

“Holy smokes! Maybe I’m dying here!”

*by Theresa Whalen-Ruiter
CFA Farm Safety Coordinator*

“I remember like it was yesterday. The freezing rain was stinging my face and I was lying there in the mud - so cold - with the horses sniffing and milling around above me. I could feel a painful heat and numbness rising up my body from my legs – like boiling water. All I could think was, ‘Holy smokes! Maybe I’m dying here!’”

These are the words of Edwin Taylor of Grand Valley, Ontario, a survivor of a horrific farm incident that changed his life and his family’s in an instant.

Ed is sharing his story as part of the launch of Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 11 to 17, with the theme “*Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) only works if you use it!*” The campaign is delivered by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and Canadian Agricultural Safety Association in partnership with Farm Credit Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Ed is not alone. On average, at least 1,500 people are hospitalized and 113 are killed in farm-related incidents in Canada each year, according to the Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program. In 2006, Statistics Canada notes that almost 14 thousand Canadian farms reported one or more medically treated or lost time injuries. The Census of Agriculture 2001 shows the most frequent causes of farm-related injuries include unsafe use of equipment or material-handling practices, followed by fatigue, trying to save time and miscommunication between workers.

It was November 16, 1990 and Ed, then 36, was going about his morning chores. A fence needed mending before the frost set in, but first he’d put out a round bale of hay for the horses. There’s no end to the things that need to be done when running a horse-breeding stable and 500-acre cash crop farm along with an off-farm job.

Meghan was only three, but she liked to help her Daddy with morning chores and visit her Pinto pony ‘Princess’ before being taken to the babysitter’s across the road.

Ed wanted the bucket on the front-end loader for the fencing work, and it was already on the tractor. If he just put the hay out with the bucket instead of switching on the bale spear then he could save at least 20 minutes by not having to switch it back again. He’d done it a hundred times before.

But today would be like no other. After getting the bale, and opening and closing the gate, Ed got back on his 674 IH tractor with a 2250 loader to put the hay in the feeder. There was a swale causing a bit of a dip in the landscape and the loader was admittedly higher than it needed to be. “I guess I must have popped the clutch a bit starting up – and then it was coming at me, end over end,” recalls Ed.

The 1100 pound, 4' x 6' round bale had dislodged from the bucket and rolled down the front-end loader toward the driver's seat. With only a split second to react, Ed leaned over to the side and toward the area under the steering wheel for protection. The bale rolled right over his back and continued off the rear of the tractor.

Ed knew he was badly hurt and going into shock. He figured it would be best to try to get some help while he still had his wits about him. Realizing he couldn't move his lower body, he used his arms to pull himself off the tractor but his overalls got caught in the gearshift leaving him on the ground with his legs partially hung-up. The horses milled around: sniffing at him, eventually turning their attention to the bale of hay.

Fifteen minutes go by. "I could feel a painful heat and numbness rising up my body from my legs – like boiling water. All I could think was, 'Holy smokes! Maybe I'm dying here!'" reflects Ed.

"Daddy why are you sleeping in the mud?" asked a little voice from behind the horses. Meghan was only three but she knew something was terribly wrong. With shock setting in, Ed instructed the little girl to go to the road and look very carefully both ways to make sure no cars were coming, then cross the road quickly and go to the babysitter's house to get help. And that is exactly what she did, but not before returning with a bag of twine clippings for a pillow and a horse blanket to make her Daddy's 'sleep' more comfortable.

Help arrived soon thereafter and Ed started what would be a full year in the Sunnybrook and Lyndhurst Hospitals in Toronto to undergo multiple surgeries, rehabilitation and physiotherapy. He had a compressed thoracic 12 vertebrae (level T12) fracture and considers himself lucky to be classified as an incomplete paraplegic who can walk short distances with crutches. "I can get around enough to get in and out of vehicles and machinery, no problem. I have some up and down movement in my legs so I can clutch and brake normally. In fact I got my A-Z licence a couple of years after the incident – passed no problem," Ed says.

"The farm safety theme '*PPE only works if you use it!*' struck home with me because the hay spear was the safe and proper loader attachment that I should have used to feed the hay," explains Ed. "I had a perfectly good hay spear right there, all I had to do was use it."

Upon returning home, Ed decided he wanted to keep farming. After some restructuring, a lot of help from family and friends and a few renovations, Ed was back in the horse business, this time racing. "We had three horses – 'Odds Against', 'Little Champ' and 'Silver Champ' – that got us back on our feet again," says Ed of his Standardbred and Thoroughbred winners. Ed has since sold his horse breeding business and is concentrating on the cash crops along with several racehorses.

"I think we farmers get so used to the reality and dangers of farm life that we get complacent and careless," says Ed. "It's a hell of a lesson to have to learn the hard way."

Ed is the Ontario representative for Canadian Farmers With Disabilities. More information is available at www.fwdcanada.com .

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*** **A photo** is available to accompany this article at www.casa-acsa.ca .

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