

Y-12's Training and Technology – TAT and Ricky Seals

Here is Ricky's TAT story:

"I ran across some of your articles concerning TAT and thought I would share mine. I was a recent high school graduate who had barely managed to graduate and was headed down the wrong road. I had taken employment in Chattanooga, mostly operating a jack hammer.

"Although I had been raised on a farm and was accustomed to hard work, I was never entirely fond of it. It didn't take me long to realize that running a jack hammer in 110-degree heat was not the best career to choose. I needed a skill.

"Therefore I signed up for a free welding class in Chattanooga that was to begin in the fall, although I had no clue how I was going to attend without any source of income. I had worked the night shift and after work drove to our county seat to visit my cousin, who was in jail. Not sure why he was there, but he probably needed to be.

"After visiting him, I stopped by the county employment office across the street to sign up for the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program. At that time the CETA program was getting more difficult to get in, but I didn't have anything to lose by signing up. I entered the office, and the lady stated she had an opening in Oak Ridge, about 150 miles away, if I was interested. The school there offered welding.

"I asked, 'Will I get paid?' She answered that pay was at minimum wage and the school was free, I said 'Sign me up.' She told me to be in Oak Ridge the next morning, take an aptitude test, and I would be in if I passed.

"I worked that night and afterwards drove to Oak Ridge, stopping at a rest area for a sink bath to get some of the dirt and grime off. I took the aptitude test and then was taken on a tour of the TAT school — welding shop, machine shop, drafting, and finally the physical testing labs.

"I inquired as to what physical testing was. 'Welding inspection' was the answer. I said, 'Can you get a job doing that?' 'Sure' was the answer. Therefore, I asked if I could change from welding to physical testing as it appeared to be a cleaner and easier looking career. They signed me up, and the next week I was in school to be a 'welding inspector.' I had never heard of such a profession.

"It didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't in high school anymore, where I seldom ever studied or even made an effort. During the first week at TAT ("Test After Test" was how we referred to it), I was given a book that might as well have been written in Greek, and a day or so later was given a test on the 'whole book.'

"I made a 60 and was immediately called into the office and given an ultimatum: make another similar grade and you are out of here. I never failed another test, and I studied relentlessly while I was there since I had, in essence, not learned anything since about the sixth grade.

"I graduated and after a couple of months acquired a job with TVA in their corporate power offices in Chattanooga. I was working in predominately a non-destructive evaluation (NDE) group with some mechanical, welding, and metallurgical engineers. Also, I was performing inspection work at the various operating coal, nuclear, and hydroelectric power plants.

"I worked there for a few years, gaining some key experience, and then moved on to companies such as General Electric, working nuclear power plant outages all over the world and doing inspection-related activities.

"I would become an ultrasonic specialist working with a lot of automated equipment on piping and vessels and later in remote underwater applications. I became a Level III specialist in ultrasonics by the time I was 25, and I guess I've have had a very successful career as I reflect back.

"Although there are things I have disliked about my chosen (or happened-upon) career, such as too much travel away from home, I realize I am very fortunate. I also realize without TAT, I would probably be in a low-paying job without any job security.

"I am currently back working with TVA, for the third time over the last 32 years since TAT, and am looking forward to retiring in a few years. I seldom run into many of my classmates, although one is also employed here at TVA.

"I had Terry Barnes as an instructor for ultrasonic testing/eddy current testing, Hugh Longmire for metallurgy, and Ernie (can't remember his last name, he was my favorite, however) for radiographic testing. Ernie was the lead instructor. In addition, there were three instructors from Oak Ridge Associated Universities, for math, physics, and blueprint. Their names escape me — one was a very nice lady, and all were great teachers.

"I attended TAT in the fall of 1977 until the spring of 1978. It was a great program. CETA was a great opportunity also, and I owe both of them a lot and don't know why either, much less both, have disappeared from our landscape.

"There is currently a shortage of NDE and welding folks in the power industry, and we could use a great school like TAT, turning out a new generation of skilled professionals.

"Enjoyed reading your articles about TAT and brought back some fond memories. Thanks."

— *Ricky Seals*

There you have a very personal story of someone who was obviously headed for early failure and possibly jail. He took control of his situation and found something more suited to his liking than a jack hammer. I am convinced TAT did more than just teach him a skill; it taught him responsibility and did it quickly.