I Survived a 14,000-Foot Free Fall!

Michael's parachute failed to open fully while skydiving in New Zealand.

A skydiver's parachute fails to open—and he lives to tell about it.

By Sarah Rehman

Michael Holmes is a professional skydiver who has completed more than 7,000 jumps without any problems. But that changed in 2007, when a jump nearly turned into a deadly disaster.

In December of that year, Michael strapped on his helmet and a harness containing two parachutes. Then, he jumped out of an airplane while it flew 14,000 feet above Lake Taupo, New Zealand. The jump seemed to be going smoothly. When Michael reached an altitude of 4,000 feet, he pulled the cord to release his main parachute.

Oh, Chute!

Usually, when a parachute opens, the force of air pushes it up. This causes the skydiver to slow down. But when Michael pulled the cord, not much happened. He appeared to be falling at the same rate.

At that point, Michael looked up and realized that the main parachute had not fully opened. And to make matters worse, the air pushing up against it was causing him to spin violently.

Michael tried to remain calm during the ordeal. "I knew I had a reserve chute in the bag," he recalled.

However, the only way that Michael could release the reserve chute was by cutting away the main one with his pocketknife. That's when things turned for the worse.

"The main chute was tangled in the harness I was wearing," said Michael. "So, no matter what I did, I couldn't cut it loose."

Michael was now just hundreds of feet from the ground. At that point, he didn't think he would survive. "I'm dead," he cried out loud.

Crash Course

Seconds later, Michael crash landed into a thicket of blackberry bushes—and that's when something amazing happened. Michael moaned! He was achy, but very much alive. The bushes had absorbed, or soaked up, the impact of the crash.

And there was more good news to come: Michael's friend had witnessed the fall and was able to get Michael to a hospital quickly. There, he was examined by doctors. They discovered that Michael had a broken ankle and a collapsed lung—serious injuries, but very treatable.

"I couldn't believe my luck," said Michael.

After Michael healed from his injuries, it was back to skydiving. "I know that people question my decision to get back up there again, but it's what I love, and I can't imagine not doing it."

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