

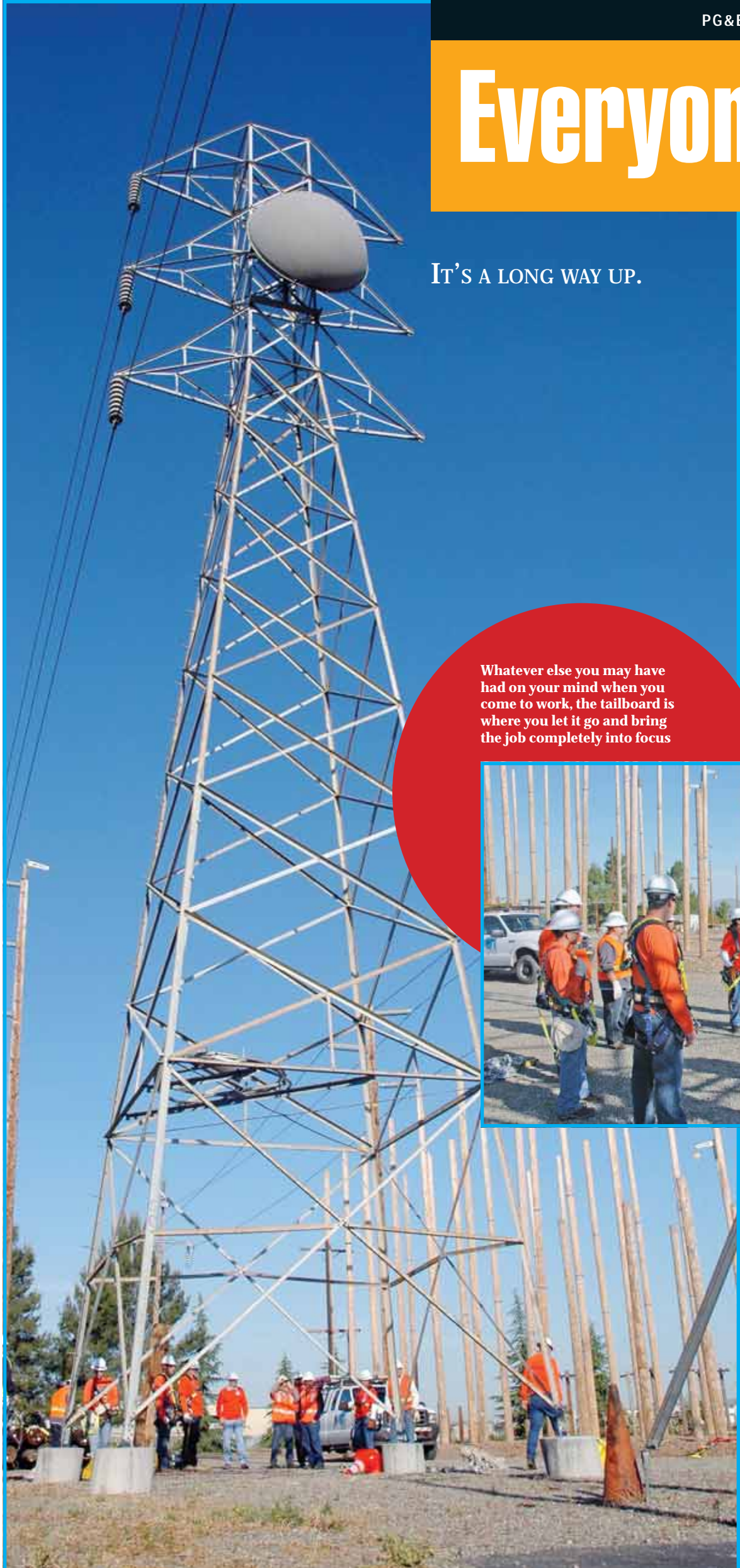
Everyone is Responsible



Travis Bess has just finished setting the load line for the dish removal.



Keith Herrmann (BELOW) sends up the grunt bag ... and it is put to use.



IT'S A LONG WAY UP.

Whatever else you may have had on your mind when you come to work, the tailboard is where you let it go and bring the job completely into focus

IT'S A LONG WAY DOWN.

That's the first thing you have to get used to – and the last thing you should ever forget – when you're up in a telecommunications tower hanging over a sea of nothing. And learning how to work safely at those heights is the first order of business if you plan to make a living as a telecommunications technician.

Working so far off the ground is "kind of unnatural," Sam Kingsbury tells nine trainees at a PG&E tower training class in Livermore. Just about everything else Kingsbury says during the training is geared to make you feel more comfortable about working at heights—but not *too* comfortable.



Classroom instruction by Sam Kingsbury.

Story & Photos by Eric Wolfe

The trainees at the April class include seven IBEW members—four utility workers and three apprentice communications technicians, along with two engineering techs affiliated with the Engineers and Scientists of California.

On Day One of the week-long class they review the Code of Safe Practices. They discuss helicopter safety. They inspect their harnesses. And there's no avoiding it, even on the first day, they get onto the tower. Today, Day Two, they'll go back up the tower to practice lowering and raising a dish. (Later in the week they'll take a test and practice hurt-man rescue procedures.)

All trainees are required to be 100% tied off during their first day up the tower. *continued on next page*



Theresa Laita makes her way up the tower.



Telecomm Tech and class instructor Sam Kingsbury gives it a thump, making sure his next grip point is securely anchored.



Travis Bess works on rigging the dish, observed by Theresa Laita (face behind dish) and Sam Kingsbury.



Johnny Hallum is first in position, but the others are on their way.



Travis Bess maintains 3-point contact on his way up the tower.



Theresa Laita

Apprentice Comm Tech Theresa Laita is the only woman in the class but the only person who seems to notice is the reporter. Being a woman in a Physical classification, while still somewhat rare, doesn't attract the same kind of attention it would have 20 or even 10 years ago.

And that's fine with Laita, who doesn't pay any attention to it herself. She's already had 9 years of experience with a communications company, as a switch technician and field technician. In fact, the company was the local carrier for a PG&E facility and "that's how I got to know some of the Title 200 techs" at PG&E, she says.

"I loved what I did," she says, which made it hard to change employers. But her company had been bought twice, raising concerns about job security. She came over to PG&E for two reasons: "Stability and [opportunities for] growth, and PG&E had both."

She got off to a rocky start in the training class: On the first day she didn't have the right boots and wasn't allowed on the tower. So Day Two of the class was her first time climbing, and she doesn't mind sharing how she felt. "I was extremely nervous."

But this is where the class's emphasis on confidence, communication and teamwork paid off. "What made me comfortable," she says, "was everybody seemed at ease up there, so that made me feel all right."



Wes Padgett

Utility Worker Wes Padgett will tell you right out: he didn't get into climbing because of a love of heights. He's not much of a risk-taker, has never even ridden a roller coaster.

He got into tower work, he says, "because I needed a job."

He's been at it a while now, and says with a shrug, "You get used to it."

He's spent time in the construction trades, including tower construction. He says this is his fourth certification class in five years, but his first since hiring on at PG&E in February.

He's looking forward to becoming a Comm Tech and gaining the job security that comes with a skilled position at a stable employer.



Travis Bess

Apprentice Comm Tech Travis Bess came to PG&E last September "for everything it offers."

Previously he worked in the car industry (and we all know how things are going right now in that section of the economy).

"They take good care of you," he says of PG&E, as he lists the union-negotiated benefits like health care, retirement "and everything else."

Bess, who has one daughter and a son on the way, says "You'd have to be pretty stupid to leave a company like this."

Everyone, *continued from previous page*—a safety precaution as they adjust to the “unnatural” altitude. On the second day most of them are ready to climb without the safety line.

THE TAILBOARD

But it’s not the safety line or any other piece of gear that ultimately keeps you safe. It’s the attitude and the understanding you bring to the job. And that’s where the morning tailboard comes in. Whatever else you may have had on your mind when you come to work, the tailboard is where you let it go and bring the job completely into focus.

“Experience shows the tailboard contributes to a safer work environment,” says Kingsbury, who is co-leading the training session with Tech Crew Lead Daryl Kehres. “A tailboard,” Kingsbury says, “must be conducted at the start of the job and whenever conditions at the job site change,” such as the arrival of a new crew or new equipment.

The tailboard gives the foreman an opportunity to spell out the potential hazards of a job and the measures that might be taken to protect against the hazards. He or she will discuss the assignments for each crew member and their responsibilities in emergency situations. It’s up to crew members to ask questions if necessary “to be absolutely clear on their responsibilities,” Kingsbury says.

A hand shoots up. “How do you organize your tools so you don’t drop stuff?”

Your belt has tool slots, Kingsbury points out. But he also makes it clear that he prefers a different method: “If you’re on my job you’re not carrying tools up or down. We have grunt buckets, we should use them.”

“Whoever’s in charge figures out the order you want to bring things up in,” says Kehres. “You don’t want everything in one bucket, but don’t want 10 buckets up there.”

Kehres explains how the person in charge can expedite the process.

“I’m going to lay out all the lines in the order I want them to go up. I’m going to keep things busy as possible on the ground,” he says.

There’s a very good reason to be well-organized before you go up. It’s a lot easier than organizing things after you’re up high where you’re contending with background noise from traffic, trains, planes, wind and who-knows-what-else.

“A good tailboard will cut down on screaming down, ‘I need this, I need that,’” says Kingsbury.

EVERYONE IS RESPONSIBLE

Tailboards mean getting prepared for the safest, most efficient execution of the job possible. But they also mean being prepared for the possibility that something might go wrong.

Who’s going to dial 911? Who’s going to

Every member of the crew has a responsibility when it comes to safety and is expected to exercise it. Everyone has a voice, and is expected to use it.

meet and orient emergency personnel?

Time and again the point is made: every member of the crew has a responsibility when it comes to safety and is expected to exercise it. Everyone has a voice, and is expected to use it.

It’s a philosophy that has evolved from painful experience. Kehres makes the point with a story about the capstan tigger.

Many years ago, he says, an employee was pulling cable in a basement. The cable was going around a capstan tigger. The line was too small, pulled too tight. The crew members thought it didn’t look right.

“The foreman said, ‘If you can’t handle it I’ll get someone who can.’”

The foreman wasn’t listening to what the crew was saying, and someone was about to pay a price.

“If that line parts for some reason and recoils, you need to be someplace that’s out of the line of fire,” Kehres explains. In this case, the employee got hit in face and suffered major vision loss. “He couldn’t see well enough even to work in warehouse,” Kehres said.

Knowing how much weight a line can bear, and how much it will have to bear,

isn’t just a theoretical problem. It’s an issue that any telecomm worker climbing a tower can expect to face.

“Once the dish is hanging on there and the wind comes up, you’ll go from having 250 pounds up there to having 500 pounds,” Kehres says.

Kingsbury and Kehres continue to take questions and give pointers until there’s nothing left to do but gear up and climb. Both of these instructors are clear about what sort of attitude they believe is needed to make a job successful.

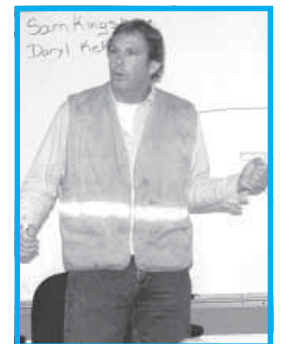
“You can either be grumpy or you can be positive,” says Kehres. “The key is to be talking to one another, helping one another.”

“It’s good work, it’s fun work,” says Kingsbury.

“The sun is shining, it’s a beautiful day.”

And with that, the trainees head out to the tower to grab hold of their first dish.

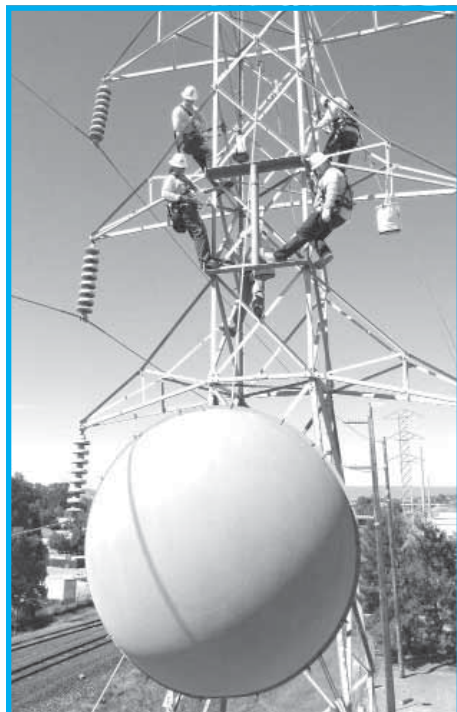
Classroom instruction by Daryl Kehres.



Training class crew, from left, Theresa Laita, Apprentice Comm Tech; Johnny Hallum, Utility Worker; Ryan Sparacino, Engineering Tech 2 (ESC); Keith Herrmann, Sr. Engineering Tech (ESC); Harold Schultz, Apprentice Comm Tech; Kyle Bennett, Utility Worker; Travis Bess, Apprentice Comm Tech; Scott Lien, Utility Worker; Wes Padgett, Utility Worker; Daryl Kehres, Tech Crew Lead B; and Sam Kingsbury, Telecomm Tech.



Patrick Windschitl, Senior Instructor, operated the bucket for the photo session. Thanks Patrick!



The dish begins a controlled journey down ... bringing smiles all around.

