

Roy Vust: How a moment can change your life

*by Theresa Whalen-Ruiter
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Another lovely summer evening was setting-in near Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. The garden produce was bountiful and Darlene was busy pickling when she looked out the window to see a neighbour's truck coming up the lane faster than it ought to. As she opened the door and their eyes met, a wave of goose bumps swept over her.

“Darlene, it's Roy,” said the neighbour. “He's at the hospital.”

Every farm wife fears this moment. In Canada, 61 per cent of farm fatalities are the owner-operator and over half of these fatal incidents happened while the victim was working alone.

It was July 30, 2001. Roy Vust (58) had just finished supper and yelled over his shoulder to Darlene that he was going to mow ditches and would be back before dark. Roy was driving an Allis-Chalmers D19 tractor pulling a 10-foot Woods mower. The past few weeks had been dry so he was able to get a good reach into the ditch. Roy was well into his task and coming to a dead-end when he pushed in the clutch and changed his life forever.

“My foot must have slipped,” recalls Vust, “because the tractor reared up and over backwards. Looking back it's the only thing that I can figure must have happened.”

Tractor rollovers are the cause of one in five work-related farm fatalities according to studies done by the Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program (CAISP). Rear rollovers generally happen too fast for the operator to react. It only takes three-quarters of a second to reach the point of no return.

“It was all over in an instant... even before I had time to react. The first thing I thought was, ‘I've got to get out of here’, but my left leg was somehow pinned. So then I thought I might have to wait for help. Then the fire started.”

“I don't know how I got out – I believe the good Lord got me out of there. I was standing there a piece away from the tractor and could still really feel the heat. Then I realized that my clothes were on fire.”

The arid summer had left the ditches dry so Roy had to drop and roll to extinguish the fire, but his fuel soaked clothes did not go out quickly or easily.

“I was about one and a quarter kilometres from the farm, so I started walking home for help,” recalls Vust. “I could see traffic ahead and waived and yelled, but no one on the road heard or saw me.”

A neighbour noticed the fire and came to see what was going on. Roy flagged him down and was taken immediately to the hospital in Portage la Prairie about four kilometres away. In shock and not realizing the extent of his injuries, Roy simply walked into the emergency area and politely asked an aghast nurse if she could help him. Meanwhile, the neighbour was heading back to the

farm to get Darlene with a single-minded urgency of task that takes over when a friend is in need.

“Sitting in that waiting room all by myself was the loneliest place in the world,” recalls Darlene as she waited to hear from the doctors. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Roy was assessed as having 50 per cent second and third degree burns, mostly on the upper body and parts of the legs. It was quickly determined that Roy would need more specialized care. With Darlene by his side, he endured the nearly one hour drive by ambulance to the Health Science Centre in Winnipeg.

“That ride was mostly a blur,” recalls Vust. “But I remember looking at the back of my hands and the skin was just hanging off. It looked like a piece of melted plastic.”

Roy spent the next three weeks in critical condition in the intensive care ward enduring skin grafts and fighting infections. When it became clear he would make it, Roy was transferred to the burn unit to commence rehabilitation and physiotherapy.

“It was a real milestone for me when they removed the feeding tube and I got to eat solids again,” said Vust. “It tasted good to eat food and made me feel things were getting back to normal.”

Roy was surprised at what a chore it was to eat. He had lost all muscle tone and coordination in his hands and hadn’t expected it to be so difficult to scoop the food and get it to his mouth.

About three and a half weeks after the incident, a nurse came in to get Roy walking. “After about 10 metres I was exhausted,” recalls Vust, “In fact I was kind of embarrassed that that was all I could do. I remember wondering how long it would take to get back into functioning shape.” After living such an active and self-sufficient life, he was truly surprised at his physical weakness.

More determined than ever, Roy worked hard at his physiotherapy. He knew that back on the farm, his sons Jeff (20) and Kevin (18) had left their off-farm jobs and returned home to pitch-in and complete the harvest and fall work. With the help of family and neighbours, 550 acres of wheat, oats, barley, canola and eatable beans were all being taken care of. Roy considered his dedicated rehabilitation as his work and contribution to the situation.

“No body has an accident – the whole family does,” says Darlene gratefully acknowledging that while she was staying at the hospital with Roy, their sons and Roy’s brothers were taking care of things on the farm. “It affects everyone,” she said.

A little more than a month after the incident, the doctors agreed to let Roy go home and be treated as an outpatient with physiotherapy from the Portage la Prairie hospital.

“I was excited at how things were progressing on the farm. One thing I really enjoyed was being driven around to see the farm and the progress that was being made even though I got weak and tired easily,” recalls Vust.

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Roy's health improved steadily all winter and by spring he was seeding crops, fully recovered - but now he is farming a little differently.

"I replaced the tractor that was destroyed in the fire with one with a rollover protective structure (ROPS)," says Vust. "It might not have stopped the tractor from turning, but I could have got out of there before the fire started. Also, I always make sure Darlene or someone knows exactly where I am, what I'm doing, and what time I should be back. So I guess I learned a little bit."

This tragic story is all too common in Canadian agriculture. CAISP studies indicate that 61 per cent of farms are run by single operators who routinely work alone and three-quarters of farm-related injuries are caused by tractors and other machinery. This makes farm safety prevention and preparedness a necessity, not a nicety.

"*Farm safety is in the details*" is the theme of Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 9-15, 2005. The campaign examines the physical considerations of farm work with a special focus on seniors and what can be done to reduce the risks of injuries and fatalities. To help motivate producers on a more personal level, memo boards with the reminder, "I'm farming safely at ..." are being distributed to encourage producers to tell someone or leave a note as to where they will be working and what time they expect to be back.

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week is delivered by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) and the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) through the generous sponsorship of Farm Credit Canada, and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Free memo boards and more information are available through the CFA Web site www.cfa-fca.ca or the CASA Web site www.casa-acsa.ca.

On average, 115 people are killed and another 1,500 are seriously injured by farm-related incidents in Canada each year – and many more minor injuries are never even reported.

- 30 -

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Photo:

A photo is available of the firefighters extinguishing Roy Vust's overturned tractor. If you would like an electronic copy (.jpg 145KB) sent to you, please contact Theresa as above.

Photo Credit: *Photo courtesy of Portage la Prairie Daily Graphic*