

Overcome the Podcast - Episode 5  
By Christian Bowman

Walking back into the jail cell that last night, and hearing the door lock behind the guard had a different echo. There was no cell mate. Nobody to tell or to talk to. I looked down at my snot covered jumpsuit and tear stained flip flops. Then washed my face in the toilet sink. I looked over at the little origami cranes I had made sitting next to my mattress. At the paperback book stuffed under the small pillow. Walked to the little window and looked down at the jail pit. The empty tables and chairs. I laid down and the first thing I saw when I closed my eyes were the photographs from that manilla envelope. I curled into a ball and stared at the wall, rocking back and forth.

I had to rewind what had just happened and play it over again a few times to really understand it. I know I got a chance to say how sorry I was to the other family. Even though it was fraught with sobs, I remember at least getting that out in the courtroom. Just as I began to finally fall asleep, the guards came and the trustee's brought breakfast. I put the meal to the side and crawled back into the cot. Then, another guard came and told me "Time Served, collect your things". He walked me down to a room, where I was given a bag that included my suit and my boots. They went over the inventory of things and deducted the cash I had spent on commissary items and gave me the few dollars I had left. I changed out of the jumpsuit and put on my boots, stuffing my suit pockets with the address book and taking a quick look at the guitar, then they had me sign a few sheets of paper, and I was walked to the front door where

one of the guards said “good luck” and then, there I was, at the crossroads of the world shell shocked and confused.

### **My name is Christian Bowman and this is Overcome.**

My boots felt heavy. So did my heart. I had just braced myself for a life in prison and yet, here I was. Standing on Main Street with no back up plan. I knew I could probably make it back to Austin, where there was a bit of a safe haven for me. My stepdad had already moved to Hawaii. My brothers were split across the country by then. I walked to a payphone and pulled out my address book. I called my Uncle to thank him for everything. He let me know that he was sorry that I had to go through all of that, but that he was proud of me for going. He let me know that I couldn't come and stay with him in New York right then, but he let me know that my older brother had begun a relationship with one of the cousins from the Hoopes' Family Murder back in Hilltown, Pennsylvania. They had gotten married and were living in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He convinced them to take me in for a little bit till I got back on my feet and wired me some money for a bus back east.

I didn't have any other options, so I went back to Philly. I continued my physical therapy, as my hips would sometimes continue to give out on me and I would just stop mid walk in sheer pain sometimes, but I found a job and began trying to save up some money. As the purpose of this podcast is to address the effects of PTSD among survivors and connecting people who have experienced some type of tragedy and have either

found a way through or are still working on it, I will continue to tell my personal story but will bypass large swaths of time to stay close to this goal.

Less than a year after getting out of jail, I met a girl from Switzerland. We met at a mall in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. I described my loss to her, and she revealed that she had been grieving the loss of someone close to her recently and didn't want to return. Our trauma bonding was a match. It was nice to be able to talk to someone about it without feeling the same guilt or having to feel like people were walking around eggshells with me. I didn't have to be fragile with her, I could just be vulnerable and it was ok.

She has a wonderful family now and is very successful at her job and has requested that I refrain from sharing any details about our past relationship, to which I'll respectfully comply. But what I can share is that, I wasn't ready. I was full of pain and looking for ways to fill the void in my heart and I wasn't right in my heart. I can also share that we were married when I was nineteen, we travelled the world together sharing many great years, had some wonderful experiences, despite my personal failings attributed to a variety of things, including PTSD, and we finally settled in Hawaii on the North Shore in 1997. I had a 1957 Harley KHK I was restoring. Two lab puppies. A beautiful house with every kind of fruit tree you could imagine growing in the yard. And a spectacular view of all of the ocean swells coming in from Waiaimea Bay up to Sunset Beach and the outer reefs down the winding drive to Kamehameha Highway.

Just as things began to work out up Pupukea Road, I received a telephone call from my Uncle. He was involved in an accident and needed help. He was in a wheelchair with a halo around his head and a series of screws holding his neck in place. He was alone and it was serious.

After a few phone calls with my brothers about who would be able to take care of him, it was ultimately decided that we would travel from Oahu to Florida to help out. I had gone through the physical rehabilitation myself and it felt right.

My uncle was my mothers only brother. He had grown up in the disconnection of money along with her in the fifties and sixties. Younger than her, he lived a very nice lifestyle of privilege. With the family so close to Washington DC, he was being groomed along with other young socialites to participate in government roles of power and influence.

Then one day, he got the news that he was being drafted into the US Army. Seemingly overnight, he went from ballroom etiquette to jumping into a jungle war zone on a parachute with a machine gun and a rucksack. The war experience surrounding his eighteenth birthday increased his empathy toward me. And mine to him. He would tell me multiple horror stories of his time in Vietnam, but the one that was the hardest for him was when his military best friend jumped on top of a grenade and told him "Go!" Before my uncle watched his torso absorb the explosion. Of all the death and

destruction he watched throughout the war, it was the image of that selfless act and loss that changed him.

When he returned home, he was a different in a different world. The social rejection of the Vietnam Veterans within his circles excluded him from the trajectory he was on. He was isolated and the only person he felt he could trust, his sister, was tuning in and dropping out. He could no longer relate with Care while she was embracing the Rainbow Family. His world was now painted Agent Orange, Olive Drab, Blood Red and Black.

He took engineering skills he developed in the army and went to New York for a new start. Splitting his time between the city and upstate, he developed destructive coping methods that included the numbing power of cocaine and the paid love of prostitution. He never married, nor knew what it was like to have kids of his own. Aside from occasionally seeing my brothers and I when we would bounce around, his life after the war was a series of disconnections.

Instead, his monstrous apartment lofts were filled with exotic toys. A foosze ball table. A PacMan arcade game. Collectors edition memorabilia from famous films. Framed sports jerseys and autographed photographs of famous celebrities with my uncle. Usually at a bar or part of some sort.

He developed a taste for the extreme. Our eccentric old uncle Jimmy. From his beautiful sports cars to his fast motorcycles, he was always pushing the envelope with the next thrill. Somewhere along the way, he was introduced to skydiving and suddenly, everything else took a backseat to jumping out of airplanes. Specifically, he was a skysurfer, jumping the board and raising the stakes.

He had left New York and set up shop in Palm Beach county joining an outfit known as Skydive Palm Beach. The airfield was in Pahokee, next to Lake Okeechobee. He had a string of toys there, from the houseboat he was living on, to the Porsche Boxster and the Buell Motorcycle, the Land Rover Defender 90 and investments in a pair of planes, a Cessna 172 and a King Air. He also bought an ambulance and an airstream, to name a few of his pursuits. Apparently, he had gone for a HALO jump, which is a High Altitude, Low Opening skydive. He grabbed the wrong parachute, the one that was packed to have a slow snivel opening and, with the low pull of the ripcord, it didn't have enough time to slow his body enough before he bounced off the ground and into the wheelchair.

When we arrived, it was a bit of culture shock. While maintaining her request to keep any information about her to a minimum, I will refer to her by her nickname, Coco. Coco and I had just been traveling around the world to places with very tall mountain and before settling in Hawaii on a house up the side of a mountain. Florida was starkly flat. For me, that felt like a huge change at the time. I'm not sure why the lack of a geological rise in elevation made for so strong a memory. But the drive out from Miami

and across the everglades to Lake Okeechobee was as flat as you could imagine. When we arrived, my uncle had just had the Halo removed from his head. There were still the indents in his skin from where the bolts had been screwed in to keep his head from moving about while his neck was able to heal.

Jimmy and Coco hit it off and he was excited to bring us into the fold of the Skydiving family. It was the first time he had a family to introduce and he was very happy about his ability to bond with this zany group of wild men and women who all shared the same passions as him. Many of them were current or former military, or in law enforcement of some sort. But a lot of them were just regular folk who you would never suspect would have this as their weekend retreat. Moms and dads, grandparents and students, the people that would come through just for the fun tandem just once and the crew of jumpers that took it every bit as serious as Olympic Athletes.

Jimmy did everything he could to accommodate us and tried so hard to get us to embrace the lifestyle. Coco took to it like a butterfly in the wind, however, I was a hold out for quite some time. I almost resented her for being able to be so free while I still felt so locked up inside. I insisted on working with him for physical recovery, I had a lot of fear that I tried to fight when I would watch him in the wheelchair. Thinking back to when I was in one myself.

I worked as the Fix Based Operative doing air traffic control at the tower and we built her a cafe with the ambulance as a kitchen inside the hanger of the airport. Slowly

but surely, we got him out of the wheelchair and up moving again. It was a long process that I had become familiar with and the fact that I was able to overcome it helped inspire him to keep a positive mindset.

As time passed, he got better and continued to push for me to go through and take the AFF program, the Accelerated Free Fall program, but first, I needed to go and just jump a tandem skydive and at least see how I felt about it. I had just finished fueling the aircraft with 100 low lead and no sooner washed my hands when they came and told me “It was time”. I had sat through multiple showings of instructions for the tandem skydives and so they just walked up behind me, fitted me with my harness and had me in the plane before I could say anything.

My self preservation instinct kicked in and I was nervous about the harness holding my hips. I was still experiencing extreme bouts of pain every once in a great while where a nerve would pinch inside a part of the bone that had grown back with a little bump in it. But it was too late, I was in the plane and rising up to altitude. I got the cliché jokes thrown at me: “Ever jump out of a perfectly good airplane”, after the harness got fit and connected to the tandem master, another jumper asked “So how long you been an instructor”. We reached about 5000 feet when the hop and pop old timers went. This is where they connect to the plane to that when they jump out, it immediately deploys the main parachute. Some of them would jump the old military rounds, but most were on some sort of modern rig. Some would just go to stay current and others to relive the thrill without the fear of the ripcord not pulling out in time.

They wanted to take me up to a higher altitude. A lot higher. Normally, we would only go to around 10 to 12 thousand feet for a standard skydive. However, we were going up to 18. Anything higher and we would need oxygen but the 18 would give us a lot more freefall time before we would have to deploy. As the plane began to level out and the fight to climb began to relax, we circle back around to line up over the drop zone. I couldn't help but think about how beautiful it was and yet how crazy it was. The King Air began to slow to slightly above stall speed. It was time to go.

The rest of the crew in the plane happened to be some of the best skydivers in the world, Olav Zipser, the godfather of modern freefall. Sean McCormack and Jon DeVore, who went on to jump for the Red Bull Team and countless stunts in movies and Television shows. The whole crew watched and smiled as I prepped to make my way to the door, strapped to Doris, my jumpmaster. Her husband right next to us filming the whole thing. We crawled out and the wind took my breath away. I was wearing goggles and a frap hat but I still squinted my eyes in reflex. She began the rocking in and out countdown: 3, 2, Go

I understood in the first three seconds what my Uncle was trying to tell me. When you listen to people who enjoy an extreme sport try to describe the sensation, it usually comes out as a jumbled string of adjectives and adverbs along with a bunch of onomatopoeia's like Shwapah and Blapow. And yet, here I was, Shwapahing through the air and turning like Blapow. His insanity suddenly wasn't so insane to me and his eccentricities all equalized to this new normal. The rush of the wind as we fell from the

plane, the plane doing a deep dive after the rest of the head down skydive team went and the pilot trying to beat us to the ground. The speed of the clouds zipping past us and the big wide flat Florida horizon welcoming our landing with no geographical obstructions. The ground rush effect of the little squares and circles of farm land suddenly becoming enlarged as we got closer and then just as I was going hoarse from screaming so loudly, we pulled the parachute and our freefall was suddenly protected under this huge patch of ripstop nylon, metal grommets and an assortment of strings that would open or close off wind cells to allow us to turn. She gave me the reins for a moment and let me make a few adjustments, then took back over for the landing. Cruising next to the landing zone downwind, then making a banking left and another left to come smoothly upwind for a tip toe landing. It was perfect. I continued to skydive after that and it made him happy that I had come around to embrace it.

Somehow, the build up to that first skydive for me meant more than just an exciting jump. I had been bottling things in and just surviving that, it did open a lot. I dove head first into the lifestyle he had been chasing.

After that, my uncle and I began to connect more. I was still having a hard time, internally, just because I was. It didn't matter where I was or what I was doing, I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin and it, unfortunately, caused a rift wherever I went. For me, not even skydiving or racing the motorcycles or scuba diving or anything else I began doing there would fill the void. I tried to understand how my uncle would deal with his PTSD after everything he had seen when he was coming of age. I tried to

imagine my own life taking a similar trajectory. Then I would remember that he never had the real love of a woman that wasn't his family. Real romantic love. Despite all the things on Maslows hierarchy of needs, it was this connection that was missing from his life, and ultimately led to a life chasing a feeling. A fleeting feeling that could only be captured at high speed with everything on the line. Unfortunately, I was beginning to imagine that I couldn't love either. And I was beginning to fear that his coping mechanism wasn't working for me either.

Not in any creepy sort of way or anything, but he fell in love with Coco. She really took to the sport and loved being in the air. She was grounded with her business acumen and did everything she could to make the cafe successful and contribute to his success in his Physical Recovery. After many months, we were able to get him out of the wheelchair and walking again. He had made a strong recovery but was still having a difficult time being grounded. Without that feeling, the encroaching darkness began to win the fight against his mental health and no amount of money could pay it off. No toy could play away the pain. He began making some rash decisions with his money. We tried to balance him with counter arguments when he would discover something that would appeal to him and his risk taking, but there was no fighting it.

A prime example of this was his investment of a hundred thousand into a company called Viaticals. Viaticals would go up to terminally ill patients and purchase their life insurance policies from them. The idea was that the terminally ill would have some liquid finances from their policy to enjoy their last bit of time and after death, the

company would cash out and distribute to the investors. The whole thing seemed so risky to us, but he believed it was a way to be philanthropic while still investing his inheritance. In the end, the company turned out to be a scam and he lost most of that investment. Of course, that was just one of many.

In the end, he was a good man, trying to do good things but the shadow from war continued to haunt him. He thought that he could pay for enough light to make it go away, but his own demons prevented him from being able to enjoy his toys.

On Thanksgiving morning, Coco and I had gone to get some food for the cafe. It was going to be a big day. Lots of skydivers were already at the dropzone and more were on their way. The sun was shining and it was blue skies. Groups were inside the hanger on furniture dollies spinning around practicing relative work formations by grabbing each others arms then their legs in shapes like stars and circles. The smell of airplane fuel was burning and propellers were spinning. Multiple colored jumpsuits walking around drinking coffee and looking up at dots in the sky opening different size and shape canopies.

It felt a little strange, however, to see business as usual since just a few days before, three skydivers fell to their death in the nearby fields. They had gone to jump head down, which was the new style of the time. They took a ball with a stringer attached and would fly around it in formation, reaching their hands out to touch the ball while carefully positioning the rest of their body to maintain their position in the sky. They were not wearing helmets nor any kind of leather frap hat. They did not have a

back up safety measure called an AAD, or automatic activation device, which fires your reserve parachute if you travel past a certain altitude without deploying your main. Somewhere along the jump, we're not sure exactly what happened, but most likely, they all bumped into each other and hit each others heads. There were no parachutes deployed. They burned into the ground at full speed. The Sheriffs department was still looking for one of their bodies that morning.

As we returned with the groceries and pulled into the driveway, we saw the King Air take off from the Tarmac. Jimmy was sitting in the door with his surfboard waving at us. We waved back. We got to the hangar and I walked in asking the manifest about him. They said that he was cleared to jump. He had just done a hop and pop on the previous load and he had two skydivers that were paired with him to sit fly while he jumped the sky surfboard.

I had a bad feeling about it. My brothers had been warning me that he was going to try to get up in the sky too early and I was trying to keep him grounded to recover for a bit longer. But there he went.

When he went to make his jump, initially there's something called a hill when you jump out of an airplane. It's different than a helicopter or a balloon where you would fall straight down. Even on the smallest kind of plane, like a Cessna 172, the stall speed of the aircraft would still be moving forward in a glide that would cause your jump to have the physics resembling a little forward momentum in an arch before you go

straight down. There are lots of ways to skysurf, but as this was his first time back, he would only be going for a basic straight stand up while positioning his arms outward to keep balance. He had two other skydivers who were sit flying, which looks exactly like it sounds, reclined back in a seated position, who would take turns coming in to dock on his board.

His sky-surfboard was attached by foot straps. One in front and one in back. A cutaway cord ran down the interior of his pants and went through the rear strap, then moved forward across the board, held down in place by a small strip of velcro, to the front foot strap. This cutaway cord would usually be pulled just before landing or in an emergency situation.

One of the jumpers came in to dock on this feet, however, their foot kicked open the piece of velcro holding the cutaway cord in place. This opened up his front foot strap. Suddenly, it was a wing that was tossing him around like a rag doll. This chaos turned into a spin. He was almost horizontal as the board threw him around in circles. He tried to reach the cutaway cord to pull the rear footstrap so he could regain control but he lost consciousness from the centrifugal force.

An attempt to fly over and capture him was unsuccessful. We watched from below as the the AAD fired his reserve parachute. At 2000 feet, the sudden deployment stopped his spin and snapped his neck. His lifeless body floated down softly under canopy and landed in the still wake of Lake Okeechobee. We jumped in our vehicles to drive down

over the dike to the waters edge. One of the first men to arrive, his business partner and best friend and principal owner of the jump zone, jumped in and swam out to pull his body back. Then others jumped in to help him. By the time I pulled up, his body was being pulled to the shore. I sat watching his body as they tried to resuscitate him with mouth to mouth CPR. I could see, as they tried to lift his head to breath into it, that his neck was broken.

He was dead.

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