

Tom Aitken had the misfortune to crash his motorcycle, but his timing couldn't have been better

On the subject of chance, or probability, or fortune so astounding as to be laughable, consider the case of Tom Aitken, of Chilliwack.



***GORD MCGINNIS* With his motorcycle crashed in a muddy ditch on a remote stretch of Highway 1 just south of Lytton, Tom Aitken, 44, of Chilliwack, his leg badly broken, is treated by Seattle doctors Andy Parker (standing in the striped shirt, wearing surgical gloves) and Steve Sorsby (in riding suit, kneeling to Parker's right).**

Aitken is 44. He drives a shuttle truck for a living. He is also an avid motorcyclist who has ridden bikes for more than 20 years. His bike is a 1991 1,100 cc. Yamaha Virago, a powerful thing designed for highway cruising.

On July 11, a bright, sunny Sunday, Aitken and four of his buddies set out from Chilliwack for a six-hour ride. They intended to go up Highway 1 to Lillooet, then down the Duffey Lake road to Whistler, then back to Chilliwack.

They set out, and on the way up Highway 1 to Lillooet, the group of five motorcyclists stretched out along the road. Aitken was in the second-to-last position. South of Lytton, on a remote stretch of the highway with absolutely no sign of human habitation along it, Aitken banked into a curve. Then: " I felt a shake in the back end of the bike," Aitken said, " and I remember looking around and seeing the rumble strip on the edge of the road, and then the ditch, and then thinking, ' Oh, shit.'"

That, for the next several minutes, was all he would remember. He does not remember the crash. He does not remember plowing into the ditch and being covered in mud — " The only mud-filled ditch along the side of the highway for miles around," Aitken said, " and I managed to find it." He does not remember flailing around wildly in the ditch before passing out.

His buddy riding behind him saw Aitken go into the ditch and rushed over to him. There was little he could do, though, but wait for the others to return. Moving Aitken might have caused more injury.

Seconds later, Dr. Andy Parker and his wife, Dawn, came around the corner at which Aitken had just crashed. The Parkers, from Seattle, were driving south down Highway 1 in their pickup, returning home after a weekend at their cabin in B. C. (Parker, originally from Vancouver, earned his medical degree from the University of B. C., and went to the U. S. in the 1980s when he couldn't get a billing number from the provincial government, which had then put a freeze on hiring more doctors. Our loss was the U. S.' s gain. Parker is now vice-president of U. S. HealthWorks, a network of more than 140 medical clinics across the country.)

It was Parker's wife who saw Aitken in the ditch.

" I told Andy that there was someone in the ditch," she said, " and he said, ' No, no, he's okay, he's just sitting by the side of the road,' and I said, ' No, I saw someone else flailing around in the ditch and it looks like there's been an accident.'"

Parker stopped. He rushed over to the ditch and started to examine Aitken. Parker, who had spent much of his career in emergency rooms and was trained in advanced trauma life support, set about stabilizing Aitken's spine and examining him for internal injuries.

It was at that moment the story got a whole lot weirder.

"It was bizarre," Parker said. "I'm down in this ditch along Highway 1 in the middle of nowhere, and I hear this voice say, 'Andy, what are you doing down there?'"

Parker looked up, and there was his friend and colleague, Dr. Steve Sorsby, regional medical director of the U. S. HealthWorks group for Washington state.

At the same time the Parkers were heading south down Highway 1, Sorsby and his son, Jason, were heading north up Highway 1. An avid motorcyclist himself, Sorsby was on vacation and motorbiking up to Hyder, Alaska.

"It was so surreal," Parker said. "I look up and it's Sorsby. He can't believe I'm down in a ditch helping this guy and I can't believe he's standing there above me. I mean, what are the odds?"

Sorsby immediately joined Parker in the ditch to help with Aitken, who was now enjoying — if that's the word — the best medical attention a man in a ditch in the middle of nowhere, or for that matter, anywhere, could hope to have. If the improbability of that were not enough, the two Seattle doctors were soon joined by an off-duty emergency medical worker from the Vancouver area who was passing by, and who stopped to help.

By this time, the RCMP had closed the highway and an ambulance had been summoned from Lytton. But time was working against Aitken. In their assessment of him, Parker and Sorsby found that Aitken had broken the fibula and tibia of his right leg. The bones had punctured the skin. Worse yet, Aitken's right foot had rotated 180 degrees in the crash.

Parker and Sorsby had to set the broken bones back in place as soon as possible and rotate the foot back to its proper position.

The ambulance arrived. It didn't have any morphine to kill Aitken's pain, though, only nitrous oxide.

By now, Aitken had regained consciousness, and he remembered Parker and Sorsby over him.

"They were great," Aitken said. "They were talking to me and reassuring me, and they said that I had broken my leg and that they were actually going to set it on site."

Whether it was shock or his natural inclination, Aitken was cheerful and upbeat through it all, Parker said. At one point, Aitken asked one of his riding buddies to get his camera out of his bag and take photos of the accident.

Then came the time to set the broken bones and rotate the foot.

Parker asked him to take deep breathes on the nitrous oxide and warned him that what he was about to do was going to hurt. And then:

"He was screaming at the top of his lungs when we rotated his foot," Parker said, "but he was a tremendous patient. And after we rotated the foot around back to the normal position, we cut the boot off and the sock off and made sure there was a blood supply to his foot. There was."

The ambulance took Aitken off to Lytton, where he was airlifted to Royal Inland Hospital in Kamloops. He had surgery that night, with surgeons pinning his right leg. He is now at home in Chilliwack convalescing. He hopes to be able to put weight on his leg within the month and return to work within six months.

After Aitken was taken away by ambulance, Parker and Sorsby went their separate ways. Parker returned to Seattle and Sorsby continued on to Alaska. They had been in the ditch for over an hour.

"And it was all free," Parker joked. "No bill. I think it's what they call a Good Samaritan act."

“ You know,” Parker said, “ when I told a buddy of mine about the accident and the odds of me and Steve being there at the same time, he said that [Aitken] couldn’t have got better care if he had crashed his motorbike into the side of a hospital.”

Not that the crash has convinced Aitken to give up riding. He asked his buddies to get the motorcycle from the wrecker’s yard in Lytton and bring it back to Chilliwack. He wants to repair it and be riding by next year.

He also hopes that one day Parker and Sorsby can visit him in Chilliwack.



“ My wife,” he said, “ wants to hug the stuffing out of them.”