

'I didn't feel a thing,' lightning victim says

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Charles Moffat remembers that he wanted to trim just one last branch before the spring storm he saw coming grounded him for the day.



He can't remember what happened next — getting hit by a lightning bolt, apparently drawn to the metal in his belt buckle and three steel rings on the safety harness that held him in the tree.

In that instant, a power surge raced through Moffat's body,

knocked him unconscious, blew out his eardrums and temporarily screwed up the rhythm of his heart.

He didn't feel it, but it left second- and third-degree burns on his abdomen, flash burns on his chest and second-degree burns on his left foot and several places along the inside of his left leg where the electricity streaked out of his body, according to the doctor who treated him.

Moffat, 34, said the next thought that crossed his mind a while later was that he had stayed up in the tree too long.

HE IS A tree trimmer for the
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Free Press Photo by RICHARD LEE
Charles Moffat and his zapped apparel.

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Man injured by lightning can't recall being struck

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City of Birmingham who was doing an after-hours free-lance job with a partner in Berkley on the evening of May 6 when he was struck.

"We just had one limb to go and we were trying to hurry up and get out of there when it apparently hit me," Moffat said Wednesday, a day after his release from the hospital.

Only difficulty hearing, a slight limp and knitted slippers on his singed feet betrayed his convalescence as he walked around his Royal Oak home.

"I didn't feel a thing," he said. "As a matter of fact, if I'd died and someone in heaven asked me what kind of death I had, I'd have to say it was very peaceful. It was just like somebody came up and turned the switch off.

"Later, it was like waking up out of a deep sleep. I mean, I was hanging there and there was a blackness and I could hear voices in the distance. When they were putting me in the ambulance I started to get coherent and understand what happened. I knew I had been hurt pretty bad."

HIS LEFT Danner hiking boot, molded from thick hide with an inch-thick sole, was blown apart with such force that the shredded leather looked like the business end of a gag cigar after the explosion.

The front of the camouflage hat he was wearing reads: "This is my tree hanging, catching nothing, bottom snagging, line breaking, fish cussin CAP."

There is no back to that cap. It, too, was shredded by the lightning.

"I trimmed his hair there," said his wife, Rita. "It was all burnt ends, like a Brillo pad."

Rita, who gave birth Dec. 28 to the Moffats' first child, Adrienne Lee, reverted to her own survival tactics when her husband's partner, Vic Connellan, told her what had happened.

"I started deep breathing as if I was in labor so I wouldn't lose it," she said. Moffat and his wife said they are indebted to Connellan for getting Moffat out of the tree.

"He (Connellan) broke his back a few years ago when he fell out of a tree and now he won't go up without two buckstraps (to fasten him to the tree)," Moffat said. "But when he saw what happened to me, he started up the tree, even though he didn't have his climbing equipment with him.

"He fashioned himself a rope saddle, which is pretty uncomfortable, and he was up in the tree when the rescue crews showed up."

LIGHTNING CAN be lethal and not always in the most obvious ways, according to Dr. John Derr Jr., the senior surgical resident at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak who treated Moffat.

Lightning victims can have cardiac arrest and spine fractures from the initial hit, but also can suffer more subtle effects that can be just as deadly, Derr said.

Electrical injuries can interfere with nervous systems and the heat that causes burns also can cause blood clots and damage to blood vessels.

Derr added: "The thing that kills most of these people who are not killed outright is infection because, with tissue destruction, the body's own defense mechanisms are diminished."

Moffat considers himself lucky.

His burns are healing. His hearing is expected to improve after outpatient surgery. And his aching muscles are responding to tender loving care. He expects to return to work in a month or so.

His wife would be happy if he never went up in a tree again, but Moffat has other ideas.

"That's what I do," he said. "And I'm going to go back and finish that last branch."