

Lesson Learned the Hard Way
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Working in Alaska was far from ideal. After the months left us, days passed uneventfully as we were all merely counting down the time until we could return home for a little bit before repeating the cycle. July 27th had started like every other day, waking in a man camp with poor cell service and the sun merely circling in the sky for the full 24 hours of every day, yet it quickly deteriorated into one of the worst days of my life.

Like every morning, we received the list of welds that had been completed the night prior that needed to be radiographed. Access to the job site could only be obtained via scheduled boats and once we had arrived on Spy Island, we went to work. Everything was uneventful until we'd come to a location that was a radiographer's worst nightmare.

The final group of welds that needed to be shot were located on a porch-like outcropping, attached to a building that was undergoing extensive electrical work, and was nestled within a group of fifty-foot-tall storage tanks. As far as the work that needed to be performed, it was fairly straightforward. It was decided that in order to keep control of the entire area, I was going to be setting up and making the exposures while controlling the area outside the porch and around the tanks while the second person was inside the building monitoring the electricians and the two hallways that were intersecting within our 2mr boundary. That was when everything seemed to go wrong at once.

Between welds, my second radiographer came through the porch. At the time, I thought he was just checking to make sure everything was going okay, but afterwards I found out that he had thought we were done. We didn't talk much at that point. We'd been working together during the day and then sharing a room at night for the course of several months. We were past the point of getting to know each other and honestly were almost past the point of tolerating each other. Being confined to the North Slope of Alaska was mostly to blame for the shared attitude; not that it was any kind of an excuse for complacency.

He believed I was breaking down the equipment when, in fact I was setting up for the next exposure. When I thought he was retreating back to his station in my blind spot, the hallways, he was in fact leaving the area to run the film at the darkroom. As stipulated by Murphy's law, that wasn't enough. Mere minutes after work had continued, an agent from the NRC introduced himself and handed me a card.

After it became obvious to me that the second person had left, I didn't know what to do other than break down the camera and return it to the vault in the truck.

A wise man once told me that a day you haven't learned anything is a wasted day. Similarly, I am reminded of the answer Thomas Edison gave when asked about his repeated failures in light bulb design. He said "I have not failed. I have found 10,000 ways that won't work." I guarantee you, looking back on the events that happened in Prudhoe Bay, I discovered several ways that won't work. In looking at everything that

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had gone wrong on July 27th, I feel that it would compound the mistake exponentially if we couldn't glean any lessons from the experience.

Most serious of the mistakes committed was admittedly when exposures were made with only one radiographer present. Decades ago such things had been allowed, but there were reasons for the tightening of these rules. If something were to go wrong, two people are necessary so that one can always monitor the barrier while the other either leaves for help or attempts to correct the problem himself. There are so many different, unforeseeable things that could go wrong at any given moment; it is a necessity that two radiographers always be present so that they can be safely dealt with.

In continuing to make exposures after the second radiographer had left, I unintentionally committed one of the biggest sins a radiographer can commit, I had shot by myself. It wouldn't have mattered if I'd made one exposure by myself or one hundred. As I'd already explained, the reason it had happened was because the second radiographer had left when I believed that he was still located at his post on the other side of the location. To prevent this from ever happening again, in the future I will maintain vocal contact before, during, and after each exposure to ensure that everyone is where I need them to be. If I did not, I understand that the potential dangers could be extreme. If something were to have happened to the camera, cranks, or guide tube during the exposure, it would be necessary to have two people so that one person would be able to either correct the problem or go for help while the second person maintained the area so that no one that is non-monitored would be able to pass through into an area that could potentially do them harm. Additionally, with locations such as the one that we were working in on July 27th, two radiographers were necessary so that we were able to safely maintain the boundaries.

If in the future I encounter a similar set of circumstances, there are many things that would happen differently. Firstly, if at all possible, visual contact with the second radiographer would be maintained. If that isn't possible, then I will make sure that vocal or radio contact will be maintained for the duration of the exposures. If for some reason one of us would need to leave, operations will cease until both persons are present and available.

Similarly, the response when the NRC inspector made his appearance was completely uncalled for. There was no reason for any of my preconceived notions about them or their intentions and I understand now that in simply cooperating with them, not only would things have gone a lot easier in the months to come, but there would have been a good opportunity for me to learn from his knowledge and experience in a way that would have made me both better and safer at furthering my career.

If in the future I'm ever working and there is another inspector handing me an NRC business card, operations would cease until the inspector was able to complete his investigation. As my understanding had grown regarding their responsibilities and my operations, in the future I will do everything I can to help them along with anything that they need to help expedite their work and allow operations to continue for everyone.

Because of everything that had happened and, more importantly, my illogical responses to them, I was fired from the company that I was working for at the time, have been struggling to find a stable position at another company, have experienced a time stretching to six months where I had not been allowed to work. Now the NRC has granted me permission to return to the field, though with weekly reporting and denying any possibility of advancement for the next two years. Even having had permission to return to work for a little over a month, understandably, employers are still cautious in giving me the opportunity return to employment.

In reading my story, for all radiographers that are find themselves anywhere near similar circumstances, if the ordeal that I've already been through isn't enough to get you to think twice, I strongly urge you to consider the strain that half a year of lack of work has taken on my financial standings, credit, and personal relationships. Additionally, consider the very real possibility that I will have to leave the field entirely and attempt to start over down another career path, scrapping a field that I'd been working in since I was eighteen. Again, I urge you to think through the consequences of what might happen before you let your fear dictate what you're about to do.