



A Black Hawk and a Geologist

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I didn't think too much of the red beacon light as I passed through the entrance gate my first day at a laser testing facility in central Florida. It was off, and to me, this didn't seem like anything more than the typical contamination assessment field event at this type of facility. All I knew was that I needed to find this light in case it was turned on, so I was just glad I didn't have to waste any time hunting for it. As the site geologist, my main focus was to find the drillers, so we could get moving with the well drilling and sampling needed for delineating a possible contaminated groundwater plume. We had a lot of work to accomplish in a short amount of time, so the days would be long and the last thing I needed were any delays.

The facility itself was very modest with nondescript industrial buildings of tan, stucco exteriors and few windows. As I rounded the corner to the back, there was an immense open field primarily of tall weeds opposite an observation tower with windows. My work that day, and for numerous weeks thereafter, would not be in the air-conditioned tower with a view. It would be in the field. And not just any field.

I later found out that the same field where we would be working was the exact location in which the facility workers would be shooting laser beams over our heads and toward targets at the farthest reaches of the field. Oh yeah, and then I was told that the less than obvious beacon light near the entrance gate was our warning sign that testing would be occurring. Only this light had no siren. No bells, whistles or spine-tingling screeches to warn us to get out of the way. And if we didn't, there was a risk that we could be inflicted with retina burns. As I gazed upon the bull's-eyes set for target practice, I couldn't help but question the facility workers' aim - and their training, for that matter.

For the first two weeks, we installed and sampled monitoring wells and stopped field activities when the light

came on. Several times I didn't notice the light right away and cringed at the thought of laser testing going on around us. Testing we could not see or hear. It was unnerving, and I couldn't wait for the job to be over, and not only for me, but also for the drillers and helpers working at the site. We had about another week to go, and I just wanted out!

That was until the evening when the wind whipped up so rapidly, I didn't have a chance to grab my groundwater sampling logs, and they ended up all over the field. I swiftly ran after them, as the data on the logs could not be replaced. The wind grew stronger by the second, followed by a loud, whip-ping sound, and I finally realized what was causing all the commotion. It was a helicopter. I watched it as it flew in very low and landed on a concrete pad adjacent to the field. And then I proceeded to curse the helicopter crew under my breath, as I rounded up my week's irreplaceable worksheets. The drillers, on the other hand, just stood there in awe, as they watched the blades wind down. And I remember thinking, "What? Haven't they seen a helicopter before?"

I was somewhat amused by them and walked over to find out the sudden interest. The lead driller asked if I knew what kind of helicopter just landed. I did not - and truthfully, didn't care. To me, this overrated chopper and its pompous crew were nothing but a menace.

That was until I found out that it was a Black Hawk.

I turned to look back at the helicopter with the same awe as the drillers, I'm sure. And with the same curiosity watched as the crew departed, and the helicopter was moved into a nearby hanger. I knew at that moment, that I had to see inside.

I asked the drillers if they thought I'd have any chance at looking inside the Black Hawk. They laughed at me.

The helicopter crew returned to the hanger, and I decided that I couldn't

let this opportunity go. So, I grabbed my clipboard and marched myself up to the hanger. I introduced myself and the gentlemen were very kind to let me use the phone. After updating my office on the progress of field activities, I proceeded to thank the crew. And as I made conversation with them, one of the crew pointed to the helicopter and asked the question I wanted to hear. "Do you want to look inside?"

I walked up to the Black Hawk slowly, wanting to take in every moment, and glanced out towards the drillers who were watching me with crossed arms. The side door of the helicopter was open and the body was low to the floor. I tried not to gawk too much, as I came closer to the four blades hanging over its dark, rugged body. Two crew members were working on the inside console with buttons and switches with which I was not familiar. I didn't care though. This was cool. I was cool. I leaned into the Black Hawk for a minute to look at the cockpit, very aware that I was holding onto a part of history, and wondered how many troops had also been in this very spot. The pilot advised me that they would be testing their laser night vision equipment. That it was malfunctioning. That they would be testing it all week. I was cool. Very cool.

I strutted back towards the drillers who just smiled at me and shook their heads when I returned. Somehow I wasn't wishing to leave anymore. And when my papers littered the field later that evening, I still cursed the pilot for flying too low (I swear he liked to watch me run around), but a part of me still smiled.

In the end, we saw the Black Hawk fly in and out two more times during that week, and we left the site unscathed and with a good story to tell. Geology field work can definitely have its challenges, but the rewarding experiences outweigh the rest. For more field experience stories, follow Sandie's blog at www.rockheadsciences.com.