

Survivor S·t·o·r·i·e·s

Stepped Off - When will the journey end!

By Steve Pape



The morning of 14th July 2000, was like any other morning and after two great days of biking I was looking forward to the ride home to Leeds. As it

turned out I didn't leave Scotland for another six weeks.

That morning, all I can remember is sitting down for breakfast and passing some time talking to a couple of other bikers. After pulling out of the hotel's car park, I have no recollection of what happened next. From what people have told me, and from what the police crash investigators have deduced from the scene of the accident, I was apparently going around a left hand bend at speed. I must have lost control of my motorbike and collided with the walls on either side of the road seven miles out from the hotel. The scene was apparently like the aftermath of a bomb blast.

I was taken to the nearest hospital specializing in neurological injuries; Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. I was immediately placed on a ventilator because I wasn't breathing on my own, even though my heart was going okay. My lungs had also collapsed so I had two chest drains inserted to keep them inflated. It must have been like a scene from E.R.! Once I was safe to move, (with drips, catheters, chest drains and loads of monitors attached), I was taken for a CT scan of my brain to assess the damage, as my helmet was proof that I had suffered a head injury. Although there was no bleeding, my brain had been damaged due to the acceleration/de-acceleration forces of the accident. It was all very touch and go as to whether I would live or not so I was taken to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). By this time, my wife Carol had been notified and was already onboard a plane to Scotland with her parents. For several weeks, my condition was very unstable and nobody could tell Carol if I would survive. How she coped with it all I don't know. She says that



being a nurse helped because it meant she could take over a lot of my day-to-day care with confidence, leaving the ICU doctors and nurses to concentrate on the business of keeping me alive. All the time I was at Ninewells Hospital, Carol and her mum lived in a little relatives' room on the unit. As daft as it sounds, Carol says that life became very simple during that time. Every day was a matter of life or death for me and the normal day-to-day worries that we all have became very inconsequential. Needless to say, Carol completely lost her appetite and slept very little. She often comments that stress should be bottled, as it would make a great diet pill! Of course, I was oblivious to the worry I was causing and I can remember very little of my time in hospital. However, while I was in my coma, (or 'sleeping,' as I call it), there are a few occasions that I can recall. Call it a dream or an out of body experience, but I remember standing in what I can only describe as an open space, pitch black but with a faint glow of light over the horizon. I was in the middle of a wide, flat, open space, feeling very calm and very peaceful. It's strange, but there was a sense of overall

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happiness. I felt no regrets and there were no thoughts that I hadn't said goodbye or needed to make amends with anyone, or that I still needed to accomplish anything. I was at peace with the thought that I had lived well and been true to myself.

Thankfully, my memories of ICU are very limited so Carol has filled in the gaps for me, even though all she wants to do is forget it. In my mind, all this happened to someone else, even though I've seen the photos that the ICU nurses recommended were taken to make me realise how ill I was. My time in the ICU was an eventful one, as my condition would change from minute to minute; I was that unstable. However, as the weeks passed I started to improve and I slowly started to come out of the coma I had been in for about a month. While I was ill, I had quite a

few visitors from Leeds. Unfortunately, I can't really remember them, but I could feel that some of them were in the room. It seems strange that, even when you're in a deep coma, you can still feel things, perhaps not physically, but I just knew that people were there. Unfortunately, I was in no fit state to notice them or to respond in any way and I completely lost any sense of time in the weeks that followed. I was finally fit for the transfer to Leeds after about six weeks in Scotland. The neurological ward at Leeds General Infirmary was my

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home for the next two weeks. I became a little more aware of my surroundings here and the reality of having a head injury really began to sink in. I became very frustrated that I could no longer feed myself, walk or even talk properly and my tolerance of other people was not good.

One of the first things I remember seeing in the L.G.I. was a big poster on the wall at the bottom of the bed that Carol had placed there for me. The sign said - 'Don't worry Steve, I'll be in at 8am'. This was there because in the mornings I used to wake up disorientated and confused; I'm not surprised with some of the dreams I was

having! In Scotland, Carol had lived in the relatives' room on the ICU and had been by my bedside at least eighteen hours a day. In Leeds, she couldn't stay overnight so she left whilst I slept and then came back first thing in the morning. The poster really helped as, in my dreams, I was waking up in the strangest of places and what's worst is that they all seemed so real. I've since found out that vivid dreams are quite common after a stay in an ICU, although it's not known if it's the drugs that cause them or the trauma of just being there!

While in hospital, I noticed that my vision was blurred and I got very nauseous every time I attempted to sit up straight. Luckily, this was just a side effect of the head injury and did wear off after a few days but it was awful while it lasted. I felt like I was drunk half the time. This obviously didn't help my walking especially as my muscles had wasted away with the enforced inactivity of the previous weeks. The physiotherapists were fantastic though, even if we must have looked quite comical walking down the ward as I was now a six foot, nine stone (126 lb.) weakling wearing an eye patch!

On the roof of the Leeds General Infirmary there is a garden with a couple of very small walks and a seating area where you can sit and relax. It was here that Carol brought me in a wheelchair a couple of times a day for some exercise and some fresh air. I have to admit that after several steps I was completely wiped out, but this never deterred either of us. It was nice, too, to get away from the ward and feel 'normal' again. If we'd had a couple drinks, we'd have felt like any other couple in a beer garden somewhere.

A full recovery was always my main goal so when I was transferred to the rehabilitation unit at Chapel Allerton hospital two weeks later, Carol and I

worked hard at the exercises given to us by the physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists. The aim of rehab seemed to be to get you back to functioning as independently as possible. The coma had taken me back to zero so I had to relearn pretty much everything. Luckily, I had a strong sense of the person I was before the crash so I made it my mission to be that person again. After only a month in rehab, I was able to walk on my own and do simple tasks such as make a sandwich - you'd be amazed at how much organizational skill is needed just to do that! My speech was also improving although my tone of voice still wasn't quite right but I was desperate to go home so I was discharged although we continued to attend the various therapy sessions on an outpatient basis.

In the months that followed, my walking and talking improved a great deal. I seemed to recover from the physical aspects of the head injury relatively quickly and I eventually returned to work about six months after the accident. As with a lot of brain injuries, my personality was affected. I'm a bit more rigid in my thinking now and I like a routine. But I'm also apparently more loving so I guess there's a flip side to everything.

There tends to be a misconception that life after a brain injury is all doom and gloom. I must admit that the first year after the accident was really difficult although we received a lot of support from the various therapists at the rehab unit and from Headway, the organization supporting brain injury sufferers and their families. I also wrote 'Stepped Off' - a book about my journey back to health, with the aim of helping others going through a similar experience, although no two accidents and no two brain injuries are the same.

Ordering the book:



- **Paperback:** 59 pages
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May be ordered through chapters.ca or amazon.com. Check various online sources, as shipping charges may vary.