

OPERATION X-WING

by Iveta Muravyeva



Above: Instructors James Flaherty (left) and Price Riggins fly with Josh Burnette at Skydive Suffolk in Virginia. Photo by James Hatch.

Opposite: Instructor Brianne Thompson flies with Todd Love during an AFF jump at Skydive Arizona in Eloy. Photo by Niklas Daniel.

A question that every skydiver gets is, “Why would you jump out of a perfectly good airplane?” A typical answer (after the “no such thing as a perfectly good airplane” discussion) is, “Well, it’s cheaper than therapy!”

Skydivers know nothing could take the place of skydiving in their lives, and many turn to it for solace when faced with adversity. This thought brought about Operation X-Wing, a skydiving program under the umbrella of Operation Enduring Warrior, an organization whose objective is to create awareness of, provide support to and honor our nation’s wounded warriors. OXW facilitates initial skydiving training (AFF through the A license) for combat-wounded veterans. This year, OXW enrolled members in its first class, and, depending on the availability of funds, the organization hopes to enroll three or four students each year going forward.

Four students—Josh Burnette, Aaron Causey, Erik Feild and Todd Love—joined the first OXW class. Burnette and Causey

both sustained combat injuries resulting in above-the-knee amputations of both legs, as well as several finger amputations. Feild, who sustained a gunshot wound to the knee in combat, is still on active duty in the U.S. Army and will be taking the reins as Operation X-Wing’s program director upon completion of his A-license training. Love is a triple amputee who lost both of his legs at hip level and his left arm just below the elbow after stepping on an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan. Burnette, Feild and Love have military static-line experience but had no freefall training prior to beginning their AFF training with OXW.

The journey for all four started with body-flight instruction courtesy of the Paraclete XP SkyVenture wind tunnel in Raeford, North Carolina. Tunnel instructors James Flaherty and Ray Kubiak volunteered their time for the cause. The instructors had to think outside the box to meet the unusual challenges the students presented aerodynamically. Burnette uses full-length prosthetics with articulated knees that he can lock at a desired angle using a remote control. Causey uses a specialized set of short prosthetics, and Love uses a prosthetic arm but no lower-extremity prosthetics. The various prosthetics and the need for the jumpers to access them on a regular basis led OXW to contact JOIN Skydiving Apparel, a veteran-owned company, to provide custom jumpsuits for the mission.

Next came gear considerations. Burnette, Causey and Feild would use unmodified student gear, but Love required a unique system. United Parachute Technologies stepped up to the challenge to create Love’s custom rig. UPT engineer and creative talent Louie Palomares designed a rig that contained a single-operation system for cutting away and deploying the reserve and a wraparound enclosure in lieu of leg straps. Performance Designs then joined the team to provide main and reserve canopies for Love’s rig.

With answers to the questions of gear, OXW began to schedule the four jumpers’ AFF instruction. However, Love needed additional tunnel time to learn to fly with his rig on, and he arranged to do so with Flaherty at SkyVenture Arizona in Eloy, which generously donated two hours of tunnel time to facilitate a week of training. Unfortunately, a last-minute (sequestration-driven) schedule change kept Flaherty from being able to attend, so Niklas Daniel and Brianne Thompson of AXIS Flight School stepped in as Love’s tunnel instructors. By the end of the week, Love had demonstrated proficiency flying in his rig in the tunnel and was ready to join Causey, Burnette and Feild for AFF.

Skydive Suffolk, a veteran-owned drop zone in Virginia, stepped up to host the AFF jumps. The DZ’s proximity to the Washington, D.C., area and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where most of the OXW students reside, made it





JAMES HATCH

OPERATION X-WING



Above: Operation X-Wing organizers, instructors and participants gather for a group photo at Skydive Suffolk. Photo by James Hatch.

Opposite, clockwise from top: Riggins (left) and Flaherty jump with student Aaron Causey at Skydive Suffolk. Riggins and Flaherty exit with Burnette. Photos by James Hatch. Thompson observes Love's deployment during an instructional jump. Photo by Niklas Daniel.

a great match for the program. And since Skydive Suffolk's instructional staff offered to donate its services, the DZ could provide the training at a significant discount. However, due to another scheduling conflict, Love and AXIS Flight School could not travel to Suffolk for the jumps scheduled for May 20–24. OXW pressed on with the camp for the three other jumpers and approached Skydive Arizona for support in completing Love's jumps.

Skydive Suffolk provided the perfect atmosphere and learning environment for Burnette, Causey and Feild. While the weather was definitely not on their side (it rained all day the first day), the determination of the Skydive Suffolk staff and the students' positive attitudes made it a success. The bad weather gave the students the opportunity to finish the first-jump course on Monday, and through the week, the instructors had a chance to spend extra time on topics not addressed in the tunnel. They concentrated on the facets of exits and landings that differed from those of typical AFF students. Burnette

and Causey practiced poised, tandem-style exits out of the PAC 750 XL, which allowed them to position in the door with their prosthetic legs on the outside. For the landings, Burnette and Causey would slide in while lifting up their legs. The instructors recommended shortening the jumpers' brake lines, which made it easier for them to land without injuring their wrists (a consideration for any jumper who plans to make a sliding-in landing).

On Tuesday, Burnette and Feild completed their first AFF jumps, but Causey had to ride the plane down due to some concerns about the security of his prosthetics. He quickly resolved the issue, but the clouds took over, and he waited until Wednesday to complete his jump. Burnette and Feild also made additional jumps during the week, and all three students are now working toward their A licenses by continuing to make weekend trips to Skydive Suffolk. James Hatch, a combat-wounded veteran and accomplished skydiver, provided photos during the week, and the experiences he shared with the students illustrated the kind of mentorship OXW hopes to promote.

While the three students trained at Suffolk, Love received the news that Skydive Arizona would fully sponsor his training through his A license. In addition, Green Light skydiving gear store, which had raised money toward Love's jumps, donated the funds to support other Operation X-Wing classes. Love scheduled his AFF course and jumps for June 2–7,

but high winds and dust devils kept him grounded until June 6. Nonetheless, in two days of jumping, Love made eight jumps. On his first jumps, photographer Mike McGowan volunteered his time and talent to capture the images. Love even had the opportunity to test out the SOS cutaway system on his custom rig (he had a problem with a brake line) ... it worked as advertised, and Love brought his reserve in for a smooth landing!

One of Operation X-Wing's goals is to make skydiving accessible to wounded veterans throughout the U.S. DZOs who have questions or concerns about AFF for wounded veterans should contact Operation X-Wing at enduringwarrior.org for advice and assistance. Where there's a will, there's a way!

A video compilation of Love's jumps is available at axisflightschool.com under the Media tab.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

 Iveta "Murv" Muravyeva, C-38187, is a pilot and a skydiver with more than 10 years of experience in both fields. She joined Operation Enduring Warrior in 2012 as Operation X-Wing's program director with the goal of connecting wounded veterans to the skydiving community. She's also a member of vertical formation skydiving team 2MH and an apprentice videographer at AXIS Flight School.