



Aerial lineman Kenneth “Badger” Knight prepares for an early morning job working on live high-voltage transmission lines in Texas.

Photo courtesy of Kenneth Knight

# Nerves of Steel

*Aerial lineman Kenneth “Badger” Knight works on live high-voltage transmission lines*

By Dianna Troyer

To commute to work, aerial lineman Kenneth “Badger” Knight hops into an MD500 helicopter—an aircraft known for being small, yet powerful and highly maneuverable.

“It’s the greatest bucket truck in the world,” says Badger, who is whisked hundreds of feet aloft to work on live high-voltage transmission lines and towers.

Depending on the project, Badger is tethered to his perch on a platform or a ladder, or he dangles by a 100-foot rope from a helicopter.

“We maintain and inspect the lines while they’re energized and provide support for contractors who are building

new lines,” Badger says.

The live lines have 69,000 to 765,000 volts of electricity flowing through them.

“Utilities don’t want to shut down a line for maintenance and have an outage that disrupts the grid,” he says.

Badger and other linemen wash or replace insulators, install 36-inch aerial marker balls and bird deflectors and splice energized conductors.

The 41-year-old Connor Creek native has been an aerial lineman for two years.

“I can’t imagine doing anything else,” he says. “It’s never boring, and I like to travel. I never know where they’ll send me next until they email me a plane ticket. I’ve been to so many states that it’s easier to say where I haven’t worked. I’ve

never been to Hawaii and wouldn’t mind being sent there for the winter.”

North Dakota during winter was a challenging job site.

“When it’s minus 40, you can be outside the helicopter only about 10 minutes,” Badger says.

Typically, Badger works 45 days, then returns home to Connor Creek for a week or two before his next assignment.

For Badger, a career in the electrical industry seemed natural. His father, Ken, worked as an electrician for Raft River Rural Electric Co-op.

After graduating from Raft River High School, Badger enrolled at the Northwest Lineman College in Meridian and worked for several companies as a lineman.



**Clockwise from above, Badger with his typical kit, including helmet and Farady suit. Badger works on lines while perched on a platform attached to a helicopter.**

Photos on right courtesy of Kenneth Knight

“A couple of years ago, I wanted some new career challenges,” he says.

Badger researched companies that employed aerial linemen and says he was impressed with Haverfield Aviation, headquartered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The company has worked with every major utility in the U.S. for the past 30 years.

Haverfield was the first company to successfully bond a lineman to a live transmission line, similar to a bird perching on a line unharmed.

“The company is known for its solid safety record, too,” says Badger. “It had 500-plus consecutive days without employees having an accident or OSHA violation. It’s unheard of in the industry.”

Badger says after watching YouTube videos of Haverfield linemen at work, he knew he wanted to work for the company.

“It looked like a fascinating job,” Badger says. “I couldn’t stop thinking about it, so I finally called the corporate office, got an interview and was hired.”

Badger says he was nicknamed by his grandfather, Lyle Durfee, for his fearless personality as a child. Those traits help him on the job.

He says he does not feel fear even when he is 300 feet off the ground because he is focusing on the task at hand and does not look down while working.

Mindful of on-the-job dangers, Badger says he starts his workdays with a prayer. He also has a pair of eyes tattooed on the back of his shaven head.

“It reminds me that I’m the one watching my back and that I have to trust myself for my own safety,” he says.

Badger says there are a few misconceptions about his job.

“People think we’re adrenaline junkies and millionaires, but we’re neither,” he says. “You can’t take any risks. You have to be methodical with everything you do. We get paid well enough, but I can’t afford to retire until I’m in my 60s like everyone else.”

Badger is part of a small crew: a pilot, a mechanic and two linemen.

“We drive a 450-gallon fuel truck to the job site because the helicopter burns so much fuel,” Badger says.

Depending on the weather, he works Monday through Saturday, starting at 5 or 6 a.m. when air turbulence is minimal.

“We might quit at noon if the winds pick up, or other days we might work 10 hours,” he says.

To protect himself, Badger wears a helmet and lightweight flannel-like work pants and shirt lined with stainless steel fibers.

“It’s called a Faraday suit and prevents electricity from flowing through the body,” he explains. “The current flows on the outer portion of a conductor instead of through it. The suit builds a field, so electricity flows around us.”

When his aerial work is done, Badger says he takes a few minutes to appreciate his bird’s eye view of the world.

“In Florida, we had to pull a line that ran over the St. Johns River near Jacksonville,” he says. “You could look down and see dolphins swimming around.”

While home recently, Badger says he happened to watch a television program about the 10 most dangerous jobs.

“Aerial lineman was number 10,” he says. “But for me, the rewards outweigh the risks. I’ll retire from Haverfield. If I’m not in the air, I could see myself teaching in the classroom.” ■