

Theo Venter

Just another day - the road to redemption

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 bloke talk to them about safety.

They've heard that he's one of them – a linie, then a live linie, who lived through what the industry so clinically terms an 'incident'. Yeah, they've heard he copped a really bad 'hit', had a stint in hospital, had a few ops. Did it tough for a while there. But, hey, if he's well enough to be travelling the countryside telling his story, he must be OK now.

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

A few more photos rotate through. Theo with a gorgeous ragamuffin girl 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 doing the same. Of graduating high school, getting his 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 three happy kids.

Australia beckons. He tells of scoring 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 Rene arrive. They're all happy, living in a beautiful part of the world in a lovely family home. Life's good...no, it's great.

Suddenly, a murmur ripples around the room. The pics on the screen on the wall are no longer depicting fun in the sun in WA. There's Theo in a hospital bed, enmeshed in a lace of tubes. There's Theo with his hands and forearms cushioned in metres of padding and bandages, with vile-looking fluid seeping out – lots of it – a shocking yellow-green against the stark white of the hospital sheets. There's Theo with his wife and kids, now all looking drawn and gaunt.

"On the morning of Monday, February 13, 2006, I was on top of the world," Theo says. "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 horror show being silently played out on the wall. A couple of others appear suddenly fascinated by their own fingernails, or by fiddling with their mobile phones.

Theo describes how his three-man crew turned up at work that bright, beautiful morning and were sent out on a different job to the one which had originally been pencilled in.

A pole had been struck by lightning. It was a hell of a mess, but the decision had been made to do repairs without inconveniencing the single customer it supplied.

At the site, Theo and his mate Nico – the two most experienced live linies out of the trio – decided to go up in the bucket. The third would be the safety observer. The two in the air were making good progress until they hit a tricky insulator. One little fiddly bolt was holding them up; seemingly impossible to thread thanks to the bulky PPE-mandated glove. Nico had a crack at it, then Theo. It was hot in the sun, and frustration started to set in.

"I looked around, decided that everything was covered – I knew what I was doing, we had all the matting in place – so I took my glove off and sorted out the bolt."

Seconds later, Theo's left wrist contacted a live part. Twenty-two thousand volts tore through his body, exploding bone, nuking muscle and tendons from the inside out, before exiting through his right hand.

"I remember each and every second. I felt each and every second." Some of his audience are by now giving the carpet their undivided attention, but most are gazing at Theo in horrified awe.

"The sound of 22,000 volts of electricity roars. Every muscle constricted. I remember everything. People say you block it out. You don't."

Suddenly, somehow, he broke contact and passed out. Nico kept his cool, dropping the bucket. Seconds later, Theo regained consciousness. His blood was at boiling point, bones burning, flesh smoking. The screaming started. Cold water, first aid from his traumatised offsideers, assistance from passers-by, even the arrival of the ambulance about 20 minutes later did nothing to ease his agony.

A new photo pops up on the slideshow. Raw, meaty claws which once were hands: fingertips exploded open, skin ruptured like an overripe melon, weeping blood and clear fluid. Someone in the audience leaves the room. Several others are whiter than Theo's hospital sheets.

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

An uncomprehending Thea meets him as he's raced into emergency. She's been told her husband has been burned; she's imagining some red welts, perhaps some blistering. A single glance at the mangled masses where her husband's hands used to be, and she's led away, shocked beyond tears.

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

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

Again, Theo is alone. Just him, the smell and the pain. He refuses to sleep – he knows he's going to die, and he's determined to meet death head on.

Day two mirrors his first night in hospital. The Royal Perth Hospital has one of the best burns units on earth, but they're not doing much beyond pain relief. Theo's not going to live.

Day three, and Theo's elderly father arrives after a frantic dash to see his dying son. The anguish on his father's face is more painful than the burns.

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

Perth Royal's medical SWAT team swings into action. Fiona Wood – former Australian of the Year, saviour of so many of those most gravely injured in the Bali bombings – is brought in. She operates. Theo wakes up exhausted, sick and in a new world of hurt. Dr Wood gently tells him he'd better get used to it – the plan is one day of operating, one day to recover, another operation, another 24 hour respite. Six gruelling surgeries in 12 days excise most of the burned, wasted, and mangled tissue from Theo's arms.

All this, only to learn his left arm is a goner – either that, or death by gangrene. Only one specialist on the team believes another miracle is possible. Theo isn't impressed with this particularly specialist, a plastic surgeon whom he dismisses as "only good for boob jobs and facelifts". But, in the operating theatre, with some of Australian medicine's leading lights gathered around, the plastic surgeon holds his ground. Theo wakes up with his arm.

So, the surgeries rev up again – another 10 in the next 20 days. They carve muscle from his back to replace the ruined tissue removed from his arms. They harvest skin from his legs to stretch over the raw, gaping wounds in his hands and wrists. They round up tissue to backfill the horrific gaping exit wound in his right arm.

Theo has 17 major surgeries in little more than a month. He ages, becomes frail, wasting away from 95kg to 70kg. His triathlon-ready frame loses all muscle tone. But he's alive, and he's ready to go home.

"My wife drove up to our house and we were greeted by my mates – they'd made a big banner and they had the beers ready. Then they saw me, and saw what I'd become, and I saw their faces freeze. So I walked through the front door that I'd last walked through left three months earlier, and began the process of losing the last of my dignity."

Theo – a proud man who has always looked after his wife and kids – suddenly relies on Thea for everything. To wash him, feed him, open doors and help out in the toilet. After four weeks, he shuts the blinds, and doesn't see daylight for the next two months. His descent into depression is breathtaking and absolute. Suicidal thoughts begin to nigger, then nag, before morphing into a perfectly logical option.

D-Day arrives. Thea is out, and Theo decides to put the tattered remnants of his life to one final test before ending it all – he'll go to the shop. After months of self-imposed confinement, daylight and the outside world are overwhelming. His useless, swaddled hands can't wrangle the car keys into the ignition, so he ropes a confused and shocked passer-by into starting the car.

"Somehow, I drove to the shops, steering with my elbows, and didn't hit anything. I parked. I went to the ATM, but couldn't get my wallet out of my pocket. Then I nearly couldn't enter my PIN into the keypad. Then I couldn't grab my money. So I dropped to my knees and grabbed it with my teeth. It was absolutely humiliating."

But humiliation carries with it rage, and with rage comes determination. Theo manages to drive his car home, and signs up for physiotherapy. The regime is overwhelming – several hours, five days a week. He soldiers through the first fruitless month, then the second. Then the third and fourth. But his poor broken hands remained useless, frozen claws.

Things were grim on the home front, too. Under the local workers' compensation scheme, Theo received very little money. Thea had a new full-time job – looking after her husband – and the once picture-perfect Venter family hurtled towards poverty. The kids had water, not milk, on their morning Weet Bix. Both parents frequently went without meals. The lowest point was a kindly phone call from the kids' school, diplomatically asking if Theo and Thea would mind if the school provided their children with some meals, since they were clearly hungry.

Theo's humiliation, sense of loss and fury at himself knew no bounds. "Why should my children suffer – go hungry, just because I did a stupid thing? It breaks my heart." Back in Queensland, pollen in the air can't be the only explanation for all the red eyes around the room. These blokes are thinking of their own families. This could be them. It's too close to home.

Theo continues his story. One day, eight months after he redefined what the human body can endure, the index finger on his right hand wriggles. Just a little, but it moves. Then, a week later, another. Then another.

Rather ambitiously, Theo decides the next logical step is to regain his drivers' licence, a plan which falls flat when he can't get his seatbelt on.

"After 10 minutes, the assessor told me to stop wasting his time, and walked off. So I went home, practiced until I could get the belt on in under two minutes, then returned. This time, he failed me because my fingers weren't strong enough to indicate properly. So I went home, practiced, and returned a week later. On my third attempt, I passed."

Theo went back to work – first, for three hours a week, then for four, then more, moving into the safety area. His left arm is of little use – the forearm is little more than spongy tissue fused to bone, and he has minimal movement in his stunted thumb – but his right has learned to do the job of two. Theo returned to the Royal Perth Hospital to thank the surgeons and burns team and physios who paved the way to redemption. He is alive. His family is intact. He will walk his daughter down the aisle.

Theo's story is essentially a tale of little events – of a brief lapse in judgement, of humble triumphs like wiggling a single finger, of the everyday comfort of being able to hold his wife's hand. And this is the message he brought to hundreds of Ergon Energy employees, as he crisscrossed the state for five weeks.

"It's the ripple effect – the little stupidity to save a couple of seconds which caused so much anguish to my wife and kids and father, which could have killed my offsider, and which cost my company more than \$1 million," he says.

"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 me."

He takes his time to eye each bloke in the room, and hits them with the reality punch.

"I was you. I was on your side of the table. I was the smart bloke, the good operator. The Friday before I almost died, I sat through a safety talk – just like you're doing now.

"It sickens me to think of how much I took for granted, about what complacency costs, about how the little things add up. I haven't forgiven myself, and I still wake up at least once a week in a cold sweat. In my dreams, I relive the accident and I can hear it and feel it and smell it all over again.

"Life is too valuable for compromise – please, don't."

After a few closing words from a local site manager, it's all over. Back to work. And as the field crews and powerworkers and linies and tradesmen file out of the room, two comments emerge as an overriding theme. "Thought I'd heard it all before – but I hadn't". And: "He's just like one of us.

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