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FIRST JUMP: JUMPING FROM A PERFECTLY GOOD AIRCRAFT



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I was a parachutist; a paratrooper; a “jumper.”

After a half-a-hundred jumps, I’ll never forget my first one.

I learned to “exit from an aircraft in-flight” at Fort Benning, Georgia, in June of 1967. (Everyone on that aircraft knew that their next assignment would be in a unit headed for Vietnam. The government didn’t call it a war, but we did.)

So why would anyone — being of a basically sound mind — jump from a perfectly good aircraft? I don’t know about others but I did it because paratroopers wore a better, sharper uniform *and* they got more demanding training and challenges. And, besides, I’ve never been in a “perfectly good aircraft.”

Most people think that your first jump is your most frightening but, I assure you, that is *not* true. On your first jump, you have no idea what is going to happen. You’re “psyched” and ready for the thrill. It’s your *second jump* when you have a heart-stopping “reality check”. However, no matter how long I live, I’ll always remember that first jump.

In preparation for my first jump, I had received two weeks of vigorous training from some unsavory and life-threatening Drill Instructors. Between the running, the pushups, and the screaming (to show our enthusiasm), we were given practice-after-practice “in-place jumping.”

Whenever the instructor yelled, “Go,” we would assume the “body position” of a jumper exiting an aircraft and loudly scream, “1000, 2000, 3000, 4.”

IF all went right, after the count of four, a beautiful mushroomed silk parachute would blossom above. The crisp air would assault your senses and your prayers of thanksgiving began.

My first jump was from the C-119, “Flying Boxcar.”

A World War II aircraft, this revered aircraft did *not* impress me. It was ugly and, some claimed, mathematically proven to be incapable of

flying. The seats were made of straps, many of which were held in place by olive drab duct tape. (It's the same duct tape you can buy in the hardware store; just a different color.) I don't care how you try to disguise it, olive drab duct tape on a gray aircraft's insides stands out.

As the aircraft gained speed in its attempt to lift off from the runway, all around us bolts fell from the walls of the aircraft. Two of the parachutists fell to the floor as the seats they were in collapsed after a rivet or two came loss. The crew chief, an Air Force sergeant in charge of the rear of the aircraft, went about calmly picking up fallen debris and placing it in a cloth bag. The bag was large and, apparently, half full. The bag had seen its share of usage. Obviously, this aircraft had not begun to fall apart just moments ago.

As the aircraft rose to 2,000 feet, the Jumpmaster got up from his seat.

The Jumpmaster was in charge of the paratroopers. At his commands, we would prepare to jump. Upon his order, we would exit the aircraft. He had absolute authority over our safety and our mission execution.

He commanded, "Get ready." Still seated, each jumper immediately checked his equipment, on the front of him, for obvious problems. Each released the belts that held him, more or less, securely to the seats.

The Jumpmaster instructed, "Stand up." All the parachutists arose as one, each releasing a guttural noise. "Hu-Ah" echoed above the deafening din of the engines. The more noise one made, the less frightened he appeared. Our motto was "To seem, rather than to be."

The aircraft crew chief opened each of the opposite side doors. Toward the rear of the aircraft, they offered us exit. The wind, forced through the small opening, howled like a West Virginia coal train coming through a narrow tunnel. The air changed from the stuffy, smelly stench of a locker room to one of swirling, bone-chilling, blowing wind. It wasn't that the air had gone cold; it was that our resolve has lost some of its heat.

Above the deafening welter of confused or discordant sounds of the wind, the Jumpmaster screamed, "Equipment check." Each parachutist checked the front of his own equipment. Then he checked the back of the

equipment of the man in front of him. (There were no women on this aircraft. Back then, women didn't jump.)

The Jumpmaster calmly walked along the line of nervous jumpers, checking a line here; tightening a loop there. "You're not scared are you, boy?" he would ask an occasional soldier. The *only* acceptable answer was a screamed, "No, Sergeant."

Then he returned to his position by the open doors. Holding tightly to the door — with a hand on each side — he leaned way out. Upon reentering the cabin, he called out, "Stand in the door!"

As a lieutenant, I had insisted upon leading my "stick" of men. I stood in the door contemplated how stupid it would be to back out now. I thought about my experiences as a squad leader commanding an armored personnel carrier in Europe. If I were an armored officer, I wouldn't be jumping right now. I'd be inside a warm vehicle racing along some German road, or maybe a Texas desert, or a Montana plain.

Briefly, I recounted the days of Jump School: the agony, the pain, the thrills, and the spills. Just as I was questioning just how badly I really wanted to wear the uniform of a paratrooper, someone yelled, "Go!" I felt a sharp blow to my butt.

Next thing I knew, I'd already counted, "1,000; 2,000; 3,000; 4." The opening of the parachute was an orgasmic shock. Nothing, short of sex, ever reached the pinnacle of a parachute opening.

I was checking my parachute as I maneuvered myself into a 180° turn. Miraculously, the world was silent. I saw the aircraft flying away in the distance. Having disgorged the jumpers from its belly, it was on its way home, leaving us to some unknown fate.

I couldn't get over the quiet. The cool breeze gently tickled my face. The view was beyond forever. All alone was I in a sky full of parachutes.

As the ground rushed up to grab me, I performed the "parachute landing fall" just as I had been trained. I struck hard and rolled: balls of my feet, thighs, calves, buttock. I arose unharmed. I screamed, "God bless America!"

The laughing instructor reminded me, in his boisterous voice, "You're supposed to be quiet. Get down and give me 10!" I did the ten pushups with a parachute on my back, a smile on my face, and joy in my heart. My God, that ground sure looked good, the dirty Georgia clay felt good, and the grass smelled like fine cologne to me.

I was a parachutist. I have over 400 jumps from aircraft. I have “exited in-flight” from everything from helicopters to jets. I’ve jumped in daylight and I jumped into the darkness of a moonless night. I’ve jumped onto land, trees, and water. I even jumped into the Gulf of Mexico. But no jump can ever erase the passion, the tension, and the thrill of that first jump.

By the way, I’m afraid of heights — but that’s another story for another time.

I’ll tell you this: No man, who is not apprehensive, should ever jump from an aircraft. No wimp should strap on a parachute. And no none-jumper will *ever* know what it is to yell, “Airborne.”