

After a Million Miles Without an Accident, He'll Keep on Truckin'

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Darren Dodman has driven to the moon and back. Twice.

He has driven the equatorial circumference of the planet 40 times.

It is the equivalent of 1,600,000 kilometers, or a million miles, all measured out in his daily 10-hour trips between Dartmouth and Saint John, N.B.

But it is neither the sheer accumulation of kilometers nor the harrowing nights of driving through fog, pelting rain or swirling snow that necessarily make Dodman's odometer worthy of celebration.

The long-distance trucker has never had a crash.

Since Dodman began working for Con-way about 7 years ago, he has never hit a car, never struck a moose and never ended up in a ditch.

The 47-year-old trucker from Enfield will be lauded at a celebration next week at a Dartmouth restaurant, along with his colleague, Terry Hillier, who has achieved the same feat driving a truck for Con-way in Halifax Regional Municipality.

"It comes down to just 100 percent safety consciousness and being professional," said Ty Campbell, Dodman and Hillier's manager at Con-way.

"Darren and Terry both take their job extremely serious. They're dynamite people. They don't cut corners."

The 1.6-million-kilometer achievement is "not very common at all," Campbell said.

Among the thousands of Con-way drivers across the United States and Canada, about 200 reached the milestone last year, said the company's website.

"To me, it's probably the biggest achievement I'll ever reach," Dodman said. "I may get to two million with this company if I keep on this same path, but a million was hard enough to get to, so the chances of making it to two will be even more outstanding."

He has had some near-misses, of course.

One time, coming over the Cobequid Pass on a night when the pavement was like a skating rink, Dodman felt that something wasn't quite right.

"I looked in my side mirror and I could read Con-way completely sideways on the road."

One of the two 8.5-meter trailers he hauls had swerved so far out of alignment that it was perpendicular to the tractor portion of the truck.

"Then it came all the way back around the other side, and I looked out the other way and I could read Con-way all the way down the other side of the trailer. Like, completely 90 degrees off of straight. It was sliding sideways.

"That was the night I thought, 'That's it, I'm done for.'"

Dodman attributes his achievement to luck and an ability to stay calm in stressful situations.

“The biggest thing is, when something unexpected happens, don’t panic. Don’t do anything sudden. Slow the vehicle down first, then try to get control.”

Although he has managed to be crash-free, Dodman has witnessed more than his share of collisions.

One of the biggest causes of crashes for truckers, he said, is falling asleep at the wheel.

Dodman said he tries to avoid fatigue by getting enough rest the day before his shift begins at 6 p.m., avoiding carbohydrates, which make him sleepy, and pulling off the highway in a safe place if he feels too tired to drive.

“Ten minutes on the side of the road makes a world of difference. If you’re tired, pull over. It only takes a second to fall asleep.”

The trucker’s life can be a lonely one. He is not allowed to pick up hitchhikers and the CB radio he used to use to chat with other drivers fell by the wayside with the advent of cell phones.

But he makes friends along his route, at the Tim Hortons and the restaurants he frequents to supplement his nightly snacks of fruit and vegetables.

Dodman has his radio to keep him company as he watches the yellow line each night. Mostly, he listens to sports, talk radio or occasionally a music station.

“It becomes a more and more lonely job, I guess. But I’m used to spending time on my own.

“I’m a pretty bad singer, so it’s just as well that I’m by myself in the truck.”