

A split second

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A powerline technician talks about the day he made electrical contact.

The fateful day

Back in 1989 he had returned to his hometown of Fahler, Alberta. Lorraine and Paul had been married for a week when, one snowy day, he got the call to respond to storm damage. A heavy load of snow had caused an outage in a rural area.

He responded and called another lineman to assist. A manager also came along. The issue was a downed line—a single phase 7200 ACSR. The crew put the line back up and installed grounds. Paul gave his clearance and prepared to “go hot” but the fuse didn’t hold.

The manager offered to do the switching and grounding. Paul waited for clearance but the manager thought they didn’t need to re-ground since there was only one customer on the circuit. Paul didn’t question the manager even though Paul says “the situation didn’t feel right.”

It wasn’t right. The control centre staff thought the crew was at a different location and re-energized the line to 14.4 kV. That’s when all hell broke loose.

“It blew me back 20 feet,” says Paul. “I could feel myself fading away. I thought this was it.”

Paul had been blown back into the mud. He was barely breathing and his pulse was gone. During the contact, every muscle in his body contracted fiercely. His fellow lineman panicked and shook him hard, which brought Paul back around.

The manager was face down in the mud, unconscious and not breathing. Paul, despite his desperate condition, managed to tell his shaken co-worker to turn him over. Paul described to the other worker how to use a resuscitation technique on the manager. It worked.

“It’s amazing what you can get out of a safety meeting,” says Paul.

His partner began the mayday procedure but was frazzled and didn’t know the rural address. Paul, who grew up in the area, was able to provide directions.



How fast can your life change? For Paul Hebert, the change came in a fraction of a second.

That’s how fast electricity blew away his old life and threw him into a new one. Paul and his wife Lorraine shared their story this spring at a two-day safety awareness event in Chatham hosted by a group of electrical and utility companies.

Paul had been a lineman for 20 years and worked in Alberta, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and California. He had also spent time in Ontario with Hydro One and a utility contractor.

“I really loved everything about it,” says Paul. “It’s a great life.”

ged his life

The hospital

When they arrived at the hospital, it was difficult to assess the severity of Paul's injuries. His body was retaining an incredible amount of heat.

"When Lorraine got to the hospital she couldn't touch me I was so hot. I was burning," says Paul.

The medical staff prepared Paul for a helicopter flight to the burn unit in the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton. "I didn't want to close my eyes and never wake up," he says.

Paul did wake up—three day later. That's when he was told that one of his feet, as well as several fingers on his left hand, had been amputated.

"I thought I was invincible. Then my life started to disappear," he says.

As the days progressed, doctors assessed the extent of the damage and made attempts to save what tissue they could.

"I pleaded with for them to save my right hand. But they couldn't."

With tears in his eyes Paul explains that he then underwent a terribly long surgery to attempt to graft tissue to save his remaining foot.

"When they took that foot, I sank into a depression—if I am honest—for 15 years," he says.

Paul did recover over time. He suffered not only the loss of two feet, a hand, and several fingers, but he also had to deal with severe internal damage as a result of the electrical contact. He has suffered a heart attack, pain, open sores, and now osteoporosis as a result of the internal burning.

"We all think we aren't going to have an incident but if you do, who is going to look after your family? Will your marriage survive?" says Paul.

While in hospital he met several people badly injured that didn't have the family and community support that he did. Those people often left the hospital with painful memories and divorce papers.

Lorraine's view

Paul wasn't the only one that endured his electrical contact. His wife Lorraine also had to undergo a complete change in her life.

"Let me tell you how uneducated I was about power. I had no idea what it could do to a human being," she says.

She asked the workers in the audience a simple question that silenced everyone: "Do your wives know how much electricity you work with? Do they know what it can do?"

Lorraine says it took a lot of years, her selling her restaurant business, and her children facing a new life before the family found itself again. She says when she would walk into a room to find her husband crying she would think of the people who made the wrong decisions the day of the incident.

Controlling hazards or cutting corners

Paul went back to work for the firm a few months after the contact. His co-workers were traumatized by the event but the company worked hard to establish safe work policies so that this would never happen again.

Paul stresses the importance of

- identifying risks, and eliminating those risks or at least controlling them through personal protective equipment or more preferably, grounding and bonding
- creating a rescue plan including poletop and bucket rescue, mayday procedures, and training in first aid and CPR.

"This trade can be very, very safe if you don't cut corners," says Paul.