

MISSION TO THE EIGER

BY ALASTAIR MACARTNEY



Chris "Douggs" McDougall



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Jump4Heroes is The Royal British Legion Extreme Human Flight Team, Deane "Smudge" Smith, Spencer "Spence" Hogg, and Alastair Macartney. We raise awareness for the largest U.K. military charity as they transition from supporting the World War generation to the younger Afghan generation. It's all about supporting our troops, past and present. The poppy is their symbol and our wingsuits are emblazoned with them. So, the more our videos and photos are seen, the more awareness we get for the charity and our troops.

In 2009, we undertook an expedition to BASE jump from the north face of the world-famous Eiger in Switzerland. We produced a very basic video with some low quality footage that got nearly 3 million hits and, three years on, we wanted to make that look like child's play. This is what we did...

Expeditions of this scale take time and detailed planning. Well, that's the theory. We had limited time and got the clearance fairly late on to pull together the funding, logistics, and training that we required. Our goal, in conjunction with our film crew, was to perform a 3-way wingsuit formation flight, in our Poppy wingsuits and with smoke trailing, from the north face of the Eiger.

We headed to Switzerland and based ourselves in Lauterbrunnen, a valley famous for BASE jump-

ing and within spitting distance of the Eiger. After a few practice jumps we started to put the formation together. We went to an exit point called the High Nose situated at slightly over 1,900' above the valley floor. In skydiving, we must be under a fully opened canopy by 2,000' and most of us do so a lot higher. We were about to attempt our wingsuit formation jumps from under this height. We'd have to exit, allow the suit to inflate, start flying, maneuver together while still traveling at high speed, gain separation prior to opening our canopies and still have enough height to be able to fully control our canopies and pilot to a safe landing in the landing area. Piece of cake, right?

To top it off, while training for our previous expedition to the Eiger, Smudge had had a near death experience from this exit point and Alastair subsequently suffered the same fate. There was a serious psychological side to this and mental preparation was key. Both of these serious incidents were missed pull situations with the team members absolutely convinced that they were going in when they happened. Fortunately, they had remained calm, kept flying, and kept fighting—no giving up until the grim reaper himself pulls the lifeless soul from your body. This tactic worked on both occasions and both team members opened up but with

hardly time to unstow their brakes before landing. Never, ever, ever give up.

We started with a steady approach; initially each team member worked on 2-way formation flying before we added a third to the mix. The 2-way formation flights steadied out and got tighter but having a third person was a whole new ball game. The level of complexity increased exponentially and we went back to the drawing board to refine our technique.

In order to capture some of the training and to provide better understanding in our debriefs, legendary BASE jumper and wingsuit pilot Chris "Douggs" McDougall joined us to video the jumps. As we developed further, we decided to move farther up the valley to an exit point a few hundred feet higher to gain the extra altitude to further perfect our techniques. To get to the new exit point a via ferrata system was in place with cables fixed into the cliff face. However, it wasn't easy and required some nerve-wracking maneuvering.

The via ferrata exit point was Spence's nemesis; three years earlier he'd been lucky to survive, having avoided striking the cliff face in freefall by just a couple of feet. But, with storm clouds rolling in, the team didn't have time to contend with personal fears—it was time to zone in and

jump. A true professional, Spence took it in stride, manned up, and dialed in; we needed to make this happen. With Douggs soaring above the formation, the team flew their best flight yet and piloted to a safe landing as the crash of thunder descended onto the valley floor.

There was one more stage of the training to go—a helicopter jump above the east ridge of the Eiger. The team planned to exit in quick succession, flying their formation next to the dominating ridge line. They would then pull away and fly at high speed over the trees, opening their canopies above Grindelwald, the famous mountaineering town at the BASE of the Eiger. There could only be this one practice jump; with no room for error, if this didn't work then the whole expedition would be in jeopardy.

Smudge, who had the left wingman slot on the formation, would be closest to the door. He had the responsibility for spotting, to ensure we were neither too close nor too far away from the mountain. Any error could be disastrous and, as a minimum, may mean we'd be unable to fly our course—it could also mean something far worse. Despite the pressure, his years of parachuting experience coupled with his numerous military operational tours meant he dealt with this calmly in his stride. Smudge gave the command: "Exit. Exit. Exit."

Perfectly located, the team climbed out onto the skid of the helicopter before calmly dropping off—a strong push-off from this small helicopter would put the pilot in jeopardy. Alastair, who was the farthest inside the small helicopter, was late. Time seemed to stand still for him, seconds feeling like hours. He knew immediately the severe consequence and had to react. Smudge and Spencer were already in formation and just fine tuning their positioning unaware of the situation above them. He picked up the smoke trail and dove down hard and forward, thinking two steps ahead and ensuring he wouldn't get caught out as the formation picked up forward speed. Fortunately, he closed his position, taking just a few extra seconds.

Spencer led the formation along the ridge, smoke billowing from the powerful Chemring smoke canister on his foot. At speeds in excess of 120 mph the arrowhead wingman formation traversed the rugged and daunting ridge line, all the time tightening the formation as planned. After thousands of feet the terrain seemed to plateau and greenery jutted from what was a dark and snow covered mass. Breaking left, the formation passed low over the tree line before opening and heading for a tip-toe landing (or a mini crash followed by a dramatic commando-style roll on the grass in one case!).

This was it. The training had been successful and the weather forecast for the next day was good. The jump from the north face of the Eiger would be next.

The story of the actual jump from the Eiger is a whole new chapter in itself, so you'll have to read about it in the next issue. By the time this goes to print the movie should be out on YouTube and a behind-the-scenes video should have also been released. You can check it out at www.YouTube.com/Jump4Heroes and see the Facebook album for more photos of the jumps at www.facebook.com/Jump4Heroes. Don't forget to subscribe to the videos and 'like' the Facebook page while you're at; it all helps the charity.

Make sure you check out the next issue to read about the Eiger jump—there were tree landings, gyro-stabilized heli-mounted CineFlex camera systems, mountain-side crashes, cameras bouncing down the cliff face, and much more drama. You won't be disappointed. 📸

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alastair Macartney is the team leader of Jump4Heroes, The Royal British Legion Extreme Human Flight Team. He is currently serving in the military, has over 7,000 skydives, over 500 BASE jumps and has competed in no fewer than 12 FAI World Cups and World Championships. See more at www.Jump4Heroes.com.