



Humor in Surveying: Bees

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A Work of Fiction (... but based on a true story)

The first sting I felt was on my lower left jaw. I was at the top of my third swing of a 3 lb. hammer driving a stake to use as a stack site. I couldn't even consider trying to abort my swing because I wasn't yet aware of what was happening to me. I finally realized it after the second or third sting - when the hammer head was about two inches from the top of the stake. There was absolutely no aborting at that point.

The whole experience worked out that way. It seemed as though my mind was working a few steps behind my body. Did you ever have the feeling that your body was doing something before your brain could consider the options and make a decision? My body was probably acting from some sort of instinct. It was starting into action without any prior input from my brain. By the time my brain could catch up it was realizing that my body was doing the absolutely wrong thing. Then my brain would tell my body to stop. But each time it did it was too late. I would have been better off to stop thinking altogether and just let my body do what it was doing. The end result was that both body and mind found themselves in a state of total confusion resulting in lack of action or totally inappropriate action.

Years ago I had an instrument operator who would react excessively whenever he'd encounter bees while cutting line. It was a sight to behold. His brush axe would go flying in the air as he turned to run. Then his voice would reach operatic levels screaming, "Ahhhh! BEEEEEEES!" He wasn't even allergic. As many times as I told him that rule Number 1 when attacked by bees was "don't run toward the Party Chief," for some reason he always headed straight at me. Maybe he was unconsciously seeking some sort of rescue. I can remember observing him after an incident like that was over. He would have to sit and rest so his head could catch up to what his body had already done. It was visible in his eyes. I was always grateful that he was never hit by that axe after having launched it so high.

Three full swings of a 3 lb. hammer driving a stake into the ground within six inches of a nest of ground bees tends to wake them up. Unfortunately, I woke up to it a few seconds later than the bees did. My confusion was replaced by a strong sense of awe. It's an amazing sight to see bees swarm out of their nest en masse right in front of your face. That sight froze me for an instant with a need to continue to watch. It was fascinating! Like a live fluid. In a way, freezing in place may have actually saved me from the salt that would have been poured on my wound. The wound turned out to be bad enough as it was. The act, or inaction, of freezing in place was quickly replaced by an inescapable need to take off running. Again, my head knew it was the wrong thing to do but my body was already in motion and off I went. Several strides away I felt myself take a sharp, 90-degree turn. I remember my mind congratulating my body with a quick "Attaboy!" I then found myself remembering, again after the fact, another instrument operator who had told me a story about being chased by bees while in a boat. Sounds odd to me, too.

But they were in a large bass boat on a lake with a 10 horsepower limit so they couldn't go very fast. Obviously the fishing wasn't any good that day so as boys will be boys, they began to try to swamp a nest hanging low over the water. They succeeded before considering any escape plans and as they were attempting a getaway in that slow boat to China they made a 90-degree turn and the bees flew right on by. Ever since I had heard that story I had hoped to remember it when I needed it. Turns out my body has a better memory than my mind.

By that time the bees that had landed on me, held on through the turn, and began to do what bees do best. My reaction was to start flailing my arms about. Wrong move again. As soon as my mind could catch up to that maneuver I quickly removed my shirt and left it in my wake. I figured it couldn't hurt anything so I took another 90-degree turn and by this time I was getting tired and beginning to hurt so I slowed down and eventually stopped.

Setting a New Record

It was at about this time that I realized this was going to be a new record for me for bee stings in one incident. My previous record had held for almost nine years. It had happened through another fluke. My crew and I had been cutting a traverse line in relatively thick vegetation and, unbeknownst to the three of us, we had disturbed a ground bees nest. The cut vegetation had covered the nest so it wasn't immediately recognizable. We had started back to the equipment hiking the line with me in the back. Apparently the first one through reawakened the bees when he passed over it. The next cleared away the vegetation and invigorated them. Then I happened to step directly on the nest and they flew right up my pant leg. Eighteen stings on one leg.

After coming to a full stop I began what seemed like an absurd video game. I would wait with senses on full alert. As soon as I felt a sting beginning I would assess the location and extricate the attacker. It was a fast paced game at first but eventually it began to subside. Good thing for me because by the time I got the last one my head was feeling a bit dizzy and I had to sit down for a while to recover. You know how your adrenalin gets going during something like this? Well, it's compounded by the effect of the venom, which also stimulates adrenalin flow. As if the sheer excitement of the attack isn't enough, right? It all combined to make me feel a bit "out of sorts" in the head.

Could've Been Worse

Believe it or not, I actually started counting my blessings before counting the stings. Have you ever heard of bell hornets? Well, they look similar to what I call yellow jackets which are the ground nesting bees that had been stinging me but they're about ten times as large. No kidding. We once measured the length of a stinger at 5/8 of an inch. Get a tape out and look at that distance and imagine something that long injecting venom into you. I once had a crew member get stung on the shoulder by one of those giants. He immediately dropped to his knees and started vomiting.

I had one fly by my head once while approaching an old snag which was a property corner but which was also a nest site for bell hornets. It sounded like I'd been buzzed by a WWII dive bomber. So what I'm saying is it could have been a lot worse.

It wasn't long before I started to recuperate and I realized that I probably looked a lot like that old instrument operator I mentioned earlier. I got it together enough to start countin' 'em up. Conveniently, my shirt was already off so my instrument operator could easily count the ones on my back while I

assessed the rest of my body. Just as we were finalizing on the number 32, 6 on my head, 8 on my front torso, 4 on one arm, 3 on the other arm, and 11 on my back, a new record, I felt that last one.

It always happens that way doesn't it? And I have yet to remember to anticipate that last one. Maybe it's because I'm in recovery mode and thinking isn't exactly clear yet. Maybe next time my body will remember for me. It was on my leg under my pants again. How did it get there? Who knows and who cares. There's always that last one that has been waiting for just the right moment to give you that last reminder to keep clear of their territory. And they mean it, too.

I won't soon forget.

About the Author



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