

Dead man walking

THEY think they've heard it all before. In lunchrooms and workshops and depots across Queensland, Ergon Energy crews have been turning up to hear some guy talk to them about safety.

According to the bush telegraph, the speaker's not some academic or management-type, but an ordinary bloke - a linie, who lived through what the industry so clinically terms an 'incident'. They've heard he copped a

really bad hit, had a stint in hospital, did it tough for a while there.

So, they file into lunchrooms and workshops and depots to hear from Theo Venter, a nuggety, shaven-headed bloke whose accent immediately tags him as a Springboks supporter. The locals take their seats - as usual, the back rows fill up first - and glance up at the Powerpoint slideshow on the wall, sporting a photo of a grinning Theo flanked by his handsome, smiling teenaged sons.

A few more photos rotate through. Theo with a gorgeous ragamuffin with a head of wilful curls - his daughter. Theo with a pretty smiling brunette - his wife. Theo and some mates knocking back a coldie on the deck of a yacht club. Theo on the beach.

He steps to the front of the room and starts to tell his story. Of growing up in South Africa, the son

of a linesman. Of setting his sights on following in his old man's footsteps. Of scoring an apprenticeship, earning his ticket and loving his work.

Theo talks of being attracted by the "excitement" of live line work; of training and qualifying, and loving it. So far, so... unremarkable. A happy man, with a happy wife and happy kids.

Australia beckons. He tells of winning a live line job in Western Australia, arriving in September 2005 and hitting the ground running. Three months later, Thea and the kids - Ruan, then aged 12, Pierre, 10, and six-year-old daughter Rene - arrive.

They're all happy, living in a beautiful part of the world in a lovely family home. Life's great, and flashing up on the wall are the pictures to prove it.

Suddenly, a murmur courses through the audience. The slideshow photos have taken a darker turn. Instead of fun in the Western Australian sun, here's Theo in a hospital bed, peering blankly through a lacework of tubes. Here's Theo with his hands and forearms thickly wadded in bandages, with fluid seeping a shocking yellow-green against the stark white of the hospital sheets. Here's Theo with his wife and kids, their faces gaunt and strained.

"On the morning of Monday, February 13, 2006, I was on top of the world - life was fantastic," Theo tells his listeners. "By day's end, I didn't know if I'd live."

Now, he has the undivided attention of his audience. Some are staring at Theo, others at the photographic horror show silently playing out on the wall.

Theo describes his three-man crew heading out that bright summer morning to repair a pole struck by lightning. To avoid inconveniencing the customer at the end of the line, the job will be carried out live.

"The sound of 22,000 volts of electricity ripping through you makes a roaring noise. Every muscle constricts. I felt each and every second. I remember everything."

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At the site, Theo and one of his workmates go up in the bucket. The third stays on the ground as the safety observer. The two in the air are making good progress until they hit a tricky insulator. A single fiddly bolt is holding up the show; seemingly impossible to thread thanks to the bulky PPE-mandated glove. One man has a crack at it, then the second. It's hot in the sun, and frustration starts to set in. "I looked around, decided that all the bases were covered – I knew what I was doing, we had all the matting in place – so I took my glove off."

His colleague in the bucket says nothing as Theo removes his glove. Nor does the safety observer, busy doing other work on the ground. Theo knows taking off the glove is a critical breach. He saw another crew take a similar shortcut a few weeks earlier, thought at the time how bloody dangerous it was, although he said nothing. Those guys had done what needed to be done, glove-free, and it worked out fine.

Theo reaches in with his bare hand and threads the bolt. In a heartbeat, his left wrist contacts a live part. Twenty-two thousand volts punch through his body, exploding bone, nuking muscle and tendons from the inside out, before blasting out through his right hand.

"I felt each and every second." A couple of audience members are giving the carpet their undivided attention, but most are gazing at Theo in horrified awe.

"The sound of 22,000 volts of electricity ripping through you makes a roaring noise. Every muscle constricts. I remember everything. People say you block it out – you don't."

Somehow, Theo breaks contact and passes out. This small mercy is short-lived – seconds later, he regains consciousness. His blood is boiling, bones burning, flesh smoking. He's still screaming 20 minutes later when the ambulance arrives.

A new photo pops up on the slideshow. Raw, meaty claws which once were hands:

fingertips exploded open, skin split like an overcooked sausage, weeping blood and clear fluid. Someone from the audience leaves the room. Another has his eyes squeezed shut. Several are whiter than hospital sheets.

Theo continues. During the mad dash to Royal Perth Hospital, he thinks of a colleague back home who was hit with 11,000 volts. Theo visited him in hospital a day or so after the incident, and the patient was coming along well. The next day, he died – infection. Theo's pain-wracked, terrified brain does the maths – he's collected double the voltage that killed his mate. He knows he's cooked from the inside. He thinks of his family, of the daughter he'll never walk down the aisle. He knows he will die.

An uncomprehending Thea meets him as he's raced into emergency. She's been told

burns units on earth, but they're not doing much beyond pain relief. Theo's not expected to live.

Day three, and Theo's father arrives from South Africa on a desperate mercy mission to see his stricken son one last time. The pain from Theo's grievous injuries pale in comparison to the anguish etched on the old man's face.

Day four, and the medical team sends him to radiology, to investigate why this dead man walking is... well, not walking, but breathing. What they find is a miracle – Theo's heart, kidneys and lungs are fine. There's hope.

Royal Perth Hospital swings into action. Fiona Wood – head of the burns unit, 2005 Australian of the Year, saviour of those most gravely burned in the Bali bombings – operates. Theo wakes up exhausted, sick and in a new world of hurt. Dr Wood gently breaks the news that he'd

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her husband has been burned; she's imagining red welts, blisters.

A triage team slices open Theo's left arm to relieve the explosive swelling. They pour antibiotics into him. Then, suddenly he's alone. It's silent – just Theo, the stench of his own roasted flesh, and a recurring thought: 'What have I done? What the hell have I done?'

Thea enters the room, and gags at the stink of her burned, broken husband. But she toughs it out because they're only allowed five minutes together. Five minutes to relive 14 years of marriage and memories; for all that needs to be said. Then she's led away.

Again, Theo is alone. Just him, the smell and the agony. All through that long night, he refuses to sleep. He will meet death head-on.

Day two. The Royal Perth Hospital has one of the best

better get used to it – the plan is one day in theatre, one day to recover; then another operation, another 24-hour respite. Six gruelling surgeries in 12 days excise most of the burned and mangled tissue from Theo's arms.

All this, to learn his left arm is a goner – it's amputate, or death by gangrene. Only one specialist on the team – a plastic surgeon – believes another miracle is possible, that the arm can be saved. Back in the operating theatre, despite opposition from some of Australian medicine's leading lights, the plastic surgeon stands his ground. Theo wakes up with both arms still attached.

The surgeries rev up again – another 10 in the next 20 days. They carve muscle from his back to replace the ruined tissue scraped from his arms. They harvest skin from his legs to stretch over the raw, gaping wounds in his hands and wrists. They mine

tissue to backfill the massive gaping exit injury in his right arm. They rebreak, and reset, and pin bone.

Theo has 17 major surgeries. He ages, becomes frail, withers from 95kg to 70kg. But he's alive, and, finally, he goes home.

Now, the man who has always prided himself on looking after his family suddenly relies on Thea for everything – to wash him, feed him, help in the toilet. He can't even open a door. After four weeks, he shuts the blinds. It is the last time he will see daylight for two months. His descent into depression is cataclysmic. Thoughts of suicide begin to whisper, then nag, before crystallising as a perfectly logical option.

Weeks pass. One day, with all his family out of the house, Theo decides to put the pitiful remnants of his life to one last, mad test before ending it all – he'll attempt an expedition to the shops. After months of self-imposed confinement, the outside world is overwhelming; the sunlight near-blinding. His bandaged hands can't wrangle the car keys into the ignition, so he shoehorns a shocked passer-by into starting the vehicle for him.

"I steered with my elbows. I parked. I went to the ATM, but couldn't get my wallet out of my pocket. Then I couldn't get my keycard out. Then I nearly couldn't enter my PIN into the keypad. Then I couldn't grab my money. In the end, I dropped to my knees and collected the notes from the machine with my teeth."

Theo's humiliation is absolute. But riding shotgun is rage, and a new surge of determination. He manages to drive home and promptly signs up for physiotherapy. The regime is relentless – several hours a day, five days a week. He soldiers through the first month, then the second. His shattered hands remain useless, frozen claws. There's a third fruitless month of physio, then a fourth. Still nothing.

Things are grim on the home front, too. Theo's princely \$700 payout in workers' comp is long gone. Thea can't work – caring for her helpless

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Normanton notches 13 years

Putting risk management in spotlight

RISK management will be the next focus of Ergon Energy's quarterly safety initiatives, running from November 2010 until January 2011.

"Feedback from field and corporate employees is that they are not clear on what risk management actually is, or how to apply it in their workplaces," Manager Field and Corporate Safety Kerry Ryan explained.

"This is supported by feedback from line management, internal and external health and safety audits, incident investigation data and our recent Field Risk Management workshops."

The Risk Management Initiative will get back to basics for both field and corporate employees, and include information about how to apply the simple five-step risk management process to their workplaces. It follows the highly successful Theo Venter roadshow which was presented to field-based employees throughout September and October and which is featured in this edition of *eConnect*.

"Risk management is not just about paperwork and procedures – it's about our people making informed, smart decisions that will ensure their own safety and that of their mates and the general public," Kerry said.

"The information that will be communicated during the risk management initiative will provide employees with an opportunity to do their 50 per cent and think about the hazards and risks that are specific to their jobs and their workplaces."

"Regardless of whether they are field workers or office-based, every employee has a part to play in ensuring that 'no one gets hurt today', and these principles will help them achieve it."

THIRTEEN years without a Lost Time Injury is a great result by most standards – and even more so when this is achieved by a depot responsible for some of the toughest terrain and most variable seasonal conditions in Queensland.

Yet, this is the proud record of the team at Normanton depot, an achievement which Area Operations Manager Charlie Casa (*centre*) recognised during a recent trip to the Gulf country – he's pictured with Normanton Technical Serviceperson Rob Poulton, Powerworker Ron O'Brien, TSP Paul Danaher and Work Group Leader Graeme Regan.

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husband is a full-time job – and the once picture-perfect Venter family is freefalling into poverty. Some days, the kids have water, not milk, on their morning Weet Bix. Often, both parents skip dinner. Someone from the kids' school rings, diplomatically asking if it's OK for the school to provide their children with some meals.

Back in Queensland, there are red eyes in the room. People are thinking of their own families, of what it means to fail them so utterly. It's too close to home.

Theo continues his story. One day, eight months after he slid off a glove and nearly lost everything he ever loved for the sake of a shortcut, the index finger on his right hand wiggles. Just a little, but it moves. Then, a week later, another. Then another.

Ambitiously, he decides to regain his drivers' licence. It takes three cracks, but he triumphs. Next, he returns to work; first, for three hours a week, then four, then five. His live line days are behind him – his left arm is of little use, although his right has learned to do the job of two – so he moves into an office-based safety role. He returns to the Royal Perth Hospital to thank the surgeons and burns team and physios for the gift of a

second chance. He is alive. His family is intact. He will walk his daughter down the aisle.

These days, Theo shares his story with people just like him – electricity industry workers, mostly men. He knows he is living testament to the unbearable price of complacency, of not speaking up, of not sticking to

me. The Friday before I almost died, I sat through a safety talk – just like you're doing now.

"Then, in a single moment of stupidity to save a couple of lousy seconds, I brought anguish to my wife and father, suffering to my kids, could have killed my offside, and cost my company more than \$1 million. I can not

"I brought anguish to my wife and father, suffering to my kids, could have killed my offside, and cost my company more than \$1 million. I can not forgive myself."

procedure, of expedience. For five weeks, he has crisscrossed Queensland meeting with hundreds of Ergon Energy employees – people just like him.

"I was you," he tells his listeners. "I was you, sitting on your side of the table. I was the smart bloke. I was the man. I was the best at what I did."

"I had a great safety record, and I knew for a fact that accidents didn't happen to

forgive myself.

"Life is too valuable for compromise. Please. Don't."

Theo thanks the audience for their time and attention and steps away. Then, after a few closing words from a local site manager, it's all over. Back to work. And the field crews and powerworkers and linies and tradesmen file out of the room with sombre expressions and a fresh realisation: they *hadn't* heard it all before.

Three great reasons to celebrate

IN THIS day and age achieving 30 years service with one company is a rarity, but Ergon Energy Toowoomba's Warehouse Team Member Doug Druce, along with Inventory Controller Alister McDonald recently achieved just that.

"It's terrific to see an organisation like Ergon Energy where employees are able to provide long-term service" Group Manager Fleet, Procurement and Logistics Tony Ballard said.

"Equally, it's important to recognise the loyalty of people like Doug, who began on 4 August 1980 and Alister, who started on 31 July 1980, who choose to stay with Ergon Energy through the good times and periods of significant change and challenge."

To celebrate their important



Warehouse and Distribution Manager Gary Wust (left) and Fleet, Procurement and Logistics Group Manager Tony Ballard (right) joined Errol Wilkinson, Alister McDonald and Doug Druce to mark the trio's 100-plus years of combined service.

milestones Doug and Alister were invited to a special evening with their partners, as well as Errol Wilkinson who retired several weeks earlier. Errol was a Warehouse Team Member at Toowoomba who started with the predecessor

company on 8 December 1969 and who clocked up more than 40 years' service.

Alister shared a few recollections of the status quo when he started.

"Uniforms were all grey -

shorts and shirts and dust coats," he said.

"A cleaner was able to accidentally unplug computer and lost all the computer info, so all staff had to double-shift for eight hours in the warehouse, followed by six hours at head office re-inputting the info."

This was the era of Joh Bjelke-Petersen going head-to-head with the electricity unions. The subsequent strikes and extended power outages did not endear electricity companies to the public, and Alister recalled that driving to Brisbane in a company car meant hiding the door logos or risking trouble.

And, he said, Dalby was the centre of the earth. "Everybody knew everybody - it was very, very simple to fix any problems," he said.



Catching up after Theo Venter's safety roadshow talk at Biloela depot are apprentice Michael Goody, Theo, and TSP Tony Picton, along with Linesperson Brendan Moore who travelled from Theodore and apprentice Kyle Draheim from Moura.



Field crews from across the central west gathered at Barcaldine to hear from Theo. Pictured are local Scheduler Danny Bunt, Linesperson Scott Frost from Blackall, Theo, Barcaldine Live Linespersons Jeff Easton, Tony Bashford and Phill Hale, Barcaldine WGL Clint Austin, EFM Jason Coveney and Longreach WGL Mick Bichsel.

25 Year Club ranks boosted

THEY'RE the long-serving employees who bring hard-won experience, a wealth of corporate knowledge and enormous professionalism to Ergon Energy. They're the members of the prestigious 25 Year Club which, over the past few weeks, has welcomed another 60 new members to its ranks. Events were held at Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Toowoomba, Rockhampton and Maryborough, and Mackay region 25-year veterans were also inducted. Congratulations to the newest members of the 25 Year Club.

BRISBANE

Marcus Leaver, Elizabeth Collins and Lian Tan

CENTRAL

Lawrence Shuttlewood, Bradley Sydenham, Clem McGee, Graeme Wangman and Peter Molle

FAR NORTH

Michael Stoter, Bob Carrodus, Peter Bacic, Sara Collins, Tony Linneman, Pina McCormick, Don McKeague, Dave Steele, Ray Thomas, Peter Day, Les Morton, Russell Zahner, Russell Boardman, Barry Ernst, Mick Bellero, Ranald Edwards, Michael Lanskey, Jenny Fletcher and Darryl Werner

NORTHERN

Wayne Fox, David Hall, Phil Bowater, Glen Davies, Gavin Marshall, Wayne Butterworth, Alan Butcher, Blane Marsh, Neville Bathe, Alan Cosmo, Barry Fitzgerald, Dean Maltby, Des Morris, Errol Wiseman, Jaryn Donaldson, Nev Bowden, Karen Glazebrook, Peter Marhin, Michael Deckert and David Williams

SOUTHERN

Mark Barling, Max Bygrave, Peter Kerr, Bruce Sheppard, Kevin Bland, Brian Valler, Shane Raabe, Greg Harvey, Mick Kings, Debbie Mmissen, Greg Zanow, David Seymour and Tony Nobbs