

Uncle Bill Talks About... Fall Arrest Rescue

Reprinted from HEADS! Vol. 7, No. 9 May 2003

I've been writing articles on Fall Arrest for a while now and this article will continue in that vein. It's not that I'm stuck for topics or anything. It's just that, judging by the mail I've been getting, there is still a need to talk about this stuff. For those of you who didn't see some of my earlier articles, here's a quick summary of the more salient points:

- If you are working in a place where you can fall more than 6 feet, you must either have an OSHA approved railing or other restraining device, or you must use a Fall Arrest system.
- You may never place yourself, or be forced by an employer, into a hazardous situation without a Fall Arrest system.
- Each component of the Fall Arrest system must have a minimum 5,000 pounds tensile strength.
- You cannot disconnect from the Fall Arrest system until you are no longer in a hazardous situation.
- You must be trained in the proper use of the equipment.
- The equipment must be inspected prior to each use.
- Written records must be kept on the use, maintenance and inspection of all Fall Arrest equipment.

The good people at OSHA bring these regulations to you. As I've noted in the past, I strongly believe these regulations accomplish what they set out to do; namely, to protect you from death or serious injury in the event of a fall. As unusual as this sounds, this really is a case of a federal agency attempting to do something to benefit us civilian types and actually getting it right. How often can you say that?

But the subject at hand is not how to be protected if you fall. I want to move on to the next step. Rescue.

A scenario.

A load-in at the local arena goes sour when one of the high steel riggers slips and falls. But happy days! The rigger was using an appropriate Fall Arrest system and, lo and behold, the equipment worked. Instead of falling 75 feet to his death, he's now dangling in a harness 8 feet below the I-beam where he was originally working. But the happiness is short lived. Joy is replaced by concern. No one in the building knows how to get him down safely. The personnel lift isn't tall enough. It's 911 time. The police rescue squad arrives soon after, but doesn't have climbing gear on the truck

and no high angle rescue training. The fire department is brought in. The truck they bring has a snorkel device tall enough to reach the guy, but it's too big to get into the building. They huddle to try and figure out another way. Meanwhile, remember the person who took the fall? He's still dangling up there. And the clock is ticking.

If you take a fall, even the best commercial harness on the market won't protect you from every injury. Muscles get wrenched. You sprain your back. Dangling 67 feet in the air in a Fall Arrest harness is definitely not a fun thing to do. The sooner you get down, the better off you are. There have been some tests conducted that suggest hanging in a harness longer than 20 - 30 minutes may seriously increase the risk of blood clots, embolisms or other circulatory problems. Seizures are another concern. In short, if you spend too much time hanging in that harness you could die there.

OSHA figured this out also. In addition to the regulations about using the right gear and doing inspections etc., the OSHA rules go on to say that you have to have a **Rescue Plan** in place for each location where a Fall Arrest system may be needed. Yes. *Each and every place*. This includes that beam on the other side of the HVAC duct where the LD always insists on hanging a side light truss. These Rescue Plans must be written down and they must be practiced.

If you stop and think about it for a second, it makes perfect sense. But, unfortunately, we don't take the time to think about it. You know how it goes: get in, get the job done and get out. Move on to the next gig. Coming up with an appropriate rescue plan takes time. And time is money. You only draw a paycheck when you're working, right? And venue owners only make money when the hall is rented, correct? So there is precious little time or incentive to put a plan together. But you must. It is essential that you convince the Powers That Be that putting a rescue plan in place is necessary for the safety of everyone. Watching, helpless, from the floor while a coworker slowly dies in a harness is not a good thing.

Who is responsible for putting this plan together? I'm not going to go into the legal answers because, frankly, I don't care what the lawyers have to say. My concern is to try and keep people alive and safe while they're working. And I believe that means *everyone involved in the space is responsible*. Certainly the venue owners and managers must be involved. So too should the members of the unions that have jurisdiction there. And yes, the production companies who bring gear and people into the space. Unless you can guarantee that you will never, ever have an accident in that facility, then you should be involved in the planning and training to handle the situation when you do have one.

You'll be surprised at how easy it can be to formulate a rescue plan. The first step is to determine what emergency department has jurisdiction in the venue. It could be the fire department or the police. If it's a large enough city or if you're in a mountainous region, you might even have a high angle rescue team that you will call. The important thing is to know whom to call before an accident occurs. Remember, that clock is ticking.

The next step is to get a representative of that emergency department together with

all of the concerned parties who work in the building to determine where the problem areas are and work out the appropriate rescue responses. Please understand that this will require more than 10 minutes of everyone's time and more than the back of an envelope, OK? Take the time to do it right.

It may be that the plans you come up with require the purchase of more safety equipment. Do it. Your staff may require special training. Get it. And then practice. Yes, it's going to take some down time in the venue. Yes, the staff and crew will probably have to donate a Saturday or two. So what? All things considered, it seems a small price to pay.

Once the plan is in place you will need to practice it on a regular basis. The union regularly gets new members who need to be brought up to speed. So do the local production companies. It's also good for the fire department or whoever is responsible from the city. Everyone needs to be reminded what to do from time to time. Hell, I can't remember what I had for breakfast most days. Always keep in mind the reason for all this planning and rehearsal: an accident could happen to anyone on any day. Maybe even to you.

There's a joke that runs around the rigging community: It's not the fall that kills, but the sudden stop at the bottom. Well, we've come a long way in eliminating that possibility. Now we have to keep you from dying while waiting to be rescued. The planning and the rehearsals will pay off, big time, if ever there is a need for them. Just remember. You want to live long enough to be a burden to your children.

That's it for me today.

Be well

Bill

©Copyright 2003 Bill Sapsis, Sapsis Rigging Inc.

Hey - don't steal my stuff!

Do not reproduce, distribute or forward without written permission. Thanks!

Bill Sapsis Bill@sapsis-rigging.com

1-800-727-7471

Sapsis Rigging, Inc.

233 N. Lansdowne Ave

Lansdowne PA 19050

[Uncle Bill Also Talks About...](#)

[Sapsis Rigging Homepage](#)