stunted growth

Jump. Fall. Burn. Hang. Climb. Crash. Top daredevils show Tim Hume how they do it and reveal their physical and emotional scars

Fifteen minutes after meeting Peter Bell, I'm seated beside him in a modified Ford Fairmont being conveyed at a clip down the Meremere drag strip on the back of a 12-wheel vehicle transporter. Bell is behind the wheel; I'm in the passenger seat, fidgeting with my seatbelt. There's a hole where the windscreen should be. The transporter reaches 45kph, its driver sounds the horn and Bell hoofs it down the ramps, hits the tarmac with a clatter, and navigates a safety cone slalom with robotic economy of movement. He pulls an obnoxious 180-degree skid, choking the strip with tyre smoke, then hits about 90 chasing the transporter, still chugging towards the end of the runway. He slows a little, finds his line and glides back up the moving ramps as gently as a new dad.

Bell, tanned and silver-haired, is the godfather of New Zealand's stunt scene. It's a macho, ultra-competitive industry whose natural habitat is unglamorous locations like this dusty, petrol-scented stretch of the Waikato, where felt-tip-on-cardboard signs nailed to trees advertise the raceway radio frequency. He turns to gauge my reaction (I am grinning like a simpleton), shrugs off praise of his sangfroid ("It was a pretty simple gag") and sets about repairing a section of the ramps damaged during our dismount.

After a decade as a globe-trotting daredevil – hanging beneath helicopters by a bit between his teeth; falling 40 metres, on fire, on to a platform of cardboard boxes; finally, breaking his back – Bell returned home in the early 80s to become stunt king of the nascent film and television industry, by dint of consistently going harder, faster, bigger than anyone else. Think of anything shot here in the 80s and 90s and it's almost certain Bell, and the four-strong team he trained, made the action sequences. Came a Hot Friday, Willow, Marlin Bay; Bell was the Indiana Jones-type clambering to a plane from the roof of an Eta Ripples truck to ensure the Big Taste got through.

When the action-heavy American fantasy epics Hercules: The Legendary Journeys and Xena: Warrior Princess began production here in the mid-90s, Bell was the obvious candidate to design and execute the demanding stunt schedules. The productions required 25 stunt performers a day, sometimes up to 85, and Bell set out recruiting athletes from the ranks of martial artists, gymnasts, race drivers. Working six and a half days a week, 40 weeks a year, the shows became a prodigious incubator for stunt talent. No other teams in the world worked as intensely and continuously.

"It was like a five- or six-year training school," says Stuart Thorp, president of the New Zealand Stunt Guild, who quit a marketing job at a cellphone company 15 years ago, after Bell noticed his tae kwon do skills. "We couldn't do anything half-assed. It had to look like it hurt. The guys Pete picked at the time – out of nowhere, really – are now at the top of the world in what they're doing."

Having established a reputation as among the world's best swords-and-sandals exponents with Hercules and Xena, then Lord of the Rings, 10 of Bell's protégés teamed up on Oliver Stone's Alexander in Morocco in 2004 – the first time New Zealand stuntmen exported themselves to a major foreign production. They earned a reputation as doughty, hard-working mensches who could take the knocks, then go again. "It's that rugby and surfing culture of not showing that something hurt," says Thorp. "You say you're sweet, walk around the back and have a cry in secret." The performers, many of whom hail from two martial arts gyms in east Auckland, have since won many of the biggest roles going internationally, banking up to hundreds of thousands a year, in a success story that has gone largely unheralded at home.

A brief and by no means exhaustive roll call: Thorp is co-ordinating Titanic director James Cameron's Avatar. Ben Cooke doubled for Daniel Craig as James Bond, Christian Bale as Batman, and worked on the last Indiana Jones and Bourne films. Allan Poppleton ran the stunt crews for the last two Narnia films here and in central Europe. Markos Rounthwaite co-ordinated recent instalments in the Indiana Jones, Bourne, and Bond franchises; along with Cooke, he is at the forefront of redefining the aesthetic of Hollywood fights away from florid martial arts scenes towards the brutal, elbowy violence of the Israeli army's krav maga close-quarter combat technique.

Zoe Bell (no relation to Peter) was Lucy Lawless's double on Xena and has become a favourite of film-maker Quentin Tarantino, who cast her first as Uma Thurman's double in Kill Bill, then as Zoe Bell, New Zealand stuntwoman, in Death Proof. This year she has a role in Drew Barrymore's directorial debut.

Meanwhile, Peter Bell is at the Meremere drag strip with Lana Coc-Kroft >>

PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHEN LANGDON

Peter Bell

Peter Bell on fire for a 1991 doco ...

in flight for 1985's The Y Project and ...

behind the wheel, six storeys up, in Mad Mission 4, 1984

and Marc Ellis, setting up stunts for unwitting punters to attempt in the local remake of Australian game show Who Dares Wins.

The first thing that anyone will tell you about Bell is that he is proud. Although in his mid-50s (he is cagey about his exact age), he has a firefighter's physique a man 30 years his junior would envy, and the clipped, brisk mien of a pilot.

The second is that he is a professional who has dedicated his life, to the exclusion of much else, to the industry. You might expect him to take great satisfaction from seeing the raw talent he broke into stuntmen become the best in the world. But his response to their success is muted. "They were given the opportunity and they ran with it," he says. "They've done well."

Bell got into the industry through a con. Working in construction in Melbourne in the early 1970s, he saw a 'Stuntmen Wanted' ad in the newspaper, and was one of 80 suckers who paid $10 a weekend to learn to tumble down sandhills. It was a nice side-earner for the organisers of a travelling stunt show who had no jobs to offer. But when two of their performers were injured, Bell, a well co-ordinated former farm boy and age-grade national boxing champion, got the call-up.

He became part of the live stunt circuit – a sort of hillbilly uncle to the film stunt industry – performing at Easter shows and race meets throughout Australasia. After a while, he struck out on his own, selling his high falls act to shows around the world, illegally jumping off bridges to drum up publicity. He incorporated light aircraft into his act. A 45m world record high fall bolstered his pitch.

It was a golden age of flamboyant, self-promoting daredevils. "I used to say I wanted to jump off the Empire State Building," he says. "My ambition was to make the high fall as big as Evel Knievel made the bike jumps."

The circuit was an unforgiving slog. To draw the crowds, the falls had to become increasingly spectacular, continually pushing safety limits. One day, at the Calgary Stampede, Bell fell onto a platform of boxes that had been inadvertently weakened with water in storage, and squashed two vertebrae to half their size.

He recovered, but his days on the circuit were over. He headed home, into a job as co-ordinator on Shaker Run, a local 1985 movie about a touring stunt show. He recruited a young driver, Mark Harris, who would become his right-hand man, working on all his subsequent projects. Bell's company, NZ Stunts, grew into a juggernaut, getting "about 98 percent of the work going". But, in 1999, with Hercules winding up and one year left on Xena, Harris launched his own agency, Stunt Productions Ltd. He took Bell's contracts and performers with him. Bell was blindsided.

"I'd had my back against the wall coming up with all those sequences, so I had no idea what was going on," he says. "It was devastating. I brought the guy in, taught him all about the industry, then behind my back he rolled me. It was an underhanded, cowardly thing to do. He took my career from me."

Harris portrays the move as more of a mutiny than a betrayal. Bell, who had built a reputation as a meticulous, demanding taskmaster, had become a tyrant.

"I'd just had enough," says Harris. "I was leaving, other guys were thinking of doing the same. It wasn't a case of me signing everyone up. The stunties banded together, and said, 'This is our preferred person to run the show.' Which was me."

Bell seethed for four years. Then he did something stupid.

Harris received a call one day in 2003 from a woman at a production company, offering him work. He agreed to meet her at the job site, down a track in Riverhead forest. Instead, he found Bell lying in wait.

> "It was a fair one on one. I thought we settled it as men: one wins, one loses. I gave him that chance and he took it. He lost, I helped him up. To me that was the end"

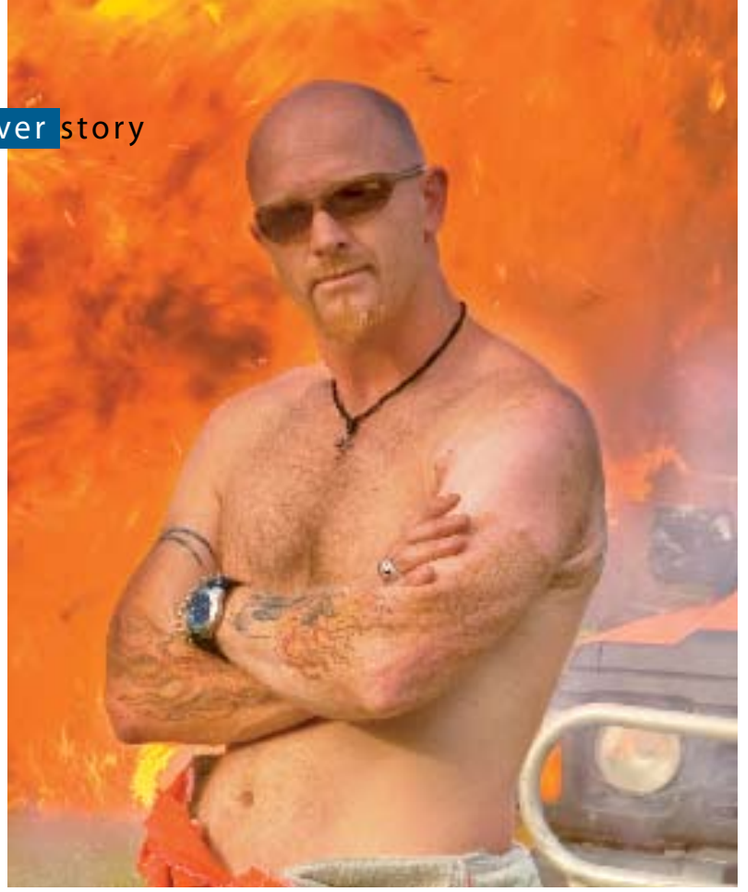
Says Bell: "It was a fair one on one. I thought we settled it as men: one wins, one loses. I gave him that chance and he took it. He lost, I helped him up. To me, that was the end of it."

Says Harris: "I was lured and set upon, basically. It was a situation where I couldn't, and wouldn't, fight back. It wasn't a good thing for two co-ordinators to be seen having a punch-up in the bush. I took the hits and thought, 'Okay, this is going to turn out bad for one person once everything comes out, and it ain't going to be me.'"

Harris received hospital treatment for facial injuries and was off work for 10 days. Bell was convicted of assault, and fined Harris's medical costs. He became professionally marooned.

Today, Harris gets nearly all the local work (Outrageous Fortune, LTSA commercials), as well as occasional foreign productions, like Power Rangers. "It was the final nail in my coffin," says Bell.

According to Thorp, the rift between the two main players was both the industry's nadir and its coming of age. Caught in the crossfire, many stunt performers broke away from the competing agencies and formed a guild, offering themselves for work as independent contractors. "It was the beginning of being in control of our own destinies," he says. >>



Jody Hooker

Stuntmen are a breed. They must be fit and co-ordinated, disciplined, fastidiously reliable. They are innate competitors, mostly from sporting backgrounds, who hustle to edge out their colleagues for a shot at a big stunt. "Although you're working in a team, you're essentially competing with everyone else," explains Thorp. "There might be 20 people on this movie, but it might be down to 10 on the next."

Naturally, they must be brave. Technology has mitigated many of the risks: car gags that used to be planned according to educated guesswork are now run through computer programmes; high falls, once a staple, have been largely replaced by cable work before blue screens. But accidents still happen. In 2007, Kiwi special effects technician Conway Wickliffe was killed in London preparing a car stunt for The Dark Knight. Locally, OSH has investigated 10 serious injuries to stunt men in the last eight years.

One involved non-guild member, Jody Hooker, founder of West Auckland-based Stunt Corp, who pours his time and money into gigs like the Kumeu Hot Rod show, where his petrol-head mates drive homemade stunt cars off ramps into towers of stacked wrecks.

Hooker traces his vocation to childhood pyromania. At four, he razed a stranger's boat with petrol. "I've always liked playing with fire," he says. "That's why I became a volunteer firefighter for seven years." (His station officer asked him to leave when he learned of his other hobby.)

Now 39, he is the first, and only, man in the world to have set himself on fire while riding a surfboard, and probably the only grandfather to appear regularly as a human torch at heavy metal concerts.

Hooker – the subject of filmmaker Luke Wheeler's Rev Therapy, screening at this month's DOCNZ Documentary Film Festival – had his most recent scare in 2006 while contracted on The Devil Dared Me To, the debut feature film from the comedians behind TV show Back of the Y.

Chris Stapp, who plays inept bogan stuntman Randy Cambell, performs his own stunts on Back of the Y, but brought in professionals as a sop to the film's anxious producers.

Hooker was an obvious choice: Stapp, whose first-ever stunt was a Homer Simpson-style tumble down a 14m quarry bank with only a couple of beers for preparation, wanted someone with a similarly gung-ho approach. "We hired the dodgiest stunt crew we could get our hands on," he says. "They were almost like the guys we were taking the piss out of."

"The Devil Dared Me To is pretty much my life story," admits Hooker.

Art taunted life; it all went horribly wrong. On the second night of shooting, Hooker drove through a wall of fire and was scorched by a flaming hay bale. He suffered severe burns to 25 percent of his body, disfiguring his arm and shoulder and requiring skin grafts and ongoing treatment. OSH found no fault. "If the car had had a windscreen, he would have been sweet as," says Stapp.

The accident rattled Hooker, but not too much. Three months later he was back on set. "It just took a little while to set myself on fire again."

Hooker has shattered his pelvis before, his teammates have fractured vertebrae; none of it kept them on the sidelines for long. "When you nail a stunt, you forget about any bruises or bumps you may have incurred," says Hooker, whose mates now call him "Crispy". "There's no comfort in being a stuntman."

Stuntmen typically wear their scars as badges of professional pride, but for Bell, the business with Harris remains a wound he'd rather not discuss. When Harris "rolled" him a decade ago, he took more than just his job, it ate at his whole identity. Bell's never quite recovered.

He continues with his stunt driving and sporadic television jobs, despite not really needing to, he says, gesturing around the well-appointed home (a gym, a pool) where, as a divorcee, he spends a lot of time knocking around on his own.

Hooker traces his vocation to childhood pyromania. At four, he razed a stranger's boat with petrol. "I've always liked playing with fire"

The acrimony hasn't diminished. Harris says Bell is "a bitter man" for whom he feels sorry. For his part, Bell expresses no great remorse or desire for reconciliation. "Would you if you were in my position? I don't see the guy; that's fine with me."

He responded to the situation according to his old codes, learned from a hardscrabble industry that makes virtues of obstinacy and ego, in which your physical safety depends on your teammates. "I've come from a background where a handshake is a handshake; you look someone in the eye and give loyalty," he says.

Thorp thinks the incident with Harris has probably deprived Bell of the broader recognition he deserves. "He's the godfather of everything. Whatever's happened over time, he's essentially the reason we're where we're at now. There's a lot of feeling like that out there, and I don't know if he knows that."

Bell seems genuinely pleased, a little surprised by the good tidings. (Thorp was aligned with Harris for a time after the split.) "That's nice to hear," he says, pausing as he flicks through a collection of old photos at his dining table.

As his career nears its twilight, he's been able to find a philosophical take on its turbulence. "With those classic Chinese movies, the action's great, but it's constant, it's all one level," he says. "For a really great action scene, you need the ups and downs, the highs and lows. That's what it's all about."