

Déjà Vu?

BY MURV,
OPERATION ENDURING WARRIOR



When Todd Love saw photos of Joseph Grabianowski skydiving over the familiar landscape of Skydive Arizona he said he felt like he was reliving his own experience from a year ago. You may be experiencing a little déjà vu yourself if you are familiar with Todd's story. Todd is a wounded veteran who last year became the first triple amputee to successfully earn his USPA A-license.

One key to Todd's accomplishment was the ingenuity of his AXIS Flight School instructors, Niklas Daniel and Brianne Thompson. Believing we found a formula for success, Operation Enduring Warrior Skydive once again turned to AXIS and Skydive Arizona with the goal of bringing another wounded veteran into the world of skydiving.

U.S. Army veteran Joseph Grabianowski sustained severe wounds from a roadside bomb explosion in Afghanistan May 29, 2012. He underwent a series of grueling surgeries that resulted in bilateral hip disarticulation—amputation of both legs at the hip joint. Skydiving had been one of Joe's goals before he was wounded in Afghanistan, but solo jumping did not seem feasible due to the severity of his wounds.

That changed when Joe learned of Todd's story and met him on the way to his first tandem jump at Skydive Suffolk. Joe recalls, "Todd has been my motivator and my true inspiration." With a tandem jump at the Wounded War Jumping for a Purpose event under his belt, Joe was ready to commit to full-on skydiving training.

When United Parachute Technologies built a unique Vector rig for Todd, we never imagined that we would be able to use it for another student, but now Joe presented that opportunity. That rig official-

ly became one of the two OEW Skydive student rigs, complete with Performance Designs canopies and Cypress AADs. The other rig is based on a container donated by Skydive Suffolk and modified by rigger Rob Wardell to better suit the needs of our above-the-knee amputee students. Putting this student equipment together was a huge step for OEW Skydive, as we hope to bring the program to wounded veterans at drop zones around the country.

This time around, the question of gear—one of Todd's biggest hurdles—was answered before Joe joined the program. We also knew that it would be best for him to have a custom jumpsuit, which would not inhibit his tunnel flying or freefall, right from the start. JOIN Skydiving Apparel was quickly able to get Joe outfitted.

After the experience of training Todd in both the tunnel and in the sky through his B-license, Nik and Brianne were confident that Joe would also be able to achieve his own skydiving goals. All we had left to do was bring him to Arizona.

It was incredible to see the support again this year as Green Light and Larsen & Brusgaard teamed up to raise funds for OEW Skydive. Skydive Arizona had already given team status to all OEW Skydive students through their C-license training, but as Joe's training date neared we were once again moved by their generosity; Skydive Arizona announced that they would sponsor all of Joe's A-license training, including all necessary tunnel time!

Joe arrived in Arizona with a little apprehension. "Honestly, I was nervous and I didn't know what to expect ... I was thinking it would be a while before I could get the techniques on lockdown." A sentiment familiar to any skydiver who looks back at their own AFF experience. It didn't take long, however,

to change that outlook. After two days of combined ground school and tunnel training, Joe was ready to make his first skydive.

On his third day at SDAZ Joe was able to perform his first two AFF jumps with AXIS instructors. Joe noted in his journal, "Well, this day was awesome! My tunnel time has paid off for sure." It was really a great start to his training. Mike McGowan was even able to capture the elusive "Joe smile" in freefall! Following his first jumps, Joe got back in the tunnel and cleaned up his body position for pull sequence and prepared for the front flips and barrel rolls that were soon to come in his training. He made progress on every jump and was soon down to one instructor, Tom Deacon. One of the things he worked on with Tom was tracking. "I love it a lot!" Joe recalls, "I felt like I was an airplane."

Unfortunately it seemed like these were some of the windiest weeks in Arizona history, but Joe and his instructors patiently waited every day for the conditions to improve. Given the time he had, Joe made incredible progress and completed his AFF course! He is now cleared for solo and coach jumps, and has 12 more required skydives for his A-license, which he hopes to complete by June. In the meantime, he and Todd have "joint custody" of their rig, which they plan to alternate jumping at Skydive Suffolk. This arrangement won't have to last long however, because as incredible as it was of UPT to build this rig in the first place, they are now in the process of making Todd's new rig. This will provide both Joe and Todd with custom harnesses. I'm picturing an awesome 2-way in the future!

As Joe was finishing up his training in Arizona, OEW Skydive began training another class at Skydive Suffolk. While weather was a factor here as

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well, our larger obstacle came from unexpected medical and logistical issues. Postponing training due to surgeries and prosthetic issues is taken in stride at OEW Skydive, though; students and instructors understand that it may take us longer to complete the program, but are never discouraged because of the amazing support we receive from the entire skydiving community.

Our current student receiving training at Skydive Suffolk is U.S. Army Captain Florent "Flo" Groberg. Flo was wounded in combat when suicide bombers attacked his team August 8, 2012. He sustained a massive injury to his left leg, resulting in the loss of the majority of his calf muscle and feeling below his left knee. Flo completed a tandem and his first

three AFF jumps at Skydive Suffolk before having to head back to work. He also decided to add some wind-tunnel time into his training and headed down to another one of our sponsors, Paraclete XP. Our experience with this spring's students solidified how vital tunnel training and tandem jumps are for the students prior to starting AFF. This is especially the case when it comes to students with amputations and unique injuries that affect their stability in the air, and also possibly canopy control.

With Flo and Joe on their way to A-license, 2014 is off to a great start for OEW Skydive!

Watch videos of Joe and Todd's on AXIS Flight School's YouTube channel, [YouTube.com/user/Axis-FlightTV](https://www.youtube.com/user/Axis-FlightTV).



James Hatch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Iveta "Murv" Muravyeva is a pilot and a skydiver with more than 10 years of experience in both. She joined Operation Enduring Warrior in 2012 as the Operation X-Wing director with a goal of connecting wounded veterans with the skydiving community. Murv is also a member of 2MH and an apprentice videographer at AXIS Flight School.

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