

Life on the line

Adapted from http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7471000/7471307.stm

Name _____ Date _____

Reading a magazine in a Parisian dentist's waiting room in 1964, French street performer Philippe Petit saw the designs for a new building due to be erected in New York.



Picking up a pencil, he drew a line between the two towers and his dream was born. Six years later Petit stood at the top of the South tower of the World Trade Centre. Between him and his accomplices on the North tower stretched an inch thick metal cable. Taking a deep breath, Petit stepped out onto the line. For me it was an elating thing to do. It was marvellous and peaceful, and I had planned it and dreamed of it for many years. I was there with impatience and with a giant smile on my face.

Artistic risks

Petit's illegal high-wire walk was not inspired by a quest for adventure or a search for the ultimate thrill.

His aim was to pull off "the artistic crime of the century", to create an event so daring that it could never be forgotten.

I dedicate my life to the art of walking in mid-air, he says. People after the performance come to me and said that it was beautiful and you inspire us. Certainly it is the opposite of a stunt.

The attempt took years of preparation and a committed team of conspirators to organise. In order to perform the walk, Petit and his friends had to smuggle 200ft of steel cable into the heavily guarded South tower of the World Trade Centre and sneak it onto the roof. Once there, they used a bow and arrow to fire a fishing line between the buildings which a team on the other side used to drag across thicker and thicker cable until the inch thick tight-rope was in place.

Still undetected, they calculated the tension required to hold Petit's weight and secure the line against the buffeting winds and swaying towers.

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'Death is very close'

With no safety net to protect him, no way to test the stability of the tight-rope and with every chance of being detected by security guards at any moment, some may have thought twice before stepping out onto the wire.

But Petit had no second thoughts.

This is probably the end of my life, to step on that wire. And, on the other hand, something which I could not resist - and I didn't make any effort to resist - called me upon that cable. As he says, in a new documentary, which tells the story of the walk: "And death is very close."

Speaking on the Today programme, however, he explained that there was not a moment of doubt in his ability to cross the 410m high cable.

I would have never stepped on that wire if I was not absolutely certain physically and mentally to get to the other side safely, he says.

Don't look down

For 45 minutes Petit walked between the towers.

At one point he lay down on the wire, at another he taunted the uniformed policemen waiting for him at the end of the line, standing just short of their grasping arms.

When he eventually comes in from the tight-rope he was arrested on a charge of "criminal trespass and disorderly conduct".

His arrest report read simply "man on wire".

The charges were dropped in return for a juggling performance in Central Park and Petit became a New York celebrity.

As for the question that all tight-rope walkers are asked, how important was it for Petit not to look down?

While Petit admits it can be somewhat disorientating, he says that to him "it is very necessary".

I allowed myself the pleasure of stopping, sitting down, and marvelling at the sight below.

I could look at New York taken by surprise and I am so glad I did that because now I have that vision in my heart for the rest of my life.

Life on the line

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Name _____ Date _____

Questions

- 1) How high up was Petit when he did his walk? _____
- 2) What is the approximate distance between the twin towers? _____
- 3) How long did Petit stay out on the wire? _____
- 4) Describe briefly three things Petit did when he was out on the wire.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
- 5) Explain in your own words how Philippe Petit got the idea to walk the wire between the twin towers.

- 6) Describe in your own words why he did it.

- 7) There are six pairs of speech marks missing from the passage. They are meant to be around all the words actually spoken by Philippe Petit in his interview. Mark where they should go on the article.
- 8) Why do you think speech marks are used round the words of the sub heading: 'Death is very close'

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9) Reread the following sentence from the passage:

When he eventually comes in from the tight-rope he was arrested on a charge of "criminal trespass and disorderly conduct".

Why are speech marks used here?

10) Find the other sentence in the passage which uses speech marks for exactly the same reason and copy the sentence out.

11) Write a few sentences explaining your own thoughts about what Philippe Petit did.

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Answers and teaching notes

Picking up a pencil, he drew a line between the two towers and his dream was born.

Six years later Petit stood at the top of the South tower of the World Trade Centre. Between him and his accomplices on the North tower stretched an inch thick metal cable.

Taking a deep breath, Petit stepped out onto the line.

"For me it was an elating thing to do. It was marvellous and peaceful, and I had planned it and dreamed of it for many years. I was there with impatience and with a giant smile on my face."

Artistic risks

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His aim was to pull off "the artistic crime of the century", to create an event so daring that it could never be forgotten.

"I dedicate my life to the art of walking in mid-air," he says. "People after the performance come to me and said that it was beautiful and you inspire us. Certainly it is the opposite of a stunt."

The attempt took years of preparation and a committed team of conspirators to organise.

In order to perform the walk, Petit and his friends had to smuggle 200ft of steel cable into the heavily guarded South tower of the World Trade Centre and sneak it onto the roof.

Once there, they used a bow and arrow to fire a fishing line between the buildings which a team on the other side used to drag across thicker and thicker cable until the inch thick tight-rope was in place.

Still undetected, they calculated the tension required to hold Petit's weight and secure the line against the buffeting winds and swaying towers.

'Death is very close'

With no safety net to protect him, no way to test the stability of the tight-rope and with every chance of being detected by security guards at any moment, some may have thought twice before stepping out onto the wire. But Petit had no second thoughts.

"This is probably the end of my life, to step on that wire. And, on the other hand, something which I could not resist - and I didn't make any effort to resist - called me upon that cable."

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"I allowed myself the pleasure of stopping, sitting down, and marvelling at the sight below. I could look at New York taken by surprise and I am so glad I did that because now I have that vision in my heart for the rest of my life."

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Links to sites including film clips and trailers from the documentary 'Man on Wire' which could be used as an introduction:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1155592/>

<http://www.manonwire.com/>

Link to Wikipedia site with film poster image:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man_on_Wire

The full length documentary is available on DVD.

Questions

- 1) How high up was Petit when he did his walk? **410 metres**
- 2) What is the approximate distance between the twin towers? **200 feet**
- 3) How long did Petit stay out on the wire? **45 minutes**
- 4) Describe briefly three things Petit did when he was out on the wire.
 - a. **He lay down on the wire**
 - b. **He taunted the policemen an arm's length away**
 - c. **He sat down on the wire and looked at the view**
- 5) Explain in your own words how Philippe Petit got the idea to walk the wire between the twin towers.
He saw designs for the new buildings in a magazine in a dentist's waiting room and drew a line connecting the two towers.
- 6) Describe in your own words why he did it.
To carry out an unforgettable daring event as the 'artistic crime of the century'
- 7) There are six pairs of speech marks missing from the passage. They are meant to be around all the words actually spoken by Philippe Petit in his interview. Mark where they should go on the article.
See text above where speech marks are added in red round text in italics.
- 8) Why do you think speech marks are used round the words of the sub heading: 'Death is very close'
The subheading quotes Philippe Petit's own words.
- 9) Reread the following sentence from the passage:
When he eventually comes in from the tight-rope he was arrested on a charge of "criminal trespass and disorderly conduct".
Why are speech marks used here?
These are the actual words used in the police report of the event.
- 10) Find the other sentence in the passage which uses speech marks for exactly the same reason and copy the sentence out.
His arrest report read simply 'man on wire'
- 11) Write a few sentences explaining your own thoughts about what Philippe Petit did.