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Mechanic Mark Lacanilao holds a compressor seal, one of the most frequently replaced pieces in a coach air conditioning (AC) system.

*Photos by
Ned Racine*

Efficient AC Team Keeps Division 8 Passengers Cool

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Sept. 2, 2008) When Larry Remata and Scott Lanski began working on buses, a passenger turned on the air conditioning (AC) by opening a window.

Now Remata, Lanski and their partner Mark Lacanilao work on sophisticated AC and heating systems with multiple zones and computer sensors and new coolants. They troubleshoot problems with a laptop computer and ensure the West Valley Division 8 coaches resist the San Fernando Valley heat.

They must be doing a good job because Pat Orr, the Division 8 maintenance manager, claimed, "I will stand their excellence against anyone in the company."

Perhaps their excellence stems from the experience this trio of mechanic "A"s have accumulated. Lanski has 30 years as a Metro mechanic, 20 years working on AC systems. Remata has worked for Metro for 29 years. Metro taught him how to service AC systems 20 years ago, and he has worked on them since.

Remata first worked on the 4801s, the classic round coaches that Metro retired in 1982. He also worked on Metro's first articulated buses in the early 1980s.

The "baby" of the group, Lacanilao, has worked for Metro for 11 years, six years of those repairing AC and heating systems.



Mechanic Larry Remata points to the insulation that separates the AC equipment from the heat of the outside air. Division 8 and other divisions are installing thicker insulation to limit strain on the AC equipment. Below, Remata checks the thermometer on a Metro coach. To the right is a filter for the AC system.



Lacanilao, who began working on air conditioning systems when he worked for a Mazda dealership, now works on systems 10 times larger than the Mazda systems. The basic theories, he noted, are the same.

Sometimes their accumulated experience allows them to hear a knocking sound in the compressor and know it's starting to fail.

As mechanics often do, these three enjoy the variety in their job. "It's always a different type of problem;" Lanski said. "It could be electrical; it could be lines leaking." Adding a mechanic's ironic touch, he commented, "You could say the heater runs all summer and the AC runs all winter."

Although operators and passengers rightly expect their cool or hot air when they request it, the AC Three have to nurture a variety of parts—heaters, defrosters, opening valves, copper tubes, filters, compressors and blowers—to ensure the correct air temperature arrives. That's a particularly difficult task for local buses, which open their doors for passengers approximately every two-tenths of a mile.

That takes some work, and they believe the computerized AC systems they service sometimes make that work more complex.

"When we started in 1988, they had a lot of mechanical switches, clicking on and off, and now it's evolved to a computer running the heating system," Lanski recalls. "Now you plug in a laptop and read the error codes."

"You have to know at least a little about computers," Remata said. "[Electrically], everything runs through the computer systems; it's basically more difficult to trace down problems when you have problems with AC. [And] a lot of the electrical parts in the computers are sensitive."

Lacanilao likes the challenge of the systems on the new coaches, such as the 9000 series articulated buses, with their two complete air conditioning systems. "There's a lot more computers, sensors; you've got LED lights,

pressure readings; it's so much more complicated."

Using laptops to find shorts or soap bubbles to spot Freon leaks, the AC Three service five or six buses a day. While repairing problems, they also fit in preventative maintenance.

"Why wait to fix it,?" asks Lanski, a Lancaster resident. "In the middle of summer is not the time to start working on the AC. Anyone can tell you when an AC system isn't working in the summer, but it takes a professional to tell you that the AC is not working in the winter."

One thing that would make systems run better, Remata and Lacanilao point out, would be better understanding of how AC systems work.

Approximately once a week, when they receive a write-up that a coach's AC is not working, the AC Three discover that all the windows are down. The operator did not have enough patience to wait for the air conditioning to begin cooling the coach, so he or she lowered all the windows. Simply put, it takes a while for the AC system's heat exchange to begin.

Orr praises the AC Three for working so well together, a trait Lanski attributes to team chemistry "I have a great crew here. We always seemed to synchronize. Every movement is a movement of accomplishment."