

I Nearly

By SSgt. Jason Marlow,
USAF,
Buckley AFB, Colo.

Several years ago, with the training of the Electrical Systems Apprentice course at Sheppard Air Base still fresh in my mind, I received a most interesting birthday present. It happened while I was on a routine interior electrical work order with an experienced E-4.

Our job was to hook up an air compressor inside a vehicle-storage shed. We just had arrived from another job and were setting up when the E-4 noticed the time and had to leave. He had a mandatory appointment, which was fine with me, because I had all the material I needed. Saying he'd be back as soon as possible, he suggested I install the conduit run to the distribution panel. We'd do the wiring when he returned.

Unfortunately, the E-4 still wasn't back when I finished installing a junction box and the 40-foot run of conduit, so I decided to run the wire (Wrong!). Circuitry for the compressor and existing control contactor nearly filled the conduit to capacity. I remem-



bered from tech school that you typically draw wire from the panel to the device so the free ends don't poke into something with voltage on it. Accordingly, I readied all the conductor strands and prepared to push the wire down to the compressor. I didn't think I needed a pull-wire, though (Wrong!).

So, to quote the late Bob Stevens, "There I was...alone" (Wrong!), working with a live panel (Wrong!), doing a two-man job by myself (Wrong!), in a deserted building. I think we all know what happened next—yep, Mr. Murphy, that

wonderful professor of the laws of applied practical probability showed up.

The conduit run I had installed proved to be a rough pull for the wire. I'd gotten it most of the way down before all the bends made further progress difficult. I was heaving and straining when I finally decided to wrap my free hand around the conduit connector to gain extra leverage—thereby grounding myself (Wrong!). While pushing on the bundle of wires, my hand slipped off and ran smack into the main, line-side, feed lug of A-phase.

Was Dead Wrong

You nearly could hear the bacon frying as my hand hit a 120-volt, 100-amp service-entrance feed. Nothing was protecting me but the transformer fuse—wherever that was—and it didn't even pop. I felt a jolt, and, an eyeblink later, I was standing two steps back from the panel, with the ladder I had been on still there. I then heard this really weird noise echoing off the walls of the deserted warehouse—it sounded like the fading echo of someone screaming. It sounded like me.

My left palm had a small, red dot where the setscrew on the connector was. I'd taken a 12-kilowatt feed arm-to-arm and somehow

I'd been doing everything wrong—I'd been an idiot.

still was alive. I'd been doing everything wrong—I'd been an idiot. I couldn't help thinking God must be saying, "Happy birthday, stupid!"

What about the job? After I finished swallowing my pride, I hauled out all that wire I had pushed in, then measured and cut a single wire and pushed it through for a pull wire. I next drew in the thick bundle from the panel by pulling at the compressor (still technically wrong because I was alone yet—but much smarter by comparison).

I finished wiring up everything and was tightening the last screw on the last cover to be replaced when my co-worker

returned.

I wondered where he had been for so long. At the same time, I realized I could have found out because he had left his radio with me. All I would have had to do was call him, but I'd never given it a thought—stupid me!

Every electrician I've ever met has at least one "gotten zapped" story; most have several. It's a part of the trade. We just hope and pray it's never serious. Thankfully, my story has a happy ending, but, for this one, there are hundreds more that end in tragedy. My advice to you is take heed and remember: Play it safe, and follow the darn rules. They exist for a reason. ■