

DRILL PRESS

405

By James Collins

A few months after I received my electrical engineering degree I joined a factory in the middle of Long Island. We were waiting for award of a contract and as a result, there were a number of engineers without anything to do. I was one of them. I asked my boss if it would be all right if I went to the prototype shop and looked at some of the machinery in there, as I had no experience with any of the larger machine tools. He said it was fine and I walked to the area.

The prototype shop was empty but there were several large machines and I decided to look at a full-size drill press. I worked with handheld electric drills and knew the basic process but did not work with a large freestanding drill press. All the drill bits were in order to the side of the machine so I took a 1 inch drill and decided that I would see how it worked on a piece of aluminum. I picked up a 10-in.² piece of scrap aluminum and put it on the drill press table. I inserted the drill into the holder, turned the machine on and adjusted the speed to low. On the right of the machine was a large steel arm in the form of an X with large round knobs on each of the ends. This was used by the operator to lower the drill down to the work.

I lowered a bit down to the piece until it just touched and started making a pilot hole. All was going well. I had my left hand on the drill motor, pulled down on the bar with my right hand, and leaned it into the work.

Simultaneously I heard the screech of metal on metal and felt the pain of my stomach as I released the arm and jumped back. The 10-in.² sheet metal rotated around like a huge saw and the edge acted like a massive knife. It had cut my tie off shredded my shirt and T-shirt and left the thin line on the edge of my stomach. A couple of drops of blood started to ooze out of the extra-long paper cut. In those days, I was 6'2" tall and weighed 141 pounds. My stomach was flat ,otherwise, I would have been disemboweled. If my left arm were not holding the motor case, my arm would have been lopped off. I was immediately relieved that I was not lying on the floor in pieces. I was so angry with myself that I was giving myself a brain thrashing. I felt I was stupid and should have secured the piece of aluminum to the plate before I drilled. I felt I should have asked for help before I worked on a powerful machine I had never approached before.

I was not scared because I expected something might happen, not on this day and not in this machine shop but just in general. I seem to attract life-threatening events ever since I was a young teenager. Before this event I experienced being in a room struck by

lightning. A riptide in the Atlantic Ocean swept me out to sea. I experienced electrocution twice before this date. On five separate occasions, I had been attacked by pairs of armed men and left six of them lying in the street. The police picked two up on one occasion and I luckily talked the other two out of cutting my throat. I also survived having a zip gun stuck in my back by a drunk who had forgotten to cock it when he tried to fire.

In high school, I survived an explosion in a chemistry lab that blew out all the windows and left a 4-inch chart of glass sticking out of the shoulder of my coat. I had been shot at a couple of times and walked out of two riots without a scratch. The episode with the machine drill press was scary but not as terrifying as some of the other experiences I had encountered and there were to be a dozen more to occur after that day. I expect there still may be a few more to go because:

Death stalks us every day,

Only God keeps death away.

The Irish know that death always wins in the end. That is why many an Irish wake is often a party. We no longer have to keep looking over our shoulders; death says, "Today is your day."

THE END