

Flying to Work

By Pete Clark

In early June, 1978 I received a call from IBEW Local 111 instructing me to pick up my clearance from the union hall and then be at a show up in Georgetown, Colorado the following Monday. At 8:00 A.M. that Monday four of us boarded a jet helicopter to fly to a work site high on Argentine Pass south of Georgetown. When we exited the helicopter, the altimeter read 11,700 feet. We were less than fifteen hundred feet below the crest of the mountain. Besides us and our equipment, there was nothing up there above timberline but scree and pikas and when the sun went behind a cloud it quickly became cold.

We were hanging off the side of the pass digging holes for concrete footers that would support the legs of a steel electrical transmission tower, so the work wasn't that much fun. The dangerous job we were asked to do was catching the tool barrels hanging from helicopters and keep them from tipping over when they made contact with the ground. Of the five pilots who were flying, one could lower a tool barrel as still and steady as if it was already on the ground. The other pilots would have their loads swinging in a one hundred foot arc. None of us wanted to get hit by something that weighed between one and two hundred pounds and those barrels landed any which way.

For environmental protection, burlap had been laid out around the footer holes to protect the mountainside's surface from the rubble coming out of our holes. One morning before we landed, we noted that we had a visitor at the worksite. A cow elk was chewing on the burlap. As the aircraft approached, she made a quick exit toward the valley below. Three knotheads, including me, got together and decided that the cow elk, who was at the site every morning, would look good in our freezers. We plotted her demise and created a plan to get her remains into town. We had a lot of fun conspiring to get that elk into our frying pans, but that was as far as it went. We had created a scenario which had us all salivating and then we went on to something else to keep our pea-sized brains busy.

Flying to and from the jobsite was particularly interesting and enjoyable, especially when the best pilot was at the controls. He had been shot down twice in Vietnam and had crashed twice stateside, but he could make that whirlybird sing. He liked to look through the paneless windows of abandoned cabins. Once on the way back to Georgetown he flew over the ridge to the west and tilted the helicopter so he could see into a cabin. As he did this I looked out to my left at the side of the mountain. The rotor blades were spinning less than five inches from the rocky slope. Fortunately I am not prone to heart attacks.

We finished our work on Argentine Pass and again had to travel to jobsites in a van. How anticlimactic.