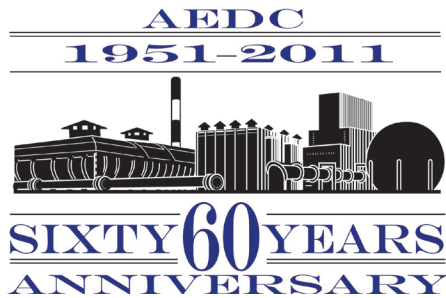


# Remembering those who lost their lives at AEDC



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It's an incredible amount of information on its own: the names of people who lost their lives on the job at AEDC over the last six decades.

Many employees at AEDC learned those names during Beyond Zero orientation, when former ATA general manager Dr. David Elrod visited their class. But he gave them more than a list of names.

He also told them ages, locations and causes of the 16 recorded deaths. They learned spouse names and how many children were left fatherless in each family. They even learned when Charles Neil Stratton died on June 5, 1958, it was a Thursday.

Dr. Elrod is able to give all of this information without referring to a Powerpoint presentation or a spreadsheet. He didn't carry a scrap of paper with him into class.

All of this information is burned into his mind after extensive research that included going through newspaper archives and talking with people who knew of the incidents firsthand.

"I didn't set out on the journey though to try and develop a presentation," Dr. Elrod said. "It was really trying to understand piece by piece what happened to these folks, and over time it kind of emerged into something you don't forget."

Stratton, the first recorded fatality



**A memorial in front of the Administration and Engineering Building displays names of 15 individuals who lost their lives in service at AEDC. (Photo by Rick Goodfriend)**

at AEDC in 1958, was a 30-year-old Marine Corps veteran working as a craftsman for Arnold Research Organization, the main contractor on base at the time. He was working at the Engine Test Facility's (ETF) "boondocks" area, behind the current J-4 test area. The valve from a k-bottle became overpressured and failed, striking him in the head. Stratton, who had a wife and daughter, died at Vanderbilt University Medical Center without regaining consciousness.

On Dec. 17, 1962, four men died during construction of the J-4 facility. At 4 p.m. on that Monday afternoon, steel scaffolding that was holding up 840 tons of freshly-poured concrete collapsed. The four men – W.A. Anderson of Beech Grove, Ernie Beitel of Manchester, Woodrow Darden of Normandy and William D. Lowrie of Monteagle – fell about 250 feet to their deaths. Several other people were hurt, but the accident happened during

a shift change and the area was not as crowded as it had been minutes before.

"That's one where I always pictured it being just before Christmas and the cold weather coming in, folks wanting to get construction done and kind of in a rush of doing the job," Dr. Elrod said. "That likely had some contribution to it."

Another person would not lose their life at AEDC for almost three and a half years; then, there was another deadly fall at the J-4 facility. ARO carpenter Wayne McBee, 33, Estill Springs, was working in the J-4 spray chamber when he fell 180 feet from a scaffold. He apparently wasn't secured to the scaffold.

"As in a number of these cases, safety practices that we require today weren't in place then," Dr. Elrod said. "I don't know other details other than he fell to his death in the chamber. He had three young daughters at home."

On May 25, 1970, ARO crafts-

man John Serafin, 54, of Murfreesboro, was seriously injured when he opened a valve at the Engine Test Facility and an oxygen hose ruptured. According to reports, Serafin was treated for shrapnel wounds in Coffee County Hospital in Manchester. He asked to be transferred to Rutherford Hospital in Murfreesboro and died on the way there. The retired Air Force sergeant had a wife and six children.

Two men died in the next incident on Dec. 10, 1971. John T. Hill, 41, Decherd, was working with two other men in an offline furnace at the Engine Support Facility. Hill entered the furnace first and fell down, unconscious. Alvin D. Overman, 51, Tullahoma, went in to help and also passed out just seconds after entering. Attempts to revive both men ultimately failed. It was later determined that argon gas – which has no color or odor – had leaked into the furnace.

Dr. Elrod says Hill's and Overman's deaths serve as an example of danger lurking somewhere that appeared to be relatively safe. Today, anyone entering a confined space goes through a series of procedures. One person goes in first to sample the air with a meter to make sure it's breathable. That person wears a harness so if something happens, they can be pulled to safety without anyone else entering the space.

"Those three things – confined space entry, gas sampling and the harness system – none of those were requirements at that time," Dr. Elrod said. "Any one of them could have helped result in a different outcome."

AEDC would go almost seven years without another fatal incident on base. Then on Aug. 4, 1978, 58-year-old Thomas Himebaugh of Fayetteville would be involved

in an accident at the Aerodynamic and Propulsion Test Unit (APTU). Himebaugh, a pipefitter, was doing routine maintenance work in a heater pit when a large metal box lid fell from 48 feet above and struck him.

"It's amazing," Dr. Elrod said. "In APTU, they have 4,000-psi air and combustible gases, extremely hot temperatures, extremely fast gas velocities as they test hypersonic propulsion systems – they have almost every danger you can imagine. The only fatality that's ever occurred there had nothing to do with any of those hazards. It was something you could book as a housekeeping issue of just securing objects. And it's the same kind of hazard we have today with folks who have to work with somebody above them. We walk out in the industrial area today and folks are working at heights. It's not something we list as the biggest hazard, but it can have fatal consequences."

Four people would lose their lives on Nov. 27, 1982, at the J-4 test cell. Three Aerojet employees from California – 57-year-old Dona J. Roy, 49-year-old Murray A. Tauscher and 58-year-old Arthur Totten – were in the bottom of the cell cutting up solid rocket fuel from a failed rocket test. The fuel ignited, causing an explosion that also killed Sverdrup outside machinist John P. Sipe, 52, of Summitville. Sipe was standing guard at a door to keep unnecessary personnel from entering the area. He happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"One of those aspects of this story that always struck me is that was not John's assignment for the day," Dr. Elrod said. "It was another person's assignment to serve as guard. The other guy who was supposed to be serving as guard just needed to take a break. I don't know if it was

to get a cup of coffee or go to the bathroom – don't know what it was. John was walking by and he asked John to take his place for just a minute. It was just a few minutes after he walked off that this event took place."

Sipe left behind a wife and four sons.

Another fall took place on Halloween in 1984. Larry Childers, 38, Tullahoma, was working for a subcontractor painting a crane at J-4. He fell 120 feet from scaffolding. From all indications, Dr. Elrod said, Childers was not tied off when he fell. Not long before the accident, an ETF worker concerned about the work tried to intervene – but was not successful in his efforts to insist on using greater caution.

"I talked to him just a year or so ago, and he still carries that struggle with him," Dr. Elrod said. "When he intervenes with people on safety issues, he won't let go until people really listen. He tried then, but I suppose it's that piece that sticks with all of us: when you see somebody do something that's risky and you want to help out, how far do you go in stopping and getting their attention? Our obligation is to do whatever it takes."

The last fatal incident on base was April 23, 2001, at the Propulsion Wind Tunnel Facility (PWT) Model Installation building. Arcenio Avila was a Guatemalan native working for a subcontractor that was demolishing the roof. Someone had removed an exhaust fan during the night and the safety barrier was missing. As Avila backed up with a wheelbarrow, he tripped and fell through the hole where the fan had been. Avila had been in America three weeks.

Those 16 deaths are the ones that have been recorded. According to



Dr. Elrod, there have been five others in three separate incidents. Two of those incidents apparently happened at AEDC in the 1950s and 1960s, and one other incident at the Tunnel 9 facility in White Oak, Md., in the 1970s cost two people their lives. Efforts to find documentation or people who remember those incidents about those incidents have been unsuccessful – a point that hits home with Dr. Elrod.

“I struggle with how short-lived our memories are of those kinds of things – how quickly we sometimes lose that information,” he said. “If it was your dad, grandfather, whatever, and you stopped by and folks didn’t have that sense of where it happened and the sorrow that your family’s life was impacted ... we just owe that to folks.”

Great strides have been taken in workplace safety since 1958, which was 12 years before the Occupational Safety and Health Act that created OSHA. Even the smallest advances in safety – such as ensuring an employee working more than four feet off the ground is tied off or that barricades are recognized – can have a huge impact, Dr. Elrod said.

But what can’t be eliminated are the hazards many employees still have to work around today. There are still non-breathable gases used. People still have to work at great heights above ground. There are still high-pressure systems in operation. They are hazards that come with the nature of the work done at AEDC. The safety methods developed and in use today are all aimed at keeping workers safe around those hazards.



**A photograph is still pinned up on a wall in AEDC’s Model Shop today from when John Hill, left, and Alvin D. Overman, second from left, received an ARO award. Overman and Hill died in 1971 after they entered a confined space in the Model Shop area, not knowing argon gas had leaked inside. The date on the picture indicates it was taken almost exactly a year before they died. (Photo by Rick Goodfriend)**

“Even though sometimes we focus hard on what seem to be minor injuries, it’s more on getting the process right with the belief that process prevents big and small – and the belief that once an instance starts to unfold, we don’t control the outcome,” Dr. Elrod said. “Once that plate in APTU started to fall, nobody had control of whether it was going to hit somebody or not. Our intervention opportunity is really before the accident ever starts to unfold.”

But AEDC’s employees see the need for safety procedures and have a broad and common acceptance for the need to look out for each other, he said. And that’s what makes him proud of AEDC.

“I’m very positive about the rec-

ognition and priority that’s given to the value of individuals here,” he said. “Arguably, one of the most important accomplishments we achieve each day is enabling our co-workers to go home at the end of each day whole – to live out their lives with family and friends and loved ones without ever facing the trauma of a major accident here. And there is a collateral benefit as well: the fact that strong safety habits and culture instilled here get carried home and as a result are safekeeping for people who aren’t employees here – the family members or friends of co-workers. It means a lot to think that good people here touch lives of others in such a meaningful and positive way.”