

Geoff musters up will to farm again

Cattle rancher Geoff Stralow sustained paraplegia after a bike accident when he was 18. He tells us how he adjusted to farming from a chair.

Hi, my name is Geoff Stralow and this is the story of my life pre and post of my accident, on the 26-05-1986.

I had a motorbike accident while mustering horses on one of my family's cattle properties, Mt Sturgeon in western Queensland. This accident rendered me paraplegic, and having to use a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

I was 18 years of age at the time and I am now 40. The day of my accident began just as any other day, rising at five o'clock for breakfast. I was giving the men a hand to finish drafting and loading of meat works bullocks which had been helicopter-mustered from Mt Emu Plains to the Mt Sturgeon bullock paddock cattle yards.

The next morning I had to take horses from Mt Sturgeon up to my family's two Mt Gamet cattle properties, Strathvale and Morecombe, to start mustering cattle. After loading the sale cattle, I returned to the homestead to get the motorbike to yard the horses I was to take with me. Once I located the horses, I turned them towards the homestead yards. I had to leave the horses for a short time so I could go ahead and open the gate that would lead them into the horse paddock joining the yards.

The gate was halfway down a gully and I momentarily lost sight of them. I back tracked and found them crossing the road and heading back up into a basalt wall. As I was getting to the lead to bend them back towards the gate, the front wheel of my motorbike hit a basalt rock and threw me off.

Being a bit dazed, I got up and attempted to lift the bike up, which I tried a couple of times but I was beginning to feel intense pain. I began to walk back towards home, hoping to make it to the road where I knew I would be found sooner or later. Walking was incredibly painful. Keeping my hands on my hips helped reduce the pain a little but once I reached the road, I could no longer keep going. I lay down just off the side of the road and within a short time; I found one leg was paralysed and unable to



BOVINE BUGGY: Geoff on his cattle station at Adelong.

move. I tried so hard to keep my other leg moving but after a short time, it also became paralysed. I began to panic and tried dragging myself closer to the road but it was almost impossible. It was now three in the afternoon, three hours before I would be found.

Lying there, I could hear the semi-trailers arriving at the homestead cattle yards to unload cattle. I was only a couple of kilometers from the homestead. So close to home, yet no-one knew what had happened.

After a while, crows began to arrive in a tree near me. I was afraid if I lost consciousness, they would pick my eyes out.

My mind was in turmoil. There were wild pigs and dingoes living in the basalt gorge behind the homestead and if I was not found before dark, I would not be able to defend myself if they approached me.

No-one noticed that I had not returned with the horses until my father and oldest brother returned home from putting the last of the bullocks onto the train in Hughenden to go to the meat works. After asking one of the men as to my whereabouts, my father and brothers then realized something may be wrong. So they began looking for me. I was lucky that I wasn't far from the gate and I could see the Toyota coming my way. As my back was broken and my two legs paralysed, I tried desperately to pull myself up by my arms, hoping they would see me and thankfully, they did.

A call was placed immediately to the Royal Flying Doctor via the two-way radio and luckily, the Murphy families from Clothes Peg and Gregory Springs stations, our neighboring properties, had heard the call and offered the use of their airstrip. When I was found,



MOWER POWER: Geoff bought a Suzuki 4x4 and his dad modified hand controls for it from a whipper snipper.

the wife of one of the stockman gave me a needle to stop the pain. The stretcher I was put on was a bed pulled apart out of the house. I was then placed into the back of mum and dad's Toyota station wagon and taken to the Murphy's airstrip on Gregory Springs, which by now was well lit.

I was flown straight to Townsville General Hospital. Townsville doctors were considering surgery that night as they thought my aorta was stressed and not functioning properly. My chest x-ray showed considerable damage, including two broken ribs and a broken collar bone. As the doctors in Townsville had not done this type of surgery before, they were in immediate contact with the surgeons at the Prince Charles Hospital in Brisbane and it was decided to airlift me there. I was taken aboard on a stretcher and accompanied by a Townsville doctor and nurse during the trip, as well as by my father.

Ansett airlines were wonderful. The air hostesses were kind and caring. The captain even offered my father the use of his private car.

Once at the Prince Charles Hospital, I underwent more x-rays, which showed my aorta was functioning properly, so it was then to the Princess Alexandra Hospital Spinal Unit. It was here in intensive care that my family and I were told that I may never walk again. My thoughts were in overdrive. My life as I knew it would never be the same again.

I was 18 years old and naturally had the same hopes and aspirations any 18 year old would have. The land was my life and would now be viewed from the seat of a wheelchair. Thank God for a loving, caring, close family who never failed to help me through not only the

physical healing but also the emotional healing.

There were always a number of family members at the hospital during my long and slow rehabilitation process. I spent two months in bed on my back, so you can appreciate how good the first proper shower felt. Pure heaven. I was placed in a wheelchair, which would serve as my legs from now on. I then wheeled down to the gym. Mum and dad were waiting for me on my return and both became upset as I believe it really hit home that I would never walk again.

I guess all in my position have gone through the full gamut of emotions, the hope, the pity, the anger and the sheer frustration. But you really do learn to move on and know that regardless of the loss, life goes on and you do adapt.

It's this realization that drove me to put all my energy to healing and finally going home. Initially, my rehabilitation was thought to be four to six months, I was home in three months, three weeks.

The staff and nurses were wonderful and I became friends with a nurse named Jo. She arranged for me to have leave and took me to the pub for a few drinks and also to the drive-in.

Leaving the spinal unit was a mixed bag of emotions; I had begun to see it as a safe haven with the doctors and the nurses, like a second family. They were always there to listen to my problems and assist in all ways and yes, there are some things a young male cannot discuss with family.

When I went home to Mt Sturgeon, it all looked so different but it was so good to be home. My thoughts soon turned to the possibility of some sort of vehicle I could maneuver around the

property. A neighbour of ours, Russell, offered to build me a "bush buggy". It was one mean machine with a Holden motor, automatic gear box, no bonnet and no windscreen. But it sure did the job. Many a time a storm would hit and the distributor would get wet and there I would sit until it dried out.

Being able to drive around once again, I could spend more time with my Brahman Stud cattle. As I would feed my stud stock molasses, they soon became familiar with the sound of the two musical air horns I had mounted on the vehicle. I had no trouble finding them, I'd just hit the air horns and every cow in the paddock would soon be right there with me.

Later on, I decided to buy a Suzuki 4x4 drop side but these were not available with an automatic gear box. So dad and the resident handyman modified hand controls for me from a whipper snipper. My left hand operated the clutch, throttle and brake. Sure took some getting used to, but once fitted to my Suzuki, I could drive over most of the entire property.

On the usual musters with choppers and horses, I would drive behind the mob of cattle collecting any of the calves that were straggling behind. Mt Sturgeon was approximately 355,840 acres, so I sure kept busy.

On one particular day, I learned that cattle and wheelchairs don't mix. The men were drafting cattle in the yards, my job this day was to count the cattle as they were drafted. A clean skin cow, which had not been mustered before, became separated from her calf, so the men put the cow in the calf pen with me hoping she would find her calf. She finally did but not before becoming agitated. She targeted the back of me and my wheelchair. I felt her head push under the back of my wheelchair and before I knew anything, myself and the wheelchair were airborne. I'm told I actually stood up for a few seconds. All I could remember is clinging fearfully to the top rail of the cattle yards, my wheelchair sprayed with cow snot. Lucky for me she was a poley cow, no horns on this one.

My family and I left Mt Sturgeon in 1993, I bought my cattle station, Adelong at the same time. Adelong is situated near Aramac in western Queensland. In 2001, I bought a small property, Glenvale, on the Burdekin River on the outskirts of Charters Towers in north Queensland. These days, I spend my time between both properties.

I would like to thank all the medical staff who have helped me from the time of my accident to the present time. I would also like to thank the Murphy families for helping to organise the Royal Flying Doctor and for the use of their airstrip on the night of my accident.