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*David Jackson and Debbie Goff on their wedding day, three days after David had been released from the hospital*

In one horrifying moment, an accident took his arms. Then a “miracle” gave them back

## “Someday I’ll Carry You Across These Steps”

BY NILAH RODGERS

**W**HEN 19-year-old David Jackson heard the scrape and clatter of metal against the sides of the mine shaft, he knew that the next heavy sheet of metal was on its way down. It was the morning of March 31, 1977, and David was part of a crew installing air ducts in the 457-metre-deep shaft at the Jersey Minière Zinc Mine, near Carthage, Tenn. He had joined a mining construction firm eight months before, straight from high school, and because he liked the camaraderie of working nights, he signed up for the mid-night shift.

David and Jerry Duncan, a 26-

year-old co-worker, waited on a metal scaffold just below the 335-metre level. On a steel set, one metre above them, stood David’s Uncle Leamon. Two metres above him, Ronald “R. D.” Ergle waited to bolt the next sheet in place. Suddenly, David became aware of a new sound — the clamor of steel slipping off the supporting cable. From more than 305 metres above, the 160-pound metal sheet plunged downward. Jerry was standing in the center of the opening, squarely in the path of the plummeting guillotine.

“Jerry!” David screamed, and made a lunging tackle. His hands touched his friend, then the metal

sliced between them. The blow knocked Jerry to the edge of the scaffold, where he lay unconscious, his right arm severed at the shoulder. Blood spurting from an artery; bone and sinew protruded raggedly.

David gasped. Dazed, he tried to push himself up with his left hand to get to Jerry. But he couldn't. Shifting his weight, he tried to raise himself with his right hand. Again he couldn't move. He hurt so much, he was sure he'd broken his arms. He looked down. Both his arms were gone! The right one was severed below the elbow, the left sliced off in the crook of his elbow.

"Oh, God, no!" David cried, closing his eyes against the sight. Then he screamed again and again, his cries echoing up the shaft. Leamon jumped down to the work deck, jerked on the emergency-bell cord, then ran over to his nephew. R. D. scrambled down behind him and made his way across the deck to the place where Jerry was lying unconscious on the edge of the scaffolding. Leamon's brother Charlie, the mine foreman, was in the lift bucket near the surface when he heard his nephew scream. He quickly pulled the cable to signal down. When the bucket set him beside David, he spotted one of the amputated arms and his legs threatened to buckle. Blood pumped from David's stumps.

**R. D.'s Idea.** When the metal sheet hit the scaffolding, it sounded to the topside crew as if the earth had caved in. Hoistman Robert Vaden quickly responded to the emergency

signal by calling an ambulance from Carthage, nine kilometres away. Now he waited impatiently for the signal to pull up the bucket.

Down in the shaft, Charlie lifted David into the bucket. He picked up the arm and yelled, "R. D.! Let's go!"

"That's Jerry's arm you've got," R. D. said tensely. Charlie looked at him, stunned. For the first time, he realized that they were dealing with three amputations.

Ravaged by pain, David kept his eyes shut and thought of his fiancée, 18-year-old Debbie Goff. They were going to be married in one week.

As his co-workers put the unconscious Jerry in the bucket beside him, the jolt made David scream. They were hoisted to the surface. It was about 6 a.m. All around was hysterical shouting.

Suddenly R. D. had an idea. *Maybe there was some way David's arms could be reattached.* "I'm going back to get his arms," he said.

R. D., Leamon and another miner returned to the 335-metre level. Shaking, they made their way across the scaffolding platform. Under the crumpled metal, R. D. found the two arms, one still encased in a rain-suit sleeve.

When they reached the top, the ambulance had already sped away with David and Jerry. Robert Vaden rushed the arms to the hospital in R. D.'s pickup truck. At Carthage, Dr. Jack Roe stopped the bleeding and gave the men pain-killers, but he knew specialists

were needed. He called orthopedic surgeon David Jones and arranged to have the boys raced by ambulance to Baptist Hospital in Nashville, 80 kilometres away.

Jerry's arm had been severed through the shoulder blade and the specialists found that nerve damage was too severe for it to be reattached. But Dr. Jones was confident that David's arms could be replanted, if they could get him to Jewish Hospital, 290 kilometres away in Louisville, Ky., quickly enough. There, head surgeon Harold Klei-ert had perfected microsurgical techniques for reattaching fingers, hands and limbs.

David's severed arms were wrapped in clean cloths and plastic bags and placed in an ice-filled cooler. Don Eyler, one of Dr. Jones' colleagues, called the airport and had the back seats removed from his twin-engine Navajo to make room for David's stretcher. Thirty minutes later, the three were on their way to Louisville. Meanwhile, Dr. Jones' brother, orthopedist Frank Jones, grafted skin from Jerry Duncan's severed arm to close his gaping shoulder wound.

**Surgical Marathon.** About 1 p.m. attendants wheeled David into a double operating room at Jewish Hospital where two surgical teams waited, scrubbed and gowned. In the two hours since the phone call from Nashville, word had spread in the hospital about the operation to be attempted and there was an air of expectancy in the operating theater.

The doctors believed that, if successful, it would be the world's first bilateral arm replant.

The anesthetist inserted a tube into David's trachea so anesthetizing gases and oxygen went directly to his lungs. She also inserted an airway to keep his tongue from cutting off his air. Another anesthetist started him on I.V., blood replacement and antibiotics, while the first monitored his heart, pulse, respiration, blood pressure, temperature and intake and output of fluids. At each side of the operating table was a free-standing microscope.

Since David had lost both arms, he was treated as two separate cases, with two surgical teams. Two doctors, a scrub nurse and a circulating nurse were positioned at each of David's stumps. Two other groups concentrated on the severed parts. Over the next ten hours, doctors and nurses would work in shifts, giving them a chance to relax. The surgeons noted with satisfaction that the amputated arms had been transported in an ice chest. Without refrigeration the cells would have died, making reattachment impossible.

Doctors removed bruised and crushed tissue, then cleansed the stumps and severed limbs with an isotonic solution containing sugars and salts. After a final washing with antibiotics, they moved to the microscopes and began isolating blood vessels in the stumps with tiny forceps and scissors and marking them with micro-sutures. Bone was

shortened to match crushed tissue that had been removed.

Another 1½ hours passed while the bones were joined by compression plates and technicians took X rays. Finally, Dr. Kleinert isolated the first artery in the left arm, then clamped, cleaned and trimmed it until the two ends fitted with precision. (Suturing the arteries first kept down blood loss and permitted a clear operating field.) After 10 or 12 stitches, he released the tiny clamp. For a long moment the artery lay flat and white as limp macaroni; then the vessel filled and blood coursed as steadily as David's heart-beat. As Dr. Kleinert mended the second artery, another surgeon worked on David's right arm.

**Tears of Joy.** Because veins are more fragile than arteries and are needed in greater numbers, the doctors had to repair four or five in each arm with sutures so small they could be used to repair human hair. Tweezerlike carriers held curved needles two millimetres long. Walls of veins thinner than a strand of embroidery floss were rejoined with almost invisible nylon thread. Surgeons connected a vein, then worked on another vessel. After several minutes, they rechecked each vessel for good circulation.

Six hours of surgery passed before a break was taken. Through the 11 p.m. shift change, doctors continued to connect nerves, muscle and tendons. Before the skin was closed, the underlying fascial sleeve — a layer of fibrous tissue — was split to allow

for swelling. At midnight surgeons closed the skin. Even now, no one dared hurry. One tight skin suture might put pressure on a repaired vessel and shut it down. David's arms must have every chance to live.

Doctors dressed the arms, foam padding swathing the gauze. Splints provided support and the gauze-encased arms were suspended from stands. At 1 a.m. David was wheeled into Intensive Care.

Eighteen hours after the accident, David awoke fully. His parents stood at the foot of his bed, Debbie waited by his side. He blinked. Remembering the bloody stumps, he raised his head to look, expecting short, rounded-off stubs. Instead, long cocoonlike bandages ended with his own fingers miraculously exposed.

"My arms!" Tears filled his eyes. "I've got my arms back. It's a miracle." Then he remembered Duncan. "What about Jerry? Is he all right?"

"You saved his life," Debbie whispered. "But the doctors couldn't save his arm."

For four days doctors kept David in Intensive Care, then assigned him to a room. Soon he was walking the hospital halls, his bandaged arms elevated from rolling I.V. poles. Three weeks after the accident, he was home.

On April 23, the third day after he was released from the hospital, David, his best man and his attendants stepped out of the anteroom to join the minister at the altar

of the Bethlehem Church of Christ.

Debbie approached on the arm of her father. David glanced down at the sleeves of his tuxedo, slit to fit around the casts and braces that extended past his fingertips. He felt he was the luckiest man alive.

Finally, the ring bearer held out the satin pillow and Debbie reached for David's gold wedding band that dangled from a gold chain. David bent down and Debbie slipped the chain over his head.

Now it was his turn. With rigid fingers, David reached for the slender band. He willed his fingers and thumb to close over it. He grasped it, praying the ring wouldn't fall. Slowly he slipped it over the third finger of Debbie's left hand. Flushed with accomplishment, he met her eyes. Her smile trembled and behind him he heard his mother's muffled sob.

After the reception David and Debbie drove to their new mobile home. At the threshold David looked at his arms. "Someday I'll carry you across these steps," he promised.

**Soaked and Jubilant.** One day, after three months of daily exercise and wearing braces at night to stretch the tendons, David felt Debbie's touch on his hands. Soon he could feel heat radiate from the stove burners, sense the cold of ice cubes.

In midsummer, David approached the hand mower. Tentatively, he reached for the handles

and missed. On the second try, his left hand slipped; but his right hand rested on one side of the handle. He raised the left hand five centimetres above the bar and brought it down. Taking a deep breath, he told his fingers to tighten. Finally, crabbed fingers held while he took several steps. At the end of the first lap, he trembled and sweat dripped in his eyes. He wanted to wipe his forehead on his sleeve, but he rested without taking his eyes off his hands lest they desert their posts. Then he maneuvered the mower into a 90-degree turn and started back down the yard. Three hours later, soaked with perspiration and jubilant, he completed mowing the yard.

Nine months after the accident, David lifted Debbie, balancing most of her weight with his upper arms, careful not to undo the surgeons' work. He carried her across their threshold.

Now David has excellent use of his arms and the nerves have regenerated enough that sometimes they are sensitive, ticklish or itch. "Someday I'll work again," David says confidently.

Would he do it again? "Yes," he says, fingering the Carnegie Hero Medal that accompanied a check for \$1000. "I'm lucky. The accident took my arms, a miracle gave them back. If I had to do it over, I'd do the same thing. A person's life is worth more than a pair of arms."