

Clean Up Materials

An article published in the August 2003 issue of the Flightplug, newsletter of the Southern California Ignition Flyers,
Mike Myers, editor

How do YOU get the grunge off your power models? Whether it's the castor and unburned kerosene from diesel engines, good gas and oil from your sparker or alcohol and nitro methane from a glow engine, you've got to get the goo and the Taft or Lost Hills dust off the airplane after a flying session. There are some commercial model airplane cleaners, which are pretty good. Most of us use kitchen degreasers that can be found packaged in spray bottles at the grocery store—Formula 409 was a favorite of mine for a long time. If you're using plastic films for covering, regular window cleaning fluid—Windex, works pretty well. By and large these degreasers use a combination of an alcohol and a detergent/surfactant of some kind, plus a perfume to kill the smell.

Recently, Tom Comparet and Art Swift showed me the virtues of a product called Castrol Super Clean Tough Task Cleaner Degreaser. It comes in a purple bottle and is found in auto supply stores. The stuff really cuts grease — in that regard, it's far superior to 409 and the other grocery store degreasers. Why? Well when you read the label there's a hint. It contains an ethanol alcohol, sodium metasilicate (a surfactant/detergent) and that secret ingredient, sodium hydroxide otherwise known as lye to Grandma. Combining lye with grease makes soap¹. There are instructions on the bottle for diluting the product with water at ratios up to 16 to 1 depending upon what you're cleaning. But at full strength, it cuts grease or old castor oil that 409 won't touch—and cleans baked on grunge off engines with ease. Swift suggests that you spray it on; let it sit on the surface for a minute or two then clean off with water and a brush. Finally, once the part or engine is clean, you clean it with lacquer thinner. That removes the "soapy feel" that's left after you wash it with water and dry it.

Lye is pretty aggressive stuff; you don't want to let this stuff get on your hands, or if it does, you want to wash them right away. Swift also suggests you wouldn't want to put this cleaner on a magnesium crankcase—and I have my doubts as to how often I'd want to put it on an aluminum crankcase or how long I wanted to leave it on the engine.* All that said, this stuff really gets grease off, and seems to be ideal for a quick cleanup of your model in the field. But, like Momma said, "Wash your hands" as soon as you use it.

*Lye is caustic and will etch aluminum or even dissolve it. A chemist friend suggests neutralizing it and halting any further reaction through use of spray bottle of mild acid such as vinegar.