



There I Was, in the Congo...

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I always wanted to start a story that way because it would have to be a lot more interesting than where I really was when my mishap occurred—in my front yard. I recently had returned home to north Florida from taking my son back to college in the northeast. My task was to take care of the 30-foot sycamore that a hurricane had left perched precariously at a 45-degree angle.

With the weekend rapidly approaching, I was busy trying to find an appropriate tool with which to extricate the lovely, leaning tree from my front yard. Two days and 12 phone calls later—chainsaws are hard to come by after a hurricane—I found a 55-cc, 22-foot, tree-removal tool at a nearby friend's house. Let's call him Brad. A quick

trip to his house, a thorough operational brief (or so I thought), and 15 minutes marveling at the torrent of water that once was Brad's river-front backyard, and I was ready to kill me a tree.

Safety glasses, check; steel-toed boots, check; leather gloves, check; gas and oil, check; choke on, check; one pull to prime; and yee haw—but wait, the chain isn't moving. About 15 minutes passed before I finally called Brad. In our brief conversation, I learned he was on the way to his rental home next-door to me and would be here in 10 minutes.

Moments later, my phone rang. "Hey, did you check the brake?" Brad asked. "If it gets bumped forward, it locks, and you have to pull real hard to get it off," he explained. "A quick and decisive

pull is all it takes, though,” he assured. I quickly repeated all my pre-start checks, and, voila!—it was tree-killing time.

Things rolled along nicely for the next 25 minutes or so, before Brad showed up. After a quick lecture from me about wearing his safety gear, he started helping me with cutting and removing the brush. We removed all the lower branches, then stopped for a safety brief on which way I was going to cut and where the tree was going to fall. In no time, it was timber!—the once mighty Sycamore was down.

Now came the easy part: Lop off some branches, cut them into manageable lengths, and haul them to the street. Then “it” happened. I just had made an upward cut through a 3-inch branch and was moving down to cut another 4-foot section. As I released the trigger of the saw—now lowered to leg level—and began cutting, the branch rolled slightly. One of its many smaller branches contacted the chain guide, which significantly slowed the rate of travel of my manly saw. However, the rate of travel of my left leg wasn’t slowed. The distance between it and the now flesh-eating chainsaw closed quickly. When the still-spinning chain hit my left leg

just above the knee, it sliced into my flesh like a hot knife cutting through butter. I was left with a 3.5-inch gash in my leg.

The lack of pain and blood was a bit surprising but not nearly as surprising as the speed with which the incident took place. After a rapid but prudent ride to a naval hospital, thanks to Brad, and five hours in the emergency room, I emerged with 14 stitches and an equal number of prescribed light-duty days—none the worse for wear.

I consider myself lucky. Chainsaw accidents normally don’t turn out well. Had I been at full power or had I been in the process of cutting, the results would have been catastrophic for me and my career.

I felt I had made the evolution as safe as possible, and, yet, I got injured. Does this incident fall under the “stuff happens” category? I don’t think so. I failed to follow a simple rule a fellow aircrewman taught me a long time ago: Slow is fast, slow is safe; always be safe and fast. I failed to show the required amount of respect for the power tool I was using, and everyone knows what happens when we fail to show the godfather proper respect. **S**

The author was assigned to VR-58 when he wrote this article.

