

The Cost of Being a True Oklahoman

By Ltjg. Dan “Fingers” Weston,
VQ-4

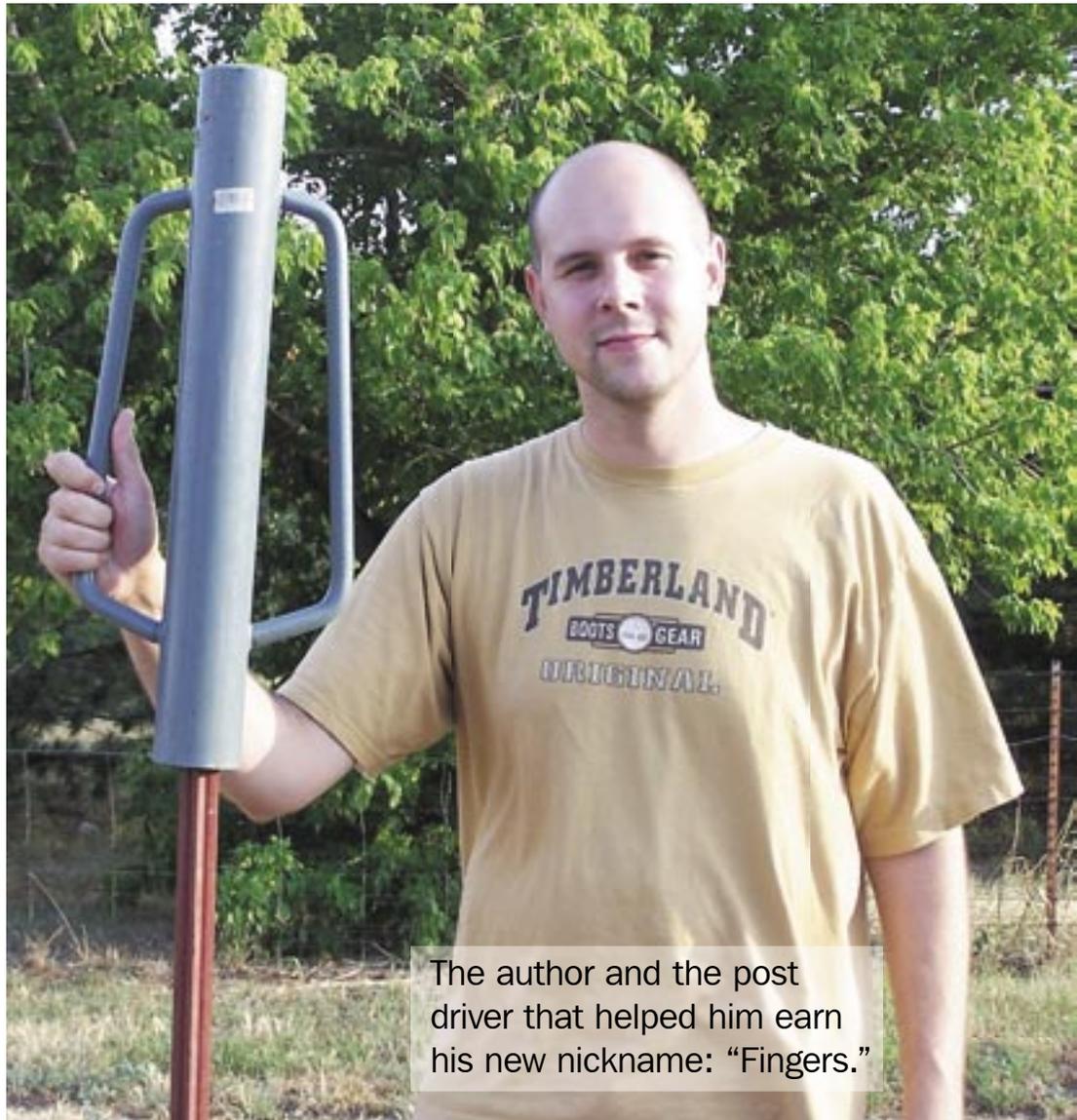
It was a sunny Sunday, and my father-in-law and I just had returned from a hardware store. We had purchased several six-foot T-posts to fence in the back of our property. It was the middle of the day when we decided, on the spur of the moment, to start installing the posts. This lack of planning was our first mistake.

We grabbed a post driver *[a heavy, metal cylinder with a handle on either side, which slips over the top of the T-post]* and several posts and made our way across the property. I remember thinking, “I wonder how hard the Oklahoma clay is going to be,” while dreading the thought of driving 70 posts 2 feet into the ground. At least, with the two of us working, we could alternate.

Once we got started and had developed a rhythm, we worked pretty fast—mistake No. 2. We already were on our 20th post when I paused to check the depth and found I needed to drive the post a couple more inches. If I was lucky, one or two more good hits would do it.

I grabbed the driver and, not recalling that I already had driven the post almost 2 feet into the ground, misjudged the height I needed

to lift the driver off the post. I lifted the 20-pound driver over the post and, unknown to me, pulled it off center. I never would have thought such a small error could cost so much!



The author and the post driver that helped him earn his new nickname: “Fingers.”



The author's hand looked like this two days after the incident.

The driver shifted to the right about 3 inches, which placed the fingers of my left hand directly over the metal T-post when the driver came down. The force of the driver slamming down onto the post literally caused the bones in my fingers to splinter. “It was like stomping on a pack of ketchup,” my wife said. It all happened in a split second. I was left wondering if I would lose my fingers, my career, or both.

I remember hearing a “thud,” then noticing my hand; my fingers were deformed and bleeding. I yelled across the yard to my wife, who raced into the house to grab a first-aid kit. Because she only recently had moved to the area, it took a while for her to recall where the nearest emergency room was located.

Once we arrived at the ER, a doctor assessed my condition and called in a vascular hand surgeon to operate on my mangled fingers. “What a way to spend a beautiful Sunday afternoon!” I kept thinking to myself.

My middle finger, between the first and second joints, was shattered, with shards of bone sticking out through the skin. The nerves and tendons had been torn apart. One artery was severed, and another was crushed, causing my finger to turn a dusty gray. The damage was so bad it required major reconstructive surgery, a total of three metal pins, and more than 25 stitches. The surgeon didn’t know if my middle finger would survive because of the lack of circulation.

My ring finger was broken at the second joint, with the extension tendon torn in half. My wedding ring had to be cut off because of the swelling. This injury required five pins and more than 10 stitches. I also ended up needing three stitches to close a cut

that went through the nail of my index finger.

A long recovery phase followed the pain of two broken fingers and surgery. My middle finger looked great while I was in the recovery room, but that all changed after leaving the hospital. By the time we had picked up a prescription and gotten home, my finger had darkened and turned cold. The gray turned to black, and the skin hardened. After several trips to the surgeon’s office, we had to schedule the amputation of my middle finger. I saw the surgeon on a Wednesday. I’ll never forget hearing him say,

“I think we will be able to save this one.”

“Are we both looking at the same finger?” I wondered.

My physical-therapy appointments started immediately and continued three times a week for more than four months. The hard, black skin peeled away and, behold, a healthy, pink finger emerged. I’m waiting for the pins to be removed. I can’t tell you how uncomfortable the pins are, but, at least, I still have all my fingers. They’ll never be the same, and I’ll have to battle arthritis and stiffness from now on, but that’s OK.

I checked in at my present command—for my first duty as a naval flight officer—just 35 days before this incident. My command has been extremely supportive throughout the whole ordeal. Everyone plans on how they will stand out when they get to their new command; I assure you I hadn’t planned my entrance this way. I never wanted to be known as “Fingers.”

Looking back, there are many things I would have changed—not rushing probably would have changed the outcome. I did some risk management beforehand (pun intended), but this scenario never crossed my mind. Thank goodness my father-in-law and wife were there to help me. I keep wondering what I would have done if I had been working alone and something this serious had happened. ■

Resource:

- Saf-T-Driver (uses, safety features, etc. of T-post driver), <http://www.oklahomadesigntech.com/saftdriver.html>