Gasoline Vapors Result in Fatal Fire

An experienced worker and his untrained helper lowered an aluminum ladder into an underground fuel storage tank. A small access hatch had been cut into the tank using a water cooled saw. One of the workers hung a lamp in the opening to illuminate the interior of the tank. Then, the experienced man climbed down the ladder, and proceeded to scoop out the petroleum sludge with an aluminum shovel.

Using a rope, he passed the buckets of sludge to his helper. The hot lamp ignited one of the buckets ? creating a fireball in the tank. The worker died nine days later due to complications from extensive body burns.

This incident probably could have been prevented by following the proper confined space entry procedures, using the correct equipment and taking time to re-think the situation. The company had explosion proof lamps, supplied-air respiratory equipment, and safety harnesses available for the workers. The victim was using the face mask, but not the air line hose, and he was using the wrong type of lighting. However, the metal ladder, shovel and bucket also had the potential to create a spark, igniting the flammable vapor atmosphere. If you are unsure about the safety of a particular job, stop and think. Talk it over with your supervisor. You have the right to refuse an unsafe task.