era.  The selective service draft had been discontinued; this was the inception of the All-Volunteer Military. With a bad economy still in recovery, many qualified young men and women found the vocational training of the military an attractive alternative. During the height of the Cold War, the Navy built many more surface ships with nuclear power. Commissioned in 1975, USS Nimitz CVN-68 was still new, she was the first in the *Nimitz-class* of ten aircraft carriers the Navy would build over the next forty years. The ship was featured in the movie “The Final Countdown” which was very popular at the time.

While serving as a sailor in the United States Navy during the Cold War, I was initially rated as a Machinist’s Mate, with skills identified by an embroidered rating badge worn on the left arm in the shape of a three-bladed propeller that most sailors of that era simply know me as a “snipe”. Nuclear propulsion training phases concluded at the Nuclear Power Training Unit before the initial operational assignment at sea. Still a young man, I served as a junior staff instructor. This extra tour made me a few years senior in service to the others who usually reported to their first sea tour. Coupled with a commitment to serve eight years, my hope was to excel through effort and be rewarded with more responsibility.

I reported for duty aboard the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Nimitz CVN-68 in 1980, while the ship was in dry-dock at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth Virginia.  My crew quarters were located in an air-conditioned berthing compartment on the third deck near the stern, where two-hundred enlisted in the grade of E-6 and below slept during sea periods. Most of those berths were stacked three high, usually only a meager amount of storage was allocated to each for personal items and uniforms.  Work completed during the winter; the carrier NIMITZ had installed new Aqueous Film-Forming Foam (AFFF) systems during the Selected Restricted Availability (SRA). Now ready for sea, training was required for the crew. We moved the ship “dead-stick” the short distance from the shipyard to the Naval Operating Base in the spring of 1981. I felt happy to see both the winter go and leave the shipyard behind. The ship’s motto was “Teamwork: a Tradition” that most wished to live up to in preparing for deployment.

My duties in the Reactor Department were similar to those assigned to any Engineering Department on a steam ship. Some of those services we provided the ship were always required. Fire-main pressure was essential to fight fires, requiring numerous electrical motors (or turbines when steaming) to drive more than a dozen pumps inside these machinery spaces below the waterline of the ship.  The ship’s fire main system moved seawater at relatively high pressure around the ship. The first aboard and the last ashore was a common condition for Reactor personnel, because we started preparations for the underway well in advance of departure. Overnight, the arrival of the airwing doubled the number of personnel aboard.

At sea, the ship’s pace quickened considerably as operations required steaming watches for roughly a hundred engineering stations to power the ship, duties that rotated around the clock spaced at regular intervals of five-hours duration. Most of those in the engineering spaces remained oblivious to weather conditions. Some like me worked in very hot and humid spaces, where heated air was cooled only by forced-draft ventilation fans. I noticed that the temperature in the spaces grew a little hotter every day as we headed further south.

What little extra time I had outside these spaces was divided between my personal needs and those spent standing watch as a trainee to advance to the higher qualification. Sometimes, I would look across the waves and just enjoy the view from the hangar bay or standing on a sponson for a moment at sea. For a change of scenery, I would sometimes climb ladders to watch flight deck operations from the island catwalk during daylight. Understanding that aircraft operations on the flight deck was busy and dangerous, it was called “vultures’ row.”

Outside those formal duties standing watches to operate machinery, my battle station in the ship’s Damage Control Organization was assigned to one of the main Repair Lockers on the aft mess decks located in the center of the ship’s second deck.  Here, the Aft Propulsion Repair Locker was also known as Repair Five.  Our primary role was fighting fires using the correct extinguishing methods, usually manning a fire-hose team. To maintain watertight integrity, knowledge of  various doors and hatches and fittings in each location to stop progressive flooding.  Assisting medical teams by administering first aid care, and serve as stretcher bearers for the wounded.  Preparing for a nuclear, biological, or chemical attack then monitoring personnel for decontamination. Following a promotion to Machinist’s Mate First Class, I was assigned as the Assistant Locker Leader in Repair Five to coordinate action between several unit locker repair teams located in the surrounding spaces. During drills, the simulated emergencies were practiced reporting damage then providing assistance necessary to correct damage.  When the General Alarm was sounded, the crew prepared the ship for battle quickly, and everyone went directly to their battle station in an orderly manner. The flight deck events were displayed on a closed-circuit television near the Repair Locker. I witnessed many of the events during the night that were not drills.

The story of this night begins on 26 May 1981, as the nuclear powered aircraft carrier USS Nimitz was en route to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.  Below decks, as a crew, working long hours to get ready for the refresher training to become proficient at moving weapons from the nearby magazines into the bomb assembly area.  After falling into a deep sleep, I recall being woken by feeling the ship shudder, then a collision alarm.  Immediately, the alarm was followed by the sounding of the ship’s general alarm that stirred my entire two-hundred man berthing compartment to battle stations.

The ship was conducting flight operations during a particularly dark night with no horizon visible that produced problems for aircrews in the landing cycle.  Near midnight, USS Nimitz was operating near the coast of northern Florida, when an Electronic Warfare EA-6B aircraft belonging to a Marine Corps squadron was attempting to land at the conclusion of flight operations.  Ignoring orders to waive off, the aircraft continued drifting to the right of the flight deck centerline and struck the tail of an Sea King SH-3 anti-submarine warfare helicopter.

As the EA-6B slammed into three A-7E Corsair IIs that had been spotted forward, the EA-6B exploded near these aircraft loaded with live ordnance, killing the aircraft’s crew of four and sending a fireball rolling across the flight deck, cooking off 20mm canon ammunition which spewed fragments into the men on deck nearby before it hurtled into a nearby F-14A Tomcat, the force pushing it into two adjacent F-14A fighter aircraft along with the nearby ground support equipment, a tow tractor, before coming to rest on the port edge of the flight deck.

An intense fuel fire erupted. The fire was fed by a continuous flow of JP-5 fuel from the punctured tank of an F-14 aircraft that had just been refueled. The three F-14 aircraft involved in the fire were each configured with one AIM-7F SPARROW missile, one AIM-9L SIDEWINDER missile, one AIM-54 PHOENIX missile, and a quantity of 20mm target practice ammunition.

The flight deck sailors bravely plied hoses onto the inferno as the ship’s Commanding Officer ordered left 30 degrees rudder to come out of the wind and brought the ship to be broadside to the wind and force the heat and smoke away from the hose teams. I heard reports as smoke began to fill the engineering main spaces and crew living space compartments.

The just-installed flight deck flush-deck and deck-edge AFFF fire-fighting systems prevented the fire from spreading, so the fire was contained in an area of about four-thousand square feet.  Throughout the fire, the hoses of numerous flight deck fire-fighting teams were trained on the missiles to keep them cool and prevent these insensitive munitions from exploding.

About 28 minutes after the fire began, it was believed “out” and the order was given to move into the area to start on the cleanup. Suddenly, a secondary explosion erupted near catapult No. 2, caused by an AIM-7 Sparrow air-to-air missile as the sailors approached the scene. The SPARROW missile had detached from the launcher of an F-14A aircraft during the fire and was among the hot debris on the deck. The SPARROW missile warhead detonation was an unexpected slow cook-off reaction of the explosive in the warhead. The warhead explosion killed two crewmembers, injured seven and rekindled the fire. The warhead detonation made a 12-inch long by 24-inch wide by 3-inch deep depression in the flight deck. Two more SPARROW warheads and one SIDEWINDER warhead detonated after the first explosion.

The fire fouled the flight deck and forced about a dozen aircraft aloft to emergency divert ashore to Charleston, S.C., before they ran out of fuel.  The flight deck fire blazed into the mid-watch and at one point the ship’s slow speed caused the ship to lose steerageway, though our bridge regained control of the ship, battling the flames with the newly installed flight deck AFFF system.  The helicopters searched throughout the night for survivors, although they only recovered some aircraft wreckage.  The body of the fourth flight crewman lost that night from the EA-6B was never recovered.  At the edge of the wind envelope during the height of the fire, one helicopter landed on Nimitz's fantail. This was a dangerous maneuver which observers said could not be done.

Our Repair Locker personnel assigned below decks were prepared as the flight deck weapons elevators brought wounded and deceased, so stretcher-bearer teams could transport the casualties to Battle Dressing Stations where they were triaged or sent to Main Medical. As the smell of burned flesh and JP-5 filled the air, sailors persevered to render aid to shipmates under the circumstances. The Repair Locker medical personnel efficiently worked to get them life-saving treatment; in all, fourteen sailors and marines were killed and forty-five were injured in this accident.

At the same time, our Repair Locker pipe-patching crews quickly repaired a newly installed AFFF transfer piping that ruptured, covering a large area with slippery concentrate that resembled snow.  At one point, a line of sailors formed a “bucket brigade” along the second deck that moved the heavy AFFF concentrate containers forward and kept the flight deck supplied with foam agents to help smother the flames.

Our Carrier Group Commander would recognize my efforts as a stretcher bearer that night among others during this catastrophic flight-deck fire.  Also, three aircraft were destroyed and nine were damaged. The cost to repair the material damage from this accident was over 58 million dollars that included twelve aircraft lost or destroyed.  I would not forget that night and it shaped my character in the service in the years that followed.

On June 19, 1981, the Navy reported to the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, which conducted a hearing to determine whether drug use contributed to the accident, the worst involving an American carrier in peacetime.  The Navy acknowledged that six of the 14 men killed in a crash aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz had recently smoked marijuana but said that drug use had not caused the accident.

Admiral McDonald said ''The pilot was solely responsible for landing the plane, the twin-engine plane came in too high, missing the four rows of arresting wires completely. He said its right wing hit the tail rotor of an SH-3 helicopter, sheared off the nose of an A-7 Corsair fighter-bomber, then plowed into a cluster of parked aircraft near the bow, igniting the fire.”

While the crash was attributed to pilot error, the Navy had also said that autopsies showed that three of the men either smoked marijuana heavily or used it shortly before the fiery crash May 26, but none of the users were members of the flight crew. The Deputy CNO, Admiral Wesley McDonald, told the subcommittee that none of the deck crew were involved in landing operations.

Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr. said in a letter to one subcommittee member, Representative Joseph Addabbo, Democrat of Queens.

“The use of marijuana,” Secretary Lehman said, ''does not establish in any way that any of these men were in the least impaired in the performance of their duty.''

''The data which I have provided confirm my belief that drug use or abuse did not contribute to this tragic crash,'' the urinalysis laboratory indicated “the presence of high concentrations of the chemical components of marijuana only in members of the deck crew and not in the bodies of three members of the flight crew of the plane that crashed,” Mr. Lehman said.

Mr. Lehman said that although the Navy had not completed its investigation, it appeared that pilot error had caused the EA-6B Prowler electronic warfare plane to crash, injuring 47 other men and damaging or destroying more than $200 million worth of aircraft.