



# ON THE LOOKOUT

From the  
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## **SAFETY FIRST!**

### **Don't Delay, Take Time to Belay!**

Working around fire lookouts always includes an element of risk, and those of us attracted to this high points know the importance of taking a moment to consider the safety of what we are about to do. That is why members of FFLA have such a remarkable safety record. We understand the risks and we look out for each other when working together.

On page 8 (of the newsletter), New York Director Bill Starr emphasizes the importance of wearing a hard hat when working on towers. Even a hand wrench, when dropped 50' can raise a real knot on your head, or worse. If you don't already have a hard hat in your tool kit, get one! They are routine in most forestry activities. We all share experiences--many of them comical--such as being downwind of someone who is little too liberal with the paint on a brush! I have a hat with grey paint spots that originated quite a distance away....and it always brings back happy memories of painting a 40' Washington tower on a windy day.

As we get older and gain more field work experience, we can come to terms with our natural fear of heights. I know I did, and to be honest, it has been a relief. But it is just common sense to carefully evaluate the task before you. Both my wife, Lou, and I managed to climb the 200'+ Glouster Lookout Tree in Western Australia. The ladder is just spikes wrapping around the trunk and sticking out 3 feet. No safety fence, nothing but common sense of not letting go, and NEVER look down. (You worry about that when it is time to leave the cab, but that is another story!) Thousands of people are said to climb that fire tower every year, and no one has fallen off. Why would they? They are

certainly aware of the clear and present danger!

The message from Australia is that the Aussies have a much more common sense approach to public safety. It is OUR responsibility, first and foremost. When climbing a tower we need to be focused on climbing, and nothing else. That is why public access to the tree top lookout is still allowed. But it is essential that we as FFLA members, when working on towers, be vigilant not to get distracted by our work project. None of us want to experience or witness the consequences.

Based on my own experience as a forest ranger, plus 40 years as a National Ski Patroller, I always make sure I have a belay when working on high places. A belay is nothing more than a securely attached safety rope kept snug by your work partner. The rules here are just plain common sense: 1) Have a work partner capable of keeping the rope snug and wrapped on a secure surface capable of handling your weight 2) Use a harness, or wrap the rope on yourself with a practical sling rig so you don't suddenly slip out, 3) Keep three points of contact as much of possible (out of two hands, two feet, or body safely wedged with supports), 4) When on a precarious perch, have the tools handed to you or let down in a bucket. A hand with a wrench or hammer may be less than useful when working your way out to where you need to be.

A special word about Catwalks, those wonderful porches that surround the lookout cab, found most often on the larger live-in cabs common in the western states. Walk on them like a cat! As far as I am concerned, that is why they are called "cat walks." The rest of this column comes to you from my heart! Please take heed.

### **Just One Misstep, That's All it Took!**

In March, I was working replacing the beams supporting a catwalk on a cabin we own on the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, adjacent to Shenandoah National Park. I was not using a belay, opting instead to be very careful to be sure that any loose boards on the catwalk were in fact still sitting on support beams. Where those beams had been removed in this reconstruction project, I had installed temporary supports that were designed (poorly it turned out) to catch a misplaced foot on an unsecured board to keep me from falling through.

The fall was unbelievably swift. In an instant I went through the deck, not being able to catch anything with my arms on the way. I landed 12' below flat on my back on rocks, breaking my back in two places and doing yet undetermined damage to nerves and muscles from my shoulders to my tailbone. The quiver throughout my back at impact was a moment of white fear I will never, ever forget. It took the Rescue Squad three hours to get me backboarded and off the mountain to the UVA trauma center.

The really good news is that I can walk! For that I am forever grateful to the Good Lord, and extraordinary good luck. A good recovery is expected, but only time will tell at this stage of healing. Any lingering pain will be a lifelong reminder to me to always be careful.

I have been given a gift.....and a new resolve to never temp fate again. How? Pay attention to Safety First.....Don't Delay, Take Time to Belay!

We have two super summer meetings this year.....I look forward to meeting many of you there to learn and share the "Lookout Magic."

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