

Safety in our Industry

One Man's Personal Story on How Far Safety Has Come in the Industry and How it Defined His Career by Teaching Others

January, 2011

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Let me begin by introducing myself: my name is David Fuechsel and I have been working in the commercial tower industry for 25 years. I sat on the NATE Safety and Education committee for three years and chaired it for one year until I had to step down due to a career change. My path in the tower industry started when I enlisted in the United States Air Force in 1981. I was trained by the government as a lineman/tower specialist.

During the first week of our 12-week technical training, we learned that wood pole climbing and tower climbing required very different -if not unique- techniques; we learned how to tie a bowline, timber hitch, square, and Carrick bend knots.

We were also shown the equipment we were to use. Our "equipment" included the following items: a leather body belt, a fiberglass coated strap, pole gaffs or spikes, a hard hat, and gloves. When it was time to climb we would all head for the store room and pick any available gear to use that day. This is interesting because we were not assigned or issued our own equipment. Because the equipment was not issued to us, there was no one directly responsible for the inspection and care of the equipment and/or documentation; it was community equipment.

There was not one second that I recall devoted to training on the inspection of this equipment. There were no fit tests to ensure the equipment fit you properly and all the pole gaffs were for people with inseams shorter than 30 inches. If your inseam was longer than 30 inches you would suffer the entire time climbing with improperly fitted equipment and the wear and tear it created for your knees. After getting out of the Air Force, I began my career with a tower company in Rockville, Maryland. At that time, the company was one of two existing companies that competed directly for broadcast, paging, emergency medical installations, and maintenance work in Maryland, DC, and Northern Virginia. Both companies were well matched in ability, size, equipment, experience, and knowledge.

My climbing equipment was something I had to purchase before coming to work. The list read: 1 rock climbing harness, Troll specifically, 10 oval carabineers, and some runner material, and all the basic mechanic tools one would need to perform the job as a tower hand (that is what we called ourselves then and personally, this description is the most accurate). At this time our industry was still free climbing; documentation was something that happened when you sent an invoice to your client and not related to your qualifications or certifications. You tied off either when you were tired or reached your work station on the tower. There was no process for tracking the condition of our climbing equipment nor did anyone think to. If your equipment got ripped or torn you would weigh the cost of paying for new equipment out of your own pocket with the severity of the tear. The pay rate was such that it usually persuaded you to keep using the torn equipment.



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The upside to this is that people took better care of their equipment because they had to rely and trust it every day and they had to foot the bill for replacements. In 1997 there was word from OSHA that they were going to institute a 100% tie off policy and it indeed became law as all of you are aware. The company I was with decided to comply with the 100% tie off regulation prior to this law being passed.

With this compliance came new equipment for everyone in the company including a new full body harness, lanyards, rebar hooks, spreader bars, locking carabiners, boots, and hard hats. All of this came at great expense to us and I mean the employee - not the company; we were responsible for our equipment purchase, care and condition. Training back then did not exist except through OJT and each person had to figure out what climbing methods would work for him or her, while still complying with the 100% rule.

The company lost a number of contracts for jobs because our labor increased slightly due the new tie off rule. In retrospect, it was not much different in labor costs and time than when we were not tying off, and we were certainly safer. It was a learning curve for the company and even if we were not doing things correctly all the time - we felt as a company that we were doing things safer. There still was no inspection process yet developed, but when our lanyards showed red we would get new ones, just like our nylon lifting slings: the old saying "red is dead."

That adage does not hold true today since each manufacturer has their own color codes and inspection process but you still hear "red is dead" around the industry. OSHA later passed a few more additions to the 100% rule such as locking hardware and snap hooks, locking spreader bars, locking rebar hooks, and shock absorbing lanyards. A lot of resistance came about during this period of time and people were hesitant to comply even if it meant it would protect them from a fall and certain death. You do not have disabling injuries in a fall greater than 6', remember?! – You have onset of death!

Around 2000, I was the senior foreman with my company and was fairly diligent in training new hires on how to climb and work safely. The Director of Operations gave me the responsibility of training new hires in a "Safety Position" along with my regular duties such as quoting, scheduling, and completing jobs in the field. This was very important to me and I took this seriously since some of new hires climbed once and if they could make it up and down, they were then thrown to the wolves and received on-the-job training for real.

Four years later, I accepted the position as the new Director of Operations. That was the same year most of the tower management firms wanted their tower contractors to be "certified tower climbers" because of the extremely high fatality rate in our industry. Why was that you may ask? Because the cellular industry needed so many sites so fast that the experienced tower companies could not keep up with their demand. This led to the wireless carriers hiring roofers, electricians, and former tower hands wanting to get on the money making band wagon to perform this work. Quality and safety were compromised during this rush and fatalities spiked. In an effort to reduce liability, the wireless carriers and the tower owners transferred the responsibility to the tower installation companies, all the while continuing to force unrealistic time schedules and cut rate project costs.

I located a training company, who in my opinion has the most solid, informative, and thorough curriculum available in the telecommunications industry to date. Their instructors are not only knowledgeable about the information they teach, but also have real life climbing experiences. What I had learned from this training was the importance of the following: proper inspections; the knowledge



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to know what, how and why you need to inspect, care for it; and - most importantly -the proper fit and use of your Personal Fall Arrest System (PFAS).

I would stress to all those who climb and work at heights, to make sure you review AND understand your company policies and procedures for your Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) inspections and use. A few things I have come to learn over the years and understand is that you must know and fully understand your PFAS system and its condition. If you need to rely on your equipment it had better be in good condition because if any one part of the system fails, you will never be able to catch yourself before the ground does.