

A *Shotcrete* feature:

SAFETY SHOOTER

Simple and Safe

By Marcus H. von der Hofen

A little more than a year ago, a friend of mine called me up to tell me about a terrible accident that occurred at the company where he works. John and I have known each other for many years, enjoy golfing together (both of us are hackers), and we have worked together on many projects. The company has an excellent record of safety and is well-respected in the industry. It rattled me to hear that something bad had happened to someone in a group that I knew well—people I had worked closely with and people who I respect as being safe.

It was pretty much a normal day for them: clear skies in Seattle, WA; nothing broke (it's a drilling company, so that's nothing new); and they didn't hit anything bad (sewers, water lines, aquifers, and so on) like I hear him talk about every day. Like I said, pretty much a normal day for us guys.

End-of-the-day normal shutdown process: it started with blowing out the concrete hose, then moving on to the cleanup of the pump. The operator dropped the door and worked the pump back and forth in reverse to clear the cylinders. He had plenty of water, so the cleanout of the swing tube was simple. It had been a pretty fast day, so the buildup was nothing really, with no need to shut the pump down while it was hosed out. Another feature of this pump is an automatic cutoff relay that engages when you lift the grate (the one that I know everyone has down while they are running!) and the pump swing tube won't move—a good feature. So, the operator was just about done cleaning the pump and there was a little piece of concrete on the end of the piston. He opened the grate, which locked out the cutoff switch; leaned into the hopper to knock the piece of concrete off; slipped; and wham!—the pump swung. As he slid, he caught himself with his hand right at the base of the face plate, severing his hand about midpalm.



The operator had been running the pump with a remote that day, which he still had on. When he slipped, he activated it, and the lockout malfunctioned. If he had done any one of a number of things that he knew to do differently, it wouldn't have happened. I immediately thought about a simple thing my father had taught me about firearms: "Treat all of them as if they are loaded and don't point them at anything you can't afford to shoot...ever."

How many of us have cut corners and taken unnecessary risks?

With today's inundation of personal protective equipment, safety manuals, MSDS sheets, tailgate meetings, safety inspections, and site orientations, I sometimes think it distracts us from the obvious: never take a risk where you can't afford the worst outcome—how hard can that be?

So, in my mind, I had already decided that I wouldn't have this happen to me. I would talk to my workers, give them a pep talk, and apply my simple and safe approach—when John says to me, "that wasn't the worst part." *What?*

They were working at a large job site. It was a highway project with no real address and no one had really thought through how to get emergency medical vehicles directly to the location of the accident. They had to come down a series of access roads that were created just for the job. It wasn't easy. "He might have bled to death before we got to him because we didn't have a plan as to how," said John.

Well, they made it to John's son in time. They were able to reattach his hand. He has regained some use, but he will never be the same.

Safety isn't a simple thing. It requires everything that we can put into it—planning, talking, awareness, and education. There isn't anything that's not important. I want all of us to remind ourselves of all of those who have fallen in our trades and how it would feel if we didn't do everything we could to prevent it.



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