

# Thankfully, lightning doesn't strike twice

In 1987, Ben Bunting was one of a group of Hamilton schoolboys struck by lightning. Wintec journalism student *Angela Hughes* asked him how it has affected his life.

WHEN lightning strikes a body, it leaves marks where it enters and leaves. Ben Bunting has the scars to prove it.

When a lightning bolt struck the former Hamilton schoolboy 20 years ago, it entered through his chest and arms, erasing freckles as it passed through.

The bolt exited through Bunting's elbows and the soles of his feet, leaving black marks from the deep burns. Today, he still has an 8cm scar on his left elbow and circular scars 2cm in diameter on the soles of both feet.

But, while he finds walking in bare feet uncomfortable, he still counts himself lucky.

A third of people struck by lightning are killed and three-quarters sustain permanent injuries, including paralysis and damage to the spinal cord and brain.

A typical lightning bolt contains 100 million to one billion volts and between 10,000 and 200,000 amperes of current. It literally fries the organs as it passes through the body.

Ben was a fourth former at Hamilton Boys' High School when the lightning bolt struck him. He says he doesn't remember the day. "But I can picture it."

He and a group of friends were sheltering under a tree from a sudden downpour.

"We'd just finished PE class and were standing in a courtyard surrounded by buildings. We were waiting for our teacher to come and unlock the class and it started to pour down. We all stood under a pretty big tree and that's when it struck."

The bolt hit the tree and passed through the group of boys, injuring 11.

Most were treated for burns, shock and minor injuries, and two - Andrew Breingan and Luke Campbell - were admitted to hospital.

But Bunting bore the brunt of the strike and went into cardiac arrest.

He was resuscitated twice, once by teacher John Tonkin-Covell and then by a parent.

He says he was conscious but he doesn't remember being taken by ambulance to Waikato Hospital's intensive care unit or his first few days in hospital.

"My first memory is of me lying in bed talking to my parents while someone was feeding me, and I just stopped mid-sentence. My brain suddenly kicked back in and I started to realise where I was and what had



PICTURE: Supplied

**LUCKY MAN:** Ben Bunting today.



**THWARTED:** The lightning strike put an end to Ben Bunting's promising tennis career.

A talented athlete, he says learning to walk again was frustrating.

"I had just been selected as a representative tennis player before the accident, and I was never able to play tennis at the same level again. I was fortunate that I was young and my body could adapt well to the changes caused by the accident."

He says he was grateful to the hospital staff and well-wishers. "I got hundreds of cards, some from overseas, as well as visitors and attention."

Lightning strikes are far more common than people think, according to National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research climatologist Stewart Burgess.

Data collected over 57 years shows nine people have been killed by lightning strikes in New Zealand. "That's one fatality every six years," says Burgess. These took place throughout the country but were more prone to

happened.

"I had never really heard of people getting hit by lightning so it was difficult to believe."

Tony Steel was principal of Hamilton Boys' High at the time of the accident.

He says he remembers being told about the lightning strike and running through the school corridors.

"Ben was burnt quite badly. He was a very brave and very lucky boy."

Steel says a classmate of Bunting's, 15-year-old Nigel McLure, probably saved his life.

"Nigel saw the lightning hit the group of boys and moved in. He ensured the ambulance was contacted and got staff telling them Ben needed resuscitation."

Some of the injured boys were taken to the school sick bay and treated with saline solution and bandages until St John arrived.

They had their clothing cut off as the least painful method of removal.

Bunting spent 14 weeks in hospital with daily physiotherapy once he could stand.

"The lightning short-circuited most of my body as it passed through. This meant I had to learn to walk again. The severe burns on my feet made it painful to put my feet on the ground."

western and northwestern parts of the country.

During the 1980s, lightning struck three other people in New Zealand.

In 1984, a post office linesman was killed when lightning hit a pole he was working on near Te Awamutu. The same day, an 11-year-old Hamilton boy was struck and seriously injured. And a 16-year-old was seriously injured near Otorohanga when a milking shed was struck by lightning.

These days Bunting lives in Melbourne and works as a consultant, managing parks and recreation-planning projects and helping plan sports grounds and skate parks. He has a Bachelor of Social Sciences and a Masters of Sciences from Waikato University.

He says while the scars are a reminder of the accident, he is determined not to be defined by the experience.

"It's amazing when people remember, but it doesn't come up in conversation often - and when it does, people generally don't believe me. I do have album with photos and newspaper cuttings in a drawer at home to prove it if I have too. Other than that I don't really give it too much thought any more. It never really stopped me from doing anything. It has simply become one of my many life events."

Melbourne is known for its unpredictable weather and on average it has between 11 and 15 electrical storms a year. But Bunting says storms don't bother him. "I'm not afraid of them, but I'm not drawn to them either. To me it's just something that happened."