

Racing To Beat the Clock

By Dexter Noonan
Safety Manager
NSGA Winter Harbor

While doing a safety inspection a few years ago, my partner and I came across two serious violations that we thought needed immediate attention. We were in a high-voltage utility room (posted as such) that fed power to the base airfield. Through the years, more and more equipment had been added to this very small room.

We noticed an unguarded 880-volt wire running across the overhead, parallel to the equipment. The wire wasn't labeled; if you didn't know what it was, you could have put your hand on it. Also, there wasn't enough clearance around the equipment for people to work safely.

We couldn't shut down this operational equipment, so we wrote up the violations and submitted them to Public Works. They posted the violations and planned to guard the unprotected wire and make the room larger to accommodate the equipment.

Then, one Friday morning, one of the lighting circuits for the airfield failed, and repairmen needed to work in this room. Two electricians were assigned to fix the problem—one to do the work, the other to be a safety observer.

One of the electricians had to work behind the equipment, so he climbed over the live equipment with the live 880-volt wire above him. After finishing his work, he climbed back over and was doing some tests when he realized that he had to move a 110-volt wire from the circuit board. Up to this point, both workers had been using lockout-tagout procedures on the equipment they were working on. However, the job was almost over, and the electrician was in a hurry to leave, so he changed the wire without



locking or tagging it out.

Within seconds, he was down with a serious electrical shock. He was between the door and safety observer, so that man couldn't get outside. He started yelling for help when the downed electrician stood up and asked him, "Who hit me with a sledge hammer?" They went outside. The shocked electrician refused to see a doctor

and went home. On Monday, the electrician came to work, but his supervisor would not allow him to work until he was medically cleared to do so.

The electrician had been kneeling on a metal deck plate with one knee. When he put his hand near the equipment, the voltage from the 880-volt wire arced, entered his left hand and came out of his right knee. The voltage went through his heart but he lived to talk about it. The electrician had fillings in his teeth, which may explain why he felt that someone had hit him with a sledgehammer.

You wonder why people ignore lockout-tagout procedures. Some think these procedures take just too much time. This electrician had a leave chit already approved for 1130 that day. This mishap happened at 1150. He was already working off the clock. Do you think he may have been in a rush to leave, and didn't want to bother doing another time-consuming task? If so, it wouldn't be the first time someone did that. But I doubt he'll ever do it again. ■