



DOCUMENTARY
FILMS

FLY

Directed by: Shaul Schwarz and Christina Clusiau

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It was almost seven years ago, following the death of the famous climber and base jumper Dean Potter, that we set out to make a short film. That's how we would eventually meet Jimmy and Marta, who were introduced to us as the "Mom and Pop" of the sport. Two things became immediately clear: First, we did not want to create a film about someone who had already died, and second, this would not be a short film. We were intrigued by those who wanted to jump off cliffs with parachutes and wondered about their motivations. Similar to our previous films, we are more interested in raising questions than providing answers. Who were these individuals, and why would someone dare to risk their life for something they love, knowing it could possibly kill them? For outsiders, BASE jumpers are often described as a reckless death cult, but the people we met and spent the last six years with celebrated life and pursued their dreams in a way that was hard not to find inspiring. "Die Living," said Chris, a BASE jumper, while waiting at a misty exit point in Switzerland. We quickly understood that the lives of those who are willing to step into the void are informed by that decision. "I'm afraid of dying; I love living," says Espen Fadnes, a 20-year veteran of the sport. "But mostly, I'm afraid of not being who I am." For the next few years, we focused on that dilemma, dreams of flight versus laws of physics. But, the film took another turn. It became a story of three couples and how to navigate relationships while making a living in the world's most dangerous sport.

Jimmy and Marta have taught more people to BASE jump than anyone else in the world. "!!! WARNING !!! You will die. You were born, you will live, and you will die." These are the first words a student reads in the introduction to Jimmy and Marta's first BASE jump course. Jimmy always preaches safety to his students, often reminding them that the sport is not for everyone. As a child, he dreamed of flight, and ever since he tasted his first jump, he never looked back. "Marta

taught me to jump, and then she taught me how to teach BASE jumping.” In a sport dominated by men, Marta is a living legend. With more than 30 years of experience and a record of never being hurt, it is not uncommon to see BASE helmets with a sticker reading WWMD (What Would Marta Do?). “In the beginning, we were pioneering and figuring out what worked and what didn’t,” Marta told us as she explained how she would tweak her skydiving gear to help invent modern BASE gear. “When I started jumping, we were outlaws. It was not a sport; we were criminals. It’s great to see that today, we are considered athletes.”

“It’s truly about a group of people in pursuit of happiness, and I find that beautiful,” says Scotty Bob Morgan, a highly esteemed wingsuit pilot and U.S. Marine veteran who served in Iraq. Scotty earned his reputation in the sport by pushing the limits of FLYing. “Scotty is not going to grow old,” remarks Espen after flying behind Scotty on a wingsuit flight. “Most people who charge as hard as he does are dead, but that has made him one of the best, and when it comes to proximity, I think he is the best.” Proximity FLYing is the term for wingsuit BASE jumpers who FLY lines uncompromisingly close to the terrain, buzzing through trees and canyons. We met Scotty when he spent the majority of his days BASE jumping, proximity FLYing and partying — on repeat. And, like Espen, we weren’t sure how much longer Scotty could sustain FLYing like he did. Scotty was a lone wolf, a BASE jumper who, like many others, experienced a lot of loss of friends. Despite that, he continues to jump and truly loves it. At first, this was hard for us to understand. We would ask, “Why not quit? When is the compounded loss of friends too much to bear?” Scotty never gave us a concrete answer, and as complicated as it was, something within us saw the pure beauty, thrill and freedom this community lived. We wanted just a small piece of it. A few years ago, Scotty met Julia, a Brazilian lawyer turned BASE jumper. They fell in love, got married, and continued jumping together. We had a front-row seat to their relationship.

“If I can’t get back from this injury, can we be in this relationship?” says a deeply depressed Amber as painkillers drip into her veins while at rehab. “Why is it that without FLYing, I feel nothing?” A few months after the accident that threatened her life and ability to walk, Amber can only think about one thing: her first jump back. Three years prior, Amber met Espen, a world champion wingsuit pilot, and their love quickly blossomed as he mentored her in BASE jumping and wingsuit flying. The two became inseparable, securing sponsors and pushing their limits together

as they embarked on various projects, ultimately deciding to compete in the World Championship in Wingsuit Acrobatics. However, in a celebratory jump after winning at the Norwegian Nationals, Amber made a landing mistake that shattered her spine and pelvis. Over the next 18 months, we followed Amber’s journey from dark uncertainty to undergoing repeated surgeries before her return to flight. Throughout her recovery, Espen remained steadfastly by her side. During one of her early wingsuit jumps after the injury, Amber exits, and Espen turns to the camera and tells us, “If she dies, I think I can handle it, but I wouldn’t be able to go through another bad injury.”

In the end, the film unfolds as a compelling story of love — both beautiful and, at times, tragic — depicting the intertwined lives of Jimmy and Marta, Espen and Amber, and Scotty and Julia. Their stories are woven with complexities and portray a profound conflict: The desire to protect their partners while setting them ultimately free.

INTRODUCTION

The sight of human beings taking flight is visceral, arresting and enough to make bystanders stop and stare. It’s an image straight out of superhero films and human dreams, an adventure taken to its most extreme and exciting. At the start of FLY, we see people respond to seeing BASE jumpers in colorful wingsuits careening above them, swooping from high mountainsides and gliding through the air — and the looks of awe and bewilderment they inspire are remarkable.

Yet just as remarkable are the BASE jumpers themselves, men and women who have devoted their lives to preparing for the leaps of faith, grace, skill and athleticism that set them apart from participants in other extreme sports. In a community that numbers only in the thousands across the globe, their commitment to the lifestyle helps them stand out. The way relationships, love and mentorship play into the world of BASE jumping (an abbreviation for Building, Antennae, Span and Earth — the exit points for jumpers) makes this insular group of athletes even more fascinating.

Through their production company Reel Peak films, directors Shaul Schwarz and Christina Clusiau’s work — including the Emmy Award-winning documentary “Trophy,” about the world

of big-game hunting and the politics and personalities within that community — is focused on opening viewers' eyes to extraordinary people, as well as pursuits and practices they may never have been aware of. In the case of their headline-making six-part 2020 Netflix documentary series “Immigration Nation,” Schwarz and Clusiau revealed the lies, intimidation and illegalities that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) used under orders of the Trump administration.

FLY follows in that tradition of illumination, as the BASE jumpers who let the filmmakers document their experiences toggle between standing on the precipice of an emerging sports phenomenon...and taking a deeply ingrained part of the human psyche to a potentially deadly new level.

As one veteran BASE jumper, Jimmy Pouchert, says to Schwarz and Clusiau in **FLY**, “Just because this sport is getting more popular doesn't mean it's any less dangerous.”

“It takes years of training and retraining to get to the level these people are at,” explains Schwarz. “The average person who simply does it occasionally is most likely *not* wingsuiting — they're probably jumping safely off bridges or cliffs. The community self-regulates, in a sense. If you want to BASE jump and fly a wingsuit, you need to do some 200 skydives out of a plane; then you need to take those skills learned to fixed objects, then back to the plane for additional training. You need to learn how to use the canopy, do tandem jumps, and it slowly builds up.

“BASE jumpers do a great job of educating the average person who wants to do it,” adds Schwarz. “There's a huge misconception that you can just put on a wingsuit and fly. What the most extreme characters we meet here do goes much, much farther.”

“It's such an easy dream to fall in love with — but the price is so high,” says Clusiau.

“The idea of flying between trees or between rocks or diving into terrain — what's called proximity flying — is something that a lot of the people who are just casually into this sport don't do,” says Schwarz. “Any adjustment that's done wrong, any malfunction with a parachute, or any zipper

that comes open on the wingsuit may force them to collide with the ground. And while wingsuits have definitely gotten more advanced over the last 15 years, at the speed the jumpers are going, it could cause fatality.

“The more the technology is there, the more humans want to push the limits,” adds Schwarz. “The fact is that people can get hurt in *any* BASE jump. There’s a razor-thin margin of error. If your foot slips on an exit or you don’t inflate your wingsuit quickly enough, you could die. A number of the people in the community were in the military, and others had years of skydiving experience before they started BASE jumping.”

“One thing we, as filmmakers, discussed was how do we create a film so that viewers don’t initially cast these people off by thinking, ‘Oh, these are just adrenaline junkies.’ Because they may be seen as an extreme group, and viewers may have preconceived ideas about them,” says Clusiau. “But this film is really about life and death, about relationships, and it’s about the dream of it all.

“As documentarians with journalistic backgrounds, we have had the opportunity to obtain access to issues and people that some viewers don’t know much about,” adds Clusiau. We wanted to understand in a deeper way. We don’t want to give all the answers, for example, to the way wingsuit BASE jumpers do things or *why* they do things. We want to show the world in a way to, hopefully, make the viewer think and question.”

That challenge was amped up with **FLY** since, at its core, the sport flirts with disaster.

“The reason there’s no organized competition for this sport is because it *is* so deadly,” notes Clusiau. “It’s not like big-wave surfing or free soloing on mountains. There are lots of injuries that are never recorded. Almost everyone we met making this film has had numerous broken bones. And they have all lost people they loved.”

“The idea of mentoring in BASE jumping is also important in the film,” adds Schwarz. “In between meeting the characters we spoke to, we wanted to show how over 30 or 35 years of BASE jumping,

and certainly wingsuiting in the last 10 years, it's clear that this is a community of like-minded dreamers who trained each other how to do it.

“Every base jumper agrees that no jump is worth their life,” says Schwarz, “but you don't know which jump is going to kill you. Yet most people watching them, or who are aware of them, don't see the full dream *they* see in what they call ‘The art of human flight.’”

Schwarz and Clusiau shoot their films themselves. FLY was shot with cameras positioned on the jumpers, mixed with GoPro footage from jumpers' helmets; only a small fraction was via drones and helicopters. The filmmakers emphasize how, in addition to relationships and personalities, they wanted to capture the rawness of being on a BASE jump.

Says Clusiau, “We wanted to celebrate the beauty of human flight as if it were an actual character in the film, just as much as every person or every couple we focused on.”

LOVE AND LEAPS

Memorable documentaries are more than chronicles of activities, movements, progress or passion. At their heart, these films are about human beings, complex emotions, and what makes people do what they do. In **FLY**, those factors are all there as the film follows a community — and specifically, three couples devoted to each other and flight.

“In 2015, we learned about the world of BASE jumping, and, in particular, to one very famous climber and jumper named Dean Potter,” recalls Schwarz. “He was a legendary and influential climber similar to Alex Honnold (the subject of Nat Geo's ‘Free Solo’) who started to jump off his climbs instead of hiking or climbing down. Hearing all of that, we thought this was something to look into. The general public can be a little judgmental of these people, considering them simply adrenaline junkies, but there's much more to them than that.”

“There are a few thousand people in the community, and the frequency they jump may vary,” notes Clusiau. “Some casual athletes we met early on may attend ‘boogies,’ as they're called, around the

world, but their day jobs are pilots, engineers, farmers, all sorts of people from all walks of life who BASE jump when they can. But when wingsuiting started to become popular in the early 2010s, as well as the social media that exploded around it helped the sport grow.”

As part of their research, Schwarz and Clusiau went to Norway, where they were put in touch with Marta Empinotti and Jimmy Pouchert, a couple who had been together since the late 1990s when Marta — already an established BASE jumper whose previous boyfriend had died years earlier — began mentoring Jimmy, a veteran skydiver, to be a BASE jumper and a teacher. They fell in love and formed a company for BASE jumping courses and expeditions that eventually came to be called Apex BASE. (The Thanksgiving parties they threw for their family of jumpers became as legendary as their personal story and the skills they imparted.)

“When we met Jimmy, we zeroed on him, knowing he was a great, colorful character,” says Schwarz. “We quickly understood that he and Marta were the ‘Mom and Pop’ of this community. Then they said we should meet Scotty Bob Morgan, who at the time was single and had been jumping off cliffs every day, be up until all hours, then wake up and do it again. FLY is focused on great characters like this and lets you see them in flight, but we didn’t want to make just an amped-up stunt film. We found more in the community to explore.”

The filmmakers’ exploration of the sport and their outsider status among such a tight-knit group benefited the making of **FLY**.

“We’re *not* jumpers — we’re journalists,” says Clusiau, “so initially it was a little tricky to get close to the community. Scotty Bob, especially, was kind of standoffish. But eventually, Scotty saw who we were and what we intended to do, and we met his now-wife, Julia, who was a lawyer and a previous member of the skydiving team of the Brazilian Army.

“Scotty had been a cameraman in the Marines in Iraq. He had two deployments, so he had an understanding of journalism,” says Schwarz, “and when we got to know him, he was so interesting.” Adds Clusiau, “Scotty, as a person, is a little bit of a hard nut to crack. He’s very deeply emotional, but at the same time, he has barriers up.”

FLY shows how, even after Julia becomes pregnant with her and Scotty's child, the love of BASE jumping continues and takes on new importance for the couple.

A third couple provided still another viewpoint for Schwarz and Clusiau.

"We were searching for a character that had a deeper connection to things and was able to express it, yet also be very different than the average BASE jumper. We found that in Espen Fadnes," says Clusiau. "He's a world champion wingsuit pilot. He's analytical and philosophical. In our previous film, 'Trophy,' there's a character who, when we met him, we had a kind of 'A-ha' moment and said to ourselves, 'That guy puts a bow on things.' The same in **FLY** with Espen.

"When we met Espen, we knew this was our third character thread, and the twist is that his girlfriend, Amber Forte, got injured in a jump from a plane soon after we met them," adds Clusiau. "But they were interested in us following them and filming Amber's long and difficult journey to recovery. That created a linear arc in the film, a way to connect deeper. There's a point where Amber says, 'Why is it that I want to go back to the activity that hurt me so badly?' That sums up so much about one of the themes of the film."

"When Scotty Bob and Julia started dating and got serious pretty quickly, you could tell Scotty was madly in love, and we realized that this film is about three couples," says Schwarz. "It's about relationships. We were fascinated with the idea that this is the most lethal sport on Earth, and it's very hard to date someone who's not in the sport, so how do you live in that reality? What if what you love could kill you, and what if you can't be happy without it?"

'DEATH IS A PRICE WE PAY FOR LIFE'

"Wingsuits are such an amazing tool for flying and have changed human flight and truly made it possible. But it has also killed many people who were flying the way Scotty Bob and Espen and Jimmy were flying," says Clusiau.

“There’s something in the BASE jumping community called ‘currency,’” explains Schwarz. “The more you jump, the more ‘current’ you are, the more muscle memory you develop, and the better you get at it. But the more you do it, you add to the totality of all the jumps you’ve done, and you’re risking it more. So the chances of injury or death go up.”

In **FLY**, one BASE jumper notes, “Every second is a terminal decision.” One unexpected element, one small thing going wrong, and something wondrous becomes fatal. The film doesn’t show the GoPro footage of any final flight, but the aftermath for the whole community is powerful and moving and full of acknowledgment that BASE jumpers die doing what they love to do.

Says Clusiau, “On the one hand, you see the group, and you understand how deep their loss is and how collectively, as a community, they lose people all the time. Yet there’s also an understanding that they somehow have a better grasp on life and death because they’re willing to accept the risk that anytime you jump off a cliff, it could happen. It doesn’t have to be human error; it could be a malfunction or literally anything. They have a real understanding of that, but at the same time, that particular loss they deal with in the film is immeasurable. It’s a constant, evolving question because they all do continue to jump. It’s very circular in that sense.”

Though wingsuit jumpers all have GoPro cameras on their helmets, the filmmakers made essential and calculated decisions about what to show and not show.

“We never show an actual death video of a GoPro helmet camera,” says Clusiau. “We never assumed when we started this film that this might be the end of somebody’s story. No matter what happens, if a BASE jumper is standing on the edge of a cliff, it very much informs how they live their life.”

“There is a lot of pain in the community, there is a lot of mourning, and there is a lot of studying death,” says Schwarz. “They have something called the BASE fatality list — it’s private for the community, so we never saw it. Every death has an analyzed report, and all of the jumpers read it and study it and look at the videos and learn from those. They do not take it lightly in any sense. The fascinating thing is that death is *constantly* there for them, but it doesn’t inform their lives.

“This film is an exciting, intense look at what these people do, yet what we were attracted to is something much more journalistic,” says Schwarz. “If you love adrenaline-fueled films, you’ll get that here, but that’s not the essence of it. We always saw the film’s main theme as: What if your dream can kill you, and what if you’re doing it *with* the person you love? We liked the challenge of telling those stories in **FLY** and having both worlds represented.”