

Lou Lessard Profile

Keeping alive a 50-year-old memory



Nearly 16 years into retirement, Lou Lessard's feet are firmly on the ground. He sells raspberries and filbert nuts from his five-acre Langley farm and enjoys a dozen grandchildren. But 50 years ago, Lessard's world was literally and terrifyingly up in the air.

He was a 29-year-old foreman on the partially completed Second Narrows Bridge when it collapsed on June 17, 1958. Nineteen workers died, and dozens were injured when the bridge went down.

"One minute I was supervising a crane lifting a 55-ton steel beam. Then, without warning, the bridge dropped beneath our feet," Lessard remembered at this week's Vancouver ceremony to honour those lost building what's now called the Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing.

That awful day, he fell more than 100 feet into Burrard Inlet, and went another 30 feet below the surface. The disaster scene was chaotic, with a lot of suffering, but everyone "helped each other as much as possible until help arrived."

Lessard spent 20 minutes floating on a plank with a broken left leg, a broken right arm, damaged vertebrae and other injuries. Recovery took more than a year, starting with four months in hospital.

Afterward, the young foreman went back to work on the bridge, using a cane for a while and paying closer attention to safety in an era when ironworkers weren't required to use fall protection equipment.

He felt "fortunate to be back" and was always "more cautious and checking other people's safety." In the next 35 years, no one under Lessard's supervision had a serious injury, and he earned safety awards from his company, the B.C. Safety Council and the Workers' Compensation Board of B.C. (now WorkSafeBC).

Today, besides family and farming, Lessard keeps fit at a gym and skis regularly each winter at nearby Mt. Baker.

But that terrible day 50 years ago is never far away.

"Nobody was a stranger," he said. "We all knew each other, from months of working together on this bridge and from other jobs in the past. I think of them very often."

Lessard noted that many at this week's memorial ceremony are related to workers on the bridge when it collapsed. They were "family — husbands and fathers, uncles and cousins.

"I believe the tragedy made all of us relatives. It created an extended family, whose founding fathers who paid so much for that bridge to rise.

"The dead and wounded must be remembered, and we depend on you to keep the memory alive."