



PRESS RELEASE

20 August 2012



Red Devils' jumps are para-para-paradise for local charity

Sister of brain haemorrhage victim, Rich, and head of charity founded in his memory mark 10th anniversary with 13,000ft tandem skydives.

When 24-year old Emily, the younger sister of Richard Bowler in whose memory the Smile4Rich Appeal was founded in 2002, and 54-year old Neil Westbrook, who runs the charity (now known as Smile4Wessex), put their names down for a tandem skydive, neither was actually looking forward to it but, after dropping from 13,000ft with the Red Devils, they agreed that Rich would have loved every second – even if they didn't!

When the Smile4Wessex charity, which funds projects at the Wessex Neurological Centre, was offered ten places for fundraisers to jump with the Red Devils, the Parachute Regiment's Freefall Display Team, Appeals Co-ordinator, Neil Westbrook, expected people to be queuing to take the plunge. Neil, from Locks Heath, takes up the story. "Initial interest for the places was a little disappointing, but as someone who's never seen the attraction of jumping from a perfectly serviceable aircraft, I couldn't say I blamed anyone for not wishing to do it. To my horror, it was then that someone suggested that I should perhaps set an example by putting my own name on the list!" Neil did so, and the remaining places were taken by others with an affinity to the charity, not least Emily Bowler, but little did they know that poor weather would lead to their jumps being postponed on no less than five occasions, leaving the pair to contemplate their fate for far longer than either would have wished.

Finally, the weather relented and Emily and Neil made their way to Netheravon, near Amesbury, the home of the Red Devils. Following a safety briefing and ground training, they were kitted out and introduced to the instructors to whom they would be attached for their tandem jumps. “After all the delays, I was just pleased that we were at last going to do it,” said Emily, “though it didn’t help to see Neil nervously pacing up and down, and the plane looked much smaller than I’d expected!” But with light winds, and just a scattering of wispy clouds in an otherwise blue sky, it was not long before they were clambering aboard.

As the plane surged down the grass runway, and with Emily and Neil already strapped to their respective Red Devils, all they could do was sit and wait for the red light to turn green, and the door to open. “It took about 15 minutes to reach 13,000ft, which is plenty of time to collect your thoughts” said Neil. “I don’t think either Emily or I have ever been so quiet, though I know we were both thinking the same – Rich would have loved to do this, so let’s keep smiling and do it for him”.

Meanwhile, back on the ground, the aircraft became all but a speck in the sky to Emily’s on-looking mum, Janice, dad. Nick and fiancé Sam, and to Neil’s wife Andrée, as they waited for the first glimpse of them hurtling downward. Understandably a little anxious, they each took comfort from knowing that Emily and Neil were jumping with the best in the business, and with two instructors who had amassed over 4,000 jumps between them.

When the signal came, it was Emily who was first to exit. “It all happens very quickly,” continues Neil. “One moment Emily was there, the next she was gone, and I wasn’t far behind her, but maybe our instructors had sensed just how nervous we both were and decided not to give us time to dwell on it.” For the first 8,000 feet of the skydive, the tandems are in freefall, hurtling face down at around 120mph. “It really takes your breath away,” recalls Emily, “but just as you’re adjusting to falling so fast, the parachute opens and you feel as if you’re being yanked back up into the sky.” From there, it was a gentle four or five minute ride, with time to take in the scenery, before lifting their legs for what turned out to be perfect landings.

The great news is that Emily and Neil’s jumps have already raised over £3,000 for the Smile4Wessex Children’s Neurosciences Centre appeal, which will part-fund the development of a fantastic new unit for the treatment of children with a wide range of neurological conditions, but would either of them do it again? For Neil, the answer was just one word, “never!”, but Emily was a little more forthcoming. “Though I’m not sure I’d rush back to do it again, it was certainly an experience I’ll not forget, and Rich really would have loved it!”

Full details of the Children’s Neurosciences Centre Appeal can be found on the charity’s web site (www.smile4wessex.org).

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CONTACT DETAILS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

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The Smile4Wessex Appeal has, since 2004, raised well in excess of £550,000 to fund projects which enhance the range and quality of patient care at the WNC, and to sponsor pioneering research into new treatments for a variety of neurological conditions. Previously funded projects include a dedicated neurological intensive care ambulance, a Paediatric Video-Telemetry Suite (used to assess children with severe epilepsy for life-changing corrective surgery), and research into a non-invasive method of measuring cerebral pressure. Most recently, the charity has funded the first UK installation of a new generation of neurosurgical operating microscope fitted with Fluorescence Imaging technology. For latest news and information, please visit www.smile4wessex.org

The Parachute Regiment Freefall Team 'The Red Devils' is the official parachute display team of both the Parachute Regiment (The Paras) and the British Army. The team's role is to promote both the Parachute Regiment and the British Army in support of recruitment - this is achieved by carrying out over 100 spectacular parachute displays at public events each year and by attracting positive publicity through the media. The team is currently manned by 13 serving soldiers from the Parachute Regiment's three full-time battalions: 1, 2 & 3 PARA. Every member of the team has served a minimum of three years in a Parachute Regiment battalion and has taken part in at least one operational tour of duty in either: The Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and/or Iraq.

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