



Legend of the Fall

Dana Bowman has spent years hurtling to the earth at harrowing speeds for the pure love of the accompanying rush. When a freak accident claimed his legs, Bowman, a bred in the bone adrenaline junkie, refused to give up that thrill.

By Christopher Lombardo

"Scuse me, while I kiss the sky". So sang Jimi Hendrix, who was once a paratrooper in the Army's 101st airborne division. With over 1500 jumps under his belt, Dana Bowman has done more than just kiss the sky, he's carried on a torrid love affair with it that lasts to this day.

For four years, Bowman was a member of the Army's illustrious Golden Knights parachute team, a distinction enjoyed only by a select few.

"I always had an interest in being one of the best parachutists in the world," he says.

The Golden Knights are certainly that. They have been performing aerial heroics for years, wowing crowds throughout the U.S. and in 45 countries around the world.

It was during one of these celestial maneuvers that Bowman's life changed irrevocably. In 1994, during a training exercise over Yuma, Arizona, a jump cost him his legs and killed his best friend.

The "diamond track", long a part of the Golden Knights' repertoire, involves two jumpers who exit the aircraft at 13,000 feet, pulling smoke that billows intricate lines across the sky. The objective is to etch out a red diamond pattern. At pre-designated altitudes the jumpers turn around and track back toward each other to finish the bottom half of the rhombus. Then they are supposed to cross safely at 3,500 to 4,500 feet, open their chutes, come down and land on target, show center.

The distance between the chutists does not appear to be great, but it's crucial when there is such a tight margin for error, especially at harrowing speeds.

"My partner and I were doing this maneuver and we collided in midair doing 150 miles per hour apiece," he recalls. "I saw distress in his eyes for two seconds. I ducked my head down and he stuck his arm out to veer off to the side. His arm caught both my legs, shearing them off, one above the knee, one below. It ended up killing him."

The tragic irony is that Bowman's partner had an automatic chute-deployment device. Bowman did not, but luckily, and for reasons he cannot explain, his parachute opened on impact.

"I landed unconscious, without my legs, in a hard parking lot. There was loss of blood, no legs. I landed on my head, skidded, had plastic surgery on my forehead, lost my smell, taste and didn't wake up until two days later in Phoenix, Arizona, in intensive care."

Incredibly, Bowman's stint in the ICU only lasted a few days and he was able to attend the funeral of his friend.

While at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, DC, Bowman, who by his own admission "had no clue about prosthetic limbs and disability," began doing some research and had his first prosthetic legs fashioned.

"I got my stuff from Hangar Prosthetics and Orthotics. They opened up doors and gave me hope," says Bowman. "There were prosthetics out there that could help me jump, waterski, ski, scuba dive -- just a few of the skills needed to re-enlist in the Army.

"They said, there's no way, you're a double amputee and if you don't have your prosthetics you can't walk." Bowman stood tall in active defiance. "There was no reason why it wouldn't work. I still had a brain," said Bowman. He figured that if he could do what everyone else did there should be no reason why he couldn't stay in the U.S. Army.

After doctors told him he'd be on crutches and in a wheelchair for more than half a year, Bowman took only seven days to walk unassisted. Soon he was back in a plane, becoming the first double amputee ever to be allowed to return to active military duty.

"I was still at Walter Reed five months after the accident and I snuck out of the hospital and made my first jump at Fort Bragg, North Carolina with the Golden Knights. I linked up and landed on both my prosthetic limbs and I was re-enlisted!"

For those who would never consider jumping out of an airplane unless threatened with bodily harm, it's hard to comprehend the rush that skydiving offers. Bowman acknowledges that it's hard to explain to someone who has never done it.

"The adrenaline rush always intensifies. There's nothing that compares, especially after not having done it in a few days," says Bowman. "I have done 800 jumps since the accident and 1,500 in total."

For Bowman, though, an even greater thrill is taking disabled people skydiving and letting them fly his helicopter (he managed to acquire a pilot's license as a double amputee, handicapped only by scepticism on the part of the Veterans Administration).

"You can imagine the adrenaline they feel. It's something that we all need to try," says Bowman.

"Psychologists said to me: 'You're gonna be a cripple and an amputee and you're just gonna have to deal with it' and I was ready to get out there and show 'em."

Bowman not only shows 'em, he also tells 'em, parlaying his harrowing experience into a successful career as a motivational speaker. With over 200 motivational speaking engagements a year, he spreads a powerful message: "It's not the disability, it's the ability."

About the Author: Christopher Lombardo is a Toronto-based freelancer with a BS in psychology from the University of Toronto. He is not afraid of heights so much as falling, and would have to be handsomely compensated to jump out of a plane.