



THE STRAIGHT DOPE

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[[Previous Week](#) | [Recent Columns Index](#)]

Have people actually survived being hit by lightning multiple times?

01-Dec-2006

Dear Cecil:

As a kid, I seem to remember reading on the back of a cereal box about a man who got struck by lightning seven or eight times during his life, totally at random, with no scientific explanation as to why this poor soul (the final strike killed him) was subject to these heavenly barrages. I also recall that the guy's headstone, by an infinitesimally small chance, was hit by lightning and obliterated some years after his death, which is very spooky. He had clearly annoyed somebody by his mere existence. Could you confirm or deny this electrifying (sorry) tale? — Greg, London, UK







Cecil replies:

I can confirm about 80 percent of it, putting it 79.9 percent ahead of most of the yarns that cross my desk. No doubt we can thank the cereal box, where at least you had somebody from Kellogg's (Weetabix, whoever) keeping things straight, in contrast to, say, Wikipedia, which is more the million-monkeys-with-a-million-keyboards approach. First the accurate 80 percent: the human lightning rod you're thinking of is Roy Cleveland Sullivan, for most of his life a forest ranger at Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. He was struck seven times:

- While in a lookout tower in 1942.
- While driving in 1969.
- While walking across his front yard in 1970.
- While standing in a ranger station in 1972.
- While on patrol in the park in 1973.

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- While checking a campground in 1974.
- While fishing in 1977. Fine, the guy's job kept him outside a lot. Still, seven?

Roy suffered assorted losses during these encounters: toenails, eyebrows, hair, and eventually his nerve. After the fourth incident he started to believe some higher power was trying to kill him, according to a 1989 *St. Petersburg Times* article; the fifth time came after he tried unsuccessfully to outrun a cloud he thought was following him. Given that, ignoring Bayesian considerations, the chances of being struck seven times in your life are about 1 in 1.6 times 10 to the 25th power, I don't blame him for a little paranoia. Lightning didn't end up killing Roy, though — he took his own life at age 71. Can't help thinking he wanted to beat the universe to the punch.

Now for the balance of the BS 20 percent — the headstone angle. I suspect you or the cereal company has conflated Sullivan's well-attested story with a possibly apocryphal tale about one Major Summerford. According to numerous accounts, Summerford was a British officer who, while on horseback in Flanders in February 1918, was struck by lightning. After moving to Vancouver, he was again hit in 1924 and once more in 1930. Dying in 1932, he rested in peace until 1936, when lightning allegedly struck either his tombstone or close to it. Great story, huh? Well, I can't verify any of it — and brother, I tried, searching vainly in print and online for anyone with a similar name and description, including British and Canadian military records and Vancouver history. I did notice the interval in years between lightning strikes was 6-6-6. You may call that a sign; I call it fishy.

I turned up something else interesting, or rather my intrepid assistant Una did: one of the Teeming Millions who has survived multiple lightning strikes, namely August Hellman of Arkansas. He says he's been struck twice, once while baling hay in an Oklahoma field in 1959 and again while sailing on Savannah Bay in 1977. In both cases, he said, the storm advanced quickly and left him nowhere to hide. Just before the first strike his hair stood on end, the baling wire made a "crinkling" sound, and he noticed a strong smell of ozone; the sailboat's mast made a similar sound just before the second strike. Mr. Hellman reports having had a sense of impending doom in each case, perhaps as a result of static charge buildup, followed by an earsplitting noise and a few seconds of lost time. Although both times he suffered severe burns and sore muscles, he wasn't permanently injured. Still, he's not looking forward to strike three.

When you consider that more than 31 million bolts hit the ground annually in the U.S. alone, what's surprising isn't that some folks are struck repeatedly but rather that most aren't struck at all. A federal study of lightning incidents from 1959 to 1994 shows that over that time roughly three people were killed and nine injured by lightning per million flashes, though mortality is dropping — by 1994 injuries outnumbered deaths eight to one. Other facts of note:

- Men really take it in the shorts, accounting for 83 percent of lightning victims.
- Golfers make up just under 5 percent of victims.
- July is the most common month to get struck, noon to 6 PM the most common time, and Saturday and Sunday the most common days, with Wednesday a strong third. Why Wednesday? Wild guess: doctors' day off.

—CECIL ADAMS

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Cecil Adams can deliver the Straight Dope on any topic. Write Cecil at cecil@chicagoreader.com.

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