The Fast Flux Test Facility — tribute to a loyal workforce

Karin Nickola, *Fluor Hanford*

FFTF operations manager Harv Harville stands in the FFTF containment dome. In the background is the Closed Loop Ex-Vessel Machine, used for moving fuel.

The fate of the Fast Flux Test Facility is still uncertain. And, because of continuing legal proceedings, not much more can be said in this venue about what the final outcome might be.

But there is another FFTF story that bears telling. It is about dedicated people with real jobs who report to work every day, to do what must be done until a path forward is solidified.

The 27-year veteran

"Harv" Harville was born and raised in Payette, Idaho. In 1975, after serving as an instructor in the Navy, he came to Hanford to work on the FFTF project. As an operator, Harv's first job assignment was in the 300 Area — testing sodium systems and the Closed Loop Ex-vessel Machine, commonly referred to as CLEM. Today he is an FFTF operations manager with more than 60 people reporting to him.

Harville's main job responsibility is to keep the planned work on track, and that requires a lot of communication.

On a typical workday, Harville arrives early to review his e-mail and read the plant log from the "shut down" watch. By 6:30 a.m. he is in the plant, observing shift manager "turnover" and receiving a daily status report. By 7:10, he's attending the "plan of the day" meeting so he knows the status of each item in the weekly plan. By 7:40, he's with the Plant, Engineering, RadCon, Training and Maintenance managers discussing daily work in progress. By 8 a.m., he's checking on the work being performed.

A 1978 Westinghouse newsletter read, "Len 'Harv' Harville, FFTF operator, opens valves in the FFTF reactor coolant system to permit sodium to flow into the first of three secondary loops."

An avid runner who has completed 14 marathons, Harville is also a bit of an FFTF history buff with an interesting collection of Hanford paraphernalia. One black-and-white newsletter in his file cabinet pictures him at 11:45 a.m. on Sunday, July 2, 1978, turning the valve that brought sodium into the FFTF cooling system.

"I'll never forget that day," Harville said. "The Hanford Engineering and Development Laboratory that operated the FFTF was managed by Westinghouse then. It was exciting to be a part of the activity. I still have the orange announcement pin awarded for the successful sodium fill."

Fittingly, Harville was chosen to open the valve to begin draining sodium from the plant, first scheduled to

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take place Monday, Nov. 6, 1995 — an action that was terminated just hours before initiation.

"I'm very proud of this plant," said Harville. "I thoroughly enjoy my job and the people I work with. My co-workers are not only some of the best and brightest in the industry, but many have become good friends. There's a working atmosphere here that's hard to describe. I guess the heart of it is, the people are very committed to working well and getting their jobs done safely, regardless of the mission."

To date, Harville has been with the FFTF project for 27 years.

About 25 years after he started the sodium flowing in the FFTF, operations manager Harv Harville converses with operator Dan Golden in the reactor's control room.

An FFTF returnee

Duane Burstad, a former Air Force nuclear-weapons technician, came to Hanford in 1976 from the Bremerton Naval Shipyard, where he was working as a radiological control technician. He was assigned to the FFTF on a temporary basis in 1978 to help with construction, and his main job responsibilities were making sure workers followed personal exposure radiological control rules and detecting leaks by performing weld-inspection X-rays. He was permanently assigned to the FFTF in 1979.

Burstad eventually became part of a team tasked with writing instrumentation test procedures for engineers. He also helped write a qualification program for RCTs, and trained them when they were newly assigned to the FFTF.

FFTF senior health physicist Duane Burstad evaluates hand-and-foot monitors as Ruben Silvas "surveys out" of the FFTF reactor containment building.

"In those days, RCTs were called radiation monitors," said Burstad. "The title was changed to differentiate people from the hand-held monitoring instruments of the same name."

During the early 1980s, he was assigned to shift work at FFTF. His job was to verify that reactor hot-cell shielding was placed correctly so workers wouldn't incur "shine" from voids where radiation streams could exceed acceptable dose rates.

Relocated to the 300 Area in the mid-'80s, Burstad wrote the first Westinghouse RCT Certification Program. That was followed by a two-year stint in the 200 Area where he consolidated United Nuclear, Rockwell and Westinghouse RadCon procedures. The consolidation formed a basis for the site-wide standard still in use today.

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In 1992, Burstad returned to the FFTF to serve as a health physicist. He's currently a senior health physicist at the facility, with more 12 years of FFTF experience under his belt.

"One of the things I have always liked about FFTF is its organizational structure," Burstad said. "The facility has kept a strong central core of people who know how the plant works and are intent on ensuring that things are done correctly. Sometimes that means continuing on with conventional modes of operation. Other times, it means finding a better way. And, while staff members are always cognizant of abiding by the rules, they aren't stuck in their ways or resentful of change. It's very refreshing and makes working together a whole lot easier."

Burstad has always had an interest in photography. At one time, he had his own darkroom and especially enjoyed using innovative techniques to print black-and-white photographs on special-effects papers. Today, when he is not helping his wife compete in dressage compulsories, Burstad spends his spare time reading up on the latest developments in digital photography and electronic photo editing.

A relative newcomer

Tom Scotto is a technical-specifications coordinator and scheduler at FFTF. Raised on Oregon's "wet side" in Saint Helens, he and his family now enjoy living on Washington's dryer side of the mountains. In their spare time, the Scottos raise cherry trees (including new varieties), train and board horses, and go camping and fly-fishing in the back country on horseback.

Before arriving at Hanford in 1993, Scotto worked for the Japanese Gas Corporation's Nuclear and Advanced Technology division as a test engineer, maintenance technician and control-room lead shift operator at the Surry Radiological Waste Facility in Smithfield, Va. While at Surry, Scotto also wrote plant operating and emergency-response procedures, conducted on-the-job training for new operators and began writing operating procedures for Hanford's 200 East Area Effluent Treatment Facility. Eventually, the company transferred him back to the west coast to continue writing procedures and begin classroom training and certification programs. Scotto continued his work with the 200 Area project as an employee of Science Applications International Corporation, or SAIC, before hiring on at FFTF.

At right, FFTF project control specialist Kathy Higgins instructs FFTF technical specifications coordinator and scheduler Tom Scotto in the use of project scheduling software.

Besides normal FFTF job responsibilities — which include identifying, scheduling, developing and closing out work packages — Scotto is very enthusiastic about new computer software skills he is acquiring. The software enables users to quickly shift variables and analyze new scenarios that determine how much time and how many resources are needed to complete hypothetical workscopes.

"The people I interface with are really good for me, and I enjoy working with them, tremendously," said Scotto. "They are so knowledgeable of facility systems, and they're consistently patient and supportive of one another. Even though their mission keeps changing, this group of people always seems able to quickly and competently take stock of where they are and where they need to go."

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Scotto finds FFTF to be like any typical workplace with its ups and downs. “But I have worked in organizations with far fewer people and not known the professionalism I have known at FFTF,” he said. He’s been at FFTF just short of 10 years.

Uncommon people

Even under the best working conditions, some individuals aren’t happy with their job situations. And they move on for a variety of reasons — higher pay, better benefits, job security, family responsibilities or a more fulfilling career.

At FFTF those individuals seem to be the exception rather than the rule. It is hard to find someone who doesn’t have something good to say about the place and the people — even with thoughts of *if* and *when* on their minds.

When employees reflect on the Fast Flux Test Facility, the word that surfaces most often is “professionalism.” Despite the twists and turns in the road toward cleanup, the people who work there do not shirk their duties or draw apart from one another. Rather, like a championship athletic team, they rally with incredible dignity — pulling together at all levels, drawing strength from each other and doing what must be done.

It’s this extraordinary commitment to their joint effort and doing a job well that is keeping FFTF on track *until*… ■