

TRUE GRIT

SPELL IT B-O-W-M-A-N

By SSG David Abrams

SFC Dana Bowman shot through the sky like a bullet. Arms tucked against his side, he angled sharply toward the Arizona desert 10,000 feet below. Suddenly, with the precision and grace of a ballet dancer, he turned and started back in the opposite direction. Bowman, one of the newest members of the Army's elite Golden Knights, was halfway through what is perhaps the parachute team's most daring and heart-stopping maneuvers — the diamond track.

As he soared above Yuma Proving Ground on Feb. 6, 1994, the highly-decorated NCO had no idea his life was about to change forever.

In the opposite end of the blue sky, Bowman's teammate, SGT Jose Aguillon, also made his turn, completing the other half of the diamond. Pink smoke from canisters strapped to both jumpers' boots, traced the path of their descent that called for them to pass within 20 feet of each other at an altitude of 3,500 feet, closing up the bottom of the diamond before opening their chutes. Bowman and Aguillon — roommates and best friends since Bowman joined the U.S. Army Parachute Team four months earlier -- had done the diamond track more than 50 times, including earlier that Feb-

ruary day as part of the Golden Knights' annual winter training in Arizona. They'd already earned the respect of other team members as being the premiere diamond tracking duo.

On this jump, however, something went horribly awry. Bowman and Aguillon came toward each other at a combined speed of 300 miles per hour. As the rookie Golden Knight, Bowman's job was to remain steady on course. Aguillon, with three years on the team, would make any final adjustments to ensure he passed well above Bowman.

Everything was going as planned, then Bowman lifted his head to sneak a glance at Aguillon. To his horror, he saw his fellow jumper directly in front of him, not 20 feet overhead. Before he ducked his head back down, Bowman had just enough time to see the distress on Aguillon's face...then everything went black as he hit a brick wall of unconsciousness.

When the two Golden Knights collided, Aguillon's arm severed both of Bowman's legs with the force and intensity of a sharp blade. The blow spun the jumpers in opposite directions, their smoke trails whirling crazily through the sky. Aguillon's chute deployed automatically when he reached 900 feet and he landed in a tree, mortally injured. Team members on the ground tried in vain to revive him but he died several hours later in surgery.

Unlike Aguillon, Bowman didn't have an automatic opening device; miraculously, the impact tore loose his pilot chute, deploying his main canopy. Unconscious and bleeding profusely from his two stumps, he drifted away from the drop zone, then landed face-down in a parking lot.

From all outward appearances, Bowman was as good as dead.

Nine months after the accident, Bowman once again stood in the door of the Golden Knights' UV-20 plane. Ten thou-

sand feet below him, a crowd of friends, family and fellow soldiers had gathered to watch him perform one of the most courageous jumps of his career. Bowman had just re-enlisted in the Army for seven years -- making him the first double amputee to ever stay on active duty in the Army. On his back, he wore the Golden Knights' black-and-gold parachute; securely fastened to the lower half of his body was a pair of state-of-the-art prostheses, artificial legs which would help keep him on his feet in the Army.

Bowman plunged into the crisp November air, the wind whipping past his body and one thought going through his mind: "I did it! I really did it!"

Minutes later, the Golden Knight touched down on the parade field, the prostheses absorbing most of the impact. He teetered for a moment, fell back on his rear, then quickly stood up and smiled at the crowd.

"On that day, they saw Dana Bowman come back into the life I almost lost," he said. "It was also the start of a new era in the Army for amputees and I guess I was the one to set the standards for that."

The Army veteran of 13 years who had gone through the most stringent Army schools -- Ranger, Airborne, Special Forces, Combat Diver and Sniper, to name just a few -- had won the stare-down contest with his biggest challenge: staying in the Army after losing his legs.

What took place in the nine months between the accident and his re-enlistment is one of the most amazing stories the Army has to offer in recent years and it proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that Bowman embodies the marks of a great NCO: courage, candor, competence and commitment.

Dana Bowman has always been full of grit and determination. His father ran an excavation business in Ohio and, by age 6, Dana was operating backhoes and bulldozers. Growing up, he rode horses and motorbikes with a fierce aggression that continues to this day.

"I don't let anybody walk over me," he said during an interview at his modest, one-story home in Fayetteville, NC, just minutes away from his office on Ft. Bragg where he is the assistant director of media relations for the Golden



file would show he was a "soldier's soldier," a tough, selfless leader.

He first took to the sky while stationed in Central America, starting with hang gliding, then moving into hot air ballooning. He now owns two balloons and plans to start soaring in ultralight planes. "I found when I can fly up as high as the eagles, it's another

much as 280 days each year, logging thousands of jumps at military open houses, national sports events and even Presidential inaugurations. To be a member of the competitive Style and Accuracy Team, jumpers must have the precision to leap from a plane 12,500 feet above the earth, perform choreographed freefall turns and twists then, after opening the canopy, land with their heel touching a five-centimeter target on the ground. Or, to be part of the Freefall Formation team, Golden Knights must group and regroup in a variety of geometric patterns -- all while dropping through the air at 150 miles per hour. To say the least, life as a Golden Knight is not for the faint-hearted.

"We're the best -- nobody can touch us," Bowman says as he walks with a barely noticeable limp past the glass cases brimming with trophy cups and ribbons. "It's all NCOs on the team, that's what makes us the best. It's all about intestinal fortitude."

Bowman steps through a doorway into the Memorial Room, where portraits of "fallen" Knights line the walls. Aguillon's picture is up there and Bowman pauses

to glance at the face of his best friend. "I trusted everything he did," he says, his voice growing husky for a moment. "We were a great team. We lived together for a year and I gave him the honorary rank of sergeant major." He shakes his head. "I didn't just lose my legs that day...I lost my best friend."

He quickly douses the light and leaves the room.



Knights (Bowman will soon report to U.S. Army Recruiting Command as a liaison for the Golden Knights). "The worst thing someone can do is tell me 'It can't be done.' I'll always find a way to prove them wrong."

In 1981, eight months before his high school graduation, Bowman enlisted as a heavy equipment operator, following in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather who'd retired from the Army as a sergeant major. "I was only going to stay in a couple of years," he says. "At that point, I had no direction."

That attitude changed when he started working on construction projects in Grenada, Honduras and Panama where he met up with some Special Forces soldiers who challenged him to go through the intense course. Maybe they didn't know who they were talking to.

Bowman met the challenge head-on and, within a couple of years, he was working as a weapons sergeant with a Special Forces unit. The SF Qualification Course was not the only hurdle Bowman sailed over; he's also a distinguished honor graduate of the Ranger course, he maxed Sniper School and was the first combat support soldier to make it all the way through Combat Diver School.

During 1989's Operation Just Cause, he earned a bronze star for valor when he and another sergeant successfully stopped Panamanian forces from crossing a critical bridge during the early hours of the military operation. Even a casual glance at Bowman's personnel

world up there -- quiet and graceful," he said.

In 1991, he graduated from the Army's High Altitude Low Opening Military Free-fall Course at Ft. Bragg. Since then, he's logged more than 300 static-line jumps and well over 450 freefalls. At this point, some NCOs might have started resting on their laurels, but not Bowman. He wanted more. He wanted to be dubbed a Golden Knight.

Stored in a room above the U.S. Army Parachute Team's dayroom is a vast collection of trophies and awards won by the team over the past 35 years. Bowman unlocks the door and flicks on the light. Gold and silver gleams from every corner of the room.

Since 1959, when BG Joseph Stilwell Jr. activated the Strategic Army Corps Sport Parachute Team, the Army's best jumpers have been racking up the awards. Ten-time winners of the prestigious World Championship Trophy, the Knights are divided into two demonstration teams -- the Black and Gold. Together, they travel around the world as



Bowman didn't come out of his coma until two days after the accident. He had so many tubes and wires in him, he couldn't even speak. SFC Paul Raspino, his team leader who'd kept a bedside vigil, handed him a pencil and a piece of paper. Bowman scrawled one word: "Jose."

Raspino shook his head grimly and leaned down to whisper in Bowman's ear, "Jose's dead and you've lost both legs." Simple, direct, brutally honest.

"That was the hardest part for me," Bowman says. "All I could think was, 'Why? Why? Why?'"

As he lay in the bed at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, Bowman says he drew on 13 years of tough Army training to get over the shock of losing nearly everything in one day.

"You become immune to the pain," he says with characteristic stoicism. "OK, this happened, now deal with it. I also learned that when you've lost something from your body and you have no prostheses, you really have no options. You're helpless. You have to give it time. Still, when you have as much drive as I do, you get impatient."

"Drive" might be an understatement when it comes to Bowman. His recovery period reads like a chapter from Ripley's "Believe It or Not." Doctors gave him six weeks to get off his crutches; he tossed them aside in three days. Six days after waking from the coma, he attended Aguillon's funeral in a wheelchair.

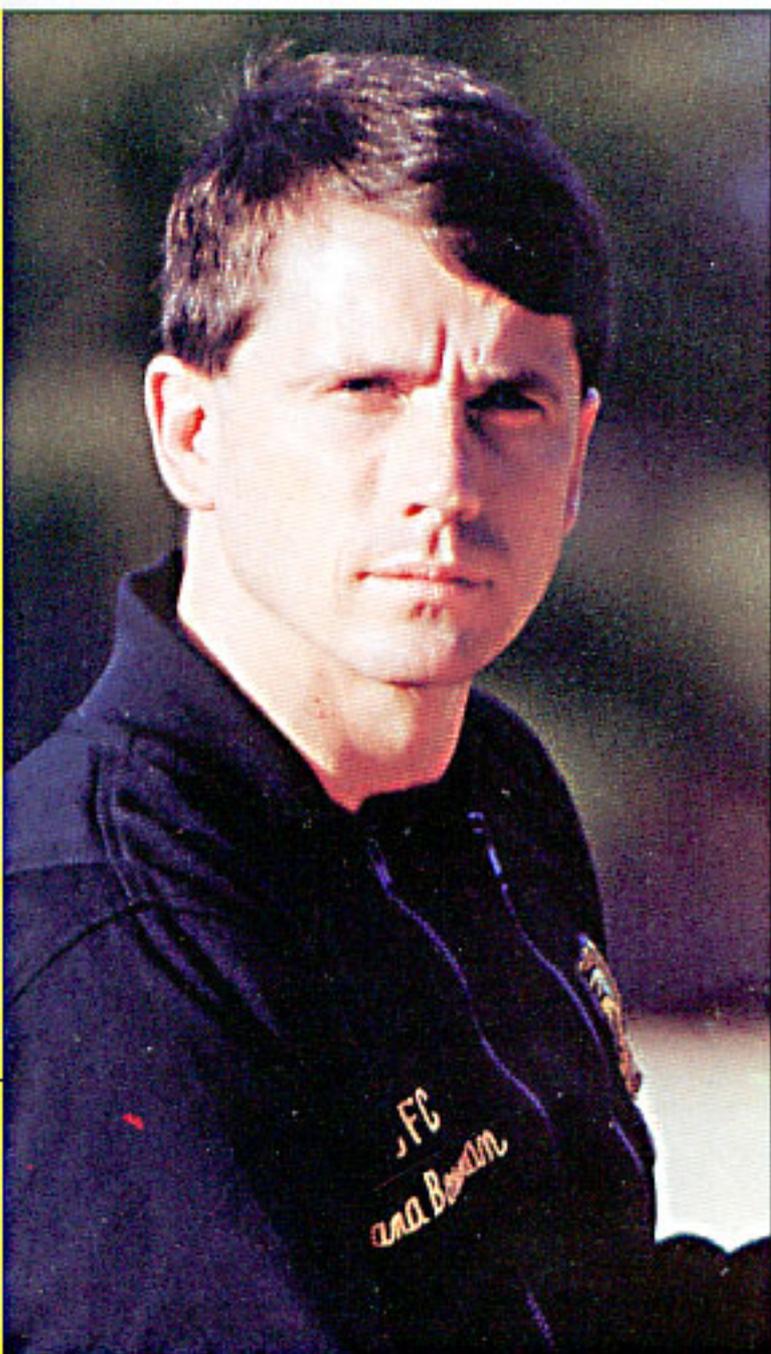
He despised the wheelchair. "It wasn't me," he says. "I didn't want anybody feeling sorry for me. I just want-

ed them to remember me the way I was."

He approached physical therapy like he'd approached his Army training — set a goal and ignore all the pain that pops up along the way. Gritting his teeth, he pushed himself past the limits for the daily sessions set by doctors at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. At the same time, he started searching through both military and civilian channels for a pair of legs that would hold up under the rigorous Army career he was determined to pursue.

Eager to get back to work, he told doctors to remove an infected flap of skin on his left stump that prevented him from being fitted for prostheses. Twelve days later, he was in the orthopedic appliance shop trying on his new legs.

Bowman continued to amaze the



physical and occupational therapists at Walter Reed as he pushed himself to the limits of endurance, learning to walk on the prostheses by swiveling his hips.

Soon, he was racing other patients up and down the hospital corridors. What's truly amazing is that Bowman raced single amputees -- and won! "I kicked their butts," he says with a grin.

Bowman's unquenchable spirit started filtering throughout the recovery ward. He inspired patients who had been wounded in Somalia and the Pope Air Force Base tragedy where dozens of 82nd Airborne soldiers had been burned in the fiery runway accident. "Four of those soldiers had lost arms and legs," Bowman says. "They were in bad shape, but they would survive. I told them that if I could walk in their room after what happened to me, anything was possible. The only problem was, they had a different attitude; they started getting in

trouble by not doing what the doctors told them to. These young soldiers had told them to. These young soldiers had all but given up. I managed to get them moved to my ward and took them under my wing."

This is where Bowman's instincts as an NCO kicked in. Like a good platoon sergeant, he started motivating the young troops into a better attitude.

"One of the guys wasn't keeping himself clean or getting out of bed in the morning. He'd just lay there and stare into space and the doctors couldn't do anything with him. I got him to start waking up on time and to take daily showers. He just needed a little direction."

"Direction" is not a word Bowman uses lightly. He claims his own life has veered off on a new trajectory since the accident. "There was a reason that I lost my legs," he says without a trace of self-pity. "Everybody's always looking for a direction they want their lives to go in. Well, I got mine. I think I finally figured out what my role in the Army is -- helping others. That's my rehabilitation."

Returning to the sky has also been part of the healing process. Bowman remains on full jump status with the team and, since getting his prostheses, he's done more than 100 jumps. Photographs of him riding the wind, the steel workings of his legs exposed and a triumphant grin on his face, have appeared everywhere from the pages of *Reader's Digest* to a poster for a prosthetics laboratory.

Because not only the accident but especially his gritty, courageous recovery makes for compelling drama, Bowman has been unable to dodge the glare of the media spotlight. His story has been featured in magazines like *People*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Outside*. He was "Person of the Week" on World News Tonight with Peter Jennings. A book and movie are in the works.

"It's been hard to stay quiet and just blend back into the Golden Knights," he says. Nonetheless, the publicity has

allowed him to spread his message of hope and encouragement to audiences eager to hear how this NCO rebuilt his life and his career.

Bowman has earned the respect of officials like Under Secretary of the Army Joe Reeder who commissioned him to write a report on amputees and the military service. He's also in constant demand to speak to groups like the Disabled Veterans of America which named him the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year for 1995, the first time the award has gone to an Active-duty soldier.

Bowman realizes the uniqueness of his remaining on Active-duty, but says he still has a lot to offer the Army while in uniform. "I don't want any hand-me-downs or exceptions to the rule," he says. "Just let me show you I can still perform in society and in the Army."

He still takes the Army Physical Fitness Test -- "though I can't run like I used to, so I do the bike event instead" -- and approaches everything with a "never quit" attitude.

With his mechanical background, Bowman has designed a stretching machine to help tone atrophied muscles on amputated limbs. He also built a quick-release coupler which lets patients take artificial feet on and off with greater ease. All this during the period when most soldiers would have taken a medical retirement from the Army.

"I never thought about getting out," he says. "I feel I still have too much to offer." Bowman points to his study on amputees in the military. "Why not let amputees stay in?" he says. "As long as they can still perform the mission, they're a benefit to the service."

"I refuse to call myself 'handicapped' or 'disabled.' You won't ever find me taking one of those special parking spaces. I want the world to know the words 'amputee' and 'useless' are not synonymous."

Just as the words "courage," "commitment" and "Bowman" are synonymous with the spirit of the NCO Corps. ■

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