

A RAINY AFTERNOON ON LORSTA ATTU

Once upon a time! This is a No SH_TTER! Really! In a late ATTU summer, we had a string of absolutely drop dead gorgeous days. Sun and warmth! A rarity as those of you who have been to the western Alaskan Islands know. The crew was making the most of it with a few afternoons of sunshine liberty.

It so happened that during this time we received a visitor from 16th District, LT K, who was going to inspect the tower. In preparation, ETC F decided that he would deviate from the standard method of getting on to a "HOT" tower. Instead of using an authorized fiberglass ladder propped against the tower base, ETC F decided that he would make it easy for LT K to get onto the tower by improvising a walkway from the T-building roof to a horizontal cross member of the tower.

To ensure that this non-standard access to the tower would be safe, ETC F, used a hardwood plank, one suitable for use as a deck plank on a sailing ship from the 18th century. It was approximately 16 inches wide, 3 inches thick and 10 feet long. It must have weighed over 300 pounds! Five people wrestled and sweated with the ungainly plank to get it into the desired location. I'd like to say that it was a beauty to behold when we were done, but you who have been there, know that's not true.

Later, we were enjoying sunshine liberty engaged in various activities around the station, when it began to cloud up. In no time our string of sunny days came to an end as characteristic Aleutian summer weather set in hard. I was watching the rain come down and the wind kick up from the rec deck when I remembered the plank spanning between the tower and the T-building. What a disaster in the making? If that plank gets wet enough it will become conductive and possibly ground the tower. Gotta do something NOW!

I ran down to berthing looking for ETs. There were none to be found. I hurried down to the ET shop. Still no ETs. I went into the comms room and found the Seaman Duty Watchstander and the ET3 Duty ET. I explained my concern to the Duty ET and said "We got to fix it". We went out of the station and jumped into one of the station's Ram pickups and went charging down the hill a quarter mile to the T-building.

Arriving at the T-building, we stood outside of the antenna enclosure, in the rain, trying to figure out how we could get the plank off the tower without electrocuting ourselves. I proposed that the Duty ET enter the enclosure with a fiberglass pole while I would climb on top of the T-building.

Once on top of the T-building I lifted one end of the plank and told the Duty ET to lift, with the fiberglass pole, the end that was supported by the tower. I said, "When your end is clear, I'll swing and drop my end over the edge of the roof and it should fall safely off of your pole too".

As we put our plan in to execution, everything seemed to be going as planned. I lifted

my end of the plank off the roof. The Duty ET was able to lift the plank off the tower's horizontal strut that the plank had been on and began slowly moving the end clear of the tower.

Suddenly! It all went wrong. The Duty ET's end slipped off the fiberglass pole, fell a couple of feet and a corner of the plank landed on another horizontal strut of the tower. The impact twisted the plank out of my hands before I could brace myself, to even attempt, to save a developing bad situation.

My end of the plank went to my right. The end the Duty ET had been supporting went to my left. Somehow, the falling plank missed the tower RF feed impacting the metal shroud over the fresh air intake to the T-building. BOOM! The shroud resounded as it bent and paint flew off leaving a large area of dented bare metal. The shroud flexed and behaved like a trampoline catapulting the heavy plank into the air. Like a very large acrobat the plank rotated 360 degrees in the air and fell across the RF feed to the tower. Twang! The copper tube feed to the tower snapped as the weight of the plank drove the "HOT" end of the now broken RF feed into the tundra.

The T-building shook. Bangs and crashes sounded through the T-building walls as the operate transmitter did a hard switch to the stand-by. When the standby failed to be able stay on air more bangs and crashes came from the building as the transmitters tried to switch back to their original configuration. "TURN THEM OFF!" I screamed to the Duty ET from the roof of the building.

The Duty ET bolted to the end door of the T building, the closest door to the main breakers to shut off the transmitters. Throwing the switches open everything went quiet. It was so quiet that I could hear the LORAN alarm sounding at the main station up the hill. Suddenly, the squawking of the sound powered phone entered my perception as the folks in the Timer room tried to find out why we were no longer on air. I stood there, on the roof in the rain, for what seemed like a long time but in reality only seconds. What had happened? What had I done?

Quickly, but not fast I went down the ladder from the roof and went in the side door of the T-building. The Duty ET was on the sound power phone trying to explain to the ETs in the Timer room what had happened. I took the sound power phone from the Duty ET and asked "Is Chief F there?" The Timer room responded that they did not know where Chief F was. I told them "Find him!".

I knew I had to get control of the situation. If Chief F was not available I needed to talk directly to COCO in Kodiak on the teletype hot loop to let him know what had happened and to formally be authorized an emergency off air. I completely forgot about the truck and sprinted the quarter mile up the hill to the main station arriving in the Timer room huffing and puffing out of breath.

ETC F was there, The STO, CWO M, was there, the CO, LTJG K, was there as well as most of the ETs and outside the room a gaggle of MKs and Seaman watch-standers.

Everyone looked at me with a strange mixture of expectation and disgust. I immediately began to explain to Chief F what had happened ending with the question, "How are we going to fix it?"

Before ETC F could say anything, the CO, LTJG K, interjected, "How long is this going to take? How long are we going to be off air?" I looked at him and shrugged my shoulders. ETC F ignored the question and opened the Timer room door. Looking at the lurking MKs outside of the Timer room he said, "Get me some long battery jumper cables". "Quick!" A couple of MKs ran off to the engineering spaces and returned in about 2 min with a set of long battery jumper cables.

ETC F and I jumped into another pickup and tore down the hill to the T-building where the Duty ET still was waiting for someone to tell him what to do. ETC F shouted to the Duty ET as he grabbed the cables and headed for the antenna enclosure, "Get me a wrench!"

As ETC F entered the antenna enclosure, the Duty ET handed him a large adjustable wrench. ETC F realizing he could not reach the nut where the RF feed exited the T-building said to me "I need a ladder!". I sprinted out of the antenna enclosure and into the T-building. Picked up a 6 ft ladder and sprinted back to ETC F. Erecting the ladder ETC F climbed up and disconnected the T-building side of the RF feed that I had buried in the ground. Then he snapped on the jaws of the jumper cables to the bronze stud and nut. Climbing down, ETC F picked up the ladder moved it to the tower and disconnected the dangling RF feed and connected the jaws of the jumper cables to the stud and nut on the tower.

Picking up our gear and leaving the antenna enclosure we went into the T-building. ETC F called the Timer room on the sound powered phone and told them to turn down the strength of the signal at the transmitter control by 50 percent. ETC F told me to turn the electrical power to the transmitters back on and the Duty ET to start the operate transmitter manually with the standby transmitter also in manual control.

Nodding to the Duty ET, I went to the main circuit breaker boxes. The Duty ET stationed himself in front of the transmitter controls where he could observe me. Clank! As soon as I closed the circuit breakers the Duty ET activated the switches to turn on the transmitter. With just the normal noise of relays closing, cooling fans running and the auto-transformer settling out the transmitter came up powering the tower.

ETC F told the Duty ET to stay in the T-building as he intended to leave the transmitters in manual control until we were comfortable with what was occurring. He and I went back to the main station in the pick-up and entered the Timer room. COCO came over the teletype stating that he saw us on air in tolerance in time but below minimum power. COCO requested that we start Blink. COCO's report agreed with what we were observing on our readouts in the Timer room and we started Blink to notify users that our signal was unusable.

ETC F then contacted the T-building and told the Duty ET that he was going to increase the power output of the transmitter and for the Duty ET to stay on the sound power phone telling him what the measurements of the transmitter indicated. ETC F slowly increased the power output of the transmitter until it achieved our minimum authorized power out. Checking the readouts in the Timer room, I told ETC F I saw us as good. He said "Ask COCO what he sees?". Before I could do so the teletype started up. I read to ETC F, :COCO says that he sees us in tolerance at min power. I typed back to COCO., "Can we stop Blink?" COCO replied "STOP Blink" which we did.

In less than 20 min LORSTA ATTU had had a catastrophic failure resulting in being off air and recovered. Subsequently, the MKs with the help of a visiting contractor fabricated a substantially stronger RF antenna feed out of a thick wall bronze pipe which worked well. It was completed and installed within 3 hours of the initial event.

As the future overtook the participants in this saga, LT K our district visitor retired as a CAPT. LTJG K, the CO, retired as a CAPT. ETC F retired as a CWO and I retired as a LCDR. Which just goes to show that no bad deed goes unrewarded.

Seriously, the lessons I took from this was event were:

If it took 5 people to do something, 2 people probably cannot undo it without damage to themselves or the equipment.

Never be without a plan B. At my succeeding LORSTAs I always had a set of jumper cables in the T-building. Just in case!