February 1981

VENTILATION CONTROLLED FIRES
Smoke Obscuration and Venting in Cable Fire Tests

By: Raymond S. Alger
    Frank I. Laughridge
    Walter H. Johnson
    Daniel D. Lee

Prepared for:

NAVAL RESEARCH LABORATORY
Washington, D.C. 20390
Attn: Code 6180, Dr. J. Leonard

Contract No. N00173-80-C-0144
SRI Project 1641
Final Report on FY-80 Task
1. Introduction

Since John Paul Jones stood on the blazing Bon Homme Richard and challenged the British with those unforgettable words, "I have not yet begun to fight," the U.S. Navy has accumulated over 211 years of experience coping with ship fires. Despite this history and a strong tradition of fire fighting, some of the simple questions about fire characteristics and the suppression of compartment fires still defy the experts. This report is concerned with three of these areas of uncertainty.

- How do fires in forced ventilation compartments behave when extemporaneous holes are introduced in the bulkheads and/or decks by enemy action or the efforts of fire fighters trying to ventilate the space or apply an agent to the fire?
- When should ship compartment fires be sealed and when should they be ventilated to remove smoke and heat so the firemen can reach the seat of the fire?
- How do smoke and the hot combustion products behave during fire suppression efforts with water, particularly how do drop size and spray pattern disturb the fire environment and alter the thermal insult experienced by the fire fighters?

The first question involves an extension of knowledge on the effect of ventilation parameters (airflow amount and pattern) on shipboard compartment fires as developed under this program (Reference 1) to more complicated ventilation conditions. Questions 2 and 3 involve the application of knowledge, techniques, and facilities developed in the study of forced ventilation controlled fires (Reference 2) to a specific fire problem; namely, the location of cable fires and their suppression with water sprayed from hand lines. Shipboard cable fires continue to present a difficult problem in fire extinguishment owing to the inability to locate and deal with such fires effectively with present procedures. Recent engine room fires have had major cable involvement and indicate an opportunity to critically review the damage control procedures for extinguishing such fires. This report covers the first year of a multiyear program on Questions 1 and 2; therefore, only the beginning of the answers.
has emerged, e.g., the scope of this report is limited to one particular class of cable fires that provided a very modest fire suppression challenge.

2. Apparatus and Procedure

The experimental parameters of interest fall into the following categories:

- **Controlled variables**
  - Forced ventilation rate and pattern
  - Free ventilation pattern
  - Fuel, type, amount, location and distribution
  - Water spray amount, rate, drop size and pattern.

- **Measured variables**
  - Burning rate ................................ weighing platform
  - Heat flux (thermal insult) .............. radiometers
  - Gas temperatures ....................... thermocouples
  - Smoke densities ....................... photocells
  - Gas composition .......................... IR analysis, etc.
  - Temperature in cable pile ............. thermocouples
  - Water runoff .......................... calibrated barrel

2.1 Test cell and experimental arrangement

Figure 1 shows the location of the simulated ship's compartment with respect to the other test chambers at Camp Parks. The 10 x 12 x 12 foot steel fire box rests on a concrete drainage basin that collects the runoff water from extinguishment exercises and deposits it in a calibrated sump. Smoke under forced ventilation conditions feeds into the scrubber attached to the concrete blockhouse and signals from the various monitoring systems go to the control building. Figure 2 shows the experimental arrangement inside the test cell. Cables to be burned were supported in an expanded metal tray located one foot below a suspended steel ceiling which in turn was one foot below the steel compartment overhead. Three water-cooled load cells support the cable tray on a pipe scaffolding so that burning rates can be monitored
by the weight loss. Because surplus cable scraps were used, the description of the fuel elements is limited to the obvious physical properties. Most of the cables were about one inch O.D., insulated with some type of rubber, contained 16 unshielded copper leads and no external armor. A few pieces of polyethylene coaxial cable (½" O.D. and 1" O.D.) were included in some of the fires but by weight, rubber was the principle fuel. Table 1 lists the fuel combinations for the various fires, the number of layers, and the spacings both between cables in a layer and between layers. These spacings are only approximate because the cables were not clamped to maintain the spacing or hold them straight. When it became apparent that the cable fires would not propagate horizontally without assistance, the cable arrays were laid on top of wood cribs as indicated in Table 1.

Forced ventilation at rates ranging from 350 to 1300 CFM was provided by a blower attached to duct 8 in Figure 2. This air entered the iron box at the southeast corner and left through hatch 2 or ducts 6 or 7 corresponding respectively to ventilation patterns G, B, and A. Free ventilation with the blower secured and the fire serving as its own air pump followed two patterns. Air could enter through duct 8 and exit overhead through vent (2) or the door (14) could be opened various amounts to let air flow both in and out. Vent (2) could be opened any amount to a maximum of 18" x 22".

The remaining controlled variable, water spray, was applied by nozzle (9) in the southwest corner of the compartment. Table 1 lists the type of nozzles used in the various extinguishment exercises along with the amounts of water applied. Water was pumped to the nozzles from a 200 gal supply tank equipped with a water level gage that indicated the amount of water used.

2.2 Instrumentation to monitor the uncontrolled variables.

Figure 2 shows the location of the instrument tree used to monitor heat flux, gas temperatures and smoke density. Details of the tree's construction are indicated in Figure 3 along with the pertinent dimensions. The radiometers are mounted in pairs, one bare to measure the total thermal flux and one behind a sapphire window to detect only the radiation
component of the flux when the water-cooled douser is opened. Five photo-
cell and lamp combinations monitor the optical density of the smoke at
the locations indicated. Hoods over the lamps and photocells combined
with air flowing out of the optical windows protect the elements from
smoke deposits and the fire suppression water. Thermocouples on each
limb of the tree monitor the gas temperature at that elevation. Three
additional thermocouples were mounted in 3/4" stainless steel tubes which
in turn were located at 2 ft intervals along the 6 ft cable pile to
monitor the rate of fire spread and temperatures in the fuel bed. Figure 2
shows the identification numbers assigned to each sensor, i.e., radio-
meters R₁ through R₆, T.C. 1 through 9 and photocells P.C. 1 through 5.
Thermocouple 6 monitored the exit air temperature at the entrance of
duct 6 or 7. Sample tubes in the exhaust ducts (10) provide the gas for
CO₂, CO, O₂, and hydrocarbon analysis. An additional port in the
exhaust duct was used with Dräger tubes to check for HC₆. All electronic
signals were recorded with a Hewlett-Packard 3052A data acquisition systems
which sampled 23 channels of information every 4 to 5 seconds.

2.3 Procedures and Rituals

After the controlled parameters for a test were set at the values
listed in Table 1, the fire was initiated with burning ethanol from a
saturated M-board wick contained in the stainless steel pan (item 16 in
Figure 2) which in turn was supported on a movable arm that could carry
the fire from one end of the cable tray to the other. The ritual followed
after ignition depended on the emphasis of the particular tests. Initial-
ly, i.e., tests 7 through 12, the emphasis was on the burning charac-
teristics, particularly flame spread and the requirements for a vigorous
fire. These fires were allowed to pass the peak burning rate before the
ventilation pattern was changed by opening the overhead hatches and the
extinguishment exercise came last. Typically, these fires burned 40 to
60 min before being extinguished. From test 6 on, more attention was
given to smoke removal, e.g., by vertical ventilation versus horizontal
ventilation. Also, a variety of water spray conditions were used as
indicated in Table 1. With ventilation patterns A and B, the fires
generated relatively little smoke, therefore, water spray was used to fill the compartment with smoke just before the ventilation exercise. The char on the rubber cables in addition to the shielding from multiple layers of cables prevented complete extinguishment with modest amounts of water; therefore, the fires were allowed to recover and two suppression tests and smoke removal exercises could be conducted on one bundle of cables. Table 1 lists the point of emphasis for each test along with the ritual followed in smoke removal and suppression.

3.0 Results
3.1 Cable fire characteristics

Under the test conditions listed in Table 1, the cable fires exhibited the following characteristics:

- Without thermal reinforcement from other burning fuels, the flames did not propagate along the cables in the horizontal direction. For example, in tests 7, 8, and 10, the cables burned only above the ignitor pan. Only a small fraction of the available fuel burned.

- With ventilation pattern B, a layer of smoke and vitiated air collected around the cables and reduced the burning rate both in the presence and absence of thermal reinforcement from a wood crib.

- With ventilation patterns A and G, flame spread and complete combustion could be obtained when the cables were burned on top of wood cribs. Under such conditions, the burning rates for the largest fires were 10 to 12 g sec\(^{-1}\) while the crib was making a major contribution to the weight loss and substantially less when the wood was mostly gone.

- Air temperatures inside the iron box remained at moderate levels. For example, in one of the hottest fires, the air temperatures at the instrument tree location remained below 250°C as shown in Figure 4a. Near the deck the temperatures were less than 100°C. The sharp temperature changes at 1500 and 3960 sec were caused by the water sprayed on the fire; however, the top thermocouple had reached its peak both times before the water arrived. Figure 4b shows the corresponding air temperature measurements for ventilation pattern B fires where peak temperatures are less than 150°C and unprotected firemen could tolerate the temperatures near the deck.
Smoke did not obscure the fires during the unperturbed portion of the tests. Two smoke situations were examined (1) the quasi steady state fire where the smoke distribution is relatively constant and (2) the extremely transient conditions associated with extinguishment. In the first case, buoyancy confines the smoke to the upper part of the compartment. Even with ventilation pattern B, most of the obscuration remained above P.C. 3, i.e., in the top 2 or 3 feet. At all times during the unperturbed burning period for all three ventilation patterns, the flames were readily observed through the window (item 12 in Figure 2). With ventilation patterns A and G, the smoke layer floated mostly in the top 2 feet of the box.

In the second case, i.e., when water is sprayed on the fire, smoke, pyrolysis products, and steam quickly fill the entire box and visibility drops to near zero. Figure 5 for the photo cells in test 14 illustrate this abrupt change in visibility which also was verified by observations through the window.

Maximum values of the oxygen depletion and combustion product production are tabulated in Table II. At the lower ventilation rates, the exhaust gases contained about 5% CO, 0.6 to 0.9% CO, 15% O, and a trace of unburned hydrocarbon. When PVC coatings were burned on the coaxial cables, HCl was detected with the Drager tubes; however, the HCl observations remain qualitative due to uncertainties regarding the effects of gas temperature on the calibrations. During the transient condition when water is sprayed on the fire, the oxygen consumption drops abruptly and CO and CO production decrease correspondingly, i.e., the water has terminated most of the combustion. A superposition of a weight loss curve Figure 6, the smoke obscuration curve Figure 5, and gas concentration curves Figure 7 illustrate the timing for cessation of combustion and production of smoke associated with the application of water. After ventilation and recovery of burning, the combustion products reappear although their magnitude indicates the fire is not burning with the vigor exhibited prior to the first water application.

3.2 Smoke Ventilation

Three ventilation situations were explored.

- Smoke control during the quasi steady state burning versus the transient conditions associated with suppression.
- The ventilation driving force i.e., natural buoyancy versus forced ventilation.
- The ventilation pattern i.e., vertical versus horizontal flow paths.
In the quasi steady state fires, the ventilation requirements were not severe; e.g., patterns A and G with both forced and natural ventilation were quite adequate to confine the smoke to the top of the chamber. The suppressed fires were the most challenging. After the lamps on the instrument tree were equipped with hoods, the photo cells could monitor visibility throughout the water spray and smoke clearance operations.

Figure 5 shows the response of the five photo-cells during test 14 where forced and natural ventilation are compared for ventilation pattern A + G. At 18 min 23 sec, ten gal of water were applied to the fire and all of the photo-cell signals dropped precipitously as the lower regions of the chamber filled with smoke and steam. At 21 min, the 2.75 ft² overhead hatch was opened to produce ventilation pattern A + G and the air inlet rate was increased by a factor of about 3. In about one minute, visibility was restored to the bottom part of the chamber. After the fire had recovered, another 10 gal of water was applied at 38 min and 37 sec and again the photo-cell signals plummeted because of the smoke and steam. At 40 min 14 sec the door was opened to provide a one foot wide crack and the forced ventilation was secured. Again, the visibility was restored promptly (i.e., within 2 min); however, much of the smoke escaped through the top part of the door opening. Figure 8 shows a similar comparison for vertical versus horizontal exhaust patterns. Actually the vertical pattern was a combination of A + G because there was no damper in the duct 7; however, with the overhead hatch open, most of the smoke left by that path. Because the blower controlled the rate which was the same in both cases, the times to clear the chamber were quite similar for the two patterns.

Figure 9 illustrates the effect of the water spray on the thermal insult experienced by the radiometers 8 1/2 feet below the overhead. R₃ is the radiometer with a sapphire window located behind a watercooled douser. When the douser is opened, R₃ registers the incoming thermal radiation in contrast to R₄ which is bare and therefore, sensitive to the total incident thermal flux. When the water is applied to the fire, R₃ signals a reduction in the thermal radiation whereas the R₄ signal drops momentarily, then increases significantly indicating a greater thermal input. Because
R₃ shows a decrease in the radiation level, the R₄ increase must be due to convective heating either from hot gases or steam. Figure 10 shows the corresponding thermocouple signals from the instrument tree. All of the temperatures drop abruptly at 25 min indicating a cooling of the gas temperatures; therefore, it appears the increased radiometers signal from R₄ arises from an increase in the heat transfer coefficient, not the temperature; e.g., steam could have such an effect. This radiometer behavior was observed repeatedly in this test series. This transient thermal insult is not large but neither is the overhead temperature. In a very hot compartment such as under flashover conditions, a similar water spray could generate superheated steam and a much greater insult. The various water spray arrangements did not alter the transient thermal insult significantly.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Cable fire characteristics

The cable fires presented only a modest thermal threat. Without assistance from other fuels, i.e., the wood cribs in these burns, the flames would not spread over the 6 ft length of the cables when ignited at one end. This behavior is in agreement with the results of other observers who find that cables in single trays frequently do not propagate fires effectively in a horizontal direction. Multiple layers of trays or vertical runs are required for rapid spread. Our burning rates of 10 to 12 g sec⁻¹ are comparable to burning rates observed in Reference 1 where wood and rubber tire fires were well below the flashover range. The air temperature and thermal flux measurements listed in Table 2 indicate that these cable fires were also well below any flashover condition.

4.2 To ventilate or seal a compartment, that is the question

Reference 2 discusses this question based on observations of fire behavior in sealed and forced ventilation compartments. Here we summarize these thoughts and apply the concepts to a real fire situation. The first
step is to understand why we seal or ventilate a compartment fire.

- Why ventilate?
  - Aid in search and rescue operations by removing heat and toxic products and by maintaining visibility.
  - Prevent or reduce fire spread caused by the hot gases and combustion products trapped under the overhead.
  - Reduce the possibility of flashbacks or smoke explosions.
  - Assist firemen to reach the fire by removing the heat and smoke that often keeps them at bay.

- Why seal?
  - Cause the fire to extinguish itself.
  - Confine the smoke and other combustion products.
  - Limit burning and damage while the firemen are preparing to extinguish the fire.

All of the what, when, where, and how questions that follow are concerned with optimizing the why answers. Obviously, there are many fires where the whys do not apply and there is no reason to decide between ventilation and sealing. Fortunately, most ship fires are controlled before they develop into a serious threat. Only about 5% of the fires cause major damage (a loss greater than $100,000 or loss of life) and require extensive fire suppression efforts. When these large fires occur, the next step is to evaluate the available options to see if sealing or ventilating will assist in controlling the fire. A variety of information is needed to make this evaluation.

- What is the state of the fire and what will control the ultimate fire size and intensity? Fires grow in size and intensity until the lack of additional fuel, heat feedback, or ventilation establishes an upper limit to the fire size. If the available fuel surface is controlling the burning rate e.g., bilge fire, additional air will not increase the fire size and ventilation can be used to remove smoke and heat without fear of increasing the fire threat. When the fire size is ventilation controlled e.g., a storeroom fire, additional ventilation will obviously intensify the fire and the firemen must be prepared to achieve control before this additional threat can nullify any advantage gained from the removal of heat and smoke. If not suppressed, most ship compartment fires will grow until their size is ventilation controlled.
- What are the opportunities for controlling or smothering the fire by sealing. In existing Navy ships, few compartments are both gas tight and small enough to smother a fire, particularly before it can cause serious damage. The space between fire control bulkheads is too large for the smother approach except as a last resort when the suppression efforts cannot confine the fire to the smaller subdivisions.

- What ventilation paths are available?
  - Vertical
  - Horizontal
  - Combinations of vertical and horizontal

Several factors to be considered in selecting a ventilation pattern are:
(1) safety, the ability to remove combustible vapors and smoke before incoming fresh air can create an explosion or flashback, (2) efficiency, usually the shortest path will be most effective, and (3) loss minimization, keep the exhaust path away from areas that are critical either because of their value to the ship or their potential to contribute to the fire damage, e.g., munitions.

- What force will drive the ventilation?
  - Buoyancy of the heated gases, i.e., the fire serves as its own pump. This force is particularly effective with vertical paths
  - The wind either natural breezes or the breeze created by a ship's motion
  - Forced ventilation with fans or smoke ejectors.

Reference 2 notes that "the question of where and how to ventilate a compartment is frequently compounded by the difficulty in obtaining all the desirable information about fuel loadings, potential fire sizes, normal ventilation and available ventilation paths under the stress and confusion of a fire. Consequently, the decision to ventilate or seal a particular compartment should be made as part of a pre-fire plan. Where ventilation is in order, the path should be laid out so there is no uncertainty during a fire. This pre-fire planning should consider the ventilation goals and the factors affecting the potential for success. Also, other options for achieving the same goals should receive attention. For example, it may be more practical to equip some compartments with
septums overhead or in the deck where nozzles can be inserted." Preferably such fire protection plans should evolve during the design of a ship when modifications in the ship could be made to circumvent, particularly awkward fire problems. At the least, sealing and ventilation plans should be incorporated in the ship's damage control plans.

4.3 Application of sealing and ventilation concepts to the Iwo Jima fire of July 1974.

At the time of the fire the Iwo Jima was moored on the north side of pier 25 at the Norfolk Naval Base. Winds variable from the west and gusting to 25 mph would impinge on the stern of the ship. The fire, apparently incendiary, was set in a berthing space (01-131-OL) between the sick-bay and the fantail. A plentiful supply of class A fuel was present in the foam rubber mattresses encased in cotton ticking and naf-gahye envelopes. The large compartment occupied the entire space athwart ship, between the port and starboard passageways. A two inch and greater gap between the top of the interior bulkheads and the overhead permitted smoke and combustion products to spread into all the surrounding medical compartments and prevented isolating or sealing the burning compartment. The final losses exceeded a million dollars so this was not a trivial fire where the question of sealing or venting could be ignored. An examination of the options shows that sealing was impossible and venting would be difficult. The first arriving fire parties were held back by heat and smoke and there was a definite need to remove these barriers so the firemen could reach and attack the fire, i.e., the "why" reason. In considering the possible ventilation paths, we have used arrangement sketches that may not show all the hatches but it appears that no hatches are available going up through the gallery deck and flight deck above the fire compartment. On the gallery deck, the balloon inflation room, meteorological office and helium storage rooms are located above the burning compartment. Any of these rooms could be sacrificed as an exhaust chamber considering the emergency; however, two holes would have to be cut to reach topside. Several horizontal paths are available, e.g., through the passageway to the hangar or through a hole cut in the fantail exterior bulkhead. This fantail hole is the most attractive from an efficiency standpoint because the path is short, direct, and does not pass through any valuable real
estate, namely the medical space. However, the wind incident on stern
would make forced ventilation necessary to keep from driving the smoke
through the ship. Fire parties could attack from the passageway or up
through a hatch from the main deck into the fire room. Finally, the
other options should be considered. Handlines were brought into the
Meteorological office and a living space across the transverse passageway
to cool the decks above the fire. If these compartments had been
equipped with septums in the decks, cellar type nozzles could have been
used to control and suppress the fire from above without having to battle
the smoke. In view of the cable fire tests and the JBISS exercises,
this septum approach appears the most desirable for a fire in the
berthing space that burned.

5.0 Conclusions

This year efforts focused on smoke control in cable fires. Consequ-
ently, the experimental variables were limited to (a) one type of fuel
and its arrangement and (b) one arrangement for extemporaneous ventilation.
Aboard ship, cable fires cause considerable damage because ship functions
and weapon systems are interrupted but the thermal threat from a hori-
zontal cable bundle appears to be relatively modest. Because of the
slow flame spread rate the fires were fuel surface controlled and the
mode and quantity of forced ventilation had little effect on the thermal
insult.

Smoke control by an extemporaneous hole opened directly above the
fire (Pattern G) was very effective in clearing the compartment; how-
ever, it should be emphasized that this ideal ventilation pattern is
seldom available in ship compartments. These observations need to be
extended to other combinations of the experimental variables capable of
generating a severe thermal environment under ventilation conditions
simulating ship compartments where smoke control would be much more
difficult than with Pattern G.
6.0 Future Work

In view of the current interest in the role of smoke and heat control in supporting manual firefighting on shipboard, it appears desirable to emphasize the features of the fire environment that control when, where, and how fire ventilation should be used to assist firemen in their attack. The temporal and spatial characteristics of the compartment fires should be measured under other conditions of normal forced ventilation and ventilation from extemporaneous holes. Particular emphasis should be placed on fires capable of a more serious thermal threat than the present cable fires. Both the smoke generation and the thermal threat induced by suppression efforts should continue to be examined.

REFERENCES


Table I

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*Starting with Test 14, recorded smoke and steam obscuration during water spray*

1. Blower up to 1300 CFM during smoke removal
2. Opened door 1" to assist in smoke removal with blower secured
3. Fire dying down, not much smoke
4. Ventilated before sprayed water; all other tests vented after water spray
5. Not enough smoke left to measure.
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Table 2

MAXIMUM VALUES OF MEASURED PARAMETERS
FIGURE 1  PLAN VIEW OF TEST CELLS AT CAMP PARKS
1. Thermocouples
2. Tungsten Halogen Lamps
3. Photo Diodes
4. Bare Radiometers
5. Radiometers with Sapphire windows behind water-cooled douser
6. Signal cables
7. Air and water

FIGURE 3 INSTRUMENT TREE
FIGURE 6  WEIGHT LOSS FOR CABLE BURNING ON A WOOD CRIB
FIGURE 9  EFFECT OF WATER SPRAY ON THERMAL THREAT