

The Power Guy from Mageroy ***Nordlys Newspaper, November 15, 2014***

Kjell Ostensen led what is touted as one of the last century important energy projects. But really he should be a fighter pilot.

- The challenge in my industry is that no one is sitting with a final answer. We must try and fail. It's about finding your way from the laboratory to an everyday product anyone can use. It is time consuming, but something we must do for our planet.

The guy from Mageroy, Kjell Ostensen sits casually attired in his home in the Hollywood Hills. Since the beginning of the 80's he has lived among super celebrities and rich people. In this neighborhood, he is probably one of the few who work in civil service.

Kjell has been an engineer and project manager for this great city's power company, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, for almost 30 years.

Most of the time he has worked with fuel cells - a technology based on converting chemical energy forms like natural gas directly into electricity - a transformation that gives almost zero pollution, and as little energy as possible goes to waste.

The challenges with fuel cells are high costs and their durability.

- Still there remains work to do, he says.

Getting fighter pilot dream shattered

Interest in technology is awakened in childhood. His father, Arne Ostensen is electric utility manager in Honningsvåg located on Norway's northernmost island Mageroy. The boy follows with interest the work being done, but also feels wanderlust. At the pier he can hear several languages and at the theater he looks at alluring images from abroad. It is safe and well on Mageroy, but also very predictable. The urge to explore is becoming stronger.

After competing high school in Kirkenes near the Russian border, he is recruited to the Army. There he serves in the military police and is stationed in the north near Tromsø, but he has not forgotten his fascination for aircraft from childhood. Then you could see fighters roar across the sky in Honningsvåg. Maybe they were on their way to intercept a Russian aircraft in the Barents Sea? The Cold War and the Iron Curtain created a spectacular framework for pilot dreams.

- The disappointment was therefore great when I got the message I was too long in the body for a F16 cockpit, he admits.

Instead he is admitted to the Air Force flying school to become a transport pilot. After completing his service obligation he leaves military life to study mechanical engineering at Trondheim Technical School (TTS). Later he competes his pilot's license in the US, and is for several years the owner of a Cessna 182 Skyline.

Escapes the Alexander Kielland accident

Graduating as a mechanical engineer opens opportunities to work as junior engineer onboard the cruise ship Royal Viking Sky. The ship will travel between the US, Australia and Asia. The year is 1975, and the Americans have long since been on the moon. Kjell sees this job as a good starting point to examine opportunities for further education within the aerospace industry in the United States.

At the esteemed cruise ship there shall be distance between employees and passengers, but a group of American passengers want it different. They turn increasingly to speak with the hardworking Norwegian. One of them, Chet, asks him to make contact if he visits Los Angeles.

Kjell instead departs the ship to start as engineer at Trondheim Mekaniske Verksted (TMV) that is part of engineering firm Aker Group.

At this time, Norway is in the starting blocks to oil age and need professionals. In 1977 he is transferred to work with Aker Group's US partner Brown & Root as Mechanical Field Engineer on Ekofisk Oil Field.

He has not forgotten the invitation from the American cruise tourists and during shore leave he goes to Los Angeles. There he is well received. The large city is the way he remembers it from the cinema in Honningsvåg. He also sees opportunities for continuing engineering programs at the University of Southern California (USC). Palm trees and sunshine seems more tempting than the rough life onboard the platforms in the North Sea.

Back at Ekofisk he begins to save for a US stay and is living onboard the accommodation platform Alexander Kielland.

On March 27th, 1980 he goes ashore for scheduled time off. He is being flown from the platform to Stavanger by helicopter. Two hours after the helicopter took off, the alarm sounds onboard the platform. A fatigue crack in a support strut of the platform causes it to tilt. Finally it is turned upside down. Of the 212 people on board 123 were killed.

- I knew several of them, says Kjell quietly.

Moves to the US

Done with platform life, Kjell moves to Los Angeles to study at the University of Southern California (USC). The American from the cruise ship is busy and asks if the man from Norway can manage some houses that he rents out in the Hollywood Hills. This job offer is a convenient match for the student from the north.

As property manager he oversees also the house which today has become his home. There he comes up close to several super celebrities. Liza Minnelli is among the guests who frequent the house. Also, Nick Mason and Pink Floyd rehearse in the living room before "The Wall" tour. In the garage played John Belushi and The Blues Brothers. Once, the Rolling Stones are there and the atmosphere is jolly and it came time for barbecue. This becomes fateful for house kitchen utensils; after a trip on the barbecue, pans had to be discarded.

When it turns too boisterous, Kjell takes on the authoritative voice he learned as military police. It is generally respected, but one of the distinguished tenants wanted it different. He has held several wild parties, with furniture being thrown into the pool. An intervention became necessary, says Kjell. The American disagrees and the bickering is unavoidable:

- "I'm going to kill you", he screams at the property manager.

- "Don't fuck with me", answered the Norwegian back.

Then the celebrity's bodyguard stepped in to calm tempers.

- I was not so much into reading about celebrities, I had little knowledge of them and how popular they were. So I treated them all alike, and I think they liked that.

Become energy pioneer

In 1985, having completed electrical engineering programs at USC, Kjell is hired by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. He rises gradually through the ranks and in 1992 he is invited by The Electric Power Research Institute to be Resident Engineer on the Santa Clara Fuel Cell Demonstration Project (SCDP) – collaboration between private and governmental power players in the United States.

The goal is to break the code to make fuel cells the new energy technology. Here Kjell directs the activities and reports to management, investors and stakeholders.

Working with SCDP is a meaningful, but also challenging experience. 60 million dollar is placed into the project and the prestige is accordingly.

- Fuel Cell development was characterized by much secrecy. It's advanced technology developers who must "talk" and that demands that multiple technology environments cooperate. The road from research to a commercial product is long. The technology is supposed to work outside lab and in the daily lives of people. It was much trial and error, and I had to travel a lot, especially to Silicon Valley, recalls Kjell.

Breakthrough

Fuel cell technology is nothing new. That was demonstrated as early as 1839, but first 1960 was the momentum of development because The United States wanted to use the technology in spacecraft.

It is obvious that the work is time consuming, and that there is a certain risk for investors. Therefore it is a milestone when Kjell and his colleagues in 1996 achieved a breakthrough in the project.

- When we managed to get an effective conversion of chemical elements converted into electrical energy, and the way we do it provides virtually no exhaust. We get to create a solution that can be in your house. It is a advances for cleaner air, cleaner environment and to create clean energy.

"A successful collaboration between government and industry", said the news bulletin that reached the media. The discovery opens door from the laboratory to everyday product. It sets the standard for how countries Korea and Germany are working with the technology. The project is subsequently appointed by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) as one of the most important of the century.

The breakthrough gave status Los Angeles Department of Water & Power and their 10,000 employees, according to former Deputy Director Paul Eichenberger in Santa Clara Electric Utility.

- Kjell-Arne is a professional, very knowledgeable and respected engineer. His profound knowledge and skills in collaboration with team and supporters were crucial.

Will give something back

Alongside his career he continues at say with property rental along with partner Chet. He is also acquiring a pilot's license and one Cessna 182. it was not chase stunt over the Barents Sea, but pleasure tours of California and of Nevada desert.

In the living room to Kjell is currently a glass statue with the inscription "Special appreciation Award "from 2007. He has achieved the highest rank as Engineering Specialist 2 at Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (LADWP) and is still used as an advisor, although he not daily work with fuel cells.

He still burns for alternative energy.

- When you come from Norway - a country has become so rich because of oil - do you feel extra to give something back to the environment. it should not take much imagination to understand that we must transition more and more to alternative forms of energy.

Opt for green energy

Kjell is not impressed willingness to world community to pursue alternative energy.

- Fortunately, it has become better. And I understand that sits deep inside to let go of the profitable oil. It is convenient to be oil salesman before buying oil. But one day world get there that it has no choice and must revolve energy consumption in a more green direction. Is it profitable one is looking, so it will come for those who have developed new and solid energy solutions. should Norway be the buyer or seller then?

He regrets that while the environment and energy does not seem to be a good cause internationally, he thinks it will change.

It is about that we all must see that we cannot continue as before. Will we risk collapse in both the economy and infrastructure, or should we attempt to accommodate? It is perhaps so that we must experience seriousness before this sinking into us. Perhaps we need a new oil crisis as the West experienced in 1973.

The man from Mageroy believes the greater awareness among most people can force greener energy initiatives.

- Any company, organization or entity has often aim to make it a little better than environment. We as consumers need to become better to speak out, but also to put food after corrosion. Most of us spend far more energy than we need. It is the planet and our children who pay the price.

The future

Today the man from Honningsvåg lives alone in the house Hollywood Hills. It is four years since his friend Chet died. He is now working to renovate and develop gardens which surround the residence. Nearest neighbor is film actor Johnny Depp. Beyond living the former James Bond actor Timothy Dalton, who Kjell describes as a polite and always greet the neighbor.

In his spare time he has been active in Fish Club in Los Angeles, consisting of Norwegian gentlemen with sense of seafood home.

What qualities were what made you succeeded?

- You must have an interest in technology and research but also be curious and have a urge to acquire new knowledge. This must have capabilities to develop. Such things require patience. Phase from a solution to commercialization can be long.

As a pensioner the man from Honningsvåg hope to travel, but also to learn and contribute to the development of green energy. He has been a member of Road Scholar - an organization which arranges travel for the person who wants to develop and disseminate knowledge in their field. Residing in a million-city that occasionally plagued by smog, he still wants to help on environmental issues. - I hope that I can be involved in projects, maybe I find one myself. It sounds banal, but it is important that we take care of the planet. This applies regardless of whether we live in Honningsvåg or Los Angeles.

White House W/ Regan Picture's sub-text:

Early summer 1986 Kjell is in Washington DC with a friend of the US president. When he visit Reagan, he invited the man from Mageroy to come along. - The gate was opened immediately and we could drive straight through. Outside the Oval Office entry door stood a US Marines guard, while within we met a friendly president. There was small talk about his time in Hollywood and in the military, and afterwards we got a guided tour, tells Kjell who went straight to Mageroy after the presidential visit. A few days after he sits in the family cabin watching television images from the White House. - "I visited there last week", he said to the family. They look at another with an expression that suggests that they thought it had scribbled for the young man.