

MISSION TO THE EIGER

BY ALASTAIR MACARTNEY

PART 2 THE JUMP



Alastair Macartney takes a self-portrait as he jumps from the higher exit point of the "Mushroom" on the north face of the Eiger.



Last month I covered the training and preparation that Jump4Heroes undertook for their formation wingsuit flight from the north face of the Eiger. I promised you tree landings, gyro-stabilized heli-mounted Cineflex camera systems, mountain-side crashes, cameras bouncing down the cliff face, and much more drama. Well here's the next installment...

The day had arrived. Our training—our limited training—was complete and we were set to go. Or at least as set as we could be.

We were going to be using helicopters from a company called Bohag. We'd used them before and loved their can-do attitude coupled with their technical piloting skills in mountain environments. Taking off at 0800 we picked up our mountain guide at Kleine Scheidegg and headed straight to the "Mushroom:" the infamous exit point that we were going to be using. Out of the helicopter first was legendary BASE jumper and cameraman Chris "Douggs" McDougall. I was next out, then crouched low as I moved to slightly higher ground. This was going against everything my mind was telling me; the last thing I wanted to do was head to higher ground with those rotor blades inching closer and closer to me. But without doing so, there wouldn't be space for the rest of the team to join me on the mountain. Literally hugging the rock with my body I inched up, making the space that was needed, grasping onto Spencer as he joined me, helping to keep him low and secure.

The Mushroom is a fairly sizable rock but, including our mountain guide, there were five of us on it. It now seemed incredibly small. We started to prepare our equipment. It was almost comical as we each balanced precariously on the rock taking it in turns to put on booties, turn on cameras, and don helmets. Quickly this was done, and we edged toward our exit positions.

The rock surface on the Mushroom isn't a flat, simple ledge. Instead, it rises and drops, with jagged parts. As we tried to get close to our exit positions we were presented with less than ideal locations; we were staggered vertically and horizontally from the exit point. Some were balanced so exactly that a nudge or freak gust of wind would send us tumbling off—not a great problem from a safety point of view as we were going to jump after all, but it would ruin the jump we had planned.

Everyone had their own pre-jump rituals. Smudge just needed to get going—he didn't want to spend too long up there. Once he was ready, he was ready. Spence took it in his stride. He's an athlete and has done a lot of mental preparation work over the years. You could just see the focus he had, dirt-diving in his mind time and time again. I outwardly portrayed a calm and confident manner but little did my team mates know that this was far from the truth. Despite our mannerisms we all had complete and utter trust in each other. We would work and function as a team, as one unit, and we could read each other like a book.

Everyone confirmed that they were ready and Smudge reached down to Spencer's leg—it was his job to pop the Chemring smoke canister. While moving into exit positions we had found that Spence was carefully balanced and unable to reach down to pop the smoke himself.

The smoke billowed and Spence started the exit count. As I saw him start to leave I pushed off hard, my arms open to get early suit inflation. My legs were a little narrow to prevent me going too head low but I wanted to be flying fast; if Spence got an early start I needed to have an even earlier one to catch him and fill my slot in the formation. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Smudge gaining inflation and closing his slot—I'd had a better exit than him and he was now playing catch-up.

Spence, leading the formation was diving it hard. This enabled us to keep diving down to the formation and ensured he wouldn't be out floating us. The plan was for him to get a solid exit, get the suit flying and then make a gentle 30-degree turn to the right. This would ensure we were heading to our intended landing area where the film crew were had multiple cameras rolling.

I was waiting for Spence to make the turn but it didn't happen. The jump would still work but we'd have to find a new landing area and it would cost us severely, eating into the time we'd need to get further jumps later that day.

But then it did happen. I was thinking things

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Jump4Heroes team member Deane Smith geeks the camera as he flies along the east ridge of the Eiger in Switzerland to raise awareness for Poppy Legion and the Poppy Appeal. Photo by Chris "Douggs" McDougall.

through too quickly. Spence was following the plan; he'd got flying comfortably, allowed us to build and was then making the turn. But in my mind, I thought it should already have happened. So my mind had raced forward which meant I wasn't anticipating it coming any longer. It caught me off guard and I dropped back in the formation. My reactions kicked in quickly. There was no time to curse myself. I rolled my shoulders and chest forward, dropped my head and cranked the power from my hips. I felt the acceleration as I propelled forward, relative to Smudge and Spence, and swooped back into position.

Spence kept diving it hard as we traversed not just the mountainside but the talus below. The slope of the features seemed to be lulling him into a false sense of security, sucking him low and leading the rest of us down with him. I had two concerns: that we weren't going to make the landing area and, more importantly, if Spence didn't pull soon, that first concern wouldn't matter.

I started to pop, getting lift and saw Smudge on my left doing the same; he'd been thinking exactly the same thing. Douggs told me afterward that he'd also been pretty concerned and was also gaining lift at this time. Spence kept on going and we felt helpless as we watched Spence diving toward the ground.

Pop, pop, pop, pop, we all opened. Looking down we saw Spence with a 90 left on open-

ing. He'd opened. I felt relief—we all did. For the next half second, that is. That was when he hit the trees. He'd had time to undo one arm zip on his wingsuit and reach for the left toggle before he hit. It was probably a good job he hadn't turned; that would have either hooked him into it or caused him to smash into a pretty gnarly area of the mountainside.

I looked down and over at him. Was he OK? Was he injured? How badly? The kit was certainly ruined—we were jumping Trango canopies made from low-bulk fabric; there was no way it would have survived smashing through the trees like that.

I turned back to try and land as close to him as I could, trying to pick an area that didn't have too many jagged edges, boulders or trees. Spence shouted out that he was OK. But he's a military professional who isn't going to admit to being too badly hurt. But at least we knew he was conscious.

We had four more jumps to do that day with more the following day. The film crew was ready, we had multiple helicopters booked, and on the very first jump Spence was in the trees, undoubtedly injured and with damaged gear. This was not going well, at all.

Douggs landed closest. He established that Spence was OK and shouted down to us, "He's OK. You guys go ahead and get packed. I'll sort him." This made sense. If Douggs, who was a re-

ally experienced jumper, figured he could help Spence on his own then perhaps we could salvage something of the project.

Against our better judgments, Smudge and I stashed our gear and ran down to meet our ground crew. Had we made the right choice? It felt like we'd just abandoned our teammate. We knew we'd left him in good hands but we also knew we had to be there for him. We had to trust Douggs; we headed down the mountain.

We started packing. Amy, our Production Manager, was there and we started running scenarios. We knew Spence was injured and his gear was damaged but not how badly. Would he be able to jump again? Would our project work without him? Where were our second rigs? Could we postpone or delay the helicopters we had booked? If only this hadn't have happened. *Shit!*

Next issue: Read about Spencer's injuries, what happened to his gear, the mountain-side crash, gyro-stabilized heli-mounted CineFlex camera systems and some wingsuit proximity flights.

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.



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