

# Survival Training Keeps Winter Safety on Track

**W**inter weather obstacles are a major factor in outside plant maintenance and service for a large part of the United States. Cold, wind and precipitation, alone or in any combination, can turn a routine task into one filled with hazards. Snow confronts workers a good part of the year for telcos in such scattered locations as New England, California, the Great Lakes, and the Rockies.

To prepare their employees for dealing with snow-related challenges, a number of telcos have sent personnel to Snow Craft Industries' Snow Vehicle Survival School. Based in Sedalia, Colorado, the program is the country's only fixed-location operation, maintenance and survival training school for snow vehicle operators. In addition to learning how to maintain and safely operate tracked snow vehicles, more commonly referred to as "snow cats," students learn how to cope and survive when emergencies arise, as they inevitably do. While participants have come from fleets as large as the 180 tracked snow vehicles operated by AT&T nationwide, the average is one or two.

According to Snow Craft president Art Seely, the training program is divided into three basic phases: classroom, shop, and field, with each section taught by an instructor who has expertise such areas as medicine, snow vehicle mechanics, map reading, snowmobile use, etc. Classroom sessions are held in the metropolitan Denver area; field sessions take place at Breckenridge, Colorado, where the 10,000-ft. elevation and 240 inches annual snow-

fall offer an ideal simulation of conditions workers might face on the job.

Snow situations vary from one part of the country to another. For technicians in Oregon the challenge may be operating their vehicles in heavy, wet slush, while Plains operators might be more likely to face white-out conditions. Training covers the varied conditions that can occur.

AT&T technician Billy Dolgener, who is based at an outside cable maintenance facility 50 miles north of Denver, echoed a common student comment of amazement that anyone lost in the snow is ever seen from the air. "It was really hard to see those on the ground," Dolgener stated after an aerial search exercise. "And we knew where to look!"

Dolgener emphasized the importance of staying with the vehicle if stranded, and keeping it clean.



*Survival techniques include learning how to build an emergency shelter.*

"The cats are bright orange and they're big," he points out, "but you're not going to be seen if they're covered with snow and hidden by branches."

For John Lindner, telecommunications technician for Tri-State Generation based in Westminster, Colorado, exercises in snow vehicle navigation were a top priority. As director of a survival school for the Colorado Mountain Club, Lindner was already proficient in survival skills, but points out that telecom technicians would not normally have such a background. Lindner's territory in the Rocky Mountains includes the country's highest base ski area where annual snowfall can reach 360 inches. "In many cases," Lindner points out, "we're out on our own, so it's especially important to know how to handle emergency situations."

One site on Tri-State's telecom path that runs diagonally across Wyoming is so remote that technicians, in this case a team, must make a four-and-a-half-hour snow cat ride just to reach the site.

Snowmobile and snowshoe exercises are taught as a secondary and usually less desirable method of transportation to be used only when snow vehicle transport has broken down. In addition to learning how to properly use different types of commercial snowshoes over varied terrain, students learn to quickly fashion snowshoes from materials on hand. Snowshoes can be improvised from three pine branches tied together at the front.

A physician who heads the region's largest hypothermia team, and a Colorado rescue paramedic

who has treated numerous cases of hypothermia in the field, brief the class on emergency medical care. Students learn what simple medications and treatments can save a life or limb if they become stranded under adverse conditions. The body can literally freeze to death in a matter of twenty or thirty minutes. Carbon monoxide poisoning is a particular threat to snow vehicle operators. According to Seely, testing has found that a full one-third

of snow cats in use have leaks in their exhaust systems. The vibration factor in all snow vehicles makes parts susceptible to metal fatigue and cracks in exhaust systems. The designs of certain models that place the gas pipe junction near the operator compartment make them particularly prone to problems.

"Many students think the physical symptoms they've encountered when operating their vehicles have

been 'a little travel sickness,'" Seely commented, "but you don't get travel sickness at 7 miles per hour."

Students also learn that units with well-designed exhaust systems in perfect condition can also have fatal levels of carbon monoxide under certain conditions, such as backing into a snow bank or hill. Common sense, a few simple rules, and carbon monoxide testers given to each student will minimize the carbon monoxide threat.

Shop training covers periodic maintenance procedures, special adjustments for extreme terrain; field repairs for tracks, engines, differentials, hydraulics and transmissions; proper adjustments to extend differential life; and trouble spots for different types of snow vehicles and how to spot them.

Additional classroom training deals with avalanche threat prediction and avoidance, map reading and altimeter use, and field meteorology. Students find that with accurate maps, altimeter and compass, they can correctly find their position and course to safety, even in white-out snow conditions.

Peninsula Telcom Inc., a subsidiary Pacific Telecommunications, located in Forks, Washington, sent two central office technicians to Snow Survival School. "We don't have the snow or the elevations you're talking about in Colorado," said Peninsula's Al Ramsaur, now a central office supervisor, "but we do service microwave sites where drifts can reach eight feet and you can be out of radio contact." Peninsula operates only one snow cat, and its area, the northwestern most tip of Washington State, receives most of its precipitation in the form of rain. Typical classes at Snow Survival School include students from other utilities, sheriff's departments, mining companies and government agencies as well as telephone companies. They all share a common need: to learn to use snow vehicles safely and effectively. **OP**

*Additional information on Snow Vehicle Survival School is available from Snow Craft Industries, (800) 345-SNOW.*



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