

THE DAY THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING: FROM PARALYSIS TO GROWTH

Some people can identify a day where everything changed in a way that was previously unimaginable. For **Dennie Coumans**, this day came at the end of December 2017. What happened totally reshaped his life, as **Steven Shorrock** reports.

Dennie Coumans lives in the Maastricht, the Netherlands, with his wife and daughter. Five years ago, as an engineer for a base and line aircraft maintenance company, he was supporting African operators in Europe and Africa with maintenance along with his team. With travel to Rwanda, Nigeria and Cape Vert, life was intense.

At the end of 2017, life changed forever. Dennie felt unwell, and went to hospital with his father, where he was diagnosed with pneumonia. Despite intravenous medication, he was becoming sicker by the day. On the fourth day, he experienced one symptom that was not characteristic of pneumonia: "While I was walking, I couldn't feel my big toes. I could barely walk." Feeling unstable, he went back to bed.

Three Terrible Hours

Over the course of three hours, the motion and sensation disappeared from Dennie's body. "It started in the feet, went up, and stopped at my chest. I was paralysed. It was very, very frightening." He didn't know when or where it would

stop. Now, those three intense hours are blurry. In a state of trauma, his mind did not record it. His wife told him that he was in a state of total panic.

Dennie was taken into the MRI scanner. He had suffered an infection that was putting pressure on his nervous system. It was his fortieth birthday. "Instead of having a party, I was lying in bed, paralysed."

In the weeks that followed, doctors tried to treat the infection from his spine. But it had been there too long. The damage was permanent. The infection turned out to be from a common bacteria, but Dennie's body had a severe reaction. He remained in hospital for five weeks.

"It started in the feet, went up, and stopped at my chest. I was paralysed. It was very, very frightening."

From Hospital to Rehabilitation

Once out of hospital, Dennie was taken to a rehabilitation clinic, where a team started to help him on his journey back to independence. *"It was a huge rollercoaster for me and my family, especially my daughter. Before, I was doing a lot of mountain biking, hiking, and travelling. But an instant, everything changed. It's difficult to describe it. In one day, you lose your life."*

Dennie had to start rehabilitation from "rock bottom", and the training programme was challenging. He was taught how to swim again. At first, he could only float, with help of therapists and buoyancy aids. It took months to learn to swim again.

And, of course, he also learned how to take care of himself in everyday life. *"But I had to let go of the things I could not do any more, which was very difficult. Still, some things are difficult to let go of."* He had many setbacks. But over time, he managed to start looking at things in a different way. *"My life was taken away from me, but I took it back."* He started

to see the things that he could still do. He met others with even more severe disability. *"I was happy I could still use my arms."*

Physical disability often comes with mental health problems, but it is impossible to imagine the impact of such sudden disability. Dennie had the help of therapists, and undertook training to help his recovery. He would do cooking lessons, hand biking, and wheelchair rugby. Joining the hand bike team was a revelation. He enjoyed being outside on the hand bike and part of that community. *"Sometimes I was very angry with setbacks. But I never had the thought, 'this is it. I cannot deal with this any more."*

Ultimately, the training became too much. Overtraining the body became a sort of escape: *"I was trying to keep busy, to try not to think a lot"*. What helped was social connection. There was another man of a similar age, in a wheelchair for around five or six years, and Dennie would ask him for advice. *"I had a lot of good conversations with him. He helped me a lot. He did not give me any answers, but he gave me tools to find the answers."* Dennie came to realise that everybody in the clinic had their own disability and their own challenges. What was an answer for him would not be an answer for somebody else. *"You have to find your own way"*, he said.

Coming Home

He left the clinic and went back home. Dennie explained that, *"Then the real training started. In the clinic, you have therapists around you. You have an alarm. They can help you 24/7. It's a safe environment. Now, you go home and you don't have the alarm any more. The house is not adapted. The world around you is not adapted."*

I wondered about the feelings that impacted Dennie the most. He said that some of his friends asked him why he was not angry about his situation. Wasn't there something inside him, waiting to explode beneath the calm exterior? *"I was quite calm about this situation. Of course, I felt it was very unfair. Why me? But there was nothing I could have done to avoid it."* He was

told that the bacterial infection was inevitable.

Dennie began to understand that he was grieving: *"During the process of my rehabilitation, I had certain feelings and thoughts, and there were situations. And then somebody told me, 'Well, this is normal, as you are now in a process of grief. How I felt, how I reacted, was because I was grieving for not being the original Dennie, but Dennie, 2.0."* Sometimes, he still grieves. There is grief for the 'counterfactuals': what could have been, what he expected, what he envisaged. An example is seeing families travel without any disability. Dennie's family have to plan things that others don't even need to think about. But he never lost hope. *"I was always trying to see the positive things."*

Dealing with the Environment

I wondered what Dennie notices now that he didn't notice before about the built environment.

"There are a lot of challenges. The world is not built for people in a wheelchair. A lot of shops have stairs. In restaurants, most toilets are upstairs or in the basement. And if they are on the same level, they're too small." Before 2019, he didn't notice people in wheelchairs or their challenges. Now, he experiences those challenges everywhere. *"I also realise you cannot build the world for wheelchair users. So I have to deal with it in a flexible way. Certain situations can make me angry. But in most cases, I just try to find a way around."*

He tries to see his wheelchair not as a symptom of disability, but as a tool, which gives him mobility. His reframing helps him to see life differently: *"Those wheels give me full freedom to go outside."*

In the home, Dennie and his family had to build or adapt everything: kitchen, bathrooms, bedroom. It took four and a half months.

At work his old engineering job was primarily office-based, but sometimes required travel to check problems with an aircraft or visits to base maintenance. *"When the aircraft are in base maintenance, I cannot enter them now. So that was also quite a setback for me"*, he

explained. His office in the engineering department was also on the second level, with no elevator. So his employer gave him a different job in the quality department, on the ground floor, and installed automatic doors. *"They made a lot of effort to get me back in the company and give me the things I needed. I now create human factors training at the quality department. I'm very happy. I'm very grateful."* He still keeps in touch with work-as-done, occasionally watching the engineers working on the aircraft.

Changes to Identity

Disability comes with changes to identity and relationships. I wondered how it was for Dennie, adjusting to a new identity, professionally and personally. Dennie is 193 cm (6'4") and described how *"I was quite a presence when I would enter a room. But now I'm in the wheelchair. So I try to work on my appearance. I do a lot of power gym and biking. I try not to eat too much because to lose weight in a wheelchair is difficult."*

It is not just about physical appearance, but 'presence'. *"When I look to people, it's like, I'm Dennie. I'm here. And it's okay for me to be here still participating in life and work. I try to present that to people."*

Some people aren't sure how to react. But for Dennie's friends and family, almost nothing changed. Most of his friends are still around, and the wheelchair isn't an issue any more. He has good contact with friends, and some relationships became even better. *"They say, 'We don't see the wheelchair. We can only see Dennie."*

Growth

After recovery from a traumatic event, many people experience post-traumatic growth, where a person rebuilds their life in a way that adds richness and meaning. People can also become stronger or more resilient to other challenges and develop new capacities and capabilities, whether physical, mental, social, or otherwise. I wondered about how this might have applied to Dennie.

In 2018, during early recovery, a nurse told Dennie that he'd always need help to take care of himself. This was a trigger

"There are a lot of challenges. The world is not built for people in a wheelchair. I can live in the moment now, not always thinking about tomorrow or next week."



for him. *"I never forgot that conversation,"* he said, *"And I thought to myself, 'We'll see about that.' I'll go through everything to take care of myself."*

Dennie regained his independence. *"I even cook now three, four times a week. I never did that before."* And he drives a minibus to get around. *"I feel the freedom even when I'm in the traffic jam."* A 20 km hand bike ride is just a *"short ride"*, and from being unable to swim in the first days in the pool at the rehabilitation centre, now he can swim for one or two hours without floating devices – *"pure arm power."*

In June 2022, he went with a hand bike team to Austria to climb a mountain: 20 kilometres and 900-metres elevation. It involved a lot of training. *"That is one of the things that I wouldn't have done before. But it takes a lot more effort for me to do it, a lot of preparation."*

He also gained a new appreciation for 'the mundane' – the ordinary delights and freedoms that most people take for granted or don't even see. *"Before I was always rushing, a lot of working. Now I can really enjoy the small things in life. When I'm outside with our dog, I can stop for five minutes and just listen to the birds. Yesterday evening, I was doing handbiking and saw a sunset. I can really enjoy such moments. Or when I spend more time with my family, playing games with my daughter. It's those little details*

in life. I can live in the moment now, not always thinking about tomorrow or next week."

These are the freedoms that most people don't even think about. *"People don't realise the freedom they have, even to get out of bed, when you have no disability."* Before, he too didn't notice people in a wheelchair. But he developed a new level of empathy for people with disabilities and illnesses. *"When I see people now, I really realise the suffering, and the challenges."*

His biggest strengths, according to Dennie, are a new level of personal resilience, a completely new perspective on life, and an ability to live in the present moment...and appreciate it.

Despite – or because of – his life-changing event and the long process of rehabilitation, Dennie enjoys the small things in life: *"I try to make the best of it with friends and family. I go out biking by myself, and that's a great feeling. My employer gave me the opportunity to stay. I have setbacks and days that are heavy. But in general, life is good. I really like to be alive. And I'm very happy."*



After my Human Factors research in 2003 at the Garuda Indonesia maintenance facility in Jakarta, I graduated from the Amsterdam University (Bachelor Aeronautical Engineering). Via Air Exel Operations and Martinair Technics, I started as a Customer Service Engineer in 2007 at Samco Aircraft Maintenance. From 2007 until my life-changing event in 2017, I supported various African operators with the day-to-day operation and heavy maintenance preparation. I currently work at the Quality Department.

I live in Maastricht, Netherlands, with my beautiful wife, wonderful daughter and our little dog. I love to ride my handbikes on outdoor trails. During my rides I enjoy the beautiful nature, silence and epic sceneries. Photography and handbiking is my golden combination. I also love to read, to build with Lego, and music energises my soul. Since my life on wheels, I also love to cook. But aviation has been my passion since I was young, when my father took me to Maastricht Airport. The DC10, L1011 Tristar and Boeing 707 are my favourite aircraft.