

Miraculous Recovery from Electrical Accident Recounted by Rowan Man

A three-man crew from a national advertising company was erecting a billboard alongside U. S. Highway 1 near Apex on a snowy February afternoon in 1967.

Clifford L. Bernhardt Jr. of Faith, operating a truck-mounted crane by remote control, was slowly swinging a post into position when the end of the crane boom touched what appeared at a glance as an ordinary electric line leading to a nearby house.

But in a sudden flash, the innocent-looking wire erupted, shunting 13,000 volts of electricity onto the crane boom and across the remote control cable.

As the lethal load slammed into Bernhardt, he slumped to the ground, a huge fireball arcing off his right shoulder.

Ten feet away, all four tires on the truck caught fire and the grass burned in the spot where Bernhardt had stood.

Bernhardt's breathing stopped and his heart fluttered.

Only because his two companions — John Ervin and James Teague, also of Rowan County — dashed to his side to render emergency aid is he alive today to tell the story of a miraculous recovery.

"One of the boys turned me over, mashed on my chest and got me going again," he says as he recounts happenings he was not a witness to.

After they got me breathing again, they said I was up and walking around, but I don't remember it."

He remembers nothing from the time the boom touched the high-voltage line until he woke up in an ambulance en route from Apex medical clinic to N. C. Memorial Hospital at Chapel Hill.

"We stopped to put snow chains on the ambulance," he recalls. "Then I went out again."

Heat burns from the electrical charge cost Bernhardt his right arm and right ear. His left thumb, pressing the button on the remote-control device held in his right hand, was burned "black as charcoal" and later removed.

Holes were blown in his right shoulder, right leg, back and feet where the electrical charge "sparked out" enroute to a ground.

Two large black spots at the right ear and right shoulder suggested that the current arced from these points directly to a nearby metal post.

The main ground for the bolt was through Bernhardt's feet. Nails in his recently half-soled boots were completely destroyed, leaving tiny burn marks on the bottom of his feet above each nail hole.

Sixteen months and a dozen surgical operations later, Bernhardt is back at work with S-M Advertising Co., leasing property for highway signs.

An artificial right arm is the only visible evidence of his near electrocution. His right ear, made of vinyl material, is not recognizable as artificial. A small hairpiece covers a gap on the right side of his head left bare by a skin graft.

The almost perfect symmetry of his left hand conceals the fact that his left index finger has become his thumb, restoring his ability to grasp things.

A surgeon who treated Bernhardt when he first arrived in the emergency room at Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill remembers the rigid paralysis of his right arm. The electrical heat produced a massive muscle contraction in the arm, pressing it tightly against the chest.

Heat-induced contraction also caused the right fist to clench tightly.

No evidence on the skin's surface hinted at the deep damage, but doctors could feel no pulse in Bernhardt's right arm.

The electricity vaporized the fluid in the left thumb. The only pain Bernhardt remembers was in this thumb.

Current sparking out the right side of his head destroyed a piece of bone behind his ear. Although the ear looked normal in the emergency room, intense heat had destroyed all the tissue.

"Arc marks" down the right side of the body pinpointed each exit used by the high-pressure electrical charge.

Often when high voltage is involved, heat created as the current burst through the skin is sufficient to set clothes afire, often burning a victim to death. Bernhardt's insulated clothing was scorched but not set afire.

Swelling and extensive infection occurred later in the destroyed tissue of the right arm and right ear.

To prevent the spread of the infection into undamaged tissue, the arm was removed, finally, at the shoulder. The ear, its surrounding tissue and portions of the skull bone also had to be removed.

Bernhardt lost eight pints of blood from major damage to his red blood cells. This hemolysis from the electrical charge and his surgical needs required 20 pints of blood in the early stages of his treatment.

Surgeons patched each area of "electrical blowout" with a series of skin grafts. About half of Bernhardt's 10 surgical operations during the acute stage involved grafting.

After the electrically damaged tissue had been removed and the infection was under control, Bernhardt was released from the hospital in mid-April. He returned the following month.

"When I came back," he says, "they slid a piece of my scalp back to cover the exposed bone in the back of my ear."

"And to cover the bare spot in my scalp, they transplanted a piece of skin from my hip."

The healed scalp is now covered by the artificial hairpiece.

Last November, Bernhardt returned again to N. C. Memorial Hospital for repairs to his left hand. He spent two weeks at UNC's School of Dentistry and its unique Oral-Facial Disorders Clinic.

To complete the rehabilitation, he needed a new right ear.

Specialists first made a model of his left ear and used this to find a "donor" with a similar left ear. Next, a mold was made of the donor's right ear.

A replica of the matching right ear was fashioned from a vinyl material, fitted to Bernhardt's head, modified to proper size,

shaded to match his skin and then made life-like with freckles, blemishes and blood veins. Bernhardt fixes his prosthetic ear to his head with adhesive, removing it — along with his right arm — each night before going to sleep.

Taking a light-hearted backward look at his near electrocution, Bernhardt says he "got lit up a bit" on that fateful February afternoon.

Ironically, he says he's been afraid of electricity all his life. He's now 34, married and the father of three children.

TAYLOR ON CARRIER

Seaman Roland W. Taylor, son of Mr. and Mrs. Horace W. Taylor of Route 4, Kinston, while serving aboard the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock participated in Operation Bearer Burden off the coast of Southern California.

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Telephone Plant Workers to Begin Paying Union Dues

Plant Department employees of Carolina Telephone Company on Friday voted 649 to 585 in favor of collective bargaining representation by the Communications Workers of America.

With approximately 1,300 plant employees eligible to vote, 1234 participated in the secret balloting. The election was conducted at seventeen points within the company area by representatives of the National Labor Relations Board.

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