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When Lightning Strikes, Lives Are Changed

By MIREYA NAVARRO

VERO BEACH, Fla, Aug 26 - George McBay never saw it coming. The 51-year-old industrial roofer said he was six stories high, helping lower a large metal pipe down to a worker on the ground below when he heard a large, "explosion-like" boom and felt "like I had just been through a B-52 bombing."

"It felt like everything in my body just blew out the top of my head," said Mr. McBay, a Vietnam veteran. "When I came to, I was in the fetal position 15 feet away from where I had been standing."

Mr. McBay, of Gulfport, was struck by lightning, as far-fetched a phenomenon as winning the lottery for most but a real risk in Florida, which leads the nation in deaths and injuries from lightning strikes. Situated between two warm bodies of water, the Florida peninsula has high humidity and better conditions for thunderstorms than other parts of the country, weather experts say.

Lightning is so common in the rainy months from June to September that it routinely delays sports events, sets wildfires and has prompted cities, schools and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to invest in lightning detection systems that can warn of approaching strikes to protect both life and space shuttle launchings. Still, the National Weather Service said, at least 8 people died last year and 55 others were injured in Florida from lightning, a conservative number that does not reflect unreported incidents and that represents about 10 percent of casualties nationwide.

Victims are caught mostly outdoors -- playing golf, having picnics, boating -- but also talking on the telephone, using the computer, even sitting on the toilet, National Weather Service officials say, because an electric charge can travel through telephone wires, electrical connections and metal pipes. Some are knocked unconscious; others have vivid recollections of the moment they were struck.

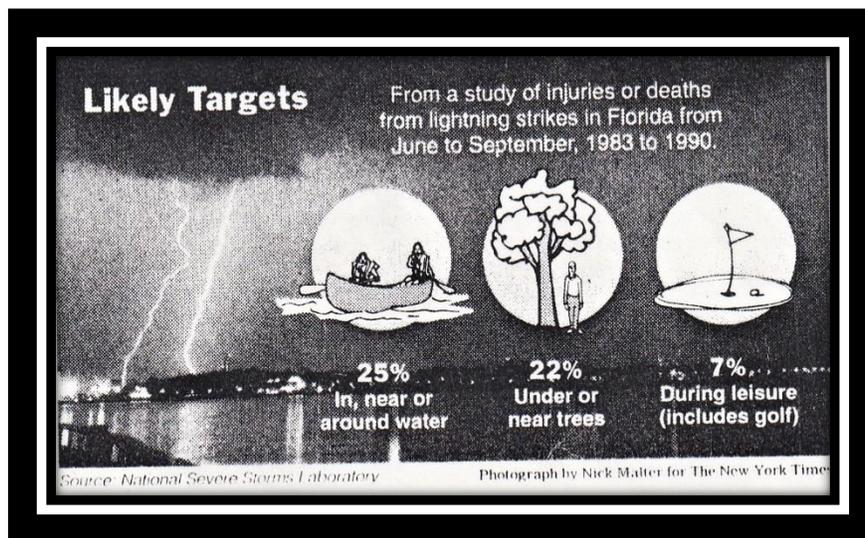
A 12-year-old visitor from Georgia struck at a Fourth of July outing at Lake Okeechobee two years ago told reporters it felt "like a bunch of ants running around inside my body, biting me." Patty Schmitt, 42, of Rockledge was struck while working on the computer in a windowless room.

"I felt it move up my arm," she remembered. "To me, it felt like adrenaline, but stronger."

When a lightning bolt hit near a fire truck in St. Petersburg last June, Lieut. Steve Hay, 37, who had just finished putting out a bedroom fire unscathed, got third-degree burns on both big toes, his right arm and back. He said the bolt had hit a tree, bounced off to him and then to his fire engine. The bolt melted the metal portable radio he carried.

"I felt an incredible pulsing, a burning sensation from head to toe," he said, adding he also lost his sight for about 30 seconds.

In the aftermath, many survivors say they are never the same. Although seemingly fine at first, within months many say they have discovered all kinds of physical and emotional afflictions, like seizures, forgetfulness, chronic pain, headaches and sexual dysfunction, that often cause the loss of jobs and relationships.



Several hundred survivors have banded together for support in a group called the Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Survivors International, based in North Carolina. Some, like Mr. McBay, travel long distances to get treatment from the few doctors who see enough lightning strike patients to be familiar with their conditions. One such physician is Dr. Hooshang Hooshmand of Neurological Associates, a clinic in this small city on Florida's east coast south of Melbourne.

"The best day that I've had since the accident isn't as good as the worst day I had before the accident," said Mr. McBay, who was struck in 1993. "You get lost. Blackouts. Seizures. A good day is lying on the couch."

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jolts of millions of volts.

But other lightning victims have reported no permanent or identifiable damage, and some say they feel like they received a new lease on life. Betty Galvano, 63, of Fort Myers, was standing in her son's kitchen cutting up broccoli with a window open when lightning struck her right foot and knocked her down. She said the electric current traveled up the leg to a steel bar doctors had implanted a year earlier after she broke her right hip in a fall. In a more surprising event than the bolt that had just hit her, she said, she groggily stood up and realized the bad leg she dragged "like a sandbag" had completely healed.

She said her doctors "all laughed and didn't know what to say."

"Lightning was a spiritual experience for me," she said. "It energized me, it made me feel better."

Doctors say people struck by lightning get a jolt of many millions of volts, far more than in an electric chair, but only for a fraction of a second. The extent of injury depends on variables like degree of exposure (whether they are struck directly or from a flash off the first object that absorbed the bolt, for instance) the point of contact and how the current passes through the body, they say.

Those who die usually suffer cardiac arrest.

"The reason they die, usually, is because the electrical current goes through the heart and the heart stops beating," said Dr. Russell Vega, associate medical examiner for Hillsborough County in Tampa, one of the area's most active in lightning strikes in the state.

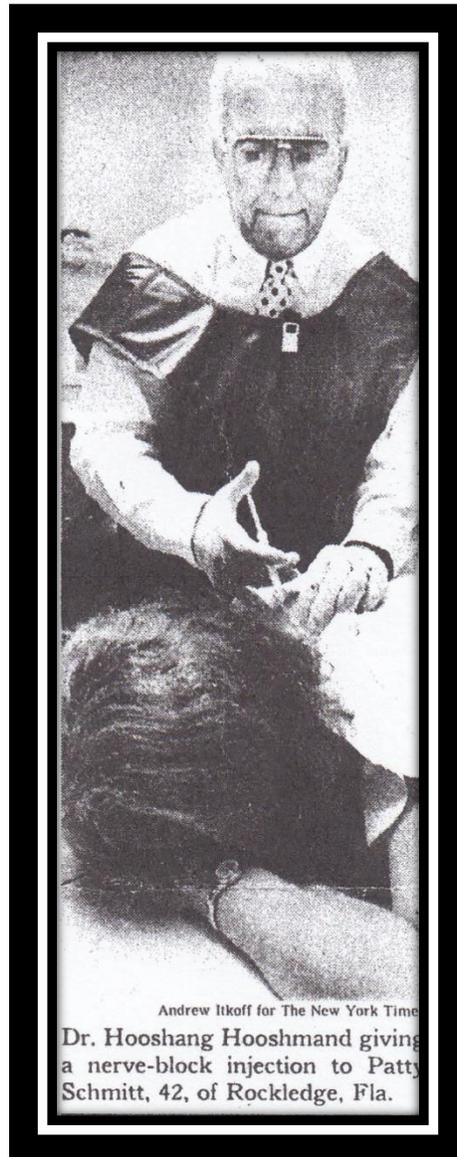
Most lightning victims survive. Dr. Andrew Alexander, an emergency room doctor at Tampa General Hospital who says the facility treats about two lightning victims a month, says the patients can have burns at the point of entry and exit, damaged eardrums, numbness and tingling in legs and sometimes trauma like broken bones from being thrown feet away. Most of his patients however, walk away without a hospital stay but "probably with a new approach in life," he said.

But Dr. Hooshmand, a neurologist who specializes on electrical injuries and sees about 300 patients a year, said that for many people struck by lightning, the worst could come many months later.

At his clinic here, he says, he treats conditions that include loss of memory and judgment, stomach bleeding and diarrhea that come from brain injury and other organ damage caused by an electric current. Some patients can recover completely, he said, but many of his lightning patients struggle day to day, taking anti-convulsants, anti-depressants and heart and blood-pressure medicine, to restore some normalcy to their lives. Some have stopped working and even driving.

Yet, many people do not seem to fear lightning as a killer or danger that causes more deaths each year than most weather-related hazards or seem to know what to do to protect themselves.

While lightning hits at random, tall objects on open areas are more vulnerable to strikes. Yet, the first thing many do is run to trees for cover. Experts advise to seek shelter indoors or inside a car with windows closed, avoid contact with metal, water and electrically conductive surfaces. That means getting out of boats, avoiding corded telephones and electrical appliances and staying away from the shower, toilet and kitchen sink.



If unable to find cover, the experts say, crouch down making only minimal contact with the ground, and choose a spot away from the highest object in the area.

As if to prove conventional wisdom wrong, the survivors' support organization in North Carolina points out that some of its members have been struck by lightning twice. Andy Upshaw, a landscaper and nurseryman in North Carolina, says he has been hit three times by lightning flashes: while he was getting out of a swimming pool, in a porch and while spraying water with a garden hose.

"It's like shock treatment," Mr. Upshaw said. "It makes you appreciate life."

While many survivors say they have become more cautious, Mr. Upshaw said that in his line of work he must spend a lot of time outside. When there is a storm, he said, it is his wife who usually stands on alert.

"My wife," he said, "reminds me of my luck and tells me to get into the house."