

Philippe Petit Tightrope Walk on The Sydney Harbour Bridge 1973

A story by James Ricketson

In 1973, on a crisp winter's morning, Philippe walked on a wire strung between the northern pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge - a serendipitous adventure I was intimately involved with and one that had its conception in Nimbin during the Aquarius Festival.

It began with a rumour. I had just arrived in Nimbin with my good friend Phillip Broughton in the 1949 Mark V Jaguar I had recently bought for \$300. A gas guzzler, yes, but , wow, what a beautiful car - with running boards, a sliding sun roof, leather upholstery and polished teak dashboard.

Philippe, juggling and walking his slack rope at the festival (whose genius idea was it to invite him?), wanted, so the rumour went, to perform a high wire walk in Sydney similar to the one he had done a year or so previously at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. I sought Philippe out, chatted with him, asked if the rumour was true. He laughed, told me that it was something he dreamt of but that it would not be possible in the short time he had left in Australia.

To organize such a walk, he said, would take many weeks, a lot of people and a lot of money. "*I think it is not possible,*" said Philippe with a wistful smile and a shrug of his shoulders. The upward inflection in his voice at the end of '*possible*' and the glint in his eye suggested that this was a question, not a statement. A challenge, perhaps? We agreed to meet up when we both got back to Sydney and talk about it.

Experience has taught me, over the years, of the malleability of memory. I take with a grain of salt the veracity of even my most vivid and treasured memories, some of which, decades after the event, have proved to be wrong in certain (and sometimes important) details.

Others remember shared experiences differently and, upon hearing their version I realize that my recollections may be flawed; that I may have unwittingly, unconsciously, selectively edited my memories. Perhaps we all do this, editing out unpleasant memories if we are optimists at heart, editing out the the pleasant ones if we are pessimists.

Philippe definitely fell into the optimist camp. So did I. A marriage made in heaven, perhaps!

Bearing the malleability of memory in mind, here is my recollection of the extraordinary adrenalin-fueled and sleep deprived week I shared with Philippe and others as we sought to pull off what seemed to be an impossible feat - breaking into the Harbour Bridge pylons, acquiring and then smuggling more than a ton of equipment into them, hiding it from the Bridge painters and workers who used the pylons as their base, finding a way to stretch a heavy wire between them - all in less than a week and with no budget.

The impossibility of pulling it off was one of the adventure's attractions, though perhaps denial of the reality of the multiple challenges confronting us had a lot to do with it. Denial is a much maligned character trait - of great value when up against seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Amidst a throng of naked and semi-naked festival goers in Nimbin and with music and the smell of patchouli oil and marijuana in the air, Philippe showed me his scrap book. It was filled with photos of himself performing all over the world - as a mime, a street juggler and magician, walking a slack rope and performing stunts on his beloved high wire. Philippe's face lit up with boyish enthusiasm as he told me that whenever he saw two towers, two pylons, two spires, his thoughts turned to walking between them. This was his obsession, and what a beautiful obsession it was.

It was the photos of Philippe walking between two spires of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris that captivated me most. In one he stands, balancing pole resting on his thigh after a crossing, looking out over the rooftops of Paris. There is an expression on his beautiful pale young face that speaks of Philippe's focus, his sense of purpose, his tranquil experience of being in the moment. As Philippe would later tell me, when he is on the wire there is no room in his mind for any other thought at all than the wire. There is only the wire. A popular book at the time, probably in the backpack of many a Nimbin festival goer, was BE HERE NOW. Philippe was the living embodiment of the philosophy espoused in Ram Dass' seminal book.

As I looked at the photos I could visualize Philippe replicating such a walk in Sydney and without even thinking about the practicalities involved, asked what the shortest time was in which such a walk could be organized if he had all the support and money he needed. Five or six days, Philippe replied. During the day we would have to find all the equipment we needed (with no budget), test it all, do a dummy run and then spend the nights inside the pylons finding and then implementing ways to secure the wire. There were so many things that could go wrong. All we needed was one of them to go wrong and Philippe's dream, which became my dream and that of the rest of our small team, would turn to dust. Philippe and I were the same age and in many ways kindred spirits. Neither of us believed that there was much in life that was impossible if you are determined and put your mind to it or, to put it another way, we were both attracted to giving the impossible a run for its money. In the battle between Denial and Common Sense, it seemed already that Denial was going to win!

By the time Philippe and I met up again in Sydney, after the festival, I had run the idea by a few friends and all were keen to help - especially my good friend Phillip Broughton, with whom I shared a house at Whale Beach on Sydney's northern beaches. And there was Paul Frame - Phillip's friend and fellow architecture student, Rob Tunstall (from whom I had bought the Mark V Jag), his girlfriend Linda. On the last night Terry Stanton joined the team (and maybe saved Philippe's life) and Mark Lewis joined us also. As a result, Mark went on to help Philippe the following year with his World Trade Centre walk. I don't believe in 'Fate' but if Serendipity were a god, I would probably be a devotee! There were others involved also but I cannot, at this far remove (40 years! Merde!) remember their names.

With little thought for what we were letting ourselves in for and with no concern about the number of laws we would have to break (lots!), our little gang, with Philippe as our intrepid leader, set about the many tasks we needed to perform to make Philippe's Sydney highwire dream a reality. We were all students in the fine art of Denial: we would not even contemplate the possibility that maybe we had bitten off more than we could chew. We would make Philippe's dream a reality. All obstacles would be overcome. No worries!

The first challenge confronting us was breaking into the metal cages that protected the entrances to the Harbour Bridge pylons. This was achieved by Philippe climbing up a wall of latticed metal and cutting a hole in it with a hack saw high up that was big enough for us to crawl through. The hole needed to be high up so that we could, when we had finished our night's work, replace the bars, superglue them back into position (repainting the joints gray to make our work invisible) so that no Bridge workmen would get wind of our illegal entry. There were some locks to be opened in various doors also but they presented no problem to Philippe - the picking of locks being amongst Philippe's many skills. Getting in and out of the pylons over the following four or five nights proved to be the least of our problems!

Acquiring 100 meters or so of heavy wire for the walk was the next major obstacle we were confronted by. We had no money to buy it. I was a poor film school student and Philippe's modest income came from working as a street juggler, mime and slack rope performer. A busker.

At one point during this hectic week, as Phillip performed in Martin Place, the police turned up, stopped the performance and took Philippe to the police station. The cops were very decent about it all but the law was the law, they said, and Philippe did not have permission to be performing in the street. There were all sorts of fun things you could not do in the street in the late 60s and early 70s. I have a newspaper clipping with a photo of a caped John Allen, one of those who inspired and organized the Nimbin Aquarius festival, taken after his arrest for dancing in the street. Dancing in the street was illegal!? Yes, dancing in the street was, at least potentially, an offense against public order back then and Nimbin was, in part, an antidote to, a reaction against, the worst aspects of the 50's conformist thinking we had all grown up with.

No charges were laid as a result of Philippe's 'illegal' Martin Place performance. The cops were relaxed about it all, just doing their job, following the rules. There were a few questions to be asked, some paper work to be done, during which Philippe removed a policeman's watch from his wrist in around a second, then asked him the time. The cop looked at his wrist, puzzled by the absence of watch. Philippe handed it back to him then asked the cop where his wallet was. The cop reached into his pocket. It was gone. Philippe smiled, handed it back to him. Yes, Philippe was a master pick pocket also!

But I digress. We needed wire but had no money. I can't remember what the wire would cost us if we had bought it but it was way beyond what we could beg, borrow or steal. What to do! Philippe came up with the solution. With his boyish charm, infectious enthusiasm and scrap book filled with inspiring photos of himself he managed to convince senior management at Bullivants to give him the wire in exchange for his performing for the staff in the warehouse factory in Alexandria.

Perfect. I would be able to film Philippe's performance and add it to the filmic record I was keeping of this adventure.

Another digression is in order.

I was a student at the new Australian Film School at the time - along with Gillian Armstrong, Phil Noyce, Chris Noonan and others. The Director of the school, Storry Walton, had no real problem with (turned a blind eye to) the fact that Commonwealth government cameras and sundry film equipment were being used to document what was an illegal act of trespass that, today, would bring down on the perpetrators the full force of laws enacted to protect us in the 'age of terrorism' we are told, ad nauseum, we are supposedly living in.

This was 1973. Another time. Another world. Phil Noyce had been (or was soon to be, I can't remember) arrested during the making of his film CASTOR AND POLUX. In those days fledgling filmmakers were encouraged to break the few (and very flexible) rules that governed the Film School. Thank you, Storry!

Philippe's passion, his enthusiasm, was infectious and fueled us all during the four or five days it took us to prepare for his walk. He talked about high wire walking in poetic terms. Up on the wire, he said, he was like a bird floating on a cushion of air, looking down on a mundane world that he was not a part of and yet a world to which he wished to make a gift of the magic he could perform on the wire.

Philippe was an artist, the pallet upon which he worked being himself. At one point I asked Philippe if he ever experienced fear on the high wire. His response: "I fear only that one day I may experience fear." Not a bad attitude to have towards life in general, I thought. After his World Trade Centre walk the following year Philippe was asked why he had done it. "There is no why," replied Philippe. He wanted to create something beautiful for its own sake - both in Sydney and in New York. There was no 'why'. As any artist knows there is no why.

Beauty is created for its own sake, not for utilitarian purposes.

Getting the wire into one of the pylons late at night was not an insurmountable problem. Walking up several flight of stairs with it was, however. It was heavy but we were young, fit and strong. The next obstacle was stretching the wire between the pylons without being seen by late night motorists or the police. This would have to be done during the final night before the walk. We could not, of course, leave the wire up during the day.

The plan was to throw a fishing line with a sinker attached from one pylon to the other. The fishing line would then be attached to a light rope, which would be attached to a heavier rope, which would then be attached to the wire which we would pull across. Easy. We had done a few dress rehearsals on land during the day and it seemed that there would be no problem at all with this plan. There was. It didn't work.

After many failed attempts to land the sinker in the eastern pylon, which ate up much of the night, it became apparent that we would not be able to get the wire up before dawn. We had to put the walk off for another day. This involved leaving all of the equipment inside the two pylons. There was a lot of it by now - the wire, hundreds of metres of ropes, Philippe's balancing pole, the tensioning device we needed to stretch the wire tight and sundry other tools. There was nowhere to hide it. If any workmen came into the pylons during the day they would see it, get wind of what was going on, our hopes and dreams would be dashed and our adventure end in failure.

For the first time in several days we managed to get some sleep - my bed being the floor of Philippe's hotel room in Kings Cross. There was nothing more we could do but wait until the following night and try again with Plan B. When we awoke, however, we got a very unpleasant surprise. There were flags flying on the Bridge. Merde! Panic stations! What if whoever put the flags up had been in the pylons, seen all of our equipment, wondered how it got there and what it was going to be used for, put two and two together and...well...shit! It was a nerve-wracking day - not knowing what we would find when we returned to the pylons.

That night we were mentally prepared to find that all of our equipment was gone but no, it was all there, just as we had left it. It had not occurred to the workmen who had been in the pylons and shifted some of it around to question its presence. Phew! We still had the problem however, of how to get the fishing line from one pylon to the other.

Plan B was to use a slingshot with a sinker attached to fishing line. It worked like a dream, and before long (though it took a few hours) the wire was in place and ready to be stretched tight. There was no turning back now. We had been joined this night by another friend, Brendon Stretch, a fellow filmmaker and cameraman. We had smuggled one of the Film, School's Ariflex cameras into the pylon and formulated a plan to lower film canisters to someone below to spirit the footage off to a lab to be processed before the police whose intervention, needless to say, we anticipated in advance.

Around 1 in the morning it became apparent that we had a problem we had not foreseen. We were a few helpers short. The wire had to be held secure with four ropes tied to railings down at street level. We did not have enough people to take control of these all important ropes - tying them tight at the last moment before Philippe stepped onto the wire. As luck would have it (serendipity played a significant role in this whole adventure) some friends were having a party in North Sydney that night. There were bound to be some there who would appreciate the nature of the adventure and offer their assistance. And there were.

However, we were also confronted by some at the party who thought that what we were doing was irresponsible and ethically unacceptable.

Whilst acknowledging the validity of this ethical question we were not interested in discussing it just hours before Philippe was due to step onto the wire. We left the party with a couple of new recruits - one of whom was Terry Stanton who, as luck (serendipity again!) would have it had an encyclopaedic knowledge of ropes and knots.

Of what happened next no words of mine can compete with the images captured of Philippe's walk - which can be found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hI8mUEy7pYQ>

The arrival of the police did not deter Philippe from walking. It was here that the police made a poor judgement call. Untying the ropes that supported the wire, they thought, would induce Philippe to end his walk. The problem was that Philippe was out in the middle of the wire at the time that the first rope was untied and, in a fairly strong wind, was now in genuine danger. Terry Stanton ran to the loose hanging wire, secured it again and Philippe had the few seconds he needed to retreat to the safety of the western pylon and await his arrest.

Again the cops were very decent about the whole business, as was the magistrate who fined Philippe \$200 - a fine paid by my mother who, despite her respect for the law, agreed that there were times when common sense must take back seat in the never-ending decision-making process that is our lives.

Just as Philippe's Sydney Harbour Bridge walk owed a lot to the spirit of Nimbin, so too did his majestic and truly awe-inspiring walk between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre owe a lot to his Sydney walk. It was, though none of us knew it then, the trial run for the much greater high wire adventure that he had lurking in the back of his mind. It warms the cockles of my heart to know that I played a small part of a web of serendipitous encounters and conscious choices that made Philippe's World Trade Centre walk a possibility. If I had not been at Nimbin, however...

Thank you Johnny Allen , Graeme Dunstan and others for giving the impossible a run for its money, overcoming all obstacles, not listening to the common sense voices that cried 'Why?', answering simply with 'Why not?'