
RESCUE NCO BACK IN THE AIR AFTER ACCIDENT

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Four months after his near-fatal accident, one NCO from Detachment 22, 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, tested his mettle recently, illustrating why he won the Lance P. Sijan Award two years ago for his outstanding leadership.

On Jan. 25, MSgt. Dave Drake, pararescue specialist at Det. 22, had a mid-air collision with another PJ, SrA. Bryan Winder, causing both jumpers' chutes to collapse 100 feet from the ground.

Both jumpers sustained severe injuries. Sergeant Drake was sent to Saint Luke's hospital in Boise, Idaho, with multiple fractures to his pelvis, while Airman Winder suffered a broken back and other complications.

After being transferred to the base hospital two weeks later, Sergeant Drake was eager to get back to work.

"I made a bet with the doctor that I would be jumping again in less than a month and a half," he said. "The doctor said I shouldn't even think about going back to work -- that I was crazy to even think about jumping again."

People in his squadron held the doctor's sentiments. "They said I shouldn't tempt fate twice," said the rescue sergeant.

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Sergeant Drake returned to his unit two months after the accident. With his doctor's approval, Sergeant Drake decided to fulfill his prophecy; he was going to requalify as a pararescue specialist, setting an example for those in his situation.

Requalification required a standardization and evaluation exam on both the use of the helicopter's M-60 machine gun and jumping. MSgt. Tony Posey, a PJ instructor from Hill AFB, Utah, conducted the stan-eval. An hour and a half after the chopper left the pad, Sergeant Drake would know if he could handle the test -- both mentally and physically.

"I had a lot of fears about how the jump would go," he said. "I wondered if the chute would open properly and whether it would hurt when I hit the water."

It wouldn't take long to find out. Following the check ride for the machine gun, the PJ was taken 2,000 feet above Strike Dam Reservoir.

For a month and a half, Sergeant Drake said he never gave up, and he wasn't about to give up now. He jumped.

How did it go? "I was as excited as a pig in mud," he said. "It felt good to get back up there and jump again."

"I love the job too much to quit -- and I had that option," he continued. "But I've been doing this job for 12 years and I'm not about to quit now."

Sergeant Drake said that it appears Airman Winder will be following in his footsteps soon. His prognosis is that the other

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injured PJ will be jumping before the end of the year.

But for now, Sergeant Drake is happy about his comeback.

"I'm now totally operational again, and it feels great!"