

Skydiving Squaw CEO cheats death

By Andy Wirth, Outside

I came to Squaw Valley in August 2010 to be president and CEO of Squaw Valley Ski Holdings and quickly befriended mountain athlete J.T. Holmes. J.T. is predominantly known for BASE jumping, wingsuiting, and big mountain skiing, but when we skied together, I'd tell him how I really wanted to get into skydiving.



Andy Wirth has given up skydiving. Photo/LTN file

In spring 2011, he hooked me up with Red Bull athlete Sean McCormick, who helped me certify to jump, and we saw to that in Perris, California. From the very first time I did it, I was in love with it. I've rapelled big faces and skied some big and hairy lines, but nothing felt like this.

We would jump as often as my schedule allowed, which frequently felt like not enough, as many addictions go. There were days when we would jump from first load to sundown, getting as many jumps as possible. On those days when we were really getting after it, we'd get seven jumps in. I got comfortable enough to do some pretty cool things out of the

plane and in the air, like four-way inverted exits—where we'd grab each other and exit facing one another—and delta tracking, where you put your hands by your sides, straighten your legs, and fly like a dart, sometimes in formation with other jumpers.

On Oct. 12, 2013, J.T., some friends, and I went to Davis to jump. We had a great, full day of jumping. On Sunday the 13th, the Davis drop zone was shut down due to winds, so we drove over to a drop zone in Lodi. It was windy, but they were still flying. I'd jumped there before, so I knew this drop zone pretty well. We went up, played in freefall, and delta tracked.

But then a few things went wrong. The pilot flew a bad flight line, so we were too far away from the drop zone, and we exited last, taking us even farther from the drop zone. I pulled my canopy too low at 2,500 feet AGL (above ground level). Normally I'd pull the canopy at 4,000 feet AGL. Unknown to all of us, the winds had changed since takeoff, so I had a headwind going into the drop zone instead of a tailwind.

I realized I wasn't going to make the drop zone, and I didn't have any good landing options: power lines on three sides and a vineyard on the other. I decided to land in the vineyard rather than try to make it over or under the power lines. I lined up parallel with the rows of the vines, but just as I was coming in and flared my canopy to slow down and land, a small crosswind forced me to my right.

I caught a pole with my right arm. The pole tore off my arm and stripped all the tissue from my shoulder down to mid-forearm. When I looked down, I knew I was in a rough spot. My brachial artery, which runs from your shoulder to your forearm, was bleeding out. Within a short period of time, I had lost a substantial amount of blood.

Read the whole story