

Milton men facing mountains together

By John-Paul Moloney

One moment John Milton was walking through the dark of his garage on his South Coast farm. The next he was slumped in the bucket of his tractor, pins and needles spreading through his body, head throbbing with pain.

He couldn't move and couldn't yell out to his wife, Rosie, who was inside watching some TV before going to bed.

As paralysis from spinal damage suffered in the fall began to restrict his breathing, he realised this was probably it. A clumsy moment in the dark a few feet from his back door was going to cost him his life.

At that point all the 65-year-old had left in him were three whistles, three chances to call his border collies from inside.

As whistles go, they were fairly pathetic. But they were enough.

The three dogs came out bounding and barking, drawing Rosie behind them. When she discovered her stricken husband she frantically called paramedics. He was rescued.

John tells this story sitting in his wheelchair on the veranda of the Moorong Spinal Unit of the Royal Rehabilitation Centre in Ryde, an old homestead set back 60m or so from busy Victoria Road.

It's five months since that night in March, of which he remembers little beyond seeing Rosie rushing to him through the dark, torch in hand.

"It wasn't terrifying," he says. "It was more a fatalistic feeling. A lot of guys go through this, have the feeling of, 'Oh well, this is it.' It's almost a feeling of resignation."

Resignation isn't a word you hear often from a Milton, especially from John's son, Michael, Australia's

greatest winter Paralympian.

Defiance of circumstances set against him has been a way of life for Michael, who lost his left leg to bone cancer when he was nine, but went on to win 10 winter Paralympic medals in skiing, almost half of all the medals Australia has won.

A second bout of cancer in 2007, this time in his oesophagus, was also beaten off, allowing Michael to switch sports to cycling and ride at the Beijing Paralympics.

Michael visited his dad at Moorong this week after a motivational speaking gig nearby. In John's small, drab room in the ageing but elegant brick building are posters of Michael speed skiing.

Continued Page 4



COURAGE: Paralympian Michael Milton gives some tips to his father, John, who is recovering from spinal damage suffered in a fall at his farm

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John Milton thinking his time was up after injuring himself in his farm shed

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Not surprisingly, the younger Milton is well known around the corridors and he's already spoken with a couple of patients about their getting into disabled sports.

But for his father, taking advice from a son who's been through some of the same feelings and experiences can be hard to take.

"When you're in a situation like this, there's only one person who'll get you out of it and that's yourself," John says firmly, adding that Michael is just one of a team of family, friends and medical professionals he relies on.

Michael admits father and son have clashed over these difficult months, as he's tried to give his father tips on adapting to his disability.

"He's an old dog. You can't teach him new tricks," Michael says, smiling.

"There's a couple of times we've bashed heads over suggestions I've made to him that he hasn't wanted to listen to. There's times I've suggested things and he's gotten up me and said, 'It's none of your business.'"

John Milton is known to plenty of Canberrans of his age group. He met Rosie in 1965 on his first day at work at the Orroral Valley space tracking station, south of Canberra. He worked there for nine years before leaving to set up a ski shop, first in Civic and then

in Fyshwick. The couple ran the shop for 27 years before selling and retiring.

John's retirement plans have now changed dramatically.

Classified as an incomplete quadriplegic, for now he is mostly bound to an electric wheelchair. He talks with immense pride though of the day he walked 22m out of the Royal North Shore Hospital for his transfer to Moorong.

In that sense he is very, very lucky. Many of his neighbours are far worse off. They sit motionless in their chairs out on the front lawn as the traffic flows constantly on Victoria Road. For some, it was misadventure behind the wheel of a car that put them there.

While his great love of driving his convertible Morgan sportscar looks likely to be denied him, he counts himself so much more fortunate he's lived most of what's been a good life.

"I've got married, had kids, sailed offshore, flown aeroplanes, I've done everything in my life I've ever wanted to. But there's a kid in here who's fallen off a motorbike and he'll be in a wheelchair all his life. He won't get the chance to do all the things I did," John says.

A few weeks ago, while John sat reading on the veranda at Moorong, Michael was down at the Milton farm,

ripping up carpet to prepare the house for his dad's return, hopefully in November.

It was just one of many efforts made by many people to help, but there was a tender parallel to the way John had helped his son about 25 years earlier.

Not long after Michael lost his leg, John fashioned for him a sailing leg out of PVC pipe and an electric sander disk. Rudimentary as it was, the leg let Michael out on to the water. Hard as it was, he worked out how to stand and sail.

Having witnessed how his son has adapted to a disability over a lifetime, John knows a similar challenge is now his.

As he sets out to adapt, live and be happy, he doesn't have to look far for a role model.

"Most people set an example for their kids. What I've had is my kid set an example for me," he said.

"I've really got no choice. After what Michael's done, do you think I could just sit there and eat chocolate and drink myself to death?"