

Patrick DeGayardon Killed in Hawaii

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by Robin Heid

The sport of parachuting lost one of its brightest stars and best ambassadors April 13 when the legendary Patrick DeGayardon died while making a wing suit skydive at Dillingham Field on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. A rigging error combined with a low pull caused a main-reserve entanglement that didn't clear before he landed in a banana field.

"Patrick's last jump was completely beautiful," said his companion and photographer on that jump, Adrian Nicholas. "We flew initially along the flight line then in a banking line along the beach for a couple of miles. There was a huge rainbow and Patrick was really, really happy because I wasn't making a mess of it! He really flew the wings and was laughing and shouting and teasing me all the way through. We were flying right over each other because the burble trails behind not over you. And we're very close and I'm filming him and he's laughing at me because I'm not making a mess. It was a fabulous jump. Then we separated to pull and I pulled over the sea. He swooped across the DZ then over the banana plantation. He opened lower than me."

Nicholas did not see what happened next; he was busy getting his own wings partially disconnected so he could fly his canopy. Later investigation revealed that DeGayardon had deployed his Stiletto between 1,000 feet and 2,000 feet, then had a horseshoe malfunction caused by a brake line that was trapped in the main container by a component of the integrated wing suit-harness container system.

"The opening force pulled a bunch of the tail through the slider, but the bag never opened," said Mike "Mad Dog" Maguire, who saw the last five seconds of DeGayardon's jump from 200 feet away and

was the first one to the body. "So he cut away and pulled his reserve. He had one handle in each hand, but the suit was so big and the burble so big, it probably didn't get a clean launch. Both bridles were wrapped nice and tight. The reserve freebag never opened; both bags and pilot chutes were out and not going anywhere: They were locked."

Maguire said DeGayardon was "flat and stable, kicking his legs and twisting his body looking over his shoulder trying to get it to go until he went in." He also said reports of DeGayardon screaming and yelling as he went in were probably inaccurate.

"When I saw him, he was busy working – kicking and trying to get it off. I don't think he was screaming. Everyone sees an incident happen and there are different stories for the same incident. But if he was screaming, I didn't hear it. What I did hear was Clint Clawson's girlfriend Miki let out a bloodcurdling scream. She saw him the same time I did and I think people heard that and the sound the suit was making."

DeGayardon landed symmetrically, arms out at a 45-degree angle, facing straight ahead, in dirt between rows of banana trees. Maguire checked for a pulse and found none. Nicholas arrived shortly thereafter and stayed with the body until it was removed by authorities several hours later.

DeGayardon was jumping the latest version of his ram-air inflated wing suit, with which he had been doing spectacular stunts for several months. The suit had large arm and crotch wings and was essentially built right onto a Vector harness/container system.

A couple of weeks prior to his death, DeGayardon had added a deflector to the bottom of the main container to increase

performance by smoothing the airflow. The deflector was attached with a zipper and a piece of 1,000-pound Microline that ran through two corners of the main container.

But while this smoothed the airflow, it also covered the BOC pouch and made it hard for DeGayardon to pull. So the night of April 12, he removed the deflectors from both rigs, sewed the BOC pouches to the top of the deflectors and reinstalled them. One rig was correctly reassembled; the second was not – in threading the Microline through a one-quarter-inch section of the main container, DeGayardon had inadvertently trapped a brake line, then didn't remove the main bag to check his work.

"He finished the mod and we went to dinner," said Nicholas.

DeGayardon and Nicholas were in Hawaii to shoot a skydiving movie with French filmmaker Patrick Passe. They were jumping at the Pacific International DZ, one of three parachute businesses at Dillingham Field. DeGayardon, who was part owner of Pacific International, did specialty tandem jumps while Nicholas filmed him. In between these, the two men would go jump the wing suits.

"While they were packing the tandem, we did wing suit training jumps – formation wing suit jumps – which were fabulous fun," said Nicholas. "Then freefly tandems, sit-fly tandems, and skysurf tandems. And then he'd hook it. Patrick hooked every canopy he flew and he flew a very nice tandem. And he loved to play."

News of DeGayardon's death was greeted with shock, dismay and disbelief by parachutists all over the world. Tributes and laments poured in from everywhere to an Internet message board. Those in his home country of France were particularly affected.

"Patrick was to French skydivers what Princess Di was to the British," said Muriel Macaux, whose father, Christian, trained DeGayardon. "Everybody in France held him in high regard. We have lost one of the

best skydivers on earth and it really makes me sad."

"He had an enormous passion for skydiving," said Nicholas, who jumped extensively with DeGayardon during the previous several months. "I had the most extraordinarily intense skydives with him. And he was always on the go, all the time, all the time. He would drive from one side of France to the other just to catch a sunset load."

DeGayardon made more than 11,000 jumps during his 18 years of skydiving, a large number of them sponsored by the French watch company, Sector. He is credited with creating first the stunt, then the sport of sky surfing, and bringing sport parachuting to the public through a series of sensational and memorable television and print advertisements. He also made BASE jumps into deep caves and from the top of tall cliffs. He jumped from then flew back into airplanes. He did high altitude jumps without oxygen. He looped his Stiletto behind a power boat in Las Vegas. He swooped his wing suit through the Grand Canyon, through the mountains of France and over the famous surf beaches on Oahu's North Shore. And every step of the way, he delighted and inspired and awed and just plain blew away skydivers and whuffos alike with the power and energy of the feats he accomplished and the images he created.

"Patrick was a real innovator," said Maguire. "He was doing things the rest of us couldn't – and we ain't bad skydivers. But I'd sit back and look at what he did and my jaw would just drop open. He was the only one out there capable of doing it. I don't know where he was headed, but he was getting better and better. Who knows where he would have gone if he hadn't made that mistake? And I don't see anybody on his coattails, no one pushing it like him, or understanding what he was doing, or flying the suit like he did. I hate to see him go."

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