

A Guide to Handcams

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Handcam has been around for a couple of years now and is moving its way onto several DZs around the world along side other video and photography products. For those of you who are not familiar with this concept, handcam is the self-videoing of tandems or base jumps where the jumper wears the camera on the back of his/her hand in a special neoprene glove. Here are some observations and insights to this new development.



Handcam was mostly pioneered in Australia and has now developed to a stage where some large Australian commercial operators offer it as their first choice of a video product. It has not however replaced conventional outside video and is offered as a separate product. From an operator's point of view, this type of product is very flexible and profitable. It offers some drop zones with restricted aircraft capacity such as Interlaken (Switzerland) the opportunity to satisfy their customers' demand for video. On the down side, operators are concerned that if this takes over fully from outside video, that a void will be left where younger up and coming jumpers gain experience as camera operators.

From a jumper's point of view there are concerns about safety, remuneration and camera equipment damage that also need addressing. The decision whether to use handcam on tandem jumps or not is one that only the individual can make. When considering this, it would be wise to think about the following: Are you experienced and comfortable with tandem jumping? Do you have the appropriate camera equipment (small=good)? Will you be adequately paid for this service (bearing in mind that your camera gear has more potential to be damaged)? Here is a brief perspective from an experienced tandem master and handcam-operator.

Handcams – A Tandem Master's Perspective

When handcams were first introduced I was quite dubious about the concept as a tandem master and cameraman. After all Tandem masters have a lot to deal with already especially if the shit hits the fan. My concerns were the same as everybody else's, how safe can it be to divide your attention between looking after some one else's safety as well as your own and try to get good footage at the same time, surely something has to give. Secondly how secure is the camera really going to be, and will it get in the way during a malfunction. Well after having done two hundred handcams of my own and observing many others the evidence shows that yes it can be safe and no it doesn't get in the way during a malfunction. I have a Way Cool Industries HC Classic and have never had any concerns about camera security.

The reality is that with a bit of common sense handcams can be done safely and they are here to stay whether you like it or not. The simple fact that they are easy money for commercial operators and a significant boost to a professional skydiver's income insures that handcam will always be supported. Having said that, they are not for

everyone, inexperienced or uncurrent tandem masters will find handcams a heavy burden on top of an already difficult task. The customer's perspective needs to be considered as well, personally I don't think the handcam can replace a good video and stills but it is nice to have options, especially slightly cheaper ones.

As with any new innovation in skydiving handcams brings with it new safety issues, e.g., loss of height awareness and stability during exit (sidespin territory). The Australian Parachute Federation has come up with some very sensible guidelines to combat these issues:

- A minimum of 500 tandems before consideration for endorsement.
- A recommendation by a Chief Instructor and logbook endorsement.
- A Chief Instructor approval of camera and mount.
- Undergo a course of instruction by the DZSO.
- One jump with a license jumper before jumping with any students.
- Audible altimeter is mandatory.

Note: A cypress is mandatory for all tandems in Australia.

So if you think you are ready for handcam adventure here is a typical jump routine that works quite well for me.

Ground Footage

An important point here is to keep the camera off to the side, the passenger's focus should be on you and your brief, remember you should have a very wide angle lens.

Begin with your company's normal leader or logo.

Tandem Master introduces himself to passenger.

Briefing and dirt dive. (I find that putting the camera on the floor beside me and slightly in front allows me to be hands free and stop people kicking the camera. My briefs are done kneeling.)

Comment while walking to the plane.

Exit practice.

It takes a little practice, but you can learn to turn the camera on and off whilst maintaining stable footage.

In flight

During take off and flight below 1000ft it is easy to secure your camera by wearing it. I have found that you can get good natural footage of your passenger by holding the camera out to the side but just behind their field of vision. Simply leaning forward and holding the camera out in front can easily obtain good face shots.

Gearing Up

Start gearing up early (3000 to 4000 ft before exit height).

Secure your camera in the glove and put it on before everybody gets up, that way you can't drop it and nobody can kick it around.

Have a well-rehearsed routine and give yourself plenty of time, remember you have two roles here.

Do your final checks.

Try to remember to think about camera angles during climb out.

Freefall

Getting good footage during exit and drogue throw can take a bit of practice but I



have found thinking about moving your hand slowly and smoothly helps. During freefall keeping the camera behind and slightly below the passenger's arm works best for me, if you put your arm in front of your passenger they tend to bump it around or even grab it. Remember to experiment with camera angles; just filming your faces with a blue backdrop gets a bit dull. A shot that works for me is to bring the camera

up to head level but way out to the side so it incorporates the passengers face and the ground scenery, do this while turning. This puts a sense of motion into the scene. During opening I always get the passenger to cross their arms, as we get upright I drop the camera down to about navel level but out in front so you can see both faces and the canopy opening above.

Under Canopy

This is where the handcams really excel. Assuming everything is OK and with one



hand steering you can capture those precious first moments when the passenger lets loose with all the "yahoos" and "Oh my gods" that a first time skydive generates in all of us. After the first moments are over you can turn the camera off, fly into a good position amongst the traffic, turn your camera back on and hold it down in front of you again and with the other hand do some spirals. Turn the camera off again and set up for landing. At about 1000ft I turn

the camera back on and film the final approach, some experimentation with the gripping of your toggle here can yield some excellent footage. Once on the ground there are a few options: 1- You can finish the video while you are still connected or 2- Unclip with one hand while filming or 3- Switch off while unclipping and switch back on again for any final comments. Conditions on the ground will have a big influence on your decision. The main factor to remember though is to keep your hand movements smooth. It is also a good idea to brief any catchers or landing crew of your requirements.

This is by no means a definitive guide to doing handcam. Circumstances and techniques change from jump to jump and person to person, this is just an Aussie perspective.

Equipment

- A small upright PC-style video camera. Sony's PC5, 9, 101, IP7 are all very suitable choices.
- A handcam-glove. There are a few guys making these, Way Cool Industries (www.waycool.com.au) is a professional manufacturer, who specializes in this market. They offer camera specific gloves in 2 hand sizes for the above cameras.
- A very wide angle lens x 0.3 or wider. Way Cool also stock these.
- An audible altimeter is highly recommended.

- An altimeter worn on the camera glove is a good idea, as it keeps your focus on the altimeter and camera simultaneously.

Useful tips

It is best to switch the camera off and secure it into the glove before putting the glove on, pay attention to aligning the function switch hole before fastening the Velcro. Setting your zoom and taping it into position is also a good idea. This will prevent inadvertent zooming, which can occur even through the glove if the camera is bumped during clip up and exit.

Turn your camera back on once geared up and ready to move to the door. This will maintain your camera settings and ensure successful footage.

Replace any Velcro on your glove sooner rather than later (annually) as this is far less expensive than a replacement camera. Inspect the stitching regularly and especially after a hard landing, remember that the glove has to secure your valuable investment.

BASE



Awesome video shots can be captured by BASE jumpers with these gloves, but beware the same safety considerations need to be considered. You need to be experienced and current before adding anything to an already demanding activity.