

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

THE MOTORCYCLE STUNTMAN — AND LEGENDARY DAREDEVIL — EVEL KNieVEL IS HELPED TO HIS FEET AFTER CRASHING DURING HIS ATTEMPT TO JUMP THIRTEEN FEET INSIDE WEMBLEY STADIUM IN LONDON IN MAY 1975



DAREDEVILS KARL WALLEND AND EVEL KNieVEL HAVE INSPIRED A HOST OF STUNTMEN WANTING TO FOLLOW IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS. HERE, FREDDY NOCK FROM SWITZERLAND BALANCES ON THE ROPEWAY OF A CABLE CAR ON GERMANY'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN IN AUGUST 2011

Discovery Channel's new show, *Heir to the Dare*, looks at some of the men and women who have sought to follow in Knievel's footsteps. And there are plenty of examples outside of motorcycle stunts too. Think of Jeb Corliss, who has jumped from the Eiffel Tower, the Seattle Space Needle, the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur and the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro. Or the magician David Blaine, whose stunts and illusions make him a natural heir to Houdini.

Think of Alain Robert, the 'French Spiderman', who climbs skyscrapers with absolutely no climbing equipment, including ropes, and most certainly without permission. And think too, of Felix Baumgartner, who jumped from the edge of space for a world record distance of 39 kilometres and broke the sound barrier with his body alone, before parachuting to safety.

But even considering all these monumental feats, there was a showmanship and a post-war bravado about that golden era of daredevils that somehow set it apart from the deeds of these talented and professional modern-day successors. In the white-star-on-blue stripes of Knievel's cape, and amidst the seven-person high-wire pyramids of the Wallenda family, there was just a glitzy preposterousness that is gone today.

MAYBE IT WAS THIS SENSE OF UNBRIDLED RISK, AT A TIME WHEN SUCH DANGER WAS STILL LEGALLY TOLERATED, THAT MAKES US LOOK BACK ON THOSE DAREDEVILS AS ANOTHER BREED. THEY LITERALLY LIVED AND DIED FOR DANGER

And of course, there were accidents. There were dozens of accidents. Karl Wallenda was not the first member of his family to die in performance; while Knievel used to say that he had broken

every bone in his body during his crashes — which while technically not true, the fact remained that there really were not many parts of his body that he hadn't destroyed over the years. Maybe it was this sense of unbridled risk, at a time when such danger was still legally tolerated, that makes us look back on those daredevils as another breed. They literally lived and died for danger.

The urge to do something challenging and possibly dangerous is probably as old as humanity, but true daredevilry really came into its own when technology and transport began to develop seriously. Early pioneers were people like Ethel Dare, whose real name was Margie Hobbs, and who was also known as 'The Flying Witch'.

Dare, who started out as a trapezist, was a famed exponent of the wing walk, in which a person steps out on to the wing of a bi-plane in flight. Later, she became the first person in history to cross from the wing of one aircraft onto another, far above the ground. Another stunt was to jump from a moving aircraft with a rope attached to her. Indeed, there is a significant case to be made for her having invented the bungee jump.

Another of Dare's wild feats saw her suspended in midair by a harness that she held — between her teeth. Sadly, she died at 28 years of age — not by wingwalking, but by parachuting with a failed harness at a Chicago air circus. However, in 1936 the US banned wingwalking below 1,500 feet (457 metres), because too many people had been dying.

And indeed, as the sobering news of the hire-wire accident spreads, this moment begins to feel like it marks the end of an era.

DAYS OF DARING

Previous years in America and Europe had been propelled by daring and bravado, whether it was a madman putting his life at risk on a motorbike or a high wire; or military men doing extraordinary new things just to see if they can be done. To break the sound barrier, to jump out of a balloon

from the edge of space, to walk on the moon. But already in 1978, it's a new era of health and safety, of laws and regulations. With Knievel's fading and Wallenda's death, something remarkable seems to be coming to an end.

You might think that this is unfair. After all, in 2014 we seem to be at an age when anybody can be a daredevil — a BASE jumper, an illegal climber of buildings, or a pioneer in a wingsuit. And it is true that there are a great many natural heirs to the daredevils of the last century.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The tightrope sways and wobbles. Slung between two towers of the Condado Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico, 10 storeys above solid pavement, it is shifting in the wind, the guide ropes beneath it insufficient to hold it steady. The man atop it, balding and wizened, has seen all this before. He is Karl Wallenda, scion of a legendary family of performers who have been synonymous with daredevilry for the best part of a century. He is 73 years of age, and

although he uses no safety harness, this moment of drama is barely exceptional for a man who has invented and tried virtually every type of high-wire stunt imaginable.

But today something is wrong. He can't steady the sway. He tilts his balancing pole sharply to the left, then the right, finally trying to sit down on the wire. And then he goes over the side, trying and failing to grab the wire as he goes. It's all on television — everything Wallenda does is on television.

He is a performer, a showman, an artist — and the live commentary from San Juan's WAPA-TV, in Spanish, rises an octave in concern. Wallenda never wears a harness. He knows it's over, all the way down 37 metres to the tarmac below. He dies on impact.

This is 1978, a year after another household name of bright-light thrills, Evel Knievel, has made his last ever jump — a failed practice for a leap over a tank of sharks at the Chicago International Amphitheatre.

Others eschewed technology and looked instead to natural wonders. Consider Annie Edson Taylor, who celebrated her 63rd birthday by going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, and remarkably, surviving. She lived to be 83 years old. Or John Holtum, a Dane who forged a career in California as a professional strongman, under the guise of 'The Human Target'. His signature move was to catch a cannonball fired from a cannon. Despite such endeavours, he nevertheless lived to his seventies.

Perhaps the ultimate early daredevil was the great Harry Houdini. He started life as a Hungarian immigrant called Ehrich Weisz, arriving in the United States in the 1870s. Surely the most famous escapologist of all time, Houdini's twist on daredevilry saw him put his life at risk in the hold of physical

HE WAS OFTEN SUSPENDED FROM A TALL BUILDING IN A STRAITJACKET; HANDCUFFED IN A CRATE THAT WAS LOWERED INTO A RIVER; AND EVEN BURIED ALIVE. HOUDINI WAS AN EXAMPLE OF DAREDEVILRY COMBINED WITH SHOWMANSHIP

restraints, then managing to bravely escape his way out of them.

The most famous of these stunts was Houdini's Chinese water torture trick, which saw him lowered, harnessed in restraints, into a cabinet filled with water. That was just one example of a host of alarming exploits: he was often suspended from a tall building in a straitjacket; handcuffed in a crate that was lowered into a river; and even buried alive. Houdini was an example of daredevilry combined with showmanship, and was for many years the most highly paid person in American vaudeville, having also made several movies. He eventually died in unlikely circumstances, from a ruptured appendix some time after being punched in the stomach by a cynical student.

THE FLYING WALLENDAS

It was into this era of emerging daredevil performances that the Wallendas emerged. Karl Wallenda was born in Magdeburg, Germany in 1905, into a rich tradition of

circus performance. The Wallendas circus troupe dated back to as far as 1780 in Old Bohemia, in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were acrobats, jugglers, clowns, aerialists and animal trainers. "They travelled through the villages of Europe setting up and performing in the city squares," says the family's official history. "Trusting in their talent and skills to provoke thrills and joy, relying on the generosity of the audience to reward them as they passed the hat around." In the late 1800s, for the next two generations, they would become best known for their expertise in the art of flying trapeze.

Against this background, it was no surprise when Karl began performing in the family show at the age of six. He was doing stunts in beer halls by 11 years old, such as stacking chairs on top of each other and doing a handstand on the top one. This was driven not just by daring but necessity in harsh mid-war Europe. His great-grandson Nik Wallenda describes in his autobiography how Karl was teased and beaten because his name was Czech not German.

"He challenged his tormentors with a wager — that he could climb the church steeple and do a headstand on the revolving weathercock. In an act of great daring, he won the bet hands down. He was nine." By this time, he writes, Karl was "his mother's sole breadwinner, working as a street performer for spare change to stave off his family's starvation."

By the 1920s, he was working on the high wires, having been joined by three others, including his brother and his future wife. Their signature act was a four-person, three-level pyramid, performed in Europe for years and having debuted in America in 1928, at Madison Square Garden. They had no net that day, as it had got lost during shipping. It's said that afterwards, the standing ovation lasted 15 minutes.

The fame of the Wallendas grew as they performed with the great circus marques of the day, such as Barnum & Bailey, and the Ringling Brothers. One day, the wire slipped as they were performing — all four fell to the wire. Yet as skilled acrobats, each of them held on and was unhurt. The recovery gained them a nickname that would stick: The Flying Wallendas.

But the Wallendas would be frequently associated with tragedy, too. In 1944, in Connecticut, a fire broke out. The performers survived, but 168 people died. Then in 1962 in the State Fair Coliseum in Detroit, the expanded show, now headlined by a seven-person chair pyramid, went horribly wrong. Watching from the platform was Karl's daughter Jenny, who should have been on a chair on the top of the pyramid but had been replaced at the last moment by another family member. She would later recall what she saw.

"As the three tiers of the pyramid took form with Jana seated in the chair on top,



ABOVE: AMERICAN STUNTCYCLIST AND DAREDEVIL EVEL KNieVEL SOARS OVER 17 CARS IN 1971. LATER THAT YEAR, HE BROKE THE CAR JUMPING RECORD CLEARING AN AMAZING 19 VEHICLES

something suddenly went wrong. Dieter [in the front position on the bottom of the pyramid] was losing control of the balance pole. I heard him cry out, 'I can't hold it any longer.' And right then, inches from where I stood, the pyramid collapsed. I watched it fall. It was the most horrible moment of my life," she describes.

"Dieter, Dick and Mario were the first to fall. Daddy and Herman tumbled from the second tier but held on to the wire. Miraculously, Daddy grabbed Jana as she fell and held her hand until an emergency

crew had time to run in with a net. Gunther was the only one who kept his balance and did his best to help Dadda and Herman. When it was over, my husband Dick was dead. Dieter died as well. Mario was paralyzed for life. Daddy suffered a cracked pelvis and double hernia. The impossible had happened, the inconceivable, the worst thing in the history of the Wallendas."

Yet perhaps no group has ever truly exemplified the phrase "the show must go on" quite like the Wallendas. The very next day, the survivors were back on the wire.

Karl, having snuck out of hospital, was one of them. He told his wife: "I feel like a dead man on the ground. I can handle the grief better from up there."

There would be other deaths. In the 1970s, while Karl was on the wire, his son-in-law Chico brushed against a high voltage clamp and fell to his death. But still, Karl just never stopped performing. He walked on wires between buildings, across stadiums, and eventually across the Tallulah Falls Gorge in Georgia at the age of 65. He performed headstands on the wire above



THE HIGH WIRE ARTISTES THE FLYING WALLENDAS WERE KNOWN FOR THEIR 'LIVING PYRAMID' ACT (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE TOP) BUT ON JANUARY 30, 1962 TRAGEDY STRUCK (OPPOSITE MIDDLE AND BOTTOM). WHILE BALANCED ON THE HIGH WIRE, ONE OF THE ACROBATS LOST HIS BALANCE RESULTING IN THE FATAL FALL OF TWO OF THE TROUPE AND SERIOUS INJURY TO TWO OTHER MEMBERS OF THE TEAM, INCLUDING KARL WALLENDAS



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN OPPOSITE, TOP); CORBIS

the Falls. And when he finally died in that Puerto Rico fall, his family reminded the world of something he once said: "Life is being on the wire. Everything else is just waiting."

MISTER UNBREAKABLE

Wallenda was already a seasoned performer by the time a baby called Robert Craig Knievel was born in the rough-

imaginative range of obstacles. The first one was over a box of rattlesnakes and two mountain lions. Later versions would include cars, other motorbikes, vans, trucks, the famous fountains at Caesars Palace casino in Las Vegas, buses, sharks and a canyon.

Clearly, Knievel had a certain amount of technical ability and a considerable amount of bravery, but he was not the best

motorcyclist ever to have lived, demonstrated by his unerring tendency to crash. No master physicist, his jumps weren't based on precise calculations about take-off speed, power or distance. He simply put ramps up and gave it a shot. Consequently, the Guinness Book of Records lists him for "Most broken bones in a lifetime", noting that he'd suffered

"AS THE THREE TIERS OF THE PYRAMID TOOK FORM WITH JANA SEATED IN THE CHAIR ON TOP, SOMETHING SUDDENLY WENT WRONG. DIETER WAS LOSING CONTROL OF THE BALANCE POLE. I HEARD HIM CRY OUT, 'I CAN'T HOLD IT ANY LONGER.' AND RIGHT THEN, INCHES FROM WHERE I STOOD, THE PYRAMID COLLAPSED"

and-tumble Montana town of Butte in October 1938. It was a tough town for a child: as he later noted, "there just wasn't anything else to do there but go into a bar or a whorehouse".

One day in 1946, young Robert was taken by his grandmother to see Joie Chitwood and his Auto Daredevil Show. The event would change his life. Watching stuntmen jump motorbikes through hoops of fire gave Knievel a sense of inspiration he certainly couldn't find anywhere else in Butte. The hard graft of working in Montana's mines after leaving school at 16 years old — plus a spell as what he called a "merchant policeman", which was actually a protection extortion racket — only convinced him there would be greater opportunities on a bike.

Evel Knievel's signature stunt became the ramp-to-ramp jump, conducted over an

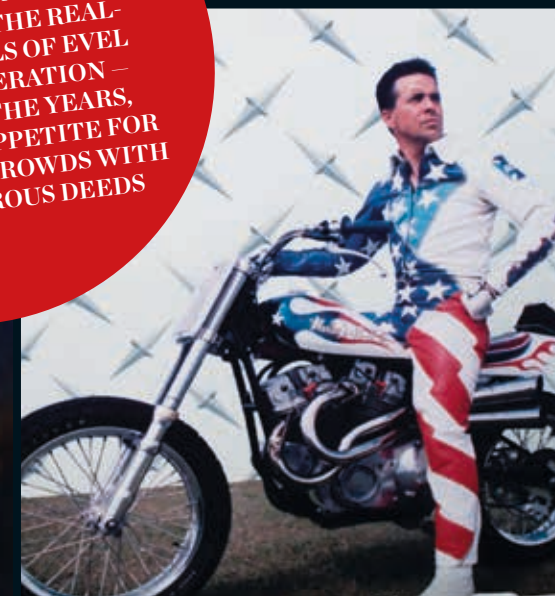
433 bone fractures by the end of 1975. And he didn't retire for another five years after that, a period that included at least one more major accident.

It often seemed as if the crashes were more frequent than the successful jumps — and considerably more popular. There was the incident where a bike hit him in the groin in Barstow; the broken arm and ribs in Missoula, Montana, when he tried to jump 12 cars and a van; or the concussion after landing on a panel truck in Graham, Washington. On the second attempt at the same jump a month later, he collected a broken wrist, knee and more ribs. Many more scrapes would follow.

For years, his most famous jump, the one that made him a worldwide star, was at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. The whole situation was classic Knievel. To get the stunt in the first

HEIRS TO THE DARE

IN DISCOVERY CHANNEL'S LATEST STUNT-DRIVEN SHOW, HEIRS TO THE DARE, WE MEET SOME OF THE REAL-LIFE DAREDEVILS OF EVEL KNIEVEL'S GENERATION — WHO DESPITE THE YEARS, STILL HAVE AN APPETITE FOR ENTERTAINING CROWDS WITH THEIR DANGEROUS DEEDS



SUPER JOE

Super Joe is a veteran and of the wild days of the 1990s Daredevil scene — he's retired but wants to get back into the game. Many of the stunts he performed during his career are now illegal, including jumping blindfolded from building to building, which made Evel Knievel himself refer to Super Joe as "crazy". Frustrated that he isn't currently jumping, Super Joe plans to do one very big jump to include rockets strapped to his backside to mark the 40th anniversary of Evel Knievel's failed jump across the Snake River Canyon. He's pumped to get back in the game with a successful jump.

"UNTIL I SEE MY TOY LINE ON THE SHELF I'M NOT GONNA GIVE UP. STAY TUNED, BECAUSE SUPER JOE REED IS GONNA FINISH WHAT EVIL KNIEVEL STARTED."



HENRY

Henry Rife is content jumping an all-terrain vehicle in his local Ohio town where he's considered a superhero. But he needs to make the leap to a wider audience if he wants to continue being a daredevil. Rife is in it purely for the thrill, but thrills don't pay the bills. A big jump should mean big money for Rife, but his only payment demands are free popcorn and free movie tickets. Those close to him want Rife to be more like Bubba (*see below*) and earn big bucks for big stunts so he can start profiting from his life as a daredevil.

"WHAT A DAREDEVIL DOES IS REALLY KIND OF LIKE A GLADIATOR... YOU WATCH SOMEBODY RISK HIS LIFE."

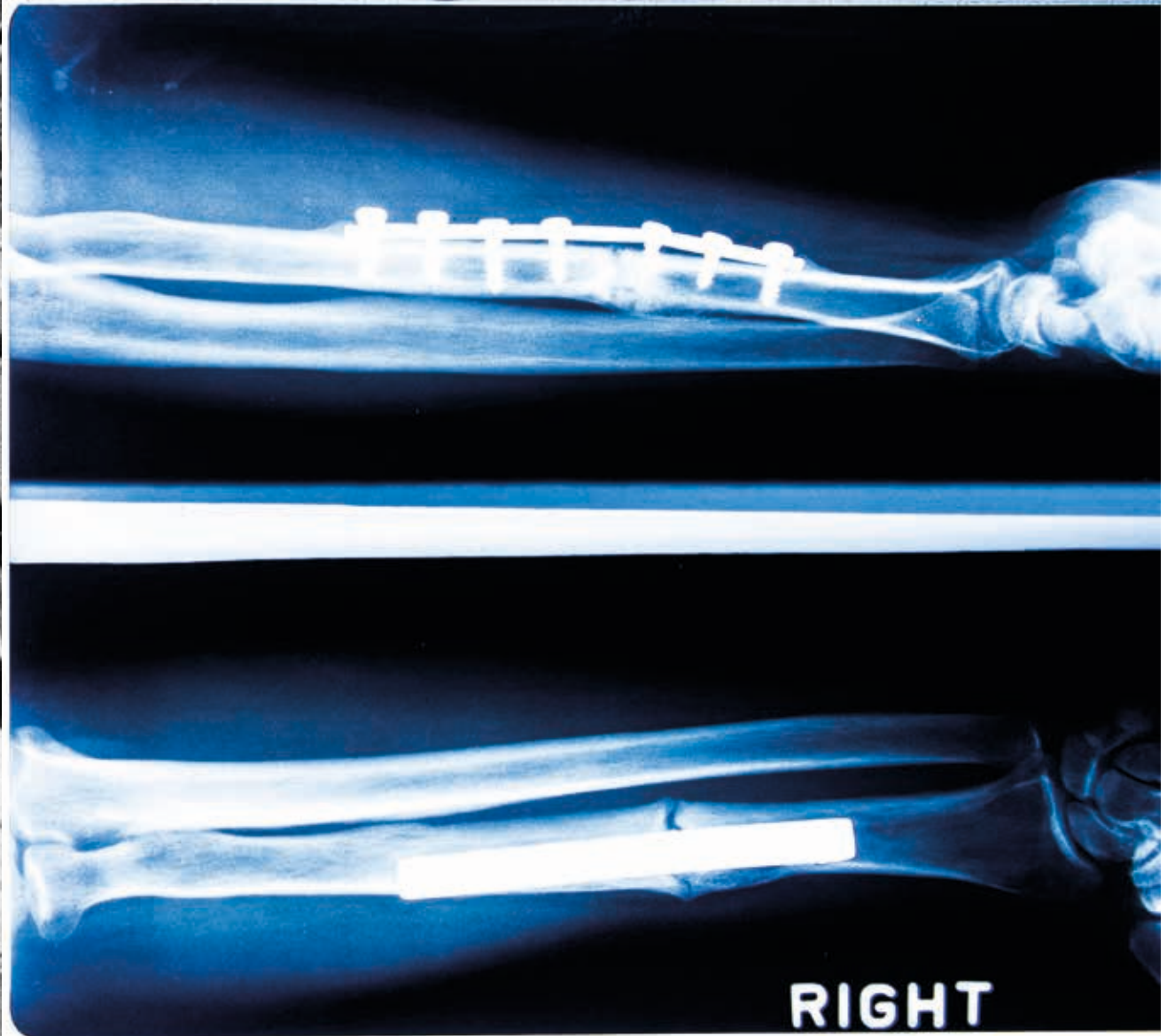
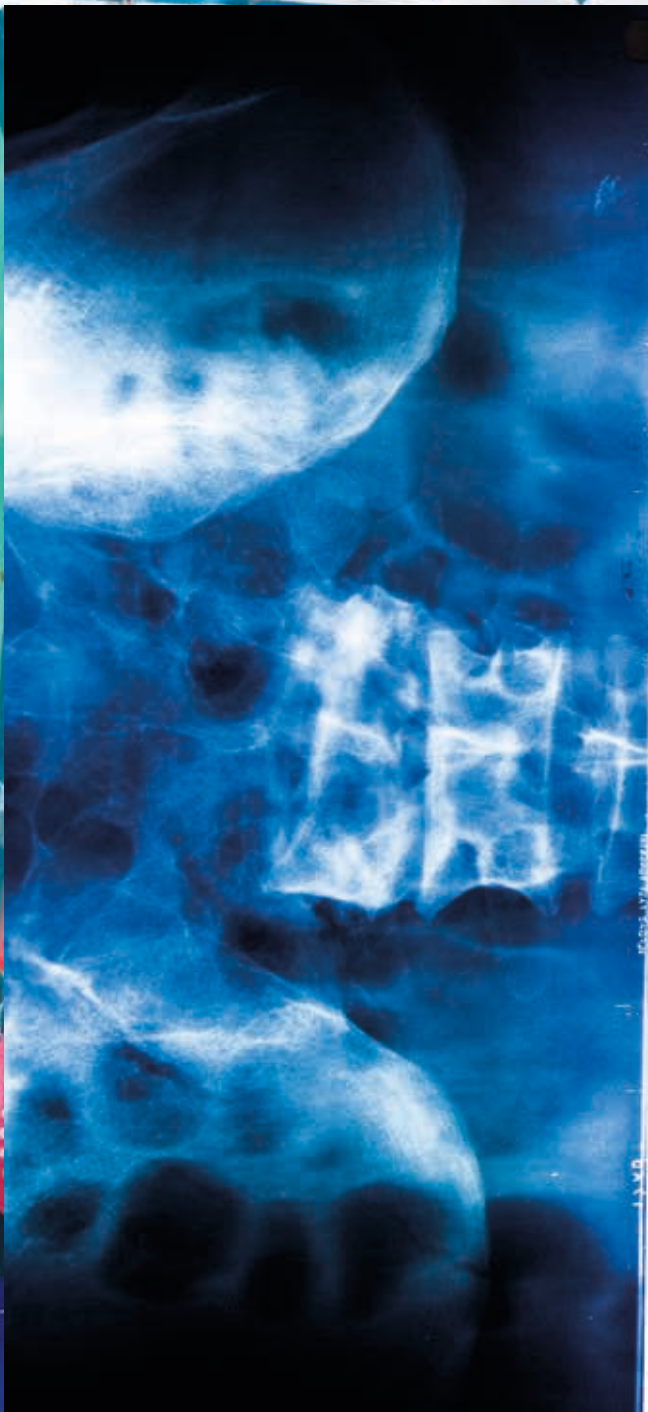


BUBBA

Stunt performer and world record holder Bubba Blackwell jumps dangerous distances and is best known for breaking Evel Knievel's jump records for both cars and buses. He's known as "King of the Harley" and he's had some really bad falls with 42 broken bones, to date. Bubba attempts jumps over objects that include helicopters with blades in full rotation as he earns big dollars for big jumps to support his family.

"IF I'M ABLE, I'LL GET UP. IF I'M NOT THEY'LL SCRAPE ME UP AND CART ME OUT OF THERE. I'M SCARED TO DEATH SOMETIMES."

PHOTO: DISCOVERY CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



ABOVE: BY THE END OF 1975, EVEL KNieVEL HAD SUFFERED 433 BONE FRACTURES, EARNING HIM THE GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS AWARD FOR "MOST BROKEN BONES IN A LIFETIME"

place, he needed an audience with the casino's chief executive, Jay Sarno. In order to be taken sufficiently seriously to get that audience, he invented a corporation and pretended to be several different lawyers making calls to Sarno's office.

Then he pretended to be a reporter from *Sports Illustrated*, then another from ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, asking about a man called Evel Knievel who was going to jump over his hotel. Once he got the deal, he couldn't get ABC to broadcast it live, so he spent most of his own money hiring

a director to film the jump. The director's wife, the actress Linda Evans, who would later become famous in TV's *Dynasty* series, served as camera operator to save costs.

On the day of the stunt, Knievel went in to the casino and placed \$100 on the blackjack table. He lost. He went to the bar, had a shot of Wild Turkey bourbon, and then went to perform. Jumping the fountains would be the longest motorcycle jump he would ever attempt, at 141 feet (43 metres). And it would prove to be too far. He lost it, coming down too short on the safety deck just ahead

of the landing ramp, loosening his grip on the handlebars. He came off the bike, skidded into the parking lot, crushing his pelvis and breaking his femur, hip, wrist and both ankles.

When Knievel awoke from a coma 29 days later, it was to some conflicting items of news. One was that his doctors said he might never walk again without crutches and that his jumping days were over. Another was that he was suddenly world famous, and that ABC had bought the rights to the film of the epic jump.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES, CORBIS (X-RAY)

"The footage of the crash was said to have been screened over the following years more than any other roll of film since the Zapruder footage of President Kennedy's assassination," writes Knievel's biographer Stuart Barker. "Children and adults alike around the world were captivated by the gory, slow-motion images of Knievel's body being battered, torn and crunched over the tarmac surface of his landing area. No one had ever seen anything quite like it before, and few thought they would see anything like it ever again," he wrote. "Surely Knievel

would never be able to ride again after such a horrendous crash, even if he wanted to?"

But that was the point about Knievel. He wasn't going to let a few broken bones get in his way. "He did ride again and he did crash again, but he always came back for more," says Barker. "If there's anything that Evel Knievel stands for it's the will to carry on against all the odds; to never say die and to never, ever give in."

The footage, needless to say, is easily found on YouTube, and is horrible to watch. It's impossible to narrate without using that

cliché about looking like a ragdoll, but that's exactly how it seems: not a human bouncing around on the ramp and the ground, but a powerless, soft, breakable toy. These videos, confronting though they are, have been seen many millions of times. Even so many years on, they are still irresistible.

But even the audacity of the jumps and the macabre popularity of the crashes don't fully explain Evel Knievel's popularity. This was also partly down to his image and his obsessive, exemplary self-marketing. Just look at a picture of him: the great flowing



MARKETING EVEL

Evel Knievel was more than a daredevil, he was a brand. In fact, his image is still trademarked and licensed today. There have been action toys, books, TV appearances, movies made about his life, plus an assortment of products named after him, including a pinball machine, a rock opera and a rollercoaster. Rapper Kanye West even parodied him in a music video as ‘Evel Kanyevel’. Knievel sued and settled out of court. As his licensing team claim, “Evel Knievel is one of the most recognizable figures anywhere.”

DAREDEVIL NIK WALLEND, THE GREAT-GRANDSON OF KARL WALLEND, WALKS ON A STEEL CABLE RIGGED OVER 400 METRES ACROSS A 400 METRE DEEP REMOTE SECTION OF THE GRAND CANYON NEAR LITTLE COLORADO RIVER, ARIZONA IN JUNE, 2013

PHOTO: REUTERS



FEARLESS

Koizumi of a bouffant atop his head; the Elvis-like leather jumpsuit opened most of the way to his navel to reveal a rugged hairy chest and a gold medallion. The stars and stripes, the red white and blue. And yes, the cape!

Perhaps in the 1970s it was possible to look this way and not appear ridiculous. Or maybe he just knew he looked ridiculous and didn't care. Either way, the image was part of his stardom, and spawned a world of merchandise; so much so that in the late 1970s, among the most cherished toys a child could have was the Evel Knievel action figure, atop a hand-cranked power generator called an Energizer. All the world over, kids would crash their Evel Knievel off tables, into sideboards and down various child-contrived ravines.

Having not only learned to jump (and crash), Knievel then set about finding a still greater challenge. He had long wanted to jump the Grand Canyon, yet having accepted he would never be allowed to do so, he settled instead upon the Snake River Canyon, in Idaho in 1974. This moment was, Barker says, “the literal and metaphorical apex” of his career.

Snake River was just over one kilometre wide. A massive jump. It couldn't be done on a bike, no matter how fast it went. So Knievel had built a rocket instead, grandly called the X-2 Sky Cycle, which would blast him into the sky at 350 miles per hour, then come down under a parachute. It was being screened via a pay-per-view model into cinemas, where audiences were watching it live. “It was the most hyped stunt in history,” says Barker. “And it didn't work.” Upon takeoff, Knievel's drogue parachute blew out, slowing it at the wrong time. His rocket descended gracefully, straight into the river. With it, seven years of planning went down the drain.

But it was only a failure in deed. Financially, it made him US \$6 million, at a time when millions really meant something. In terms of recognition too, he was just as much a celebrity for failing as

for succeeding. “Even by today's extreme-sports standards, Knievel's Snake River jump remains a monumental act of daring, bravado, showmanship, courage, and, for some, sheer stupidity,” says Barker. “Never again did he capture the collective imagination of the world in such a way, nor attempt anything quite so spectacular and original, or on such a magnificent scale.”

Knievel did continue jumping for several more years, only stopping after an accident hurt not just him but a bystander, a cameraman who lost an eye. But the rest of his life became more an alcohol-filled disappointment, leavened only by a period of retro-cool in the 1990s before his eventual death from diabetes and pulmonary fibrosis in 2007.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Curiously, considering their iconic status, Evel Knievel and Karl Wallenda were also friends. His great-grandson Nik Wallenda, now the most famous of the latest generation, quotes his father Terry in his book *Balance*. “One of [Karl's] closest friends was Evel Knievel,” Terry recalls in Nik's book. “The two men, bonded by their boldness, enjoyed a deep relationship. Neither knew the meaning of fear. And both had suffered a variety of mishaps. Both had persevered against overwhelming odds. You knew Evel was coming up the pathway to the house because you'd hear this loud clicking noise. This was the clicking from his broken bones. And yet, for all the pain, he was not a broken man. Neither was Karl. Until the very end, Karl stayed strong.”

So with Karl Wallenda's death and Knievel's retirement, was a golden age on daring now at an end? Yes and no. In some sense, the whole thing was coming to an end: the era of the circus, of the live performance element. Nik Wallenda recounts in his book the realisation as a child that, no matter what remarkable things his parents could do on a wire, their biggest threat was actually financial.

“By now I have absorbed the emotional truth. I am aware that the danger does not come from

any stunt that my folks practice in the backyard. The danger comes from the world itself,” he writes. “The world is not safe for performers like us because the world will not pay us enough to live.”

But one other thing that these two men had in common was to produce a line of people who followed in their footsteps. Tracking down the Wallendas is a complicated business: as the Wallenda family history puts it, “There are several distinct branches of the Wallendas performing today.” There isn't any mention of great-grandson Nik on the family's website. Karl's grandchildren, Tino and Delilah, each perform with their families; while two other grandchildren, Rick and Rietta, have performed as a team. On one occasion in 1998, all the performing family members were reunited, to recreate the seven-person pyramid — with a paralysed Mario, who had fallen from the wire in the original accident, watching.

One other member of the seven that day was Nik Wallenda, Karl's great-grandson, and now the most famous of them all. He has performed all manner of audacious feats over the years; including, with his mother Delilah, a recreation of the Puerto Rico high-wire stunt that killed his great-grandfather. But the most

famous by far was his tightrope walk directly over Niagara Falls in June 2012. A logistical as much as an artistic challenge, it took about two years of lobbying governments in the US and Canada in order to receive permission, and right up until the day of the walk there was a possibility that it might be axed. One necessary concession was that he wore a harness, against his own wishes. Though many in the late 1800s had crossed parts of the falls or the river

leading to them, nobody had ever crossed directly over the falls themselves. It was also the longest unsupported tightrope walk in history. He has since followed it by walking over the Little Colorado River Gorge, part of the Grand Canyon.

Similarly, Robbie Knievel, Evel's son, makes a living as a daredevil performer. He has completed more than 350 jumps and set 20 world records. Among his many jumps was a replicate of his father's famous crash at Caesar's Palace — Robbie landed safely, then said: “That was for you, Dad.”

These days the prodigies take inspiration from more other-worldly methods than Evel Knievel's pre-jump shot of bourbon. Nik Wallenda is profoundly religious, his book being as much about his faith as his walks. As he notes, “God's grace is the balancing pole that keeps me from falling into self-obsession and self-deception.”

Robbie Knievel has two grandchildren. Nik Wallenda has three children. Maybe they will follow in their illustrious ancestors' footsteps and continue to build dynasties of daredevil performance. But if they don't, they might still draw inspiration from what has gone before. Inspiration such as Evel Knievel's words, just before the Snake River Canyon jump.

“If I make it across the canyon, I'll drop to both knees and give thanks to God almighty I'm still alive,” he said. “And if I miss it and hit the canyon wall, it really makes no difference — because I'm just going to get somewhere quicker where you're going someday, and I'll wait there for you. Dying is a part of living, and while I'm alive I'm going to live it.” ●

"YOU KNEW EVEL WAS COMING UP THE PATHWAY BECAUSE YOU'D HEAR THIS LOUD CLICKING NOISE. THIS WAS THE CLICKING FROM HIS BROKEN BONES. AND YET FOR ALL THE PAIN, HE WAS NOT A BROKEN MAN-"

DOUBLE DARE

Risking life and limb is all well and good if you're a daredevil. But if you're an actor, perhaps you'd prefer to let someone else do the risky business on set. Enter **Zarene Dallas**, a stunt double to the stars. And while her rough-and-tumble celluloid life may seem glamorous, the reality can be very different indeed. *DCM* chats with her from her hospital bed. Yes, really.

If the golden age of daredevilry passed in the '70s, one can argue it lives on in the movies, where stunt performers attempt ever more remarkable and audacious feats — the difference being that they do it to make someone else look good.

Zarene Dallas is an accomplished stunt double whom you may well have seen, without ever knowing it, in films like *The Counselor* — a Ridley Scott movie in which she was a stunt double for Cameron Diaz — and *The Fast and the Furious 6*, in which she doubled for not one star but two: Michelle Rodriguez and Gal Gadot. That scene where someone rides a Ducati motorbike and jumps off it onto a moving army truck? That's Dallas.

The path to stunt work is different for everybody, but for Dallas it began with a love of horses in her native Australia. "In the beginning, I lived on horses all my life," she says. "I don't want to say I am a thrillseeker on horseback, but I was always interested in pushing parameters." When she moved to England, where she now lives, she learned a range of horseback tricks, hanging off the side, going all the way around a horse's body as it runs, standing on two horses, "and I thought: I really want to ride horses in films."

Research showed her that in order to even ride a horse in a film, she would have to be British Equity stunt-registered, which in turn

required training in six disciplines. This she did, for many years. "You've got to be at a very high level in many different sports, to have coaching, to pass exams and become a brown belt in martial arts, to get on the Equity stunt register," she says. She succeeded just under three years ago.

From there, things started to happen very quickly. "Within the first year, I had a pinch yourself moment," she says. "I was riding a Spanish horse, doubling Cameron Diaz, riding at a gallop with cheetahs all around me." The cheetahs, she adds, were filmed separately, but still, it's not a bad start.

While riding is her love and perhaps her specialty, the stunt performer has to be able to do a whole lot more besides. "For all that other work that comes along — motorbike stunts, or falls, or fighting — you've got to be a generally fit, coordinated, mobile person," she says. "It's best to have a lot in your toolbox, so to speak."

The elongated nature of film production is such that much of Dallas' canon is not yet out in cinemas, including not one but two films in which she is a stunt double for Nicole Kidman

One is *Paddington*, about Paddington Bear — which might not seem the most obvious film to need a stunt double, but you'd be surprised — and the other is called *Queen of the Desert*, based on the life of explorer Gertrude Bell. But is there actually any interaction with the

stars? "It depends on their actions," Dallas says. "When I doubled Michelle Rodriguez on *Fast*, I was on second unit — which is usually the action unit — and while I drove cars for her, there was no necessary interaction with



her. With Nicole Kidman, though, I had to show her things, test things with her, be aware that she is left-handed, counter her footsteps to line up a shot. I wanted to keep her as safe as possible. So I'll take the knocks of repeated action and do sequences that are more dangerous, and she'll do other things."

There are complications to being a female stunt double. One is that, even if in padding, the double can't be any larger than the star, such is the movies' fixation with

HORSERIDING WAS THE PASSION THAT LED ZARENE DALLAS TO HER CAREER IN STUNT DOUBLE WORK. HERE, SHE DOUBLES FOR CAMERON DIAZ ON THE SET OF *THE COUNSELOR*. OPPOSITE: MOTORBIKE STUNT WORK IS ALSO PART OF DALLAS' ARSENAL.



women's size. "I can be smaller than the person I'm doubling, or the same size, but I can't be bigger than her, that's for sure."

The other is that female movie stars are often depicted wearing very little, thereby limiting the amount of protection that can be worn by the stunt performer. In that respect, is a stunt woman's job harder than a stuntman's? "It's difficult, and tricky to compare," she says. "But if you're wearing a dress above the knee and high heels, you can't also wear pads. You're going to hit the cement."

"I remember my first job, doubling a very petite model who had become an actress. I had to run towards an explosion. My boss didn't want me stuffing up the shot by wearing any pads on my knees or my thighs or anywhere. And I had to hit the tarmac, and hit the tarmac, and hit the tarmac. It is tough."

It appears a glamorous existence, but what's the reality? "There is a great deal of graft and tedium," she says. "I've been working on *The Avengers* doing 12 or 14 hour days, but I could be sitting in the green room waiting for some action, or to go to a rehearsal. The whole day might go past. A whole week might go past, and you don't get on set."

"But obviously there is the exotic side. You might be in Istanbul today, Australia tomorrow, or Longcross army base in Surrey the day after, in a freezing cold corrugated iron studio."

Where does she think stunt performers fit within the tradition of daredevils? "There's a difference," she says. "A stunt performer, at least now, takes a calculated risk, and is all about safety. If I do a stunt walking in front of a car that is doing a handbrake turn, that will have been rehearsed at very low speed with great distances between you and the car."

"Historically, a stunt performer would have come from being a daredevil," she suggests, and perhaps then the line was more blurred. Clearly respectful of the forerunners of her profession, she recalls a famous stunt by Yakima Canutt in the 1939 John Ford movie *Stagecoach* in which he dropped from a coach between six running horses, then climbed back on to the stagecoach again (a stunt so revered that it was repeated, using a truck instead of horses, by stuntman Terry Leonard in the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). That, by any measure, has an element of daredevilry about it. "That sort of stuff is just phenomenal," Dallas says.

Stunt performers do not earn anything like the stars for whom they double. There is a decent daily rate, Dallas says, and an 'adjustment' of additional pay for particular stunts, but it's hard to work out quite how they are calculated relative to the risk involved. "I don't think you can ever be paid enough to risk breaking your neck," she says. "I ran alongside a moving tank on *Fast and the*

Furious 6 and, yes, there was an adjustment given, but I can't say how they decided to give me that figure on top of a daily fee."

It is clearly not without danger. Dallas says she was "black and blue for most of my rehearsals" on *Fast*, "and you take that as part of the job, part of the craft." But just days before our interview, Dallas has been injured rehearsing a stunt for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, badly breaking her ankle when preparing a scene in which she is supposed to be rescued by Captain America (who clearly didn't do much of a job in the rescuing). Our interview is conducted while Dallas, with pins in her ankle, sits in a plaster cast.

What's it like to be part of an epic production like *Avengers*? "When you're with a good team it can be like being part of a family. You can have a really good close-knit unit, you get along well with other departments, and everyone pitches in, whether it's the arts department, props, costume, vehicles, carpenters or special effects. It's like a little moving city. It's huge: everything is on a massive scale, down to the caterers, and you're a cog in the wheel."

In her mid-30s now, she doesn't envisage "taking whacks and falls at 50 years of age", and is considering ending up as somebody involved in stunt safety. "I see that as a long term goal. Everyone can learn from an accident." ●