

‘I’m glad I don’t remember...’

The Brett Verhoeven Story

by Theresa Whalen-Ruiter
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It was April 6, 2003 and Brett Verhoeven (20) from near Salmon Arm, British Columbia was pleased to have landed a summer job with a neighbour who was milking 300 cows and cropping about 300 acres. Brett knew the job well as he was raised on a 125-cow dairy farm with about 200 acres in crops. His Dad had sold the cows and quota about three years before, so it was nice to be back amid the dairy business and all that goes with it.

The day’s work was to spread the manure from the liquid pit in preparation of planting. Brett’s job was to ready the pit for pumping by hooking up the agitator to the tractor power take-off (PTO) and starting it up. This would allow the solids and liquids to mix while dissipating any gases that may have collected.

As you can imagine, putting out the manure was a stinky job and Brett and his co-workers joked about how ‘nice’ they were going to smell by the end of the day.

Brett attached the pit agitator PTO to the 100 horsepower tractor. A PTO is a device that transfers mechanical power from a tractor to a piece of towed 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 that does 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.

Having made the hook-up, Brett got into the tractor and powered it up, then went back down to the PTO to check that everything was running properly.

Now that the agitator was running it was almost time to start pumping. A co-worker came to see if Brett was ready. As the young man approached the tractor he saw clothes spinning around the PTO; and a few more steps revealed where lay Brett’s crumpled body. Brett’s clothes had caught in the PTO.

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.

“Today’s farm machines are very large and complex,” explains Glen Blahey, chair of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. “Two-thirds of farm fatalities are caused by machines – mostly tractors. For those that survive, injuries from farm machines often result in amputations and long-term disabilities.”

An ambulance was called and Brett was taken to the Salmon Arm Hospital where he was assessed and forwarded to the Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops, about 120 kms away which offered superior surgical expertise and ICU facilities.

Brett’s injuries were terrible. The PTO had wrapped some of his ripped clothing tightly around his neck, crushing his throat. His throat and air passage were badly damaged and had to be surgically reconstructed. He also suffered three fractures in one arm, a broken scapula (shoulder blade), several broken ribs, four fractured vertebrae, and a fractured skull that resulted in short term memory loss from the brain injury, along with numerous cuts and abrasions.

Brett remembers waking up in the Kamloops hospital two and a half weeks later. “I knew where I was and what had happened, but I can’t remember the details,” says Brett. “I’m glad I don’t remember it all, but I wish I knew what I was doing to get caught up. It all happened in so fast.”

After three weeks, Brett was transferred to the Vancouver Hospital for further reconstructive surgery on his lungs and air passage. Two months after his incident, Brett was discharged and went home to start learning how to live again. The first step was two months of physiotherapy at the Salmon Arm Hospital as an outpatient.

Looking back, Brett sees things that should have been done differently. “The PTO shaft didn’t have a guard on it. A lot of farmers around here think that if it isn’t going to break the machine by not having it on, then why bother putting it there? Whereas after my accident, a lot of farmers made repairs and put the guards back on,” explains Brett.

“As a worker, it didn’t bother me that there wasn’t a guard on the PTO. I had been given instructions on how to operate the machines in general and how to do the task – but not about the PTO specifically – but I was raised on a farm so I kind of knew what was going on. Also my jacket was bulky and loose. If my clothes were tighter fitting it might not have happened. There were a lot of contributing factors.”

“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.”

Brett 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. Most farm accidents are predictable – and if something is predictable, then it is preventable. As the planting season approaches, CASW is a reminder to all farmers that they are responsible not only for their own safety, but also the safety of their workers. CASW is delivered by the Canadian Federation of

Agriculture, and the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association through the generous support of Farm Credit Canada.

In hindsight, the lessons from his incident are clear to Brett. “Maintenance and repair of safety equipment is just as important as the maintenance and repair of other components of the machine. And a quick review of the job and what to watch out for would be good too. It’s really important to make safety a priority.”

“I can’t do things as fast as I used to or as much in a day, but I’m still plugging away,” says Brett. “... and I’m still here and that’s good.”

- 30 -

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Photo:

“I can’t do things as fast as I used to or as much in a day, but I’m still plugging away... and I’m still here and that’s good,” says Brett Verhoeven, who survived entanglement in a PTO. Verhoeven is a spokesperson for Canadian Agricultural Safety Week, March 8-14, 2006.