

## Logging a Life: Remembering Eric "tonto" Stephenson, D515

3 March 1962 – 28 October 2007

By Taya Weiss D27874

Soon after we first met in 2002, Eric explained that he had four personalities. I must have really liked him, because it seemed reasonable that he had named them all as well: tonto was the skydiver. Shadrack was friendly and social. Dominic was the muscle, the one who used to carry the gun but was now on permanent holiday in the Himalayas finding himself. Eric was the man I fell in love with and the adoring father of his two daughters, Caleigh and Shanna. When he asked me to marry him, hanging off the top of a multi-pitch climb in Harrismith at Easter four years later, I said yes to all of them.



Eric touched many people's lives on his journey, and skydiving was the path that led him to those he felt he was meant to teach and learn from. I get messages from people all over the world who learned from him, miss him, and wonder how to cope with the empty space where he used to be, in the sport of skydiving and the broader universe.



**He taught a fire safety course for crèche teachers in Kliptown.  
Not many people knew this side of him.**

In trying to answer them, and to soothe the longing that still tears at my heart, I go back to the man who was, above all, my best friend. On October 23rd, 2007, he wrote to me about Jabu (a packer at JSC): "Hi Love, You probably heard that Jabu's wife was killed in a Taxi accident on Saturday. I deposited R500 from the 2 of us into the JSC funeral account. I'll give him a little cash next time I see him too. I'm always amazed at how few people realise what a meaningful contribution they make to our sport. Death visits all of us. We're all equal in the end. I love you. t". He gave of himself generously to those he cared for and to those who needed him the most, valuing relationships over material things right up until the very end.



Few, if any, skydivers at Eric's level of the sport keep a logbook as diligently as he did. He logged love, relationships, Formula 1 seasons, and bottles of wine in the same place he kept a record of his jumps. When he made a small but fatal swooping mistake five days after writing his eloquent last lines on death, there were only four jumps missing. It was a heavy but loving task to fill them in, and I did. He wouldn't have it any other way.

**This is part of his story, and the path we walked together.**

### **Jump 1**

2 February 1985  
Location: Citrusdal  
Aircraft: Cessna 206  
Type Jump: Static Line  
Altitude: 2500  
Target Dist: ZAP  
Ground wind: 8  
Main Chute: L9  
Aux. Chute: 26 Lopo  
Air work: Static Line  
Parachutist or Pilot's Signature: A. Scalabrino D278  
Remarks: "Look up more and count. Welcome to the sky!"

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### **Jump 140**

Date: 14 February 1987  
Location: Dorset, England  
Aircraft: C172  
Type Jump: Hop & Pop  
Altitude: 5500  
Delay: 20 seconds  
Target Dist.: 15  
Sur. Wind: 15  
Main Chute Type: Unit One!  
Aux. Chute: Lopo 26  
Air Work: No one keen for RW, pissed off  
Parachutist or Pilot's Signature: Billy Goat Gruff  
Remarks: "Exit ok, bad spot, spiralled and had canopy collapse. Shattered femur."



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### **Jump 1000**

Date: 12 April 1992

Location: Perris Valley

Aircraft: Twin Otter

Type Jump: 10 way

Altitude: 12500

Delay: 65 seconds

Target Dist: 16:10

Sur. Wind: 3-5

Main Chute Type: Peregrine

Aux. Chute: 150R

Remarks: "One Thousand Dives. Wow."

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### **Jump 2000**

Date: 1 April 1995

Location: Carletonville

Aircraft: C-182

Equipment: AR-7

Altitude: 6000

Delay: 5 seconds

"Team dive with Ricky and Tony. Ricky in good Base-pin. Tony very slow and not very aware on the catch. Cam got me a killer pic!!!"

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### **Jump 3000**

Date: 11 March 2000

Location: JSC

Aircraft: C-206

Equipment: Jonathan

Altitude: 10000

Delay: 51 seconds

"AFF LVI with Marius. Exciting stuff!!"

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### **Jump 3322**

Date: 13 January 2002

Location: JSC

Aircraft: C-210

Equipment: Tandem

Altitude: 10000

Delay: 30 seconds

"Tandem with Caleigh. Very brave girl!! Skydiver Cay!"



**Eric loved his daughters with everything he had to give. Sharing the sky with his family – Caleigh twice; Shanna when she turned 9; and me – was like getting to heaven early.**

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## **Jump 3336**

Date: 20 January 2002  
Location: JSC  
Aircraft: C-210  
Equipment: Jonathan  
Altitude: 10000  
Delay: 51 seconds  
AFF L5R [repeat] with Anne. No release.

Less than a week after this jump, I met Eric. I had just arrived in Johannesburg, a refugee from my Harvard-graduate life San Francisco, looking to use my education to make the world a better place. I had 138 skydives. He arrived on a street corner in Yeoville at dawn to give an American stranger a lift to the dropzone after reading about my move to South Africa on dropzone.com. I was sitting outside in the gray morning stillness with my gear bag when he pulled up in his Mazda Sting and got out. Caleigh and Shanna were asleep in the back seat; I was reassured that he wasn't an axe murderer. Anyone actually willing to drive into Yeoville in January 2002, with its frequent shootings, carjackings, and thriving drug scene, might have been. I was surviving there for the affordable rent.

We drove on the M1 South passing the city on the left as the sun rose. Mist hung over the downtown skyline, the kids slept quietly in the back, and we started a conversation that lasted for the five years and eight months we shared. That morning, we talked about apartheid, about war, social justice, truth and reconciliation. He was not your average white South African male. Eric cared about these things, and his place in his country's history, more than tonto or Shadrack would ever let on.

My first jump in Africa was a two-way with Clyde Holland out of the C-210 at JSC. It was the only jump I did that weekend and I landed off. Clyde came to pick me up after a bit of a hike, and I got plenty of funny comments about looking out for the lions in the veldt. I was still quite American then, with an obviousness that faded as South Africa became home. Eric looked on with amusement.

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## **Jump 3345**

Date: 2 February 2002  
Location: JSC  
Aircraft: C-210  
Equipment: Jonathan  
Altitude: 10000  
Delay: 51 seconds  
"Freefly with Taya. Nice head-down launch. Answer to [a question he asked himself on jump] 3075: Not Long."

On the way up to altitude on our first two-way jump, Eric sat behind me. Around 5000 feet he reached over and ran his finger lightly along the edge of my right ear; it was an odd thing to do but very tender, and we joked about it for years

afterwards. He said the light was shining through my ear and he wasn't thinking straight. We exited head-down and he grinned at me the whole way.

At the end of that weekend I turned 25. We had dinner at Café Espresso in Parkhurst (two plates of cubed fillet, rare, candlelight). We didn't know each other that well, but for some reason the conversation felt intimate. We talked about writing letters to dead people, something we discovered we both did. He told me about being at Perris when the Otter crashed in 1992. I told him about my childhood friend who died of cancer when I was 12. More than anyone I had ever met, he embraced the impermanence of time instead of running from it. I saw someone who had seen as much, if not more, death than I had, and was still in love with life.

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## **Jumps 3360 and 3362**

Date: 10 February 2002

Location: JSC

Aircraft: C-210

Equipment: Jonathan

Altitude: 10000

Delay: 46 seconds each

"Fun sit with Taya. Really very nice, but I'm still sitting on my back." Then, "Sit headdown with Taya. Hard! But went onto my head at the end. Pretty girl." And above both entries, "Taya Begins".

He invited me over for dinner on Valentine's Day.

We fell in love.

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## **Jump 3516**

Date: 8 June 2002

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Jonathan

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 57 seconds

"AFF Level I with Elna. Very slow start."

Elna (Elle to her friends), despite the slow start at AFF, quickly became my best friend in Joburg. She had a beautiful house in Melville, a deck of Tarot cards, two dogs that she only spoke to in Afrikaans, and a refrigerator magnet that said, "Faith is the daring of the soul to go further than it can see." She loved to cook dinner, even if it was just Woolie's lasagne, and was looking for a deeper purpose to her life. She also understood why and how I loved Eric, a man 15 years older than me, at a time when some were sceptical that we could build something lasting. She crawled right into my heart and stayed there.

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## **Jumps 3885 and 3886**

Date: 22 June 2003

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Stiletto

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 52 seconds each

Eric did two AFF dives that day with someone else, then wrote: "ELLE GOES IN".

He was the Chief Instructor when the fatality at JSC occurred. Elle had 66 jumps that Sunday afternoon and no AAD or RSL; she cut away and then struggled with her reserve handle, pulling it eventually but too late. He walked out to the site of

impact alone, and I saw him stand there from a distance. He looked down, and then he sank behind the high grass. I watched him and then I couldn't let him be alone, so I started walking out across the dirt road. Deon came too.

What I witnessed was the naked truth of human fragility, and the truth of that particular time and place belongs only to the three of us who were there. Late afternoon sun glowed through opaque clouds on the horizon. The wind had died and the air was still. The ground was as solid as it has always been: without remorse, uncaring, beyond moralizing.

Losing Elle forced us to consider why we jumped, and how to love each other in a sport where any day could end this way. We talked about what it meant. We held each other. He got out Elle's written A-license test later that week – he saved all of his students' tests and I still have this one. She had done well. Still, he was tortured by his inability to have changed the outcome. Every day we took another step towards acceptance, slowly, out of necessity, and together. We loved each other. We were still here. The course of someone's life is beyond any human understanding or control.

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## **Jump 3946**

Date: 13 September 2003

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Stiletto

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 48 seconds

"Sitfly with Taya! Very nice! My love can catch me!"

Within a few months we were smiling again in the sky.

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## **Jump 4000**

Date: 16 November 2003

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Heatwave

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 60 seconds

"Birdman Rodeo dive with Taya! Cool! Busy on the exit, then perfect heading control. Good turn after she left."

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## **Jump 4316**

Date: 14 August 2004

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Hornet

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 60 seconds

"Taya's 1st Birdman dive!"



**A year later in 2004, I did my first wingsuit jump (he had 39 by then, according to his logbook) and our flocking adventures began.**

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## **Jump 4453**

Date: 30 December 2004

Location: Eloy, AZ

Aircraft: King Air

Altitude: 20600

Equipment: Safire 119

Delay: 234 seconds

“High altitude dive with Taya – wings. 12k: 91 – 9k: 76 – 6k:64 – 3k: 53. Good speed – lost T on bottom half.”



**We went to Eloy and Perris at the end of 2004 to get our Birdman Instructor Ratings. He said this jump made him feel like he was truly flying for the first time. I was hypoxic and didn't have his energy at the end, but I loved the glow he had for the rest of the week.**

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## **Jump 5000**

Date: 31 October 2006

Location: Cross Keys, NJ

Aircraft: PAC 750XL

Altitude: 13000

Equipment: Safire

Delay: 97 seconds

“Very nice to share.”

Soon after I went back to the US for the academic year to start my Master's degree at Princeton University, Eric came to visit. It had only been a few months, but it felt like an eternity. Getting into the sky together was like stumbling into a cold lake after a Saharan marathon. It was getting cold on the east coast towards winter time, and it was a Tuesday so there weren't many people at the DZ, but we had a perfect day. I wrote next to his logbook entry: "5000 over New Jersey. I'm so proud of you. I love your smile in the sky. Thank you for sharing this special jump with me, and a neighbouring Boeing! LOVE. -T BMI SA003".

That's right- if you signed his logbook, you had to put a license or instructional rating of some kind. Even after he had 5000 jumps.

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## **Jump 5032**

Date: 9 December 2006

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Balloon!

Altitude: 5400

Equipment: Safire

Delay: 29 seconds

"Very windy. Dragged on take-off: Fast climb to altitude, at 600fpm. Felt heart beating after exit. Good flight. Landed at the Zenex 7km away, Johan broke fib. Dian hooked in at the pond L"

We spent what seemed like endless time after Dian's accident following his progress, hoping and praying that he would be okay. And...

He was.

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## **Jump 5038**

Date: 30 December 2006

Location: Citrusdal

Aircraft: Porter

Altitude: 12400

Equipment: Safire

Delay: 107 seconds

"Last dive at Citrusdal. Beautiful. 2 way wingsuit with Sam (980). Very cool day."

Saying goodbye to the place where he did his first jump was bittersweet; as usual, he was very practical about impermanence, but it was important to be there at the end.

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## **Jump 5209**

Date: 16 June 2007

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Altitude: 10700

Equipment: Velo 84

Delay: 40 seconds

"Tandem with Shanna for her 9th birthday. Wonderful!"



I was in Belgium on Shanna's birthday, so we exchanged emails and pictures on the 17th and 18th of June. I wrote:

"I loved my CRW jump. I've always loved it I think--but it's a lot easier with 4kg of weight and a 126 than under the 143 with twenty weight belts!! I was still too light to do a proper dock so there was some serious human/canopy thrashing about-type interaction. Which of course I enjoyed. You taught me so much about being brave. I missed you this weekend, and I miss you now. The pics of Shanna's dive are amazing. There is so much love in all of them, and so much sharing of joy--I had to fight back some tears. We get these moments of extreme humanity, and so often for us they happen in the sky. Being able to truly share that with your daughter is just beautiful. She clearly got it, with her eyes and her heart wide open. That look in the door as she sees open door, blue sky for the first time--powerful stuff. I love you. -T"

He wrote back:

"Ah, my love, I never taught you anything about being brave. I think I was just there some of the time when you discovered it within yourself. Remember the 1st dive we did at Eloy and how nervous I was? You helped me through that. We can help each other be brave. I called Shanna today and sang her happy birthday and she cried. I think she has an adrenaline hangover. I know she'll get over it though, and the experience was an overwhelmingly positive one. The vibe on the ground after the landing was amazing... I do wish you could have been there though, but I have that feeling whenever I experience anything really special. Somehow, I feel if it were shared with you, it would be even MORE special. I love you. I'll be home all night, so if you get a chance to Skype me, I'll be there. t".

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## Jump 5283

Date: 6 July 2007

Location: Cochstedt

Aircraft: AN2

Equipment: Safire

Altitude: 8000

Delay: 64 seconds

He was too busy for eloquence during our trip to Germany, so he let me write this one: "I love you. Thanks for entangling with me on the ground, in that wind, and in life! Yours always. -T D27874".

The winds were howling by the time we got out after a half-hour climb to 8000 feet for a wingsuit jump. We both landed backwards. I was getting dragged with my eye on my cutaway handle, desperately trying to reel in my break line. He came in right next to me, both of us laughing. Our canopies entangled on the ground and collapsed: no cutaways necessary. It was our last two-way.



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## Jump 5312 and 5313

Date: Saturday, 27 October 2008

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Safire

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 88 seconds

Wingsuit jumps with Matteo, testing student Firebirds. Matteo told me, and I wrote in Eric's logbook, "It was one of my proudest days. I got to jump with him as a mentor and teacher, but I got to jump with him as a friend and an equal. I will never forget the happiness those jumps brought me."

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## Jump 5314

Date: Sunday, 28 October 2008

Location: JSC

Aircraft: Porter

Equipment: Velo

Altitude: 11000

Delay: 48 seconds

AFF L5 with Agnieszka. Eric begins the Long Flight.

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## Jump ASH DIVE

Date: 28 June 2008

Location: JSC

Aircraft: PAC 750XL

Equipment: Safire 99

Altitude: 11500

Delay: 96 seconds

"2 way Taya and tonto. You were my soulmate and best friend, life partner, fiancé, my heart. This last time, soft landings for you. You said: 'In the end, the feeling I'm left with is only love. Love for you. Love for us. Love for the world that streams below us as we fly together.' (June 2007). Fly on, my love. I will always love you. Till next time. Your -T D27874".

On the eight month anniversary of his death, Eric's mother Edith and I went to JSC with a small portion of his ashes. Familiar faces on a sunny day: Charis, Stuart, Ma, the riggers, DJ Ed, PJ, Pears, Pottie, Marius, Dian. I saw more than one friend whose survival after skydiving accidents we had prayed for together, and who had made it back to the dropzone in one piece. It was so hard to know that all I had left was what I had to let go.



Edith is one of the strongest women in the history of the world. She gave me a picture of Eric as a young boy to carry with me in my wingsuit pocket. She put her hands on my shoulders and her forehead against mine (I was thinking: just like he used to do) and she said, "He was my son. He came from my womb. His life started with me, and it ends with you." I missed Caleigh and Shanna. My heart shattered from missing them, as it often does now, and I did what I have to: sweep up the pieces and hope for a day when they come looking for me.

I walked to the plane with a red pouch strapped to my left wrist. I sat at the back of the PAC with Raymond in front of me, and I closed my eyes, and breathed, and focused. I felt Eric's presence. I was in the Porter. He was smiling, with a student. He was kissing me in the door. I was in the AN2 and our eyes were closed, curtains on the plane windows. He laughed when I kissed the pilot's hand before exit. I saw him behind my closed eyes. I felt him.

Tears streamed down my face, and Raymond took my hand, and prayed. Millions of years later, we got to altitude.

After everyone else was out, I flew. The air felt dense, and everything was slow. He was off my left wingtip, he was underneath me, he was the air and the sky and my beating heart and the planet below me.

I pulled, open above 5000. I looked up at the sky and down at JSC. Home. I opened up the pouch, took out the plastic bag, and said goodbye. He – pieces of him – streamed out of the bag to my left side. Going home, softly. A last jump, a last chance to fly. He went back to where we all come from. Raymond flew on my right, an honour guard. I landed softly in the place where he had left us. I felt like I was made out of lead: very, very heavy. Edith and Ma held me as I sobbed. The sun bright, the earth red, the breeze soft, the sky brilliant blue, the birds alive, the grass still growing. Everything in vivid colour. Everything heavy and bright, almost bleeding with the memory of him.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers were on the speakers as I walked in to the clubhouse. His favourite band. I put down my kit. Slowly, the world started turning again, and I got lighter.

I ate a banana, got packed up, gave packer Justice a hug, and then I did what felt right.

I kitted up for the next jump.

**-T D2787**

