

FATAL ALERT

April 26, 2006

A 52-year-old male, newly hired employee who had extensive oil field experience arrived at the drilling rig location about noon. The employee immediately "jumped in" and joined the crew with the tasks at hand. From the outset, he impressed the driller and rig manager as one who knew what to do and who had initiative to get work done. The well was at target depth, the drill string had been tripped out, and the crew was involved in the final steps of working with casing. A section of casing was cut off and laid down on the catwalk. The newly hired employee, without having been directed, began readying a front-end loader with a fork attachment to move the section of casing. The employee raised the head and tipped the forks. He manually spread the right fork to its widest position and began spreading the left fork. A collared cap screw used to prevent the left fork from coming off the end of the attachment rails was sheared off. As the employee pulled the left fork toward himself, he pulled it off the end of the attachment rails. The employee fell backward, hit his head, and was rendered unconscious. The horizontal section of the fork came to rest across his throat. The employee died of asphyxiation without a struggle. None of the other personnel on the rig location observed the fork falling and the fatally injured employee was not noted as a "man down" for several minutes following the mishap. Trained first aid/CPR responders on location who found the employee immediately provided medical assistance, initiated a "911" call, and began CPR. The employee never had a pulse and did not respond to immediate or follow-on EMT life support. The time span from when the employee arrived at the drilling rig on his first workday with the company to the mishap was approximately three hours.

Significant Factors

Although this mishap occurred at a drilling rig location, the sequence of events are not peculiar to that industry – it could happen to any employer or employee who operates forklifts. Further, though this mishap occurred with a front-end loader with a fork attachment, a conventional "powered industrial truck" forklift could also be susceptible to this type mishap.

Of significance in this mishap:

- The fatally injured employee had over twenty years experience in the industry. Immediately upon arrival at the work location, he impressed his coworkers and supervisors as knowledgeable and as having a "can do" spirit.
 - o The fatally injured employee took it upon himself to begin operating the forklift in preparation for the next work task without being told to do so.
 - o The fatally injured employee had arrived at the work site late due car trouble while enroute from the company office where he hired on. When he arrived, he immediately and enthusiastically "jumped in" and began assisting his supervisors and coworkers with the tasks at hand.
- The employer had an extensive and well-written safety program. Included were guidelines that employees were not to operate forklifts unless trained and certified by the employer.
 - o The fatally injured employee had not received any training or certification from his employer on forklift operations during his approximately three hours of

- employment. It is not known if he had ever operated this particular make and model of fork equipped front-end loader previously.
 - The supervisors or co-workers did not halt or “double check” the newly arrived, enthusiastic employee as he headed off on his own to operate the forklift.
- The employer had a comprehensive Daily Forklift Inspection Checklist and written policy that it would be accomplished each day.
 - The checklist was not completed on the morning of the mishap or the morning prior.
- The collared cap screw used as a stop for the left side fork had been sheared off at some point. The forklift was on a long-term (several months) rental contract.
 - The daily checklist includes: “Are safety hooks, mast, fork locks & forks intact?” This item had been checked OK for each day the week prior.
 - Another employee interviewed during the investigation (who had been on payroll with the company for about ten days) said that when he spread the forks, he put the head on the ground and turned the steering wheel to slide the forks sideways mechanically.
 - This employee and two coworkers were immediately terminated following the mishap for failing or refusing the post mishap drug test. (Two had passed the pre-employment test within the past ten working days and the third two days prior.)
- The surface where the forklift was parked when the mishap employee began his work was exceptionally slippery. A drilling fluid spill had occurred two days prior. The entire drilling pad is covered with sections of oak plank matting. The weight of the forklift on top the wood matting caused the drilling fluid trapped below to ooze up to the surface.
 - Drilling fluid, by its engineered design, is slippery.
 - A dry area would have been available by backing the forklift less than 50 feet.
 - The fatally injured employee made a personal choice to spread the forks while standing in the drilling fluid on the slippery, wood surface.

Recommendations

- All employers and employees who control or operate forklifts should read this alert. (Of note, the mishap employer issued an internal company safety alert within five days of the mishap.)
- Employers must assure employees are trained, qualified, and authorized to operate equipment before work begins.
- Employers must consider the unintended consequences of their employees working on slippery surfaces. Employees have a significant role in recognizing hazards of this nature and in exercising effective and efficient alternatives.
- Checklists should be relevant, efficient, reviewed periodically for effectiveness, and used.
- Drug users should be eliminated from the workplace. Supervisors should be cognizant of drug use indicators and have authority to initiate/recommend timely “probable cause” testing to bolster pre-employment, random, and post mishap testing.
- Enthusiasm and personal initiative to “get the job done” are admirable and desirable characteristics. Concurrently, those in leadership roles must assure reasonable boundaries are subtly exercised to ensure unchecked energy does not lead to tragedy.