

# Flying High Again

## **One man's story of courage following a life-threatening accident.**

by Rob Senior

He had done the maneuver a hundred times before. The "Diamond Track" was a crowd favorite, and one of Dana Bowman's preferred stunts. Passing within a few feet of each other, he and his U.S. Army Golden Knights skydiving partner were able to create an illusion of passing through each other while tracing a diamond in the sky. The move required world-class skill and precision.

However, on this day in 1994 in Yuma, AZ, their timing was off by just a fraction of a second. Bowman and his partner collided at a combined speed of more than 300 miles per hour, killing Bowman's best friend and partner, Sgt. Jose Aguillon. While Bowman did survive the impact, both his legs were severed and doctors were forced to amputate.

In that one instant, Bowman, now 40, lost everything. In the nine years since, he has worked to rebuild what he once had. He may have lost his legs, but some would say as a result of the accident, he now has more spirit than ever. This is his story of triumph in the face of physical adversity.

### **"I Looked Down and Saw... Nothing"**

Bowman joined the United States Army in 1981. He found his love for skydiving in 1985, and shortly thereafter joined the seven-time gold medal winning Golden Knights, the best skydiving team in the United States. He completed hundreds of jumps around the world, from heights as high as 37,000 feet while working with the Special Forces HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) teams. All the while, he was doing what he loved.

But on that ill-fated day in 1994, Bowman thought he had completed his final, tragic jump.

"I woke up, and one of my teammates was standing over me," Bowman remembered. "At first, I had no idea where I was. I didn't remember the accident. But then he said, 'Dana, Jose died.' And after that sunk in, it was 'That's not all, Dana... you lost both your legs.'"

"And so I looked down and the sheets were up to my waist" I looked down and I saw nothing. That's when it hit me."

On top of the loss of his best friend and his legs, Bowman sustained a head injury in the accident that caused him to stutter for several months.

Six days later, against doctor's orders, Bowman went to the funeral for Sgt. Aguillon. As difficult a day as that was, Bowman believes it was the starting point for his recovery.

"Things weren't looking too good," he admitted. "I lost my legs, my best friend died, and then my wife left me. The military came, asking me to sign the papers for my release. They said, 'Look, you're disabled now... it's time to get out.'"

In reality, it was just the beginning of Bowman's story.

### **"I'm Going Skydiving Tomorrow"**

Bowman checked into the Walter Reed U.S. Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. He knew rehab would be difficult, but how much worse could things get?

"I just ended up putting everything in front of me," he remembered. "I lost everything"what else was left? I decided to just start at the bottom and climb the ladder back to the top."

But no one expected his first step to be such a big one. One of Bowman's Golden Knight teammates was scheduled to be married in July, and the Knights were planning to jump into the ceremony as a team. While his teammates encouraged him to make it back in time, the odds weren't looking too good for Bowman.

"Every day, the doctors would come into the room, get me to move around, that kind of thing," said Bowman. "One Friday, the doctor came in and asked, 'What are you doing this weekend?' So I told him, 'I'm going back to Fort Bragg, NC, and going on a skydive."

"Well, the medical staff in the room started cracking up. The doctor just looked at me, smiled and said, 'Sure you are, buddy.'

"That was all I needed. I had permission, the way I saw it. They signed the papers, and I was off! I drove back to NC, and showed up the next day ready to jump."

Except for one small problem Bowman didn't have a parachute. "So I went to my teammate and told him I needed to borrow a parachute. He told me there was no way he was giving it to me."

In fact, all of the Knights had questions about Bowman jumping. "They asked me if I was cleared to jump, and I told them, of course I was," he said. "I told the doctor I was going skydiving, and he said, 'Sure you are.' That was permission, right? In my eyes, I was cleared."

Reluctantly, Bowman's teammate gave up the parachute, and Bowman prepared for a 15,000-foot practice leap. "I was the "stinger" one of the last guys on the formation. I told them, 'Look, I'm not real steady on my legs yet, so when it's time to go, just give me a push, OK?' Well, they did, we got into formation, and I landed, right on target, on my prosthetic legs.

"One of my favorite things to do was videotape during my dives. So I rolled up my pants before the jump and got a good shot of my prosthetic legs, so that I could show everybody that this was possible."

### **"Want To See the Video?"**

Triumphantly, Bowman returned to the Walter Reed Center, and just like every day, his doctor came around on Monday morning and asked what was new.

"Oh, not much," Bowman replied. "I went skydiving this weekend. That was fun."

The doctor, of course didn't believe him. But Bowman's next words floored him. "Would you like to see the video?"

Needless to say, the entire hospital staff was stunned, and one of the nurses called the Pentagon immediately. They were similarly impressed, and a couple of months later, Bowman became the first person with double amputation to re-enlist in the United States Army.

"He's just a very highly motivated person, and he doesn't think anything is impossible," said Kevin Carroll, MS, CP, LP, FAAOP, vice president of prosthetics for Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics, Inc. "Even with technology as it is today, there are limitations to prosthetics. For example, Dana has a computerized knee system, so he can't go in the water with that. But he wants to know why. He doesn't take no for an answer."

Bowman said he doesn't like to say no, but he does understand. "I'm not a non-compliant patient, but I want to do everything in my power," he explained. "I want to change things. Sure, there are limits to everything, but I want to test those limits—see if we can't make it better." Since that time, Bowman has completed more than 650 jumps. His proudest day came when he leapt into the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta, GA. Additionally, he has jumped into a Monday Night Football game to present the game ball, and has opened several Easter Seals events with leaps from above.

### **Giving Back**

But skydiving is only part of Bowman's story. He retired from the Army in 1996, and began touring different bases to tell his story of triumph.

"My message is for everyone—young, old, able, disabled," he said. "I just want people to see how limitless their lives are. Look at me, I lost everything, and here I am. If I can do it, anyone can."

But Bowman doesn't forget his hardships, either. To that end, he has created the Limb Bank Foundation in Weatherford, TX, to help Americans and those in underdeveloped countries who are in need of prosthetic limbs.

"Through my organization, people can get prosthetic limbs for free—no questions asked," Bowman said.

Bowman has also undertaken another love, flying. He recently became the only person with double amputation certified to fly helicopters, and instructs others on learning to fly as well. In addition to skydiving, he also enjoys scuba diving, skiing and motorcycling.

He has also developed a number of modifications for his prosthetic limbs. Realizing that his feet would need to adapt to help him turn and land when skydiving, he specialized different sets of prosthetic feet for his myriad activities.

"I've got my flying feet, my skydiving feet, my biking feet, and since I moved to Texas, my country-and-western dancing feet," said Bowman, laughing.

Bowman has also undertaken public speaking as an additional endeavor. He speaks to schools, amputee support groups and other organizations around the country, always specifying his message to fit his overall philosophy on life: "No Limits, and Never Quit!"

"I don't compare myself to anyone," Bowman stressed. "No athlete, no individual... I am who I am. Everyone is so competitive, hating the other guy. It's just wrong. It's all about setting your own goals."

While anyone could safely say that Bowman has reached and surpassed all realistic goals, the truth is, Bowman sees more out there.

"Just the other day, I was working with him," recalled Carroll, "and he started talking about all the things he wants to do. But he was worried. He said, 'It's gonna take me several hundred years to accomplish all this stuff!' That is a great attitude to have."

Bowman lives with his wife Jennifer and his five children in Willow Park, TX, and spends a great deal of his time speaking to groups and spreading the motto by which he lives his life.

"Give everybody a chance," Bowman urged. "That's the advice I give everybody, including therapists. You could have somebody in therapy who is incredibly self-motivated, and you may think he's crazy. But he can end up surprising you. After all, it's not the disability, it's the ability."