

Three women tell how life-or-death experiences changed them forever

# We've survived the worst

## 'I STOPPED BREATHING THREE TIMES'

When Dianne Farmer's car was T-boned on a rural Victorian road in 2007, no-one thought she would survive. But almost eight years later, Dianne, 58, is thrilled to be able to be here to tell the tale

I don't remember any of this, but the story goes that I was driving 100km/h on a main country road with my labrador Beau chained in the back seat, when a car pulled out, hit the side of my car and pushed it down a dirt road, through a fence and into a ditch. The driver told the police he forgot to look.

Another driver stopped and ran onto the road to wave down cars to help. The first few cars to stop contained nurses and doctors, who freed me from the steering wheel and worked on stopping the bleeding. I stopped breathing twice before a helicopter arrived to take me to Royal Melbourne Hospital. On the way I stopped breathing again.

I was put in an induced coma for two weeks – doctors didn't know if I'd survive. I had three bleeds to the brain and all my ribs were broken, as was my sternum, vertebrae, discs



and left arm. I can't recall a thing from the next six weeks. When I regained consciousness, apparently I was talking like a little girl and then called my husband Ken by my ex-husband's name for two weeks. I was also very erratic and yelled at one of my daughters for bringing me flowers!

I spent four-and-a-half months in hospital, slowly recovering and now have a steel plate from elbow to shoulder holding my left arm together.

Some things have never been the same again. I have short-term memory loss, problems with my vision and balance, and no use of my left arm. I also have no

### What odds?

Fear of flying? Statistics show three times as many people die from accidents on water as in plane crashes, while 58 people died from falling out of bed in 2011 and eight from falling off cliffs, suggesting a fear of heights is probably unfounded.

inhibitions, which can be dangerous – after moving to pick up an oven tray that was on fire with my bare hands, my family feels they always need to watch me.

My husband is now my full-time carer and I have carers to help me two days a week with washing or shopping or anything I need to do for the day.

I won't ever be able to work again but I keep busy writing articles for the Transport Accident Commission magazine and gardening. My goal was to be able to walk Beau again, and now I do that every day.

Ken and I are a dynamic duo. We have a caravan and go away to dog-friendly parks whenever we can. My daughter Belinda, who has studied psychology, told me most men would've traded me by now, so I feel very lucky! I've learned never to take things for granted as one day will be your last.

## 'I GOT CAUGHT IN FLOODWATER'

Kaye Blanchard, 63, was airlifted from her home near Charlton in north-west Victoria after a river broke its banks and swept through her farm

My farm's no stranger to floods. In 1938, floodwater ran under the house so my grandfather built a levy bank around it and sheds and despite a few floods since, it's never gone over. My husband Bessie died in 2010, so when I heard the Avoca River was rising in January 2011, I knew I had to take care of things. It's flat country and when the water peaked in Charlton, I had 12 hours to get livestock over the levy.

I got my 350 ewes and lambs, 18 horses and stallion onto higher ground, then moved a tractor on top of the levy so I could drive out if I had to. I put my dogs into a boat and put my cat up on the hot water service, high and dry. By 5pm the water hadn't come so I drove to another farm for hay bales to feed the animals.

By 8pm the water had come over the levy – I couldn't believe the volume! I didn't have time to think about my own safety – I was so preoccupied getting the animals to dry land. At midnight I grabbed a couple of hours' sleep. By 2am I heard the sound of pots and pans rattling as the water rose higher through our kitchen cupboards, so I waded out to the tractor and snoozed as best I could. The water peaked at 4am; it was really dark and very deep.

When the sun came up I could see the currents were quite strong

so I wouldn't be able to drive. The local authorities rang to say they'd come and get me. I didn't want to leave but after people had been washed away in the Queensland floods, they were on high alert and said they had to take me to safety.

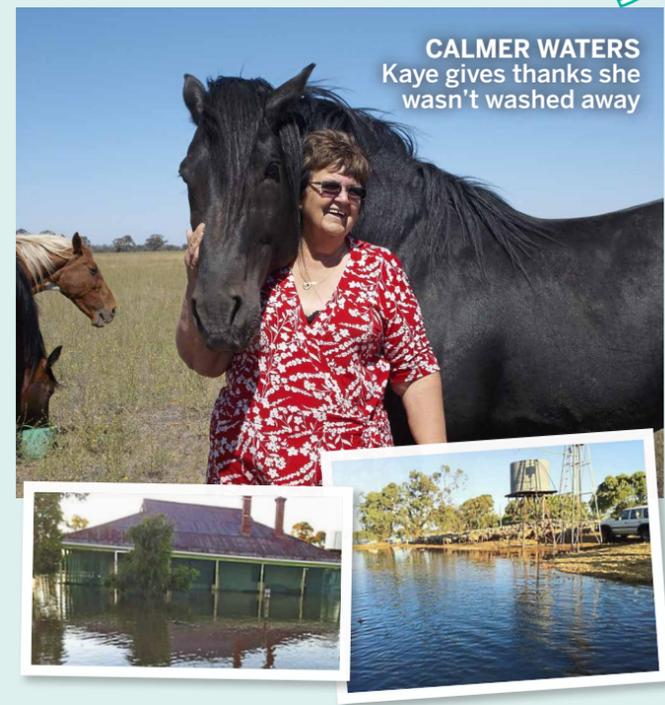
I was airlifted to the town. It was incredible to look over the land: you couldn't see roads or fences, just the tree line where the river and roads were. I returned two days later. It was still underwater but I had to go and rescue sheep stranded on top of drums and pipes.

A week later the water had started to subside so the fire department came and pumped water out of the house and sheds. That's when I saw how destroyed the house was. My mum's beautiful Westminster carpet in the front room was ruined. Family and friends came

to help me take everything out, including carpet, furniture and wardrobes. I lost so many belongings, including photos and china which was special.

Four years later, my house is still not fully repaired. I have no floor coverings, none of the doors shut properly and it needs re-stumping. BlazeAid, a volunteer organisation, helped me put up new fences, which was a huge help. You need a few hands to build a fence and it's tricky to coordinate! My kids Kylie, Tony and Jacinta also helped me build them.

I always like to look for the positives. I lost about 60 sheep, some lost 600! I have my health so I think I'm lucky.



## 'I ENDED UP STRANDED IN ANTARCTICA'

Author Hazel Edwards, 69, was on an Antarctic voyage when a supply chopper crashed right onto the ship she had been stranded on!

I got a writer's grant to go on a resupply voyage to Antarctica in 2000. It was meant to be a five-week round trip, but ended up taking two months; that's because about six days in the ship I was on got stuck – "beset" – in ice, about 90km from Casey station. It was a particularly icy year, so it's not rare for ice-resistant ships to get stuck. You have to wait until an icebreaker can carve a path through to you – which can take weeks – or just wait until the ice melts so you can get out.

There was no immediate danger, aside from boredom. Since I was there to record what life was like, I found it fascinating to watch how people got creative to keep themselves occupied. We taught each other skills – writing was mine and I didn't think it gave me much to trade, but they were all keen.

But things didn't stay that way. Two helicopters came towards the ship and one seemed to be coming in on a strange angle. I assumed I was over-reacting, but it did a dynamic rollover while



**BREAKER, BREAKER!** Hazel awaits a path to be forged in the ice



it was attempting to land on the deck. The rotor shattered and pieces flew

everywhere! Nobody was hurt, but because the ship was carrying so much fuel there was a serious risk – and we were so isolated. The most extreme threat is fire as there's no water or rain to put it out.

The damaged chopper was covered in a tarpaulin and would be removed once the ship got back to Hobart – it served as a stark reminder of how secluded we were.

We were waiting for the icebreaker *Aurora Australis* to arrive, but our captain was able to move the ship before it reached us, so our voyage to Casey station continued about two weeks after we were beset. On our way back to Australia it was again very icy, but the *Aurora Australis* arrived to break a trail through the ice for us.

After being surrounded by ice for so long, the colours, sounds and smells of Hobart were striking. It was extreme and I've gone on to set many of my stories in Antarctica. I'll never forget it. Hazel's memoir *Not Just a Piece of Cake – Being an Author* is out in July.