

VOLTS Newsletter

VALUING OUR LIVES THROUGH SAFETY

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It Won't Happen To Me!

One of the VOLTS Steering Committee Members suggested asking Kirk Stevens to share his experience from an accident that happened to him in 2007 and the lessons he learned. Kirk graciously shared the following story.

"It's not gonna happen to me. That is a pretty interesting phrase a lot of us use every day, whether we say it audibly or we display it by our actions. We are constantly thinking something isn't going to happen to us. 'I only drive new cars, so I won't be left stranded on the highway,' or 'I eat healthy so I won't have a heart problem,' or 'I am smarter and more able than that other guy who got hurt.'

"Back in the winter of 2007, I was an Auxiliary B Operator on Crew One. I was on dayshift in the Coal Yard and the weather was super cold causing the Coal Yard to be a major problem area. Coal has moisture in it, so it will freeze in the train cars—sometimes in a huge black ice cube—and won't come out. Conveyor belts will also become extremely slippery when they frost up. This causes the coal to only make it part way up the conveyor, break loose, and all slide down, ending up in mountains of coal inside the transfer buildings. We would keep the belts running all the time, even empty, just to help keep the frost from forming on them. The turnover pulleys would also have ice

buildup on them and would get to the point that the ice could actually poke holes or cut long slices into the conveyor belts.

"The previous three days had been spent going—what seemed like nonstop—from problem to problem trying to keep the hungry boilers fed. We would go all day in what seemed like a never-ending circle from the train, to active reclaim, to the crusher grizzlies, to the unloading grizzly, and back to the train.

"On Thursday, the long awaited last day before long change, I was more than ready for a week away from this mess. I was dead tired from the cold and also from beating on the side of train cars with a scaffold plank. This was in the days before the mechanical coal car shaker (operators used to be the coal car shakers back in the day). This day was starting out just the same as the whole week had been. There was a train onsite with frozen coal, which if I remember right, we started unloading the day before. We were just in the process of checking the salt blocks and antifreeze drip cans used on the conveyor belts, which helped to keep the conveyors from frosting up. I only had 12 hours left before I could head home to my wife and four kids. Things were looking up!

"My supervisor found us and said we had some major ice built up on one of the pulleys on the boom conveyor. He asked me and my partner to go see what we could do to get it off before it started

tearing up the belt, so we headed out to see what we could do.

“Once there, we found that it was the pulley directly above the motor pulley, about six or seven feet above the landing where we stood. There was a custom-made, long-handled shovel, with a wide, flat head close by to remove coal and debris from the north end of conveyor six. We decided to do something that we had seen done in the past. We leveraged that shovel up against the ice as the pulley turned. The theory was that it would shave the ice right off of the pulley as the pulley spun around. We gave it a try, but the round handle of the shovel gave us little grip to hold it in an optimum position. We soon gave up and decided that we should go to the Tool Room for some hammers, shut the belt down, and beat the ice into submission. Well, that didn't work either, the ice turned out to be much stronger than we were.

“As we were walking through the weld shop to return the hammers, I glanced into the metal bin and saw a piece of metal I thought would work great for our dilemma. It had holes punched in it which were in an even pattern, and it had been cut with a torch straight across the middle of the holes, making a perfectly jagged edge. I thought that it looked like the makings of a great ice shaving tool. All it needed was a long handle welded to it, and of course, a tee on the end of the handle to give us better control, unlike the shovel handle we had already tried. So minutes later, after commandeering the expertise of a mechanic, we had our tool and were headed back to conquer the menacing ice.

“Well I am sure you can guess what happened, seeing how this conveyor happens to be one of the largest and fastest moving conveyors onsite. Turns out the jagged edge made a much better ice grabber than it did an ice shaver. The tee handle also worked very well in hooking my belt and picking me up six feet off the ground before slamming me into the cage, which thankfully was securely in place helping to unhitch me from that tee handle allowing me to fall back to the landing.

“Obviously, I am still alive, although a statistician would argue that I shouldn't be. A good friend of mine pointed out that after he saw where I was working, and what had happened, I really should have ended up ‘10 feet wide and 30 feet long,’ or in other words, smashed flat.

“To be honest, I can think of many things attributing to why I made the decisions I did that day. For this

newsletter's purpose, I will only mention a few. First of all, I was extremely tired. I just wanted to get the week over with and muddle through this last day so I could go home to the pleasures that awaited me there. Secondly, I had been an eyewitness to this method of ice removal before. Nothing bad had happened when I saw others do the same thing. Lastly, I grew up on a farm and ranch for heaven's sake! ‘Dive in and get er' done boy!’ was a common phrase I heard often growing up. Many other circumstances added to this situation, helping me make the all-out stupid decision I chose to make. Ultimately though, it wasn't going to happen to me—but it did.

“After a ride in the ambulance to Delta, a ride in a chopper to the LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City, two surgeries, and about two months of recuperation, I was blessed to be good to go again. That comment from my friend about how I should have been ‘10 feet wide and 30 feet long’ still hits me pretty hard. I will also never be able to forget the look in my wife's eyes when I came out of the anesthesia. I could see the concern and the uncertainty she was experiencing while wondering what the future held for us and our young family. We both were faced quite directly with what we thought was never going to happen to us.

“I was asked to write my story because of the concern about our mindset in certain situations. We often think we are invincible and that bad things won't happen to us. Often we think we are somehow smarter or more talented. ‘I will be fine, it won't happen to me.’ A big obstacle that hampers sound decision making is when we know that a certain job has been performed unsafe for decades and no one's been hurt yet, so it must be OK.

“If I can portray anything of value I learned from this experience it would be just how quickly things can go wrong, and how, when things do go wrong, many people's lives are affected, not just our own. When we are asked to do something unsafe, or when we get in a hurry, or are tired, or we are just being plain lazy, let's just hit the pause button and pointedly ask ourselves, ‘What really could happen to me?’”

Our families are counting on us to make good safety decisions while at work. Please think about your loved ones, especially when performing work that involves high risk. Take the proper steps to mitigate risks involved in your jobs (fall protection, respirator usage, wearing seat belts, following clearance procedures, etc.). Your decisions may be the difference between life and death. Make good decisions—even if it seems like a pain to do it safely.

