Contractor Dies in Tank

A contractor inspecting the seals inside a large gasoline storage tank did not make it out alive. He was overcome by the toxic vapors in the tank and unable to escape or call for help.

His partner was stationed outside the tank awaiting his return. It was arranged that the system of communication would involve tapping with a rock on the inner or outer wall of the tank.

The only safety equipment the team had was the self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) worn by the victim, and an unused safety line left outside the tank. Investigation indicated the victim had not been wearing the SCBA correctly and had lost consciousness after breathing in the deadly vapors. It took several hours to extricate the victim’s body from the tank after his partner went for help.

This unfortunate incident illustrates some of the many dangers of confined space entry. Lack of communication between the worker inside and the standby personnel, and lack of a rescue plan were serious mistakes. Incorrect use of the SCBA by the worker inside, and lack of SCBAs for standby personnel also contributed to the tragedy. Never underestimate the dangers of confined spaces. Follow all applicable safety precautions, starting with obtaining training and authorization right through to preparing for a rescue situation. Whether you work for the company or a contractor, the hazards are the same.