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Local sky diver mourned

Dies in California accident

The Boston Globe



Stephen Millard Harrington, decked out in a blue "wingsuit."

By Matt Rocheleau
Globe Correspondent / November 14, 2009

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It was far from the first time that he jumped out of an airplane, but a photo taken of 40-year-old Stephen Millard Harrington hours before he died in a sky diving accident in California shows him smiling with passionate anticipation as if he had not taken such a leap more than 3,000 times before.

There he was, "in his true element," his friend Justin Shorb recalled, decked out in a blue "wingsuit" designed to allow skydivers to soar through the air. Soon after the photo was taken, Harrington joined 67 other skydivers Wednesday for a record-setting jump to raise money for a charity.

Later that afternoon, Harrington jumped again to celebrate the new record with four other wingsuit fliers. But, upon exiting the plane, friends and family members said they believe that Harrington may have struck the tail of the plane, knocking him unconscious.

Harrington, a Wellesley High School graduate and Boston area information technology specialist, was pronounced dead after landing in a driveway in Murrieta, Calif., about 100 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

"Steve was an experienced skydiver and wingsuiter, with over 3,000 jumps," said his husband, Adam Wright. "He was a wonderful, caring, loving husband. We are completely devastated by the loss of Steve."

Wright said Harrington text-messaged him after the record-breaking jump to say he was excited about breaking a record at the event he had spent months preparing for.

"Being a part of that team and being a part of that jump meant everything to him," said Shorb, a 28-year-old fellow skydiver from Manchester, N.H.

Harrington and Shorb met in 2006, cofounded Flock University, a wingsuit school based in Massachusetts, and became close friends through wingsuit jumps they made together nearly every weekend, weather permitting. In a

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phone interview yesterday, Shorb remembered the man he skydived with more than 1,000 times at sites around the world.

Wingsuit flying “was his absolute favorite thing to do, in terms of sky diving,” he said. “He was always a blast to fly with. I went on a lot of cool jumps with Steve.”

During one of their more memorable sky diving adventures, on what Shorb described as “an absolutely beautiful day” this past June, the two jumped together and wingsuit glided in and out of tall clouds, which was fun and relaxing, he said, but caused them to lose track of where they were supposed to land. They wound up in the yard of someone who was throwing a graduation party, which caused comical confusion when the partiers thought the unexpected guests from above had been hired to make an appearance at the gathering, Shorb said.

Harrington began skydiving on a whim with his twin brother in 1991. After drifting away from the sport, Harrington discovered wingsuiting, and “it just made me feel alive again,” said a tribute on www.flockuniversity.org, Flock University’s website.

Jeff Donohue, 38, a Norwood native who lives in Foxborough, knew Harrington for about four years and said Harrington helped teach him to wingsuit jump. Of the nearly 550 times Donohue has jumped, Harrington was there for around 90 percent of them, he said.

“He was an incredibly kind-hearted guy,” Donohue said in a phone interview yesterday. “The word unassuming comes to mind. He was low-key, a non-attention seeker. . . . The quiet unassuming character is not what you expect to see in this sport. But his calm personality put a lot of people at ease.”

Both Donohue and Shorb recalled Harrington’s attention to safety. He would often check and recheck his own and others’ gear to make sure everything was the way it should be.

“He was incredibly safety-focused,” Donohue said. “He was one of the most conservative skydivers out there.”

And though he said he will not give up wingsuit diving, Donohue said the accident made him briefly reconsider his future in the sport.

“I thought if it can happen to Steve, it can happen to anyone,” he said. “It can happen to me. The slightest of errors” can be disastrous.

“It’s been a very hard thing for us to deal with,” said Shorb, referring to himself and other members of the skydiving community.

Wednesday’s record-setting wingsuit jump raised \$5,000 for a Los Angeles charity, said Eli Bolotin of Raise the Sky, a nonprofit group based in Massachusetts that sponsored the event. The jump was expected to be officially certified as a record by the United States Parachute Association, he added.

“Skydiving in general was very important to him, and he was a very charitable person,” Wright said.

Shorb recalled Harrington making personal phone calls to family and friends back home asking them to donate.

Harrington was an information technology professional at Wellington Management Co. for 12 years. In addition to Wright, his partner of 10 years, he leaves his twin brother, Parker, two other brothers, Fred and Jonathan, his mother, Charlotte, and father, Skip.

His friends were moved by the expression on Harrington’s face in the photo taken by skydiving photographer Scott Burns on the day he died.

Said Shorb: “He was beaming and pumped up for the jump, and Scotty just happened to see him there smiling and took the photo.”

Globe correspondent Caitlin Castello contributed to this report, which included material from the Associated Press. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mrocheleau@globe.com. ■

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