

This Is **Not** the Kind of Tip You Want to Leave

By Ens. Kevin Shmihluk,
USCGC Hamilton (WHEC 715)

It happened early one morning as the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Hamilton* (WHEC 715) was searching for fishing vessels breaking the law off the Hawaiian coast. Below decks, a petty officer third class was learning how to operate the ship's incinerator. He would end up getting rid of more than just trash.

Some background: *Hamilton's* shipboard incinerator operates at high temperatures, so when a plastic bag of trash is placed on the loading bucket, the loading arm must be pushed up with enough force to make sure all trash falls into the burner and no bags stick to the bucket. The loading arm then must be pushed down hard again to its original closed position so the incinerator operator isn't looking directly into the burner fire.

Hamilton's petty officer was loading trash onto the loading bucket when he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his left hand. Looking at it, he saw his middle finger had been mashed between the seating plate and the bucket arm, which was in the position shown in the photo.

The injury did not reach his knuckle, but the fingertip was damaged. Within minutes, the PO3 was stabilized and being treated by a ship's health services technician. The injury to his fingertip was severe enough to require amputation. Meanwhile, *Hamilton* had to suspend operations and change course so the petty officer could be taken by medevac to a hospital ashore.

How and why did this injury occur? The petty officer's left hand was not in the proper position to operate the incinerator. Instead of holding the bar that goes across the bucket, the PO3 had his left hand on the loading-bucket arm, up far enough to where the arm touches the seating plate. During the investigation, the operator attributed his hand being out of position to a loss of situational awareness. He also expressed fear his hands would hit the safety shield's bar when he raised the loading arm (see the picture).

Operators have been reminded to be more vigilant—and to stay focused—while operating the incinerator. ☹



Because a Coast Guard petty officer had his hand in the wrong place, he lost the tip of a finger (above) to an incinerator like the one below. This incinerator is found aboard all 12 Coast Guard *Hamilton*-Class, high endurance cutters.

