Bridge Worker Falls Through Unsecured Opening

Falling through an opening on a bridge deck under construction wasn’t Tom’s* idea of how he wanted to leave his mark in the world. If only the deck pan had been secured. If only he hadn’t tripped or lost his balance. If only he could have reversed time and done something different.
If only. . .

Tom’s Background
Tom was a steel worker who was hired from a union hall. He had worked for the decking subcontractor since the beginning of the project (about 2.5 years). The employer considered him a good worker and was planning to promote him to foreman.

What Happened
The company Tom worked for had been hired to install corrugated steel decking pans on two bridges (prior to pouring concrete to form the bridge deck). Tom was preparing to secure the last pan when he lost his balance or tripped on a piece of rebar. This caused him to fall against the unsecured pan, which fell through the opening, carrying Tom with it. He was killed instantly after falling 55 feet (17 meters) and landing head first on a concrete pylon below.

Tom had not been wearing fall protection. Although this area of the bridge was equipped with safety railings along the sides, there were no rails or safety lines along the beams where the pans were placed, according to investigators.

Workers Take Heed
Employees should follow these recommendations to prevent similar deaths when working on bridges:

- Fall protection gear should be used when working at heights above six feet. And when workers wear the required safety harnesses and lanyards, they must be secured to an “anchor”

point. Too often workers wear safety harnesses that are not properly anchored to prevent a fall. (A number of fall protection devices provide the mobility needed by ironworkers. One example is to use a retractable reel system that feeds out a safety line as the worker moves.)

- Workers should ensure they are involved in a job hazard analysis prior to any task. Such an analysis will assess the hazards they face and help them avoid injuries on the job.

* *The names aren't real, but the incidents are. These accounts are based on actual fatality investigations.*