

Everyone is Responsible

IT'S A LONG WAY UP.

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.

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.

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Story & Photos by Eric Wolfe

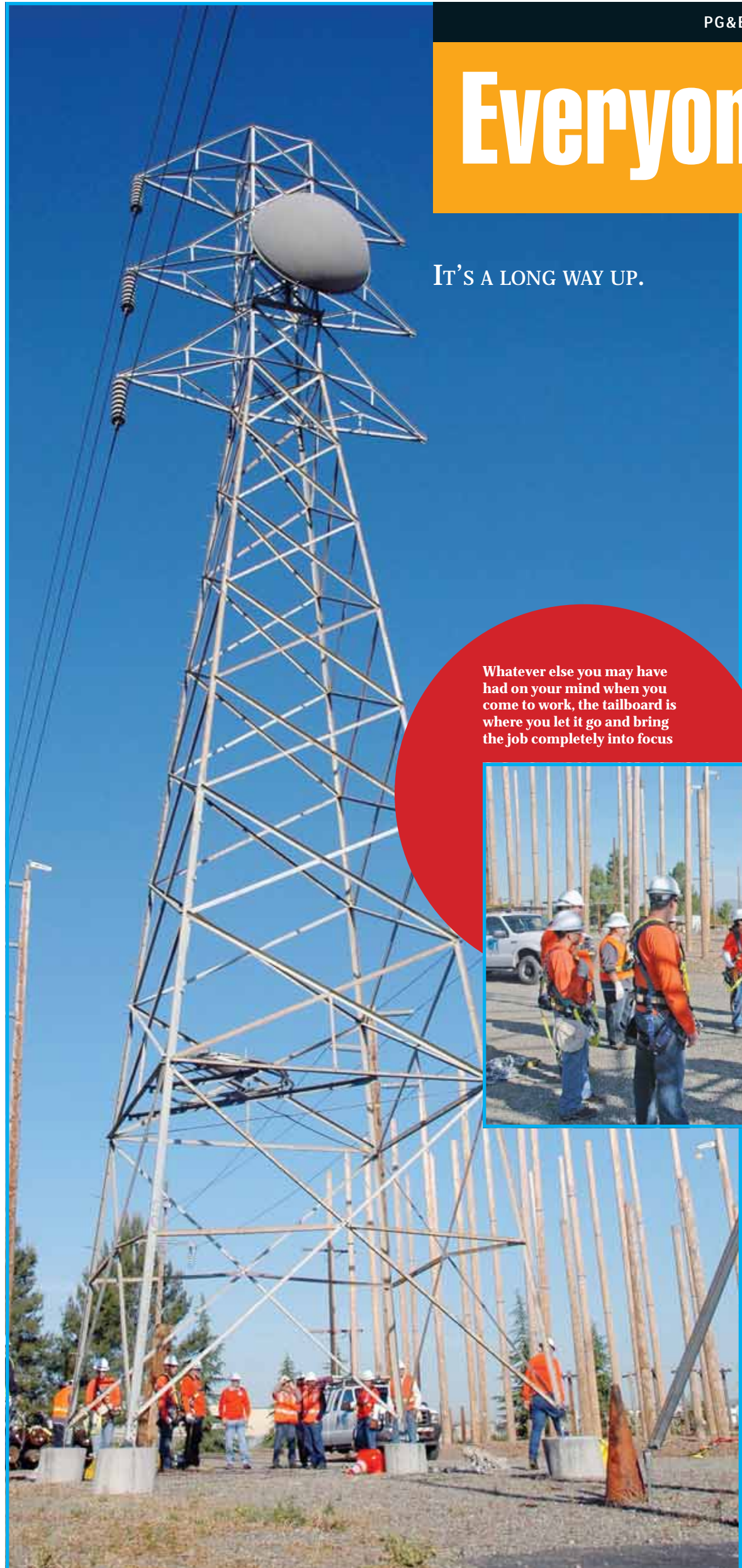
Whatever else you may have had on your mind when you come to work, the tailboard is where you let it go and bring the job completely into focus



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.



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



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



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



Theresa Laita makes her way up the tower.



Classroom instruction by Sam Kingsbury.

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



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."