OF ASHES

At the bright beginning of his dazzling career, this sportscaster had to live with pain that never left him—and a creeping fear that his only escape was a deadly road to destruction

by BILL STERN

SELDOM HAVE I SEEN a more beautiful day than that Sunday morning of Oct. 20, 1935. I was well-rested from a good night's sleep and thoroughly pleased with a life which, at 28, had brought me back into radio broadcasting after losing my first announcing job at NBC. I whistled exuberantly while Jack Gelzer and I stowed our bags in my new convertible and headed out of Austin, Tex., on the way back to Shreveport, La. My new employers, Stein Stores, were highly complimentary about the job Jack and I had done at the Centenary game against the University of Texas the day before. I was anxious to call New York and tell the good news to Harriet May, my fiancée.

As the city fell behind and the countryside unfolded before us, crisp, clean, and sun-washed, Jack commented continually on the lovely day.

"It's great to be alive," I nodded.

I'll never know why I hadn't seen it long before I did, but suddenly out of nowhere a car crossed the road directly in front of us. One moment it wasn't there, the next it was squarely in our path as it emerged from a side road.

I hit the brakes as hard as I could. There wasn't even time to swerve to one side. My tires screamed and there was a tremendous grinding of metal and shattering of glass as we piled head-on into the other car.

The sky and the ground spun as darkness closed in around me, much like a pinwheel I had had when I was a child. Screams and the smell of smoke shook me back to consciousness.

White-faced and shaking, Gelzer appeared at my side. His quavering voice was almost a shout.

"My God, Bill, I'm not even scratched."

Then he saw that I was pinned down. Putting a shoulder to the wreck, he strained to raise it slightly, and somehow I wriggled free. My left leg hung loosely, the foot straying off at an awkward angle, and I knew that it was broken. Jack grabbed me under the arms and dragged me a safe distance from the burning car.

Eventually, after what seemed like days but actually was about an hour and a half after the crash, an ambulance arrived. Swiftly they hoisted me inside for a jolting, agonizing ride over a bumpy back road. When I thought I could endure no more, we stopped and the doors were opened.

"Okay, we're at the hospital," a voice said.

Within moments, an ether cone was clapped over my face and the pain faded quickly away with my consciousness.

On regaining my senses, I found myself in an upstairs bedroom. The leg pained severely and, straining upward, I saw that it had been set in a cast. A few minutes later the doctor appeared.

"You have a compound fracture there, son," he drawled pleasantly. "But it's all set now, and I think everything's going to be all right."

By the third day, however, the pain had become worse and specialists were summoned from Dallas. They assured me everything was in order.

But the pain mounted until it was one continual wave and I was kept constantly drugged. At the end of a week it became obvious that something drastic was wrong. So finally, after a phone call to my parents, arrangements were made to put me on a train for New York.

A nurse traveled with me. Her instructions were to make me comfortable, namely with a hypodermic needle. I was in dope-inspired high spirits during most of the trip back to New York. I was met by Dr. Samuel Stein and my parents, and taken by ambulance to the Hospital for Joint Diseases.

Dr. Stein didn't waste any time stripping off the cast. I saw his eyes widen and his lips tighten. Then I was conscious of the odor. From the wound, Dr. Stein removed sand, cement, gravel, and even manure which had been rubbed into the leg as I was dragged from the wreck of my automobile 10 days earlier.

Gangrene had set in.

A few days later, without explanation, I was wheeled to the operating room. I had no idea what was going on. Suddenly the doctor bent over me, a gauze mask covering his face, and again the ether cone settled down to sweep me into darkness.

When I came to, a feeling of singular strangeness impressed itself on my consciousness. Slowly and with great effort, I forced myself up on one elbow and my eyes traced the outline of my body under the sheet. Something was queer. The mound under the sheet was too narrow. Then it struck me with the force of a sledge hammer as I collapsed on my pillow.

My left leg was gone.

I WAS LYING THERE rigidly in a state of shocked disbelief when Dr. Stein came in. He put a consoling hand on my shoulder and his voice was soft and gentle. "I'm sorry, Bill, we just had to take it off. It was a question of losing the leg or your life."

I didn't even answer him. For hours I lay there, alternately cursing and praying, refusing to believe that this had happened to me. Gradually I subsided into black despair.

At this point, somebody told John Royal at NBC, the man who had fired me a year earlier, of my condition.

He appeared outside my room at about 8 a.m., as the nurse was leaving with a breakfast tray I had not even touched.

"Give me that," the big, bluff Irishman said gruffly to the nurse.

My door swung open and Royal strode into the room and thrust the tray onto my lap. His voice was sternly insistent. "How the devil are you going to get well and broadcast for NBC if you don't eat?"

An amputation is excruciating and soul-searing. Recovery is a long, slow process. My nerves were ragged, and there was the added strain of getting over the opiates which had been pumped into me in such frightening quantities. But John Royal had instilled in me again the will to live.

Royal and Harriet, my fiancée. Every day while I was in the hospital, she wrote me faithfully and tenderly. In one of her dearest letters she demanded: "Just when are you going to get out of there and marry me?"

Ultimately the pains and pangs began to lessen. After six weeks, I was discharged from the hospital.

OFTEN I WAS discouraged to the point of tears. My nerves were as tight as violin strings. The sensitive end of my stump ached and pained constantly, and the artificial leg rubbed the tender flesh until it was raw and sore.

My nights were almost unbearable, and soon I began to take sleeping pills. In the beginning it was a matter of two or three seconal tablets a night, but even these weren't enough to bring repose. It was a frightful, miserable period of extreme unrest, despair, and constant pain.

It wasn't until the following August, in 1936, that I mastered my artificial leg and my courage enough to go see John Royal at NBC and ask him for a job. He kept his promise and gave me part-time work on the sports staff. A year later I had a full-time job with NBC, and Harriet and I were married in April of 1937.

Unknown to anyone except possibly Harriet, there was a dreary, dismal undercurrent to what appeared to be a glamorous, swift-moving, and highly successful career. Immediately after my release from the hospital in 1935, I fought an up-and-down battle, losing ground constantly in my attempts to get off sleeping pills.

Inadvertently, in more relaxed moments, scant as they were, I reached for the sleeping-pill bottle after tossing and turning for hours.

This created a circle of catastrophe. Sleep-drugged mornings were inevitably counteracted with pep pills in a constant clash between barbiturate and Benzedrine.

The three years after my leg amputation were an endless struggle to readjust myself and attempt to learn to live with pain.

Then, in 1939, while the leg was still an unending source of pain and irritation, I began to have frequent kidney-stone attacks. These are among the most agonizing ailments a man could have. In those days there were no truly effective dissolvents, and

(Continued)