



THIS DAY IN NAVAL SAFETY HISTORY

JANUARY 14, 1969

USS ENTERPRISE (CVAN-65) FIRE

28 KILLED, 314 INJURED, 15 AIRCRAFT DESTROYED

EVENT: On the morning of January 14, 1969, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Enterprise (CVAN-65) was operating about 70 nautical miles southwest of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. She was preparing for an 8:30 a.m. launch of six F-4 Phantom II fighters, seven A-7 Corsair II light attack jets, one RA-5C Vigilante photo-reconnaissance aircraft, one EKA-3B tanker, and one E-2A Hawkeye airborne early warning aircraft of Air Wing NINE (CVW-9). This would be for the final battle drill on the last day of an operational readiness inspection (ORI) in preparation for Enterprise's fourth deployment to Vietnam (and eighth deployment overall). Flight operations had commenced at 6:30 a.m. that morning.

At 8:19 a.m., one of four 5-inch MK-32 Zuni rockets loaded under the wing of an F-4J Phantom aircraft overheated due to the exhaust (about 850°F) from an MD-3A "Huffer" unit. The MD-3A, a mobile tractor heating unit used to warm up jet engines. The Huffer was positioned on the starboard side of the fighter, ready to prepare for aircraft for takeoff. The huffer's exhaust temperature could reach 590°F at a two-foot distance, while only 358°F was sufficient to cook off the warhead in about one minute and 18 seconds. The aircraft also carried two wing fuel tanks and six MK 82 500-pound bombs.



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A junior airman apprentice attempted to call attention to the dangerous situation, but his warning was either misunderstood, or unheard amidst the jet noise. The subsequent investigation determined that warning was probably already too late. When the Zuni warhead exploded, shrapnel perforated the external fuel tanks and ignited a JP-5 fuel fire. About one minute later, the other three Zuni rockets on F-4J No. 105 exploded, blowing holes in the flight deck down while burning JP-5 flowed into the O-3 level.

The Enterprise skipper, Captain Kent Lee promptly steered so the wind blew smoke and flames off the flight deck. However, after three minutes, a bomb on a Phantom exploded, blowing an even bigger hole in the flight deck, and spreading burning fuel into the ship down to the O-2, O-1, and 1st Deck levels. This explosion severed fire hoses and rendered the closest fire-fighting foam units inoperative. Two more 500-pound bomb explosions followed by three more on a rack that created an 18- by 22-foot hole and ruptured a 6,000-gallon fuel tank, resulting in a huge fireball. In all, there were 18 explosions that blew five large holes in the flight deck (although not in the landing area) and destroyed eight F-4's, six A-7's, and the EKA-3B tanker.

The huffer driver, Airman John R. Webster, was killed instantly by the first blast; the radar intercept officer of F-4J No. 105, Lt.j.g Buddy Pyeatt, was killed in the fire; and the pilot of the aircraft, Lt.j.g. Jim Berry died as a result of his burns months later. The second explosion killed many of those who rushed to fight the fire. A preponderance of those killed were flight deck maintenance personnel of VF-96 and VF-92, and from the ship's VI Division. Other crewmembers were killed as they ran bravely toward the fire, while others were trapped in compartments below decks. Of note, USS Rogers (DD-87) was commended for aggressively coming alongside Enterprise to help fight the fires, while USS Bainbridge (CGN-25) rescued a number of Sailors blown over the side.

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The U.S. Coast Guard and Navy personnel searched extensively across more than 250,000 square miles of Atlantic and Gulf waters for five days, but nothing was found—no aviators, wreckage, life raft, or oil slick.

The Navy launched an investigation into the incident but found nothing conclusive.

LESSONS LEARNED/PREVENTATIVE ACTIONS: Many aboard Enterprise were trained in shipboard damage control and firefighting as a direct result of lessons learned after the USS Forrestal (CVA-59) fire. The deadly Forrestal mishap occurred July 29, 1967, killing 134 Sailors and aviators, injuring 161, and destroying 21 aircraft. The Enterprise mishap report released by the investigation board, indicated that “...*sound damage control organization, training and execution minimized casualties and prevented the initial fire from spreading beyond the Fly Three area of the flight deck to any significant degree.*” Prior to the fire sailors were already aware of the danger posed by the huffer heating units to aircraft weapons, due to earlier, nonlethal incidents. The USS Constellation (CV-64) crew had even devised longer huffer hoses for safer use. However, this awareness did not lead to Navy-wide policies which could have prevented the accident, and the ordnance crew on the Enterprise’s deck failed to react promptly to a deadly threat to their safety despite spotting it in advance. One result of the fire on Enterprise was the re-design of the huffer so the hot exhaust vents directly upward. It is important to remain ever vigilant so that the 28 men who died and the 314 injured in the fire on Enterprise did not do so in vain.

Sources:

H-025-2 USS Enterprise Fire 1969 (navy.mil)

[https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/about-](https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/about-us/leadership/director/directors-corner/h-grams/h-gram-025/h-025-2.html)

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