



Emergency
Relief Operator
Brett Bristol

Communications and camaraderie are the keys to Fort Churchill's phenomenal safety record

Story by Eric Wolfe
Photos by John Storey

At NV Energy's Fort Churchill power plant, there was an area around the electro-hydraulic units that was always wet, kind of slippery. People were careful passing through there, naturally, but at Fort Churchill people go beyond careful.

"I put it in as a safety issue and we got some grippy paint, put that on the ground so we didn't slip anymore," said Tom Houghton, a Control Room Operator and 11-year IBEW 1245 member.

It sounds like a small thing, but small things add up. At Fort Churchill, the employees' attention to safety has added up to 25 years without a lost-time accident—a phenomenal record that has drawn national attention. And questions. Like, how do you do it?

"Everybody looks out for everybody else here, everybody knows everybody," says Gary Detrick, an Assistant Control Room Operator and 11-year union member. "From the time you get here, you're part of the family."

You hear the family comparison a lot here at Fort Churchill, whose two gas-fired units are about an hour south and

east of Reno, near Yerington.

"We're more of a family," says Eddie Eubanks, an I and E Tech. "It's not an 'I' thing, it's a community thing."

Anyone with a family knows, of course, that family relations aren't always about sweetness and light.

"When I first came here, if somebody saw you doing stuff that was not safe, you got told—in a demonstrative manner, so you paid attention," says Mike Chisum, a Lab Technician.

If people shout at you "in a demonstrative manner" at Fort Churchill, there's most likely a good reason for it. Potential hazards include electrocution, chemical burns, fires, falls, power tools and moving vehicles, not to mention high-pressure steam.

"If any of that stuff ever gets loose and you don't hear it and you walk into it, it will cut you in two," says Detrick. "You have to be aware of that every time you're around this equipment."

Making a Dangerous Place Safer

A power plant is an inherently dangerous place. At Fort Churchill the employees understand that you make a dangerous place safer by watching out for yourself and others.

Good maintenance is another important factor, according to Chisum, who is a 33-year IBEW member. You're going to be safer, he says, "if machinery and tools and ladders and automobiles are maintained."

Safety is built into the plant's way of life. Morning tailboard meetings make sure everybody is on the same page about the work to be done, but tailboards are also a place where safety issues can be raised—even if it's just normal wear and tear.

"If a leak has developed, for example," says Detrick. "It's good to go over

those little things so everybody knows."

The plant's safety committee, which meets monthly, also plays an important role. It's a chance to look into safety issues in a little more depth.

"Mainly it's the members themselves who run it, organize it—a lot of pride there," says Brett Bristol, an Emergency Relief Operator and 13-year IBEW member, currently working on upgrade to supervisor.

But the pride you find at Fort Churchill isn't the pride of individual accomplishment. It's the pride of collective accomplishment. Another person's

Gary Detrick, in the unit #2 turbin house, inspects the brushes on the collector end of the turbin.





Left: Duane Matheus and Eddie Eubanks stand on the third floor of the unit #1 boiler, talking about a problem they were having with the #1 gas burner.



Right: Welder/Mechanic Bronc Cutler repairs a section of pipe on the unit #1 hydrogen cooling water system.



Storekeeper Noni Killian operates the forklift.



Tim Houghton takes a set of hourly readings on unit #2 in the control room.

accomplishments don't detract from yours, they add to it.

"From day one, when I started working here, the other personnel would say, 'If you need help with anything, just call me, we'll come over and help you,'" says Noni Killian, the storekeeper who's been at the plant for 16 years, in the IBEW for 21 years, and at NV Energy for 23 years altogether.

Knowing when to ask for help is another component of safety, says Killian. She might ask for help with lift-

ing something that's too heavy for her, or asking someone to spot for her when she's driving the forklift.

On her desk, Killian displays one of IBEW Local 1245's "Don't Tread on Me" decals. She says the union has always been part of her family. Her mother worked out of a union hall as a flagger for construction companies. She told Killian about the financial benefits of being in a union, and the idea of brotherhood—workers watching each other's back, "looking out for each other."



Left: Machinist Jerry Espinoza builds a new shaft for the unit #1 hydrogen cooling water pump.

Right: Duane Matheus and Eddie Eubanks troubleshoot the #1 gas burner on the unit #1 boiler "A" deck firing aisle.



"I agree with that now, that's what it means to me," says Killian. It's part of my brotherhood and part of my family."

Communications and camaraderie

When you go 25 years without an accident, it's not unusual that a lot of people want to know how you did it. The employees themselves aren't entirely sure, and tend to think it's a combination of things. Some of it, they acknowledge, is probably plain old luck.

But not all of it.

"Communications and camaraderie is the biggest component of our safety record," says Duane Matheus, a working foreman and 34-year IBEW member.

The phenomenal accident-free record, he believes, is based in part on "a sense of ownership" that employees have felt about the plant.

Bronc Cutler, a welder-mechanic who has given some thought to the long safety record at Fort Churchill, came up with a different theory:

"Must be something in the water here in Yerington."

If it's not broke...

Although they are justifiably proud of their safety record, and their ability to keep their Fort Churchill family free of injuries, some employees worry about the future.

One important concern, among others, is workforce attrition. Employees are not being replaced when they retire—leaving a smaller workforce to try to do the same amount of work. This trend, they worry, will make it more difficult to preserve their culture of safety, making an accident more likely in the future.

No one wants to take anything away from Fort Churchill's safety achievement. They're proud of it. They'd like to see the safety record continue. But most of all, they want to do everything possible to make sure that no one in their family at work gets hurt on the job.

Why change something, they wonder, that has been working so well?