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Free Falling

Feature Writing

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With a look of excitement, he described the most freighting part of his first skydiving experience was waiting on the ground before the jump. “I had been there all day. The weather was beautiful. I was there watching people landing their chutes all day. And to finally gear up and realize you’re about to toss yourself out of an air plane with a chute is incredible. You don’t know what to expect.”

“I remember a noisy airplane pulled up and the doors sliding open and me getting in it with my instructors. Sitting on these benches and looking out as we climbed up higher and higher and realizing that I am not landing with this airplane. Which is just an insane mind thing.”

He looked at his altimeter as the altitude was rising and he realized he was running out of time to contemplate it.

The split second before letting go he steps out of the aircraft, thinking to himself, “What am I doing? What am I trying to prove to everyone? This is crazy.”

“All of a sudden I am out there sitting on a cushion of air and there is no sense of falling whatsoever. It’s a feeling of wavelessness. Almost like a pitching or dropping like you would feel on a roller coaster.”

At 6,000 feet staring at his altimeter, he waves, pitches his pilot chute and pulls the rip cord. All of a sudden he feels a jerk in his harness and the instructors fall away from him. “I remember just looking down and I just realize the enormity of what I had just done and I just start screaming ‘Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! I’m doing it! I’m doing it!’”

The experience to him felt incredible, and mentally exhausting. “It’s just literally all the adrenaline and neurotransmitters that make you feel good like when you eat chocolate or whatever… And then you are on that high for the rest of the day. When you are driving home you get a little bit depressed because you’re just like ‘nothing is going to be that daring or exciting’ there is nothing like it”

This would be one of many jumps to come.

In March 2012, Hunter Davis, second lieutenant with the Air Force’s 33 Special Operations Squadron, enrolled in the Advanced Freefall Program at Skydive San Marcos in Fentress, Texas. He explained that he was able to enroll in the Advanced Freefall Program with no prior experience and took course work before he was able to jump.

Davis was born and raised in Houma, Louisiana. He could not pinpoint a date or even a year when he decided that he wanted to join the Air Force, but the decision was influenced by his Grandfather, William Joseph Davis, who had served as a lieutenant colonel and pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. “Hearing his story and having that influence in my life. I idolized him and he’s my hero and still is my hero. It was a thought I always had in the back of my mind that I wanted to fly for a living and serve my country. I couldn’t think of a better job or better people to work with.”

Davis had been flying since he was around the age of twelve, with an instructor. “The first time I solo'd on my own was on my sixteenth birthday, a day before getting my driver’s license just to say I got my pilots license before my driver’s license.”

After he graduated Vandebilt Catholic High School, he attended Virginia Military Institute because he liked that it was rich with tradition and history.

He had a choice of the Army, Air Force, Navy, or Marine Core. He debated the idea of joining the Navy because he said he would have liked to fly from a carrier, but as far as a long term career with the military, he decided the Air Force would be the best and checked it off.

He described the weather on August, 8, 2012, as beautiful, blue skies, and light wind. As he left his apartment in San Antonio that day, he could not have prepared himself for what was going to happen.

Davis sighed and said that he remembered everything that happened. This was to be his seventeenth jump, and although it was not military related, it was approved by the military and thought it could advance his career at a later date.

He was doing what was called a hop and pop jump from 3,500 feet that day. Basically he was to step out of the aircraft, pitch a pilot chute, and land it. It was a practice jump in case there was ever an emergency where he would have to jump out at low altitude.

Davis hesitated at the door before he jumped.

After doing jumps where he was able to pull his shoot anywhere from 6,000 feet to as low as 4,000 feet, jumping out at 3,500 feet was unnerving. He was a little unstable coming out, and he tried to pitch his chute but got tangled up in it. The main chute was wrapped around his leg as the chute was trying to catch air.

He began to spin and tumble.

“I was upside down and every time I would take a split second to rest, I was in a sense bewitched struggling and not too sure how I was going to get out of this one.”

The situation got worse as he got less resistance and less lift.

“I’m accelerating at around 100mph at this point, and I was trying to deploy my reserve parachute. Since the main parachute was wrapped around my leg, it hadn’t fallen free from it like it was supposed to…I remained like that for the duration of the fall.”

Doing whatever he could think of, he tried to get his leg free. “Basically my back and my butt are faced towards earth. I just remember it was the weirdest thing. I don’t remember myself consciously wanting to say it, but I just said it out loud. I just said ‘goodbye.’”

“All of a sudden the question that you kind of dismiss over a beer with your buddies, ‘what happens after you die? and is there a God?’, becomes very real problems for you. You are forced to wonder if you were faithful enough and if there was any reason to have faith, is it going to hurt and what is really happening. It’s just such a great unknown.”

When he was near the ground, he looked up over his shoulder kind of curled up and tried to get his leg free, and the ground rushed up and everything went black…

After he hit the ground he came back to consciousness for a while before being transported to a nearby hospital. “I was fighting people off of me of course because the whole experience was traumatic and I didn’t know what was going on and I’m severely injured. I was just trying to fight people off of me and I remember hearing a friend of mine say, ‘Hunter, we’re trying to help you. Stop,’ and at this point I’m breathlessly saying, ‘I just need to get up, I need to get up’ and finally after I remember them giving me oxygen and waiting for the helicopter.”

The result: a collapsed lung, lacerations to his spleen and one of his kidneys, crushed pelvis, 29 broken vertebrae, and internal bleeding. Also while in the hospital his grandfather, his greatest inspiration, fell ill and passed away.

Davis faced many setbacks and the doctors were unsure of what his recovery would be. Some doctors said that he may never walk again; others said that it may take up to a year before he would be able to walk again, but they just were not sure at this point. His greatest support system was his friends and his family.

The doctors started rehab for his recovery three weeks after the accident when he was transferred to the Poly Trauma Center. Though he was in a wheel chair and in a brace because all of the fractures to his spine they were only able to do mobility training and he was not able to bear weight on his legs until November.

He was able to put weight on his legs a little over two months after the accident. He was so tired of being in a wheelchair that he was really motivated to get up to walk. He used crutches for a couple of days, then a cane for a couple of days and then he was walking with a severe limp for a while.

He is still waiting for medical clearance so that he can be approved to go to his next assignment with the military. When his accident happened he was a week away from leaving San Antonio. As soon as he gets medical clearance he will be able to go to formal training as planned. He says that he will hopefully leave at the end of March or August.

Davis paused for a second and then said “What I have learned from this experience is that you may leave this life at any moment, but ultimately it's nothing to be feared, what is to be feared & avoided is putting yourself in such a position that when you do have to leave, you feel some form of regret. In short, say what you have to, never leave angry, say "I love you" as much as you can, and smile often.”

Six months after his accident he is determined to skydive again soon after he spends sometime in a wind tunnel to build up his endurance and asked the question “When do you get the opportunity to face such a real fear again right?” and laughed.