

Rob Rickards



One morning In Feb 1977 I woke up and asked a passing nurse to call the cops “somebody has stolen my foot.”

Whether this was a result of the anaesthetic or what my wife describes as a selfish sense of humour I am not sure. It did seem to set the tone for the future!

The previous day I had stood on a landmine of the “AP” variety (Anti Personnel) the 4 inch device had done an excellent job of blowing off my left foot. Hurt a bit that did. Those older readers of Amplified may remember Rhodesia and the terrible bush war that came to an end in 1980 when Robert Mugabe’s ZANU party took power and Zimbabwe was born.

I clearly remember a conversation with my Rhodesian army mates, early in our training, when I had boldly stated, “I would rather be shot dead than maimed” but when I sat looking at my mangled leg that day there was this immediate and total acceptance that I was now a person with only one leg. This was me “the one legged guy”. Damn. No more rugby. And I did not want to be dead!

The mangled foot had indeed been expertly “stolen” by a wonderfully apologetic doctor, and was all neatly wrapped up in a white bandage and there was little pain! The new stump stopped 8 inches below the knee, a fact which has been gleefully

(and sometimes inappropriately) explained ever since. “You know most people average 6 inches I have 8.”

More seriously, the lack of weight was the clincher that brought home my new medical status. No doubt that a big bit was missing. After 5 nights in hospital the bed was needed for someone worse off and the 20 year old boy was sent home with the comment “there’s nothing much more we can do for you come back in three months for a new leg”

If “counselling” or “physio” was available, nobody told me! When I tell today’s medicos this they are blown away. New amputee’s need to understand certain things to make the transition smooth.



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An example is that if someone had told me to do a few simple exercises every day I would not have lost much muscular bulk in my thigh. I did nothing and it was much harder, even impossible, to regain the same evenness between legs later.

Mentally I was very strong because I had seen many worse off soldiers and had lost mates and considered myself lucky and was blessed with a good start with incredible support from friends, family and a certain girlfriend. They all helped me swap my rifle for a pair of crutches and I headed off to start my planned University law course.

Three months later after a surprisingly few visits to the “leg place” I walked out of there with my crutches over my shoulders whereupon my brothers insisted that we went disco dancing at the local dive. I was a little unsteady and stumbled into this huge bloke and spilt his drink. He accused me of being drunk and threatened to clobber me, I offered to buy him a replacement beer and he could help celebrate my new status or I could hit him over the head with my brand new “wooden” leg - his choice.

The new leg worked really well and after a few months the realization sunk in that law was not suited to me. I became determined to continue to serve my country in its time of need and faced with the obvious fact that walking in the bush was out, why not boats or airplanes? I promptly volunteered to do “call ups” in the “Rhodesian Navy”

otherwise known as Boat Troop which was run by the Rhodesian Army Engineers. A small monthly disability pension backdated 12 months provided a lump sum which was spent on taking flying lessons. In aircraft you use your feet extensively (rudder and brakes) and the leg proved to be no problem. Aviation became the main focus. There were many “adventures” flying Cessna aircraft for the Ministry of Internal Affairs during last year of the Rhodesian war and on through the ceasefire and “free” elections. These small beginnings lead to a few years in GA (general aviation) and after 8 years flying for Air Zimbabwe (Vickers Viscount Boeing 737-200 and Boeing 707) the situation in Zimbabwe became untenable and it was time for a move to Australia and 17 years later I fly B737's for QANTAS and I am heavily involved in the training and checking of our aircrews in the aircraft and in simulators.

My wonderful wife of 25 years Sian and my two great children James (25) and Lori-Ann (23) have put up with the selfish sense of humour all these years and the expectation is that they will continue to do so! We have all embraced our new country and love our life living in the hills on the North East outskirts of Melbourne. My 50th birthday was celebrated in style recently and my new golf clubs have still to improve my game. Other interests are home renovations, camping, kayaking, bike riding, swimming, computers, wine and beer! The “wooden” leg has never held us back.

This first leg was not “wooden” actually but was quite basic compared to today's models. It has been interesting watching the technology develop over the years. This year I became involved in the La Trobe Uni volunteer group and besides meeting the young students, it was a great chance for a close up look at the new technology. The future amputee can expect great things. I have been fortunate in that I have had very few problems and can boast I have never lost a day's work directly related to my stump. I do know my limits though and won't play golf on a 40 degree day! I am in awe of the achievements of amputees around the world as they make full use of the new technology.

For many years I have wanted to make myself available to talk to new amputees and provide support but never found any avenues to do so. Limbs 4 Life has changed that and I look forward to meeting new amputees and their families and helping them realize that there is very little that an amputee cannot do and hope that the example of my wonderful career flying big fast jets can illustrate this.

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