

"A Good Day for Safety"

Fireproof Suit, Safety Procedures Save a Life



Eric Chrisman, left, David Zak and Zak's NOMEX suit. The suit, constructed to withstand temperatures of up to 800 degrees Fahrenheit, was badly charred, indicating the intense heat Zak encountered.

Can your worst day at work also be your best day? It can be if your name is David Zak.

On Jan. 25, Zak, a gas journeyman in AmerenUE's Wentzville District, was part of a crew replacing a natural gas valve. Before the day ended, he would find himself in the back of a 10-foot long trench, blasted square in the chest with 3,400-degree burning gas.

Here's the kicker: Not only did he walk away from the fire, but he was back at work the next day—with a new philosophy and a firm belief in the NOMEX suit and respirator that saved his life.

"I thought I was going to burn to death," Zak recalls. "Now, any time I step into a hole I'm going to expect it to ignite. I no longer think an accident *might* happen—I think it *will* happen."

A crew consisting of Zak, Dave Creech, Bob Strode, Keith Eilers and Rudy Bell had been assigned that January day to a routine gas-leak repair job—someone had reported a gas odor, but they didn't know what would be required to fix the leak.

After exposing the main along busy Front St. in Troy, Mo., Zak and Eilers determined that a gas valve was

leaking and set about fixing the problem.

"My first thought was that we'd be able to fix the leak just by tightening the bolt on the flange," says Zak. "When that didn't work, I knew we'd have to cut the valve out and replace it. That's a bigger job, but still routine."

The crew, together with Construction Supervisor Donnie Schaper, decided to replace the valve "hot," with gas running through it, because the main supplies numerous businesses. Another crew arrived at the site to stand by with fire extinguishers while Zak and Eilers worked on the valve in the trench.

"Keith made the final cut to get the old steel valve out. Then I started to fit the new PE valve to the old PVC main. I had slipped the coupling on and heard gas rushing through it. Suddenly everything went silent and I saw flames around my hands."

Several eyewitnesses describe what happened next in eerily similar details. Something—static electricity, probably—ignited the gas that had gathered in the trench. A cloud of flame crept out of the ditch. An instant later, the stream of gas pouring from the main ignited.

Gas Foreman Jack Haley had arrived earlier to assist with the repairs.

"I was directly above where the gas ignited, handing tools and glue to Keith in the ditch," Haley recalls. "At first, it was a slow, lazy yellow flame, but then the stream ignited. It was eating Dave up."

Haley watched, horrified, as Zak scrambled to get out of the hole.

"It was one of those situations where you're just helpless. I kept screaming at him to get out of that ditch," Haley says.

In the trench, Zak was doing his best to do just that.

"I dropped the pipe, and my

instincts took over. I remember the extreme heat, and my vision being blurred because my visor had melted," he says. "The flames followed me as I crawled out of the ditch. All I could think of was 'Stop, Drop and Roll.' I thought I was still on fire because of the heat."

Zak wasn't on fire—at least, not any more, thanks to the crews who began dousing him with fire extinguishers before he was out of the trench.

One of them was Gas Apprentice Eric Chrisman.

"I just reacted, based on the training I've had," says Chrisman. "If it weren't for that safety equipment and training, one man would be dead, and another would be extremely burned. The equipment did what it was supposed to do."

And so did the workers, if you ask David Zak.

"I'm proud of how we managed the whole job. We took our time and didn't cut any corners. I walked away because I used every piece of equipment and took every precaution necessary."

That's good news for Zak, and good news for his sons, Noah, age 2, and 9-month-old Quin. Ironically, Zak's wife, Andrea, once worked in a burn unit at University Hospital in Columbia, Mo.

Zak consulted with a plastic surgeon for minor burns on his face, neck and ears.

So was Jan. 25, 2001, a good day, or a bad day? All involved agree on that point.

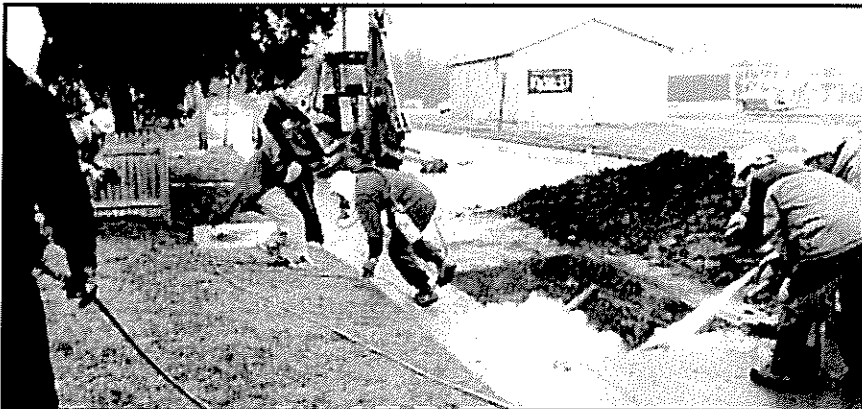
"It was a good day because all the guys got to go home and play with their kids after it was all over," says Schaper. "It was a good day for safety."

But the day could have ended very differently, says Ameren Services Vice President-Customer Services Bill Carr, who heads up the Energy Delivery Business Line's safety initiative.

"These employees did exactly what we expect people to do. They made the right choice to wear that equipment—but not everyone makes that same choice every day," Carr says.

"In the past decade, we've had eight fatalities in this company. This could have been another one, if the employees involved had chosen differently. All management can do is supply the tools needed to do the job safely. It's up to the employees to choose to use those tools and to use them properly.

"That's the only way we can eliminate serious accidents and fatalities." ■



Top left, as the cameras roll, flames blaze from the trench dug for the re-enactment. Anderson, top right, discusses the re-enactment with Donnie Schaper, left, and David Zak, center. David Zak, above, demonstrates how he escaped the inferno.

NEAR-TRAGEDY INSPIRES SAFETY VIDEO

After David Zak's experience, Ameren's Communications Services Department made a safety video documenting the incident. The video encourages all gas employees to use the fireproof suits along with air supplied respirators that likely saved Zak's and Eiler's lives.

To make the video, Communications Services re-created the event, including the fire. Communications Services Specialists Keith Anderson says the video needed to be as dramatic as possible to drive its message home.

"We've heard that some gas workers get into trenches filled with gas and no suit," says Anderson. "Though it is unusual for that gas to ignite, Zak's experience shows that it can—and does—happen."

Anderson hopes the video will help employees get that message without going through what Haley, Zak and the other members of the crew did.

To request a copy of the video for your work group, call Communications Services at (314) 554-2807.