

Amputee Parachutist Tests the Limits of the U.S. Army - and Himself

In late 1994, five months after losing both of his legs in an accident as an elite U.S. Army parachutist, Dana Bowman strode into Walter Reed Army Medical Center, eager to tell the doctors about his weekend of sky diving.

He came armed with a videotape that documented his first jump as an amputee and with a renewed confidence to prove to the U. S. Army that his disability wasn't a disability at all.

"I wasn't about to give up when those guys told me I was unfit for duty," Bowman stated. "That jump helped me re-enlist in the Army. I convinced the military, the Pentagon—everyone—that there was still a place for me."

And his re-enlistment as a double amputee in the U.S. Army showed the military that there was also a place for today's amputee soldiers who want to return to their units. With the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are hundreds of them.

Now, a decade after his own fight to re-enlist, Bowman is seeing that the military is finally more open to accepting amputee soldiers.

This is exciting and encouraging, since Bowman is working constantly to help people see that amputation doesn't necessarily equal limitation.

He's spent the last several years traveling as a motivational speaker, telling the story of his success and difficulties to audiences including the Amputee Coalition of America, the Challenged Athletes Foundation, NASA and the Paralympic Games.

He's also a contracted speaker with Hanger Orthopedic Group, a member of the National Speakers Association and a helicopter flight instructor. And he's the father of five young children.

His message is simple and powerful: "It's not the disability; it's the ability."

A Golden Knight falls

Prior to his accident, Bowman was a Special Forces soldier and a sergeant first class with the U.S. Army and was a member of the Army's elite parachuting team, the Golden Knights.

He was on this select team for less than six months before that fateful day in early February 1994 when the Golden Knights were at annual training in Yuma, Ariz.

While performing a routine maneuver known as the "diamond track," Bowman and his teammate, Sgt. Jose Aguillon, collided in midair. Rather than crisscrossing in the sky, as they had done flawlessly more than 50 times before, Bowman and Aguillon slammed into each other at a combined speed of 300 mph.

Aguillon died instantly. Bowman's left leg was severed below the knee and his right leg above the knee.

After receiving immediate treatment at a hospital in Phoenix, Bowman was sent to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to recover and begin rehabilitation.

Taking the plunge

Bowman's friends kept in touch during his rehabilitation, and they used sky diving as motivation to keep him going.

"My buddies were calling me all the time and coaxing me along," Bowman remembered. "They'd say, 'We'd love for you to come down here and jump with us,' and I'd say, 'Yeah right, they're going to let me jump.'"

Eventually, he was convinced. Some of his teammates were performing a private jump in North Carolina and invited him to come.

"They wanted to get me out of the hospital and get me going," explained Bowman. "But they didn't really expect me to show up."

On Friday morning, when his doctors came during daily rounds, Bowman said that he needed a pass to leave for the weekend. The doctors asked why, and Bowman answered them honestly.

"I said I was going to North Carolina to do a dive, and they said, 'Sure you are,' and laughed about it," Bowman said. "They thought I was joking and gave me the pass."

When Bowman arrived in North Carolina, his friends were surprised to see him and wary of letting him jump. At first, no one would even give him a parachute. Bowman recalls that the person in charge said, "Dana, we really don't feel comfortable to let you jump. We don't know what your ability is."

Bowman proved his abilities had not changed that day, five months into his rehabilitation, when he completed a jump from 10,000 feet and landed safely on both of his prostheses.

But he was determined to prove himself to the military as well as his friends; he asked someone to videotape his descent. "I rolled up my pant legs so that the boys at Walter Reed could see," Bowman said. "I looked just like anybody else."

That same day, he participated in a more complicated jump that required 18 of the men to come into a formation. Although Bowman was given the hardest position, he made it into his spot, whereas eight of the other divers didn't.

Achieving re-enlistment

That video was a revelation to many people.

"The doctors took my video to the interns, to high-ranking doctors, to the general of the hospital," Bowman recalled. "It eventually made it up to the Pentagon and to the undersecretary of the Army."

His goal was to prove to the Army that it still needed him on its team and to convince a stubborn system that there was a place for him.

Bowman remembers thinking, "I'm being kicked out of the U.S. Army because of what happened to me. It wasn't my fault, but they said, 'There is no place for you. You are disabled, [and] you are not able to function in wartime.' I started thinking about all of it. And I thought, 'How do you know? Let me show you what I can do.'"

He tested different prostheses to see what worked best for various activities, finding that the C-Leg® worked well. He researched the O&P industry, continued jumping and kept in constant contact with his former Golden Knights friends.

Of course, not everyone—including some old teammates—was supportive of his decision.

"I faced a lot of negativity," Bowman said. "There were guys...saying, 'What are you doing? What are you trying to prove?' I just wanted to survive [and] to use my skills."

After four months of relentless hard work and just nine months after the accident, Bowman was allowed to re-enlist for active duty. He had to complete the required paperwork and physical fitness tests first, but he passed them without a problem.

"After I did all of that perfectly, there was no person that doubted I couldn't still do my duty, my job [and] my mission," he remarked.

A soldier again

Bowman immediately returned to the Army as the U.S. Parachute Team's lead speaker and recruiting commander. He also returned to completing nine sky diving jumps a day, five days a week.

"I've done over 1,000 jumps since the accident," he noted. "I can't tell you how many [prostheses] I've broken on my way down, but I always have spares."

His prosthetist, Kevin Carroll, CP, FAAOP, with Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics, continually helps Bowman find prostheses that best suit his active lifestyle.

"I told him that I want something lightweight, durable, flexible and that I can do everything in," Bowman said. "Basically, I'm just asking for my leg[s] back. But, Kevin was able to do that. He encourages everything I can do, and he knows what I need."

Bowman said that Endolite's Mercury™ Pylon unit works well for him since it is extremely durable and he can use it to ski, swim and run. He lands his jumps by coming down first on his left leg, where he is a below-knee amputee, followed by his right leg, which has the above-knee amputation, and then "runs it out."

How times have changed

By 1996, Bowman's time in the military was also running out. He retired from the Army and pursued his bachelor's degree in commercial aviation from the University of North Dakota.

And, as though being the first double amputee to re-enlist wasn't enough, Bowman is now the only double amputee helicopter flight instructor in the world.

Throughout everything, he's maintained close ties with Walter Reed and is a regular visitor to the hundreds of wounded soldiers returning from Iraq. He talks to them candidly about his own experiences and strongly encourages those who are interested to return to active duty.

"We don't want soldiers to think they're not wanted," Bowman noted. "We have to support each other. If I can get in there and build these [soldiers] back up, that's great."

When asked why so many soldiers want to return to the battle zone after suffering severe injuries, his response is surprisingly simple.

"I was given a chance to live, so I have to give back," he said. "It's the human spirit, the American spirit. These soldiers are seeing that."

Bowman is also seeing how much has changed in the decade since his own struggle.

"[The Army is] more supportive now," reflected Bowman. "The prosthetics are better, [and] the care is better. The different organizations that have come about, like the amputee support groups, have helped. And the money—they have thousands of dollars pouring into Walter Reed and the new building that they just broke ground on a little while ago.

"The current world situation has changed, too," he added. "We've made it a better world, and now we're making it more accommodating [for] these soldiers."

Marique Newell is the staff writer for the O&P Almanac.