

I remember thinking, ‘Am I dead?’

The Billy Woods Story

*by Theresa Whalen-Ruiter
CFA Farm Safety Coordinator*

It was one of those miserable spring days when the icy rain stings against your cheeks. The kind that makes you turn your collar up against the wind and hunch your shoulders, so the chill doesn't go down your neck and back. Evening was setting in and there was still much work to do. It would be a while yet before Billy could enjoy the warmth of the house and the hot dinner he knew was waiting.

Billy Woods (28) was working on the 180-cow dairy farm that belonged to his grandfather and uncle near Torbay, Newfoundland. They were busy putting the manure out in preparation for spring planting. Billy had already hooked up the manure pit agitator to the power take-off (PTO) of the 90-horsepower tractor and started it up. This would allow the solids and liquids to mix while dissipating any gases that may have collected.

A PTO is a device that transfers mechanical power from a tractor to a piece of towed or stationary equipment through a rod or drive shaft. The tractor makes the driveshaft turn and this drives the piece of equipment. A PTO is directly geared to the tractor and is designed to spin at either 540 or 1000 rotations per minute (rpm) depending on the machine that is being powered. It doesn't stop until the tractor is shut down. Furthermore, because of the massive workload they must endure, PTOs are made of superior steel and do not break. When operating, a PTO is extremely dangerous – that's why it should have a sleeve guard around the shaft and a plate shield over the connecting joint to protect things from getting caught in it.

Billy heard a noise out by the manure pit and went to investigate. The manure pit agitator had been working, but ice had jammed against the pump. As he reached over to turn the handle on the pump, Billy felt himself being pulled by the leg.

“I was conscious for the first few goes around and I knew I was in the PTO. There was this thump, thump, thump feel and everything was a blur – I knew I was in there,” recalls Billy. “It just happened so fast.”

This tragic story is all too common in Canadian agriculture. 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. Of these incidents, machinery entanglements account for 9 per cent of fatal injuries and 15 per cent of hospitalizations says a study by the Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program.

“Machines – especially tractors – are by far the leading killers in agriculture, accounting for two-thirds of farm-related fatalities,” explains Glen Blahey, chair of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA). “Survivors of farm machinery incidents often sustain injuries that result in amputations and long-term disabilities.”

Looking back, Billy figures the wind must have blown his bootlace into the spinning connecting joint of the PTO causing him to fall backwards onto the racing PTO shaft. The PTO had the sleeve and plate guards properly installed and he believes that made the difference between injury and death.

Billy doesn't know how long he was entangled, but it wasn't until his arm detached from his body that he was freed from the machine's grasp and thrown to the ground – along with his severed arm nearby.

“When I first came-to I remember thinking, ‘Am I dead?’ because everything was all black. But then as my senses came back I could hear the tractor revving and my clothes making a whipping sound as they spun around the PTO,” tells Billy, taking a moment to reflect. “I just lay still for a bit and then slowly things came into focus and I was looking at the sky.”

“I guess once shock sets in you don't really feel much anymore – that's the only thing that can explain it,” said Billy. “As I was lying there I realized my left arm was gone and that I'd better get help in a hurry.”

So that is just what he did. Billy got up, held onto what was left of his arm, idled-down the tractor, walked about 35 metres to the barn entrance and yelled for his uncle to come and help him.

“I guess he knew by the tone of my voice that something was wrong,” recalls Billy. “And then my instincts and training kind of took over.”

Billy was a Level II certified volunteer fire fighter with First Aid and Trauma Training for First Responders. He told his uncle to call 911 and bring blankets to keep him warm. By the time his uncle got back, Billy had put a tourniquet on his own arm complete with a half knot.

The Fire Chief was the first on the scene with the rest of the unit close on his heels. It was quickly determined that no ambulance was available for dispatch, so the Fire Dept Rescue Unit transported Billy on the 20 minute drive to the St. John's Hospital.

“At first the doctors thought it was only my arm that got caught in some machine,” said Billy. “Once I explained it to them and told them I had gone around, then they got more worried about internal injuries. They had no idea what a PTO was or what the dangers could be.”

Billy survived two surgeries that night and woke up in the intensive care unit. “When I came-to and saw the bandages I knew they couldn't save my arm and that it was gone – but I also knew I was lucky to be alive.”

In addition to the loss of his left arm, Billy suffered a dislocated SI joint, whiplash to the neck, severe lacerations and bruises, and nearly died of blood loss. Amazingly, Billy had no internal injuries and was discharged from the hospital after three weeks to return home and take physiotherapy as an out-patient from his local hospital.

“I was left-handed and that’s the arm I lost, so there was lots to get used to,” says Billy reflecting on his April 1996 incident. “Now I have to watch my right arm because it gets tired and weak from excessive use. So I’ve had to learn my limitations and leave more time to do things.”

Billy has shared his story as part of this year’s Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) campaign, March 8-14, 2006. The theme, “*Farm safety is MY business.*” emphasizes the importance of applying risk management processes to all farm work. CASW is delivered by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, and CASA through the generous support of Farm Credit Canada. More information is available at www.cfa-fca.ca.

“Farm-related incidents are almost always the results of a series of little things that are not much on their own, but when put altogether create a significant safety hazard,” explains Blahey. “Some of these things we have control over and others we don’t. With some of these factors we can predict what might happen, and with others we can’t. That’s why it is so important to think things through and control all the risks that you can – because that still leaves all kinds of risks out there that you’ll have no control over. This thought process is called risk management.”

“When I think about what happened – I didn’t really do anything wrong – but there was more that could have been done to prevent this,” explains Billy. After the incident, bigger shields and guards were installed around the PTO and a rail guard around the pump area to keep a minimum area clear.

Billy also feels very strongly that First Aid training is a must for everyone on the farm. “Even little things can make big injuries. The machines are so powerful that when a farmer gets hurt, it’s usually a significant injury – knowing First Aid can make all the difference.”

Billy is still farming with his uncle, raising replacement dairy heifers and cropping about 500 acres of hay and pasture. He also leads the Newfoundland chapter of an organization called Canadian Farmers With Disabilities.

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Photo:

“I was left-handed and that’s the arm I lost, so there was lots to get used to,” says Billy Woods reflecting on his April 1996 incident. Woods is a spokesperson for the recently launched Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 8-14, 2006.