

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

FRIDAY, MARCH 2, 2007

## Shaky hand Nolte, 659 feet up in the air and not looking down

Carl Nolte, Chronicle Staff Writer

Remember the movie "Cool Hand Luke"? Luke was a prisoner in a chain gang, and he wanted to make a point about what a tough guy he was.

"I can eat 50 eggs," he told his fellow cons. "You watch."

That was me. My idea about climbing up atop the highest construction crane in San Francisco was like that. I had always been interested in those high cranes that are used to build big buildings. I thought, I ought to go up in one, sometime. I can do that. You watch.

We had been doing a series of stories about One Rincon for a year now, about workers, and developers and planners.

So I told my editors I wanted to go. They'll take any kind of story. Then I had to talk Bovis Lend Lease, the contractors, into letting me up there. They were hesitant, to say the least, then said they were going to train me, then finally gave in. "Sign here," said Vicente Roman, a project engineer, who was my escort. It was a release; if anything happened, it wasn't their fault.

Mike Kepka was The Chronicle photographer assigned to go with me. He's young and fit. I, on the other hand, am what we call a seasoned reporter, not young and not fit.

So anyway, up the construction elevator — the hoist — to the 30th floor. "Over there,"

said Roman, who was at the edge of the building. He pointed to a wooden plank that led out over what looked like an abyss to the crane itself.

He climbed over a big pipe, then across the plank, then over some kind of other piece of metal.

"Follow me," he said.

I had forgotten one thing: I am afraid of heights. But I guess I am more afraid of being afraid, so I went out there. Don't think, I thought. Don't look down.

Now there was a ladder, steel rungs, straight up. It was the first of eight ladders, each with 24 rungs and ending with a small platform, called stages. I could look right out, through the steel lattice work of the crane structure, out at the city, out at the tall buildings, all lower than me.

You have to get to the top of the ladder, pull yourself up, clamp a hand on some kind of rail, turn half way, then start up again. About the second set of ladders, I began to think: You

know what? I am terrified.

What was I thinking of climbing this ladder? How about if I called the crane guy on the phone and interviewed him? I wouldn't have to go up there. And whose idea was this anyway? Can't give up. Keep

pull yourself up." I did and stood up at the top.

You know what was out there? Nothing but air. It was like being on the wing of an airplane, oddly pleasant. I was so scared I wasn't scared any more.



Reporter Carl Nolte (right) and photographer Mike Kepka hang tough on the crane at One Rincon Hill. Chronicle photo by Mike Kepka

going, right hand up a rung, pull up the left leg, keep going. It went on forever, up and up.

After awhile, Roman said, "Almost there. Only three more stages."

When I got to the top, holy Christ, no more ladders. We had to scramble over some metal stuff. "Put your foot there," said Roman, "Now

Going down wasn't so bad, but on the street level, Kepka and I gave each other high fives.

I wanted to kiss the ground, but I was afraid someone would see me.

*Carl Nolte has worked for the Chronicle for 45 years.*