

# ANDY KEECH

## E#1, F#1 - SKIES CALL



By Kelly Brennan

**ANDY KEECH IS AN UNDISPUTED SUPERSTAR OF SKYDIVING, WHO'S ABOUT TO GET HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE IN THE SPORT'S INTERNATIONAL HALL OF FAME. AMONG MANY ACHIEVEMENTS, HE DID AUSTRALIA'S FIRST RELATIVE WORK AND THE WORLD'S FIRST 4-WAY, PRODUCING AMAZING IMAGES IN HIS TRAVELS AND SHOWCASING SKYDIVING AROUND THE GLOBE.**

But, of all the things he's done, it's "that 8-word poem that keeps popping up", he laughs. "If I leave anything after I'm gone, that's probably the one thing that'll still be here!"

### MAN SMALL. WHY FALL? SKIES CALL. THAT'S ALL.

Oddly enough, Andy didn't think much of it when he first wrote it, doodling during a coffee break. His ideas for photographs came to him at night in between dreams, and the poems also flowed naturally when he sat and reflected quietly on his passion for the sky.

### BIG ACHIEVEMENTS...

Andy Keech has three key events in his busy life right now. In addition to the Hall of Fame induction, he's just turned 80 and he's celebrating 50 years of marriage to Marie. It's still impossible to keep up with his energy, his creative and analytical mind, or his ability to seize new challenges.

He was just nineteen when Andy did his first jump in 1959, in Camden, N.S.W. He soon competed for Australia in Style and Accuracy, but relative work and photography would become his main focus.

Andy was part of Australia's first baton pass on ANZAC Day in 1961. A baton pass was the original relative work, when skydivers hadn't yet learned how to stop and dock. They'd pass a stick or rolled up newspaper in freefall, and the second person would land with it as proof of the pass.

From the first moment he saw somebody else in freefall, Andy realised he'd been privileged to see something that very few people would ever experience. He wanted

to share this with others, so he bought camera gear and did a deal with a local newspaper. In return for use of their dark room, he'd give the paper any good skydiving pictures.

Andy was a key part of an Aussie 6-man baton pass in early 1964. None of the Aussie jumpers had telephones, so Andy mailed a two-page briefing to each of those in the group.



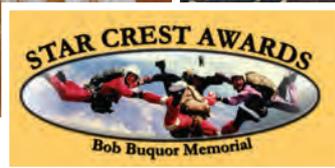
# ANDY KEECH



1964 Australian Parachute Team



1964 Australian Parachute Team



"I hand-wrote for each position what they would see as they came out and what their responsibility was to fly in to receive the baton," he explained. All this planning paid off. The group succeeded with their quintuple baton pass from 13,500 feet. It was equal to the world best at the time, done by America's Golden Knights from above 30,000 feet.

After representing Australia at the 1964 World Championships in Germany, Andy ended up in California, where he was part of the world's first documented 4-way. He'd managed to stay in the line-up despite crashing through one of the early attempts. The mission also took a hit when two participants were drafted for the Vietnam War. Finally, they did it and they had the photographic evidence. "I call that 4-way photo my most unfortunate image in skydiving," he laughed. "The camera angle was from behind me, and the other three all got their faces in the shot!"

His high-flying achievements have gone beyond skydiving. Andy was an early BASE jumper, with an 'El Cap #73' certificate signed by Carl Boenish. He competed at international level in rifle shooting, and he notched up more than 30 flight records as a pilot. (His little yellow Autogyro called Woodstock is now in the museum at Oshkosh, and Andy cuddles her each time he visits!)

He had a few career changes over the years to fund all the different addictions. Andy started out as an industrial chemist before leaving Australia. In the U.S., he worked

in Australian and New Zealand embassies for 25 years, and he spent ten years as a zookeeper, looking after invertebrates.

Even in his retirement years, Andy hasn't slowed down much. He's been competing internationally in indoor rowing and Crossfit, bench-pressing remarkable weights for his small frame.

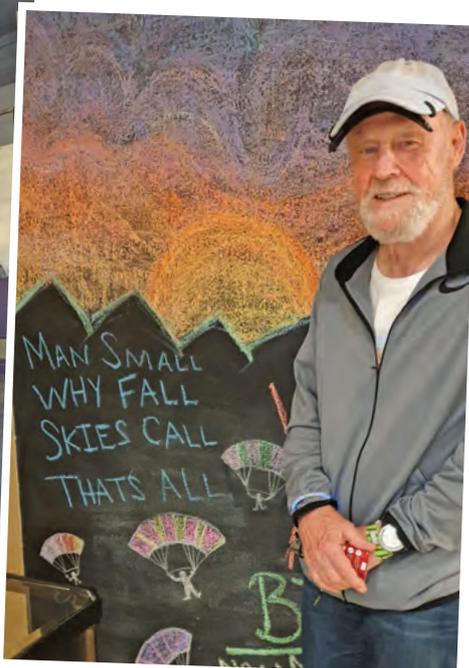
## GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY...

Andy met his wife Marie when they were studying at college in Australia. "She was the one with beauty and brains who sat up the front and got top marks," said Andy. "I was the one who sat at the back and could think of nothing but skydiving!"

One day, Marie approached Andy because she'd seen his photo in the paper. "Don't screw this up!" he said to himself. As it turned out, he did screw it up for a while, but they eventually got their relationship on track, travelling together and building an incredible friendship network around the world.

Marie, who had a fine arts degree, was the designer behind the Skies Call books, and she also chose the title. They self-published, with help from a British friend, paying each bill along the way with their meagre earnings. Marie recalled many long nights at their kitchen table working out how the pages would look and the layout of the shots.

The three books were a bit of a passport for Andy, who got several photographic jobs for big magazines like



**“YOU CAN'T CHOOSE YOUR PARENTS OR THE TIME OR COUNTRY OF YOUR BIRTH. WE ARE A PRODUCT OF A WHOLE STRING OF FLUKES. SOMETIMES THE WIND IS AT YOUR BACK, AND I WOULD SAY IT'S BEEN AT MY BACK ALL MY LIFE!”**

**Andy Keech**



Sports Illustrated. For example, CRW came along and he was involved at the early stages. He had to figure out how to do it so he could get the shots the magazines wanted. Likewise, he'd film 10-way speed stars at the height of their popularity and also the bigger formations as relative work grew.

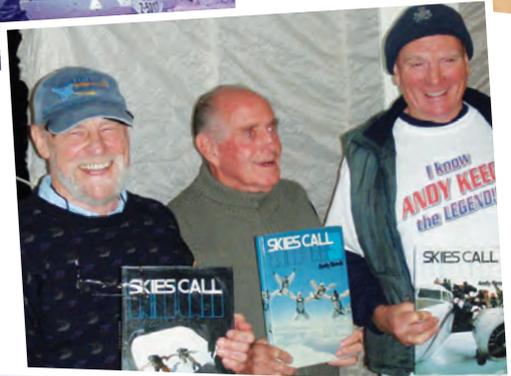
Marie is the photographer in the household nowadays, (with an excellent website of images at [www.mariekeechphotography.com](http://www.mariekeechphotography.com)) and Andy spends a lot of his time in the Crossfit box.

### HALL OF FAME

Andy's been living in the U.S. for 55 years, but we'll still proudly claim him as a true-blue Aussie, only the third to get Hall of Fame status in skydiving. (The other two are Claude Gillard and Graeme Windsor.) He was tickled pink when he got the news.

Andy is in regular contact with several Aussie skydivers, offering the same wise counsel and mentoring support that set him apart from his peers in the sixties. He has visited the Aussie Big-ways team during several of their trips to Perris, cheering them on and marvelling at the growth of the sport.

When he's formally inducted as a Hall of Famer in October, Andy will join a cast of skydiving giants who've helped shape our wonderful sport. He's small, modest and quietly spoken. But he stands very tall among those giants!



## ACHIEVEMENTS

- Australia's first baton pass
- Australia's first quintuple baton pass
  - World's first 4-Way
- 3 'Skies Call' books in 1974, 1978 and 1982
  - APF licences E#1, F#1
- One of only two pilots since Wright brothers to hold world records in speed, distance, rate of climb and altitude
  - APF Master of Sport Parachuting
- International Skydiving Hall of Fame

