

## ON THE JOB: STILL AIMING FOR THE SKY AFTER HE LOST HIS LEGS, DANA BOWMAN TOOK FLIGHT AS A MESSENGER OF HOPE

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Army chopper pilot Joseph de Garay, his left foot amputated after a truck had crushed it, was brooding in bed at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington when a stranger marched into his room and threw a foot up onto the mattress. Before de Garay could object, the man pulled back his pant leg to reveal a gunmetal-gray prosthesis. De Garay was startled -- right out of his self-pity, as it turned out. "When Dana walked into my room, well, it was definitely an uplift," he says.

Army Sgt. First Class Dana Bowman, 33, is a one-man mission of mercy. Seventeen months ago his legs were sheared off in a skydiving collision that killed his best friend. After rehabilitating himself in less than five months, he has become not only the military's first-ever double amputee on active duty but a veritable ambassador of inspiration. In the past 12 months, Bowman, the father of a 10-year-old, Austin, has traveled from his base at Fort Bragg, N.C., to visit survivors of a midair collision at a nearby base, soldiers wounded in Somalia, even victims of inner-city shootings. Wherever he goes he conveys a singular message: "What I've done, you can do." "Dana Bowman embodies the kind of spirit that just won't quit," says Lt. Col. Danny Greene, commander of Bowman's unit, the Army's Golden Knights parachute team. "He is truly a remarkable person."

One of the more remarkable things about him is that he is alive. On Feb. 6, 1994, Bowman was with the Knights in Yuma, Ariz., practicing for one of their 300 annual skydiving shows. He and his friend and longtime partner Jose Aguillon, 23, strapped smoke canisters to their ankles and jumped from opposite sides of a plane at 12,500 feet -- a trick known as the Diamond Track that they had performed 50 times before. But instead of criss-crossing beneath the plane with 30 feet between them, the two men, each traveling at 150 mph, collided. Bowman's legs were severed by the impact. Their chutes opened, but Bowman awakened in the hospital to learn that he had lost his right leg above the knee and his left leg just below it and that massive internal injuries had claimed his friend.

For days, Bowman's emotions ricocheted between anger and denial. "I felt everything had been ripped out from under me," he recalls. He soon began to realize that he would spiral into a self-destructive depression if he did not take control. As he studied the tangle of sheets where his legs should have been, his military stoicism nudged him beyond despair. "It was then," he says, "that I knew I wouldn't call myself disabled."

Lunging into a punishing program of recovery, he wore out four pairs of prostheses in six weeks. Frustrated with the plastic devices he had been issued, he spent six months designing his own lightweight chassis of titanium "bones" and carbon-fiber "tendons" (at an eventual cost to the Army of \$250,000). "I absolutely had my own personal deadlines," he says.

As his strength grew, so did his reputation as a cheerleader for other wounded soldiers. "He was just a real spark plug," says Army Under Secretary Joe Reeder, who visited Bowman in the hospital. "His accident would have brought most people down."

Not [Bowman](#). Last November he re-enlisted-[Bowman](#)-style. He took his oath airborne, his pant legs rolled up to expose his hardware.

"He's always been one of those go-go types," says his mother, Donna [Bowman](#), 52, a retired health-care worker. "I always told him if you want to do something bad enough, you can." [Bowman](#), the second-oldest of five children -- their father, Norman, 54, is a retired Ford Motor plant electrician -- grew up in North Ridgeville, Ohio, and enlisted in the Army in 1981, serving in the 1983 Grenada conflict and the 1989 invasion of Panama, where he earned a Bronze Star for valor. In 1993 he fulfilled his dream of joining the Golden Knights.

Since the accident, he has faced further challenges. Two months after [Bowman](#) lost his legs, his wife of four months, Andrea, left him. "She told me that she stopped loving me the day I had my accident," [Bowman](#) says. Still he manages to find solace in his counseling and in his active lifestyle, which includes skiing, skydiving and even country line-dancing. "I have plenty of reason to live," he says. "If I fall, I'll get back up. I do every time."

KEVIN GRAY

ANDREW MARTON in Fort Bragg

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