

My second chance.Peter Bons.

A stirring emotion swells through me with a lump in my throat, whenever I see and hear a rescue chopper off on another mission, and so much more so if it's one from Careflight. My humble thoughts of gratitude are immediately directed to a special breed of dedicated professionals.

Thanks guys, It's because of you, I'm here with a second chance. My life changed 16 years ago after a near fatal traumatic brain injury. This is my story.

2 Aug '97 started with a day off to the Appin model flying field to fly our radio controlled aeroplanes.

I was chatting to someone with my head through their open window, in the carpark. Meanwhile unbeknownst to me, a visitor enquired for a trial familiarization and underwent a flight under supervision. Difficulties ensued, and control of the model plane was lost after communication broke down between the student and pilot. I heard someone yell "look out" and pulled my head out of the car to investigate, only to be struck in the right temporal lobe region with the model plane engine and propeller, rendering me unconscious on the ground.

A road ambulance transported me to Campbelltown Hospital where my coma was stabilised and I was prepared for air travel. A Careflight helicopter was scrambled from Westmead and soon arrived.

With my family looking on, I was loaded onto the chopper, and with high emotions the family could only watch on as the 2 turbines started and the big 412 lifted off, not knowing what was to become of their dad, still in coma, bound for Concord Hospital near Sydney.

I was to find out later to my amazement, that the pilot today was the now late Terry Summers. We were both in Army Aviation together during the 70's. Terry was on choppers and I was on fixed wing, mainly Porters. I reflect often with emotion to this flight, imagining Terry redlining the big 412 towards Concord on the "med1" dash and Sydney approach radar clearing away any aircraft that dared to get in the way, while the paramedic and doctor kept working on me, still in coma and head swelling.



I was in coma for 2 weeks in Concord ICU, with the family being told more than once that I was not expected to pull through. But it helps to be a stubborn Dutchman, because I helped fight as best I could, with the teams of incredible medical staff and neuro surgeons at Concord operating to save my life over the 2 weeks. During the time, they varied the medications and procedures to control the levels of coma and responses. This had me surfacing slightly out of coma occasionally, sufficiently to hear voices of medicos, and I remember my kids singing along with mum. They're a talented bunch.

(1 year later, a reunion with the very doctors and staff at concord would bring tears to my eyes as I recognized voices, no words could describe what I felt) Another occasion during my coma, I responded to a handshake, and I know someone went out with a sore hand, because it was as hard a squeeze as I could muster to imply I was hanging on as best I could.

After 2 weeks I came out of the coma and was transferred to a ward, with half my brain left. My right temporal lobe had to be removed, along with another sizable chunk to the rear inside the ear area. Visual impairments also resulted from damage to the optic nerves. But I was alive. How the surgeons and staff got me through that and sorted out the mess is still beyond my understanding. I had another chance to live a new life with my family. The prolonged recovery was very disorientating and vague with my cognitive and visual impairments, but the new half brain gradually started to make a little sense, with endless support, treatment and patience of the medical staff, family and friends.

I vividly remember a particular turning point. The nurse helped me onto the balcony for a bit of fresh air, with a magnificent view over the parramatta river. I looked up and saw what I thought was a familiar sight. I said to her, looking through my sore and lazy eyes, "I think thats a Dash-8, I used to fly them," then running out of strength and headed back to bed. The nurse smiled and said, "you know, it's no coincidence that you saw that aeroplane" and I wondered what the dickens she meant.



Pilot colleagues from Eastern (now Qantaslink) had pre-arranged the flypast on a Sydney to Canberra flight. The skipper had briefed the passengers of the plight of one of their colleagues, and explained the impending flypast. Thanks Wozza and Bladesy. It sure did lift my spirits, being able to reconnect to my working past for the first time.

After 1 month at Concord, I was transferred to the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit, attached to the Liverpool hospital, staying there for 4 weeks before coming home. Our family holds a deep respect and admiration for the brilliant work the staff do there. I was one of the lucky ones, able to walk out of there and go home, remaining in contact for follow up care. Feeling lost and helpless, with all qualifications and licences stripped from me, it was a slow road over many years before my new life started to make any sense. Having always been the bread winner, I felt worthless and just in the way. But step by step, with the invaluable love and perserverance of my family, friends and medical follow up, I did progress in many ways. Particularly so when my son Travis took me to an airshow or just an airport and I could enjoy some aviation, and if I was lucky even sniff some burnt kero out the back of a turbine reminding me of my past. Ahh, that stuff is so good. It's so important to reconnect to the past, particularly with any passions before getting on with the future.

A large part of my prolonged rehabilitation was taken up by the legal & insurance aftermath over 7 years. I was in the unknown fighting for the unknown. That came closer to killing me than the accident did and I cannot say what I would like to say.

But the stubborn Dutchman in me kicked in renewing my determination to be the best I could be. I owed that to my family. There was also helpful inspiration from two books written by two ladies who fought courageously to regain their lives after serious injury. "Never tell me never" by Janine Shepherd, and the other "The best I can be" by Allana Arnot, both with aviation connections. Thank you both.

I was unable to work full time, as all day labour orientated work ran high risk of a fit and deskbound work led to eye strain headaches. So I decided to pursue my hobby business interest where I could float between various activities under my control to cater for my disabilities. First was to learn computers and desktop publishing to enable me to do my own product publications. 2 years of regular partial day learning through a disability facility with Cambelltown TAFE and one-on-one tuition made good progress. I recall my teacher Ken Hall commenting after passing my final assignment, "Ya know, over the 2 years, I saw the blinkers come off".. thanks for your patience Ken. The more I excercised my brain the more it came good. I started to feel good and worthwhile again being able to do something as I walked to catch the train home. I think there was a smile.

It was 11 years before I was finally able to drive again, after some tuition through a driving school with a teacher that specialised in brain injury. Thanks Bill. Ahh, the joy of going to the local hardware store on your own.

I have also ventured back into radio control flying model aeroplanes, which after being kicked out of the real ones, is the next best thing. A great challenge.

I am currently venturing into CAD, and enjoying workshop practice with increased skills, thanks to the help of some close friends with their engineering skills. I am building my pet project, a 1/3 scale Airtourer (the aircraft I learnt to fly in) for radio control flying. Thanks Macca and Giffo.

The more the brain is excercised, the more it seems to work and normalise, and is best done with your interests and that which you have a passion for. *There is truth to the old saying, "use it or loose it"...well...the remainder of it anyway.*

I appreciate now more what I have rather than ponder over what I've lost. (Though I must admit, I get a little mad when I'm short of a few \$\$) I am fortunate to be able to live and enjoy the Camden surrounds, my families including 7 grandkids, friends and Travis flying overhead inbound to Sydney, who has taken over from me, flying the Dash-8s for Qantaslink.

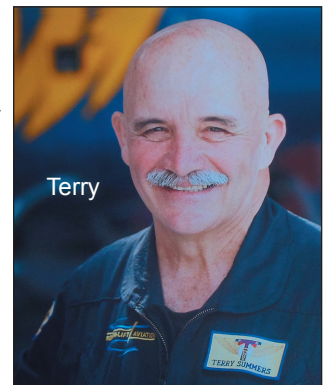
My gratitude and thanks go to so many great people along the way. The Cambelltown Hospital Emergency, Careflight, Concord Hospital, Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit, Cambelltown TAFE, friends and most of all my family, my wife Carol, and kids Sarah (&Sean), Tammy, Travis and Jemma, who have helped me so much in my recovery.

It was Careflight that got me to the medicos quick enough to have any chance of recovery though. Your organisation and helicopter crews are a special breed of highly specialised people who are so admired, and to which the community is deeply indebted. Ever since that day, I get that stirring emotion of humble gratitude with a lump in the throat, whenever I see and hear that rescue helicopter that saves lives. You make the difference.

My great chopper team on the day was: Terry Summers - pilot, Col Robshaw - crewman, Anthony Stewart - doctor, and Paul Smith - the paramedic. Thanks guys.

Sadly, we have recently lost Terry to cancer. We are all the richer for having known him. He was a major figurehead in helicopter aviation, so respected by all his peers and a great bloke. You Terry, are of that special breed mate, and more. Thanks for being there on my day of need.... Hey, I hear they're going to name a careflight chopper after you mate.

What was that Terry?..... Hey Gay, (*Terrys wife*) I think I heard him say; "that'll be magic."



Thank you all, and remember the Careflight saying that rings so true, "The next life saved, could be yours"