

MISSION TO THE EIGER

BY ALASTAIR MACARTNEY

PART 3

THE FINAL INSTALLMENT



Chris "Douggs" McDougall



Chris "Douggs" McDougall

Last issue you read about Jump4Heroes, The Royal British Legion Extreme Human Flight Team, making their first 3-way formation wingsuit flight from the Eiger. Team member Spencer opened low and almost immediately hit the trees. Knowing that he was conscious, cameraman Chris "Douggs" McDougall went to his rescue while the remaining team members started running scenarios on what they should do. Here's what happened...

Our second rigs look pretty similar to our main rigs but they are slightly different. For filming continuity purposes we decided not to use them and so left them back at the Horner, the pub in Lauterbrunnen that we were staying at. Wow, what a bad decision that was. Even if Spence could still jump, his low-bulk Trango would be trashed from crashing through the trees. Should we carry on with just two of us? Should we scrap the whole project? Smudge and I started packing while we bounced ideas and threw the problems at the film crew, working through various options.

Halfway through our pack jobs we looked up and saw a figure running down the mountainside with a stash bag on his back. Wow. Maybe Spence wasn't so badly hurt. He got closer and we realized it was Douggs. Our hearts sank as we realized that Spence must still be up there, hurt, and that Douggs had come to get help.

We were wrong. Douggs had got the gear out and headed straight down to us—he knew we

needed to pack up and get going again. Spence was just taking it slightly slower. It turned out that, as Spence hit the trees, he started grabbing anything he could. The slow flight characteristics of the Trango allowed him to hold on and lower himself down in a controlled manner. He was just a little battered and bruised, with no damage to the canopy at all—what an awesome result. So we packed up, de-briefed and boarded the chopper. The next jump was important—we had a second helicopter mounted with a gyro-stabilized Cineflex camera coming to film us.

Standing on the Mushroom exit point we started to get ready. The Cineflex helicopter was late; we heard on the radio that they had a technical difficulty. We're pretty mad—we'd just plucked Spence out of the tree, run down the mountain and packed up as fast as we could to make the agreed timings and now, because a little fuse had gone, the Cineflex helicopter, which we were really depending on, wasn't there. We all took a deep breath.

Then we got the call, finally, it was on its way. We breathed a sigh of relief. As it approached us, we stood on the edge of the Mushroom while it orbited around. All three of us are either former or serving military personnel and we took this opportunity on Remembrance Day to bow our heads and have a two-minute silence in memory of our fallen comrades. Thoughts of friends that we'd lost filtered through our minds—it was truly emotional.

We lifted our heads and the helicopter set up



Chris "Douggs" McDougall

behind us, hovering, for the exit shot. Timings were crucial. On board, the Cineflex Director was working three radio channels to keep us all informed. The countdown started, Smudge popped the smoke, the helicopter approached from behind. And it was 3, 2, 1, and we were off. Before exit, we'd had the smoke burning for too long from the powerful Chemring canister—it was everywhere. I couldn't see the others at all. I had to trust them. They had to trust me. I jumped, popping my wings and diving to where I knew Spence should be. I was right. I was closing quicker than last time and Smudge was just behind me. Spence made a gentle turn and we accelerated toward the landing area. We hit a small patch of turbulence but kept it together. This time we broke

FLIGHT PERFORMANCE

FELIX BAUMGARTNER

10.14.12

SPEED

1,342.8 KM/H (833.9 MPH | MACH 1.24)

HEIGHT

39,045 METERS (128,100 FEET)

ALTIMETER



L&B IS PROUD TO HAVE BEEN A PART OF THE EPIC QUEST TO JUMP FROM THE EDGE OF SPACE. MANY THANKS TO LUKE AIKINS, FELIX BAUMGARTNER & REDBULL STRATOS FOR CHOOSING L&B AND THE ALTI TRACK OVER ANY OTHER ALTIMETER.



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higher and had a long canopy ride to the landing area. That was more like it.

We landed, packed up, and huddled for a debrief. Andrew Pfeiffer, a former Australian sky-surfer and the Cineflex director, had reviewed the footage. We'd messed up. The count had slowed down toward the end as the helicopter was further out than planned. But we'd been fired up and not changed our timing. We needed the cameras to be directly overhead on the exit but it was still behind us when we went. We'd have to do that shot again.

So, we boarded the helicopter and up we went. Exactly the same again. We knew what to expect this time with so much smoke. We exited and closed it faster again. Spence made the turn and we were off. We opened up and closed in tight together under canopy—we wanted some canopy shots too as we emerged from the shadow of the north face into the glaring sunlight. Soft landings for some, a couple of forward rolls for others.

We knew we were tight for time as we had limited hours on the Cineflex helicopter. We packed fast and headed back up. We'd heard that they'd got the shot they needed and so we'd set up for the next one. We got off the helicopter and radioed down. The Cineflex helicopter wasn't coming; we were too late. Despite all the planning, we wouldn't get this shot that we really needed. All because a fuse had gone this morning, which made them late, we were out of time. It wasn't our fault but we were suffering. Another deep breath moment. We were up there with no cameraman, just us. Well there was nothing for it but just to practice. So off we went.

We landed and packed up in slow time. We could relax a bit now. The helicopter still had to head back to base so we jumped on. We flew high and to the south of Stechelberg. It had been a long morning. The adrenaline had flowed hard and we were tired. The guys just wanted a gentle flight down the valley. I had other ideas.

We hopped out and flew. I looked to my right; the east ridge of the valley had a V formation. I'd eyed it up ever since I'd been coming to the area. I just had to fly through it. We were pretty central along the valley. Smudge and Spence were cruising along together. I banked steeply away and lined myself up. I set myself up high and then dove it hard—arms back, chest forward, and chin out. I could see my line from a long way off. I was taking it in tight but had a lot of recovery ready. As I approached it I had more to give and dove harder and faster. I flew through the V with what felt like just inches to spare from the rock but, in reality, was more like meters. Smudge, watching from the side, couldn't believe what he was seeing. I kept going. There was still a huge wall to my right and I wasn't going to give up the chance of proxying this too. I flew, lost in the moment, being present. Time

was almost standing still. I was totally lost in the moment yet all of my senses were super aware. My brain was working lightning fast, suddenly able to process every tiny element of information like Albert Einstein on crack. This was what true human flight was all about.

My arms were tiring. I wasn't giving up but I eased off—there's no room for error when flying at these speeds so close to the cliff face. We all opened up, landed together and high fived. It was time for an ice cream while we walked back to the Horner for a long, cold beer. Much of the afternoon was spent de-briefing and planning the next day. The footage was reviewed and we were set to go.

The next morning we had an 8 a.m. take off with the focus being air-to-air camera jumps; we'd missed out on much of this while doing the Cineflex filming. We went up for the first jump. I'd like to say we were refreshed but the adrenaline had flowed through the night and there had been some tossing and turning. We had a clean exit and Douggs got in tight. Flying above and around, he captured the speed yet calmness and serenity of the flight—exactly the angles the director was after.

The next jumps Douggs cleaned up on the other angles we needed. We opened up a bit lower and started to fly back. Spence had taken it even lower than the rest of us. He was descending further and heading for a gully. Hopefully he'd make it with enough height for a flat turn to the left with the gully giving him the extra altitude he'd need to glide past the trees and down to the landing area. It didn't happen. Bang. He pounded into the side of the mountain. Feet and knees together. He rolled off the ledge and dropped further. The rest of us were helpless, watching from under canopy—he had seemed to hit hard. He rolled again. He was still. My mind started racing. I kept looking down—all of us feeling weak—there was nothing we could do. Then, he got up. He waved. He was OK. I started to breathe again. We flew down to a safe place and landed, heading back up to help him.

Spence was already limping slightly from the day before. This crash only made it worse. He limped down and we re-grouped. Then we got more bad news. There was an incident up at the exit point.

David Durstberger is an up-and-coming—and extremely talented—videographer who had been filming us from the Mushroom. He'd unclipped his camera while he moved it to a different location and it fell. Initially, the tripod was caught on a piece of rope but as he went to retrieve it, it fell again, tumbling thousands of feet, pounding against the unforgiving wall of the Eiger. Not only had we lost his camera setup but the footage we needed too.

There wasn't time for sympathy; we still had work to do. The director was happy with what we had so far but a couple more shots were needed. Smudge and Spence took a rest while Douggs and I went up to the High Eiger, or Higer, exit point. Now, I'm not a mountaineer and if the adrenaline wasn't flowing fast enough, this certainly raised it to levels that I haven't seen for a long time. People talk about three points of contact mountaineering—I was trying to get eight! Climbing, crawling, and traversing the steep slope wearing a wingsuit amongst snow, ice, and loose rock was intense. To

make it worse the mountain guide we had with us made it seem like a walk in the park!

Eventually, while my legs were still shaking, Douggs stepped onto the edge of the diving board shaped rock and leapt. I'd like to say I calmly walked to the end and followed with as much glory but I think I kind of waddled like a nervous duckling. I dropped off and felt the suit inflate. We wanted footage of the Mushroom exit point and had planned a fly-by. I flew out and 'round the corner, thinking I had lots of height. As I picked up sight of the Mushroom I realized I didn't. I immediately cupped air and assessed the situation—should I abort? Did I have enough height to carry out the flight safely?

I changed my plan. I wouldn't go so close but I'd still pass by it, flying back over the Eiger, with the rock just below me, before a right hand carve around and out into clear air and to the landing area. What a flight that was. Douggs and I both landed with the adrenaline still pumping hard.

The director needed one more shot. Spence took some big "Man Up" pills and we went up again, despite still being in pain. This time we covered our bodies in GoPros and other cameras and made our flight. Then, while in a line under canopy, Douggs buzzed us in his wingsuit.

Sweet. That was it, done. Spence, hobbling, had pulled through it all. We packed up and boarded the helicopter for the flight back to base. But of course with our rigs packed we weren't going to land in the helicopter. We knew there were power lines to the west but had scoped out a couple of sweet lines to fly to the east of the helicopter company's headquarters. Douggs hopped out first. I followed and peeled after him, with Smudge third. We flew over to the ridge and found our lines. I could see Douggs ahead of me diving hard while Smudge was fast approaching behind me. I chose my line, diving hard past the jutting rocks and swooping down between trees before popping and just riding the air as I cruised in toward the heli pad. As I opened up I watched the chopper coming in to land. I set up for my landing on the adjacent hillside full of smiles. What a trip this had been. Touching down, we all looked over and headed toward each other. Spence, Smudge, Douggs and I high-fived. What a journey. It had been THE journey. Now it was time to celebrate.

As you read this, the video should be out on our YouTube channel and, if it's not out already, a longer video showing behind the scenes footage complete with crashes should be posted soon. It would be great if you could help us share it—it's all been done for charity to help raise awareness for our troops. Your support and donations mean a lot to them. So please click the links; 'Like' Jump4Heroes on Facebook and subscribe to our YouTube channel. Even better, share it around the Internet—it's all for a good cause. 🙌

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alastair Macartney is 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 at no less than 12 FAI World Cups and World Championships. See more at www.Jump4Heroes.com and don't forget to follow the team on Facebook ([Facebook.com/Jump4Heroes](https://www.facebook.com/Jump4Heroes)) and watch and share their videos on YouTube ([YouTube.com/Jump4Heroes](https://www.youtube.com/Jump4Heroes)).

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