

The Selfish and the Selfless

Sometimes drivers are called upon to make difficult decisions. Sometimes the outcome is not of their own making.



JIM PARK

A bouquet of flowers rests amid a tangle of grass and weed freshly ripped from the earth by the wheels of a truck careening sideways off the highway. A few meters to the north, the mangled wreckage of a bulk tanker and its tractor lay upside down in the grass.

The flowers are a testament to a man who had run out of options, but who knew what had to be done.

In the space of perhaps five or ten seconds, David Virgoe's life's work came unraveled. Cruising northbound on Ontario's Highway 400 with an empty bulk tanker behind him, he was heading to Midland, Ont. for a load of sand. He may have seen the two – possibly three – vehicles rushing up from behind jockeying for position in what police are calling a street race.

One of the alleged racers swerved in front of Virgoe's truck, apparently clipping the front of the truck, and setting in motion

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a chain of events no driver is prepared for, that no amount of training or experience can mitigate, but that all drivers fear may one day confront them.

There's a fine line between self-preservation and the altruistic notion of self-sacrifice. I'm sure any soldier could speak to that, and many truck drivers too. In the act of attempting to avoid catastrophe, we sometimes put ourselves in harm's way. In the ultimate expression of optimism, Virgoe took the path that he must have concluded presented the best of the worst of possible outcomes.

Witnesses say the truck first went left, crossing the left lane heading for the thin steel rail that separates north- and south-bound traffic — passing at closing speeds of 250 km/h or more. Virgoe took out a section of that barrier

before steering right and heading 'er for the ditch.

We can only imagine what torment Virgoe must have experienced in his last few moments.

This can't be happening to me. I can't go left into oncoming traffic. Have to get back to the right. Have to steer right. Head for the ditch. The trailer's coming around. Straighten out. The ditch. The ditch. Why me? My life or theirs? My family or theirs? I'm rolling. Why can't I bring this around?

And then, for all his effort and anguish, an ignominious end beneath 22 tons of twisted steel.

That David Virgoe, a happily married 48-year-old grandfather and devoted family man from Innisfill, Ont., chose the path he did is a triumph of the human spirit. It's a spirit I believe is possessed by a lot of men and women who call themselves truckers.

On countless occasions on any day of the week, anywhere in this country, drivers find themselves in the position of the ultimate arbiter. When catastrophe is imminent, drivers are called upon to make decisions. Judge and jury sitting there in the cab. My life or theirs? Who's responsible for all this? Which way to steer? Many of you have been there and will recall the rush of adrenalin. If you're lucky, a moment after the event, you break into a sweat, your heart races, and you feel physically exhausted. The moment is over. The horns stop blowing and the vehicles go whizzing off leaving you to ponder the fatefulness of it all. And the tenuousness. Who the hell is that guy to have put me in this position?

There but for the grace of God, we go.

To call it an occupational hazard for drivers gives the issue short shrift, but that's what it is. We all accept that big trucks can do a lot of damage when things go bad out on the highway. I believe we all tote that bit of baggage around with us every moment of the day, hoping that we'll never come face to face with the same demons the late David Virgoe did on June 18, 2007.

May he know peace in death, and honour that was never afforded him in life. ★