

The team who rushed to help Lancashireman Paul Kelly were calm professionals, but even they had never seen anyone so enmeshed in machinery

# To Save One Man

BY DAVID MOLLER

**I**T HAD BEEN a hectic morning. Two staff who should have been with Paul Kelly that day in his small factory in Whittle-Woods, Lancashire, had phoned in sick, so he was entirely on his own. But the trim, six-foot 47-year-old still had a business to run—and he'd never been one to worry



Paul Kelly (front) and rescuers, notably paramedics Bob Keen and Zoë Steel (green) and Phil Edmondson (orange, left), and firemen Steve Hart and Andy Henry (back row)

about getting his own hands dirty.

On the mezzanine level of his tile-adhesive plant, he began shovelling half a ton of cement and Norwegian talc into a rectangular opening in the floor—the mouth of a large mixing machine. Then he set the mixer's two four-inch blades—revolving round a four-foot horizontal shaft—to start churning up the dry powder at a steady 30 revolutions a minute.

The problem as always was the dust that crept up into the air. Kelly

stopped. He had been in it no more than 15 seconds. He was now upright, buried up to his chest in powder. He could feel his left leg splayed out, trapped. Had his boot tripped-out the machine by jamming between one of the blades and the side of the mixer? The machine was now quiet. But could it suddenly start up again?

Kelly looked down. His left lower arm and right hand were like those of a rag doll, attached to his body by only a few scraps of skin and tissue.

## It was a drop of just a **few feet into the**

got a large cardboard sheet and laid it over the opening. Before he could replace the guard, his mobile rang with a call about one of his orders.

Kelly put down the phone and went into his office to make a note. He was walking back towards the mixer when it rang again.

He hesitated a moment trying to remember whether he had put the phone down on a pallet. Then he spotted it and moved forwards.

As soon as his foot touched cardboard, he knew he had done something appallingly wrong. It was a drop of just a few feet into the mixing machine—but once in, no escape. Entangled in its relentless rotation, he was being dragged through the powder.

As it was a direct-drive machine, there was no way of disabling it. Instinctively, Kelly tried to curl up in a ball to protect himself in equipment that could run on indefinitely.

Then, a miracle. The machine

Bones were sticking out, broken and smashed. There was a lot of blood. It ran in rivulets over his dust-caked skin. Little pain, but deep, numbing shock. *Could I bleed to death?*

He tried to get his elbows to the side of the machine, but couldn't move. He pulled again at his left leg. Still trapped.

"Is there anybody there?" Kelly could barely shout. He felt the stirrings of panic, desperation.

Then, a second miracle. A man appeared on the stairs. Mick Bethell, a driver delivering 25 tons of sand. "Oh, my God," he exclaimed. He couldn't even tell who the figure caked in white powder was.

IT WAS 9.47AM ON February 13 last year when paramedic Bob Keen got the call at Chorley ambulance station. "Male trapped in machinery." Whittle-le-Woods was four miles away. With his ambulance technician Zoë Steel navigating, Keen

drove it in just over five minutes.

Around the mezzanine gallery the atmosphere was thick with dust. A chunkily built 44-year-old, Keen had worked in the ambulance service for 20 years and been a paramedic for 11. But he had rarely faced such a challenge: someone totally trapped in machinery, with little way of getting at or assessing his injuries.

He crouched by Kelly. "What's happened, Paul?" he asked. "Can you talk to me? Are you feeling any pain?"

## **mixer, but once in, no escape**

"Not too much pain," Kelly replied. "Please! Just get me out of here."

The fact that Kelly could still talk was a good sign. Once he was certain the machine had been turned off, Keen lowered himself into the hopper. He felt for the carotid artery in Kelly's neck. His pulse rate was sky-high: about 120 as against an expected 70. Quickly, Keen put him on oxygen.

**S**TANDING ON the ground floor below the mixer, Steve Hart, a 50-year-old with 26 years in the fire service, was also facing massive problems. To stand any chance of freeing Kelly from the hopper, they'd somehow have to get rid of the powder—and fast. Though there was an outlet at the mixer's base, emptying was normally done with the machine running—now an impossibility.

There was no way they could cut into the machine with oxyacetylene

torches without causing an explosion.

There were now a dozen firemen at the plant. They removed the bolts on the machine's outer casing and bashed hammers on its side to release the compacted powder. They also poked a rod up through the base outlet to speed the flow. But they had to be careful. Not knowing exactly where Kelly was in the mixer, they were fearful of inflicting more injuries.

Above them on the mezzanine, two firemen were supporting Kelly

with a sling under his arms so that he would stay in position as the level of powder began to fall.

"How are you doing, Paul?" Keen asked as he began assessing the horrific damage to Kelly's arms. "It won't be long now. You'll be OK, lad."

Under his breath, Keen muttered to Steve Hart who joined him: "Keep talking to him. Keep him talking." He was desperate to distract Kelly from the near-amputation of both hands.

KEEN WAS NOW joined by a second paramedic in an orange flight suit—38-year-old Phil Edmondson, who had been dropped by air ambulance a quarter of a mile away while the police cleared the factory car park so the helicopter could land right by the plant.

It was 10.12am. Keen put dressings and a splint on to Kelly's mangled right hand. While Edmondson sorted the equipment to free Kelly, Zoë Steel worked on what remained of his left

arm. The slim, 24-year-old technician, who had been "out on the road" just a few months, hurriedly prepared the saline while Keen sought a needle point in Kelly's right arm.

"Have you got family, Paul?" fireman Hart asked Kelly. The injured man told him that his wife Rhona worked for a wallpaper firm in Blackburn. Though Kelly's voice was now muffled by the oxygen mask, he could still speak. His 24-year-old daughter Joanne was a pre-school nursery nurse. His son Mark, 21, worked for the benefits agency. "Rhona and I love dancing," Kelly said. "The whole family does."

Bob Keen's attention was suddenly drawn to a fireman on the ground floor. He was holding up a stick he'd been using to drain the powder out of the hopper exit. It had blood on the tip.

Kelly's mangled hands couldn't have produced that much blood, Keen realised. There had to be some other serious bleeding.

It was now 10.17 and a team of doctors was on its way, ready if need be to amputate a trapped limb. Keen knew that with amputations the body had its own way of dealing with the pain—by releasing endorphins. To some extent it could also restrict blood loss, by naturally conserving blood for the heart and other vital organs.

But they had to keep Kelly awake, keep him talking to prevent him slipping off into sleep, unconsciousness and then possibly death.

"What hobbies do you have, Paul?"

Kelly said he loved football, squash, badminton. He paused. "I love to see

Joanne dancing." Another pause. Then he could bear it no more. "Please! Please get me out of here."

10.30am. Paul Kelly was drifting in and out of consciousness. "Come on, Paul," Keen urged, fixing a second bag of saline. "We're nearly there. Is it hurting anywhere?" Kelly mumbled no.

"Open your eyes! You've got to talk." Keen's words were drowned by the helicopter dropping in close to the plant.

**T**HE LEVEL OF POWDER in the mixer was now low enough for fireman Andy Henry to be able to trace down Kelly's left leg to where it was trapped. A 34-year-old ex-Royal Marine, Henry needed all his powers of endurance. For some 40 minutes he had been in the mixer, holding up Kelly on his left side—and for much of that time he'd had the stump of the injured man's left arm in his face.

Henry ran his hand along what was left of Kelly's jeans. The seam of the denim had got twisted round a blade. "The leg's not attached any more," he whispered.

Kelly sagged. "Stay with us," Henry shouted. "Keep fighting."

It was now 10.40am and most of the powder had drained from the machine. "We've got to shift him soon, lads," Bob Keen told the firemen supporting Kelly with the strap. They tried lifting him straight out. Kelly squawked. "Reposition him slightly," Henry told them. He was terrified that if they pulled too hard the leg would not follow. Some four firemen and paramedics inched

Kelly round awkwardly to his right.

Henry now manoeuvred the pitiable mush of denim, bone and tissue gently round the edge of one of the blades.

"Go for the lift, lads!"

At last, they could haul Paul Kelly out of the mixer. Quickly they dressed and splinted his left leg and wrapped him in a thermal blanket. He had been in there just over an hour. As the air ambulance took off, the race was on to save Paul Kelly's life.

AT WYTHENSHAW HOSPITAL outside Manchester, nine surgeons, under Professor Gus McGrouther, carried out three simultaneous operations over more than 12 hours. On Kelly's right hand, they reattached the three nearly-severed fingers, repaired the many bones and painstakingly reconnected arteries and veins to restore circulation. On his left arm, they reattached the wrist and hand.

They removed what remained of the left leg below the knee, and the next day a surgeon harvested what he could from it. In a second 12-hour operation the big toe was used to replace the smashed thumb on Kelly's right hand. The top of the foot was grafted to make good missing tissue on his left arm. Its sole provided a perfect stump for a prosthesis for his left leg.

Amazingly, weeks later Paul Kelly



**Dancing days are definitely not over for Paul Kelly and his wife Rhona**

was back running his business helped by his son Mark. In September he raised £2,200 for North West Air Ambulance and the plastic surgery unit at Wythenshawe. Then, a month later, with his new prosthesis on his left leg, he took to the dance floor with Rhona.

*North West Air Ambulance is a registered charity. If you would like to donate, contact 0800 587 4570*

## DEMON DRINKER

I couldn't understand why my uncle called his friend "Exorcist" until we had a party and all the spirits disappeared.

BEN LYONS, Bearsden, East Dunbartonshire