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Lawn Darts

FIRST OF ALL, it didn't even feel like I was falling. It didn't feel like anything at all, really. It was as if time had just stopped and now everything was slowly rotating past me. I'd expected there to be a roar of wind or something, but there was nothing; it was as though I was trapped inside a vacuum. I kept trying desperately to remember; I knew there was something I'd forgotten to do, but what? Oh, yeah. Count! Shit.

One thousand

The United States Army Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, is where soldiers are taught to "jump out of a perfectly good airplane." The essentially paradoxical nature of a paratrooper is evinced in this one statement. For why, after all, would anyone in his right mind want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane? That's exactly what I was asking myself that muggy June morning when I arrived at Fort Benning. I'd volunteered for Airborne School as an ROTC cadet at Wake Forest University, but I still wasn't sure why. Airborne was for those hard-charging, "Ooh-rah!" types, which was exactly what I wasn't. But there was something I had to prove to myself: I needed to know I was the equal of all those gung-ho, Patton wanna-bes I'd met, in deeds if not in words. Five successful jumps were required to earn the basic parachutist's wings, but I was only concerned about the first one. Even if I got all busted up on that first jump and was unable to complete the course, I knew I'd be satisfied. Because as far as I was concerned, stepping out of an airplane while in flight was the most unnatural thing a human being could do. I believed that if I could bring myself to do it just one time, that would be enough for me to know I could accomplish anything the army might ask of me. Those other four jumps I'd worry about when their time came; for the present, I was only focusing on the first.

Leonardo da Vinci was the first person to draw up plans for a parachute. The parachute Leonardo sketched in the fifteenth century was remarkably similar in dimensions to parachutes in use today. It took another three hundred years before someone put Leonardo's idea into practice. In 1785, Frenchman Jean Pierre Blanchard took to dropping dogs and sheep secured to makeshift parachutes from a balloon several hundred feet above the ground. Unlike the U.S. Army Airborne School, participation in M. Blanchard's program was not on a volunteer-only basis. Its attrition rate was quite high.

When a candidate arrives at Airborne School, he or she—Airborne classes are co-ed today—is assigned a number. Name and rank don't matter at Airborne School. I could have been a general or a private, but as far as the instructors were concerned, I was just another worthless "leg." *Leg* is the pejorative invented by paratroopers to describe non-Airborne type personnel and is, from their perspective, intrinsically contemptuous. The school doesn't actually take away a trainee's rank; it's there on the uniform, plain as day, for anyone to see. It's just that it doesn't mean anything anymore—unless the trainee happens to be a cadet, as I was. I'd been warned by senior cadets who'd already completed Airborne training that the funny little ROTC rank insignias and the ROTC patch on my left shoulder would serve as an open invitation for abuse from the grizzled noncommissioned officers who run the school. While the Black Hats, as the instructors were often called, appeared to take great delight in abusing all of the candidates, they reputedly saved their best work for "college boy" junior officers and cadets like me. The fact that I was tall and skinny, with a beak that stuck out from under my helmet like that of the eagle on the back of the dollar bill—definitely no poster boy for old Uncle Sam—probably didn't help matters either.

So it was that on that first day, while the numbers were being assigned, I had my first piece of luck. An Airborne class usually consists of a couple of hundred candidates. Everyone is given a three-digit number, which is affixed to the front of the Kevlar helmet, and that is the only thing he or she will be called for the next three weeks. The numbering system is arbitrary; no one gets to select his own number. So call it Providence, Kismet, or whatever—the three numerals I was given were: 069. As I was to learn over the course of the next three weeks, there wasn't a paratrooper at the Airborne School who didn't know at least one joke involving the digits 6 and 9. Good "troop" that I was, I faithfully memorized all those jokes, filed them away carefully, ready to be called to mind

at a moment's notice. It's amazing how much goodwill one off-color joke can engender.

Another Frenchman, André-Jacques Garnerin, is generally acknowledged to have been the first man to successfully make a parachute jump. The names of the people who attempted it unsuccessfully were apparently lost along with their lives. Garnerin did it in 1797 from a balloon floating three thousand feet over Paris. One year later his wife, Genevieve Labrosse, became the first female parachutist. Between 1815 and 1836, Garnerin's niece Elisa jumped forty times. As the saying goes, "The family that plays together . . ."

On the first morning of ground training the Black Hats got us out of our bunks at "O-dark-thirty," and marched us over to the chow hall, where we inhaled greasy sausage patties and cold greenish scrambled eggs. Then we hustled over to the training area through the predawn mist at a near double time. The training area was a sprawling open space, layered in shadows and surrounded by a bunch of tall towers that looked vaguely threatening. We formed up in two companies and stood at parade rest in the dark on the still-cool, red Georgia clay. There was another hour left before sunrise, but the temperature was already starting to climb. Sweat from the march beaded on my forehead underneath my helmet.

We waited in complete silence. About two hundred men and women had been thrown together in the class from all branches of the armed forces. There were buck privates fresh out of army basic training, marine recon types, and Navy SEALs. There was even an air force chaplain whom everyone had taken to calling "Padre" even though he wore a Star of David on his lapel. About the only thing we all had in common was that we'd all volunteered, most of us against our better judgment, to learn how to jump out of airplanes in flight.

Only one month earlier I was getting drunk at the Sig Ep house with a bunch of guys who couldn't have performed a proper "left face" or snapped off a decent salute to save their lives; that was worlds away now. Standing motionless in the predawn darkness, I thought about my classmates loafing at the beach, or partying through summer school back at Wake, and wondered what sick, masochistic impulse had landed me here. But I knew, deep down, that I had to be here. I had to see this thing through, not so much for the wings they'd pin on my uniform if I com-

pleted the course successfully, but to prove to myself that I could do it.

Several minutes passed, and still nothing happened. We shifted nervously in ranks, waiting for something—anything—to occur. Then a fortyish man who looked like a grizzly bear stuffed into battle dress uniform strode out in front of us. He was the Sergeant Major Airborne, the ranking enlisted man and de facto dictator of Airborne School. He walked with the assured air of a man who knows he has the complete and unwavering attention of his audience. The measured precision of his steps couldn't completely conceal a slight limp. His thick arms stretched the rolled-up sleeves of his fatigue shirt to the point that it looked as if the buttons would pop off. Upon seeing him, the instructor who'd marched us out there, and was now standing in front of us, came to a rigid position of attention. Cocking his head over his right shoulder, he barked: "Class, a-ten-SHUN!"

In unison, two hundred bodies snapped to attention. We stood there, rigor mortis-stiff, looking straight ahead and waiting for the Sergeant Major Airborne to say something. He glowered at us for a few moments in what might most optimistically be described as benign disdain. Drawing a deep breath, which seemed to suck all of the oxygen out of the general vicinity, he bellowed: "What are you?"

He was answered by perplexed silence. Nobody had prepped us for something like this. Soldiers are trained to be told things, not asked.

"Get down and give me twenty," he snarled.

Without hesitating, we dropped in place, every last one of us, and began knocking out push-ups with the blind enthusiasm of children. It was, at least, a command we could all understand. When the entire company were on their feet again, he repeated his question: "What are you?"

Realizing this time that some sort of response was demanded of us, we shot back, not entirely in unison, with the most logical reply we could muster: "Airborne!"

This answer seemed only to further enrage him. Even in the scant light, I could see the veins bulge out of his thick neck and the spit fly as he bellowed: "Airborne? You ain't Airborne. Gimme twenty more!"

So, for the second time, two hundred bodies dropped to the ground. When we were again standing, now panting and perspiring somewhat, he decided to give us a little coaching. "When I ask 'What are you?' I want you to look down in shame and say, 'Dirty, nasty legs, Sergeant Major Airborne.' Then I want you to spit on the ground so you can get the taste of those filthy words out of your mouth. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major Airborne!"

"When I ask 'What do you want to be?' then you can answer 'Airborne.' But you ain't Airborne yet, not by a long shot. Now, I'm gonna ask you again, what are you?"

Everyone looked at his or her feet and parroted the words just fed us. "Dirty, nasty legs, Sergeant Major Airborne," we responded dolefully, punctuating the statement with two hundred loud ptooeys.

"What are you?"

"Dirty, nasty legs, Sergeant Major Airborne." Ptooeey.

"What do you want to be?"

Our spirits lifted a little. We looked up and shouted: "Airborne!"

"What do you want to be?"

"Airborne!" with more enthusiasm this time.

"What do you want to be?"

We were rabid dogs now, frothing at the mouth: "Airborne!"

This was how we began every morning.

Billy Mitchell, a brigadier general in the United States Army Air Service during World War I, was the first person to think of using parachutes as a means of deploying combat troops. Mitchell was one of those crazy visionaries, not unlike Einstein or Picasso a little later in the century. He helped change the thinking in his field, except instead of physics or art, Mitchell's medium was warfare. To be more precise, his area of expertise was finding ways of employing the still-novel invention of the airplane to wipe off the face of the planet large groups of people with sociopolitical views different from his own.

In the fall of 1918, he persuaded his boss, U.S. Army Expeditionary Force commander General John J. Pershing, to give him a division to equip and train with parachutes. The idea was to drop soldiers behind enemy lines—in this case the adversary was Kaiser Wilhelm's German army—to confuse the opposition and divert their efforts. Pershing also saw the potential for a parachute unit and approved the plan for 1919.

Mitchell never got to see his plans for an airborne strike force come to fruition. The Armistice of November 11, 1918, put his dream on the back burner. He was subsequently court-martialed and drummed out of the service because of a bitter quarrel with some rear-echelon desk jockeys.

Friends who had completed airborne training always insisted the first jump was the easiest. I found this difficult to believe, partly because

it was impossible for me to see past that first jump. Still, I felt that once I'd done it, survived, and seen that it could be done, then it wouldn't be so bad the next time. But no, the veteran paratroopers insisted. Once you do it and discover just how frightening it is, when you learn how many things can go wrong and how hard you smack into the ground, you want to do it even less. Military parachutes are nothing like civilian ones. First of all, they're designed to descend quickly because when a soldier is in the air, he's nothing more than a floating target. Second, they can't be steered so well—they're designed like that on purpose. Think about it. If there are a few hundred paratroopers filling up one small patch of sky, then a bunch of them can't be jetting around thinking they're the Blue Angels. A lot of things can happen when two parachutists collide in midair, and all of them are bad.

Owing to these design idiosyncrasies, there's no such thing as a "standing landing" in the United States Army; it's simply not allowed, since that's the fastest way to break a leg. Landings with military parachutes tend to be rough, but maybe only one out of three will be hard. One time a parachutist might touch down softly on a nice grassy spot, and the next jump he could get slammed into the hard-packed, sun-dried clay of an emergency landing strip. There's really no way of predicting, except that if it's a windy day, look out.

Nazi Germany was the first country to employ paratroopers in combat. During the initial, blitzkrieg phase of the Second World War, prior to the United States' involvement, parachute units were used to capture bridges and airports in Belgium and the Netherlands. This opened the way for the invading force that followed. In the Mediterranean, German paratroopers and glider forces seized Corinth and Crete. Across the Atlantic, the United States took note of this, and in 1940 the War Department laid plans for an experimental airborne infantry platoon. The men were initially billeted in tents near Lawson Field at Fort Benning.

One of the main focuses of Airborne School is exiting the plane properly. Roughly half of the training time during Ground Week is devoted to that, the other half being spent on landing. The problem is that all of that practice exiting the plane is done on the ground or at relatively low altitudes. Everything changes when, fifteen hundred feet above Mother Earth, a door swings open on the side of the plane and some half-

insane jumpmaster starts barking, over the roar of the wind and the engines, *Go out!*

On that first jump, I did almost everything wrong. My exit from the C-130 could best be compared to the spastic death dance a chicken's body performs upon being separated from its head. But once I was outside the plane, something strange happened. A preserving calm descended over me. I tucked in my chin as I'd been trained, pulled my feet together, and placed my hands around the emergency chute strapped to my belly. And I counted.

Two thousand

After the Sergeant Major Airborne finished his dog-and-pony show, he'd turn the morning formation over to his instructors. The instructors would begin an in-ranks inspection. They'd pace up and down the lines like drug-sniffing dogs at the Miami airport. They were looking for any little imperfection in the appearance of our uniforms or our persons: loose strings, buttons undone, nonregulation haircuts, and shaves that weren't clean and close enough. We wore our tennis shoes to the training area because physical training was performed in uniform immediately after the inspection. This meant we had to carry our boots, which consequently merited extra-special attention. The Black Hats wanted our boots spit-shined to the point that they could use the toe as a mirror for shaving. Clean, close shaves.

If they found something wrong, even the smallest defect, it was a gig. If an Airborne candidate received two gigs over the course of the three weeks, he'd be recycled and would have to start over from the beginning. A third would send him back to his unit, which, though humiliating, might not have been as bad as being recycled. One gig was plenty, however, because it purchased an all-expenses-paid trip to the gig pit. I'm not entirely sure who cooked up the idea of the gig pit, but whoever did must have been a big fan of Tomás de Torquemada.

It was literally a pit. Covering fifty square meters, it was spacious enough to accommodate an entire class should the need, or whimsy, for that matter, arise. Not particularly deep, it had been dug a foot or two below ground level and then filled with sawdust. The sawdust was the essence of the gig pit. The gig pit was actually just a remedial physical training area where the Black Hats berated the unfortunate trainees who'd been giggered, while running them through an unremitting series of flutter kicks, squat thrusts, and four-count push-ups.

By the time activity in the gig pit began, the sun would be coming up and the morning would be turning hot in earnest. First came the push-ups. The Black Hats bellowed to pump them out until everyone's arm and chest muscles literally gave out from under them. Not pausing at all between exercises, they'd roll the gigees over and have them perform flutter kicks and "Hello darlings" until it felt like their abdominal muscles were about to rip. Before anyone could catch his breath, the Black Hats would have the group back on their feet, huffing and sucking at the muggy Georgia air, doing squat thrusts until their legs and backs burned. That was followed by practice Parachute Landing Falls right there in place. Then the entire routine would begin again with the push-ups. Hell is circular, Flann O'Brien once wrote.

In the end, what made the gig pit such a thoroughly distasteful experience wasn't so much the screaming; that can be blocked out. And it wasn't the unrelenting intensity of the workout, because if they weren't in great shape, the trainees wouldn't have made it that far. In order merely to be considered for Airborne School, candidates first had to score high on the standard army physical-fitness test. No, what made the gig pit truly torturous was its smallest detail—the sawdust. With all that wallowing around, it would gradually coat the length and breadth of every soldier in there—like rolling chicken in flour and crumbs before frying it. Starting with the hands and forearms, it would work its way up to the face, then dig deep into the folds in the back of the neck. Somehow it would find its way inside everybody's T-shirt and then migrate down the pants. It was like a creeping rash that eventually spread to every crevice in the body. The really diabolical thing about it, though, was that the more a person sweated, the more it stuck to him or her. Immediately after the gig pit, the Black Hats would take us on a five-mile run—not most people's first choice of activities when slathered with sawdust. After the run, there were field showers set up in the training area that the Black Hats would send us all through in uniform, flapping our arms and quacking like ducks for the trainers' amusement. Nevertheless, there was no way of shedding all of that sawdust until we returned to the barracks in the evening.

By the time the United States entered the Second World War, the first airborne units in the American military had been organized. Participation then, like today, was on a volunteer-only basis. In August 1942, the two airborne divisions were formed—the 82nd and the 101st. They saw their first action in North Africa later that year. About everything

that could go wrong with that initial mission did. A number of planes were lost for various reasons during the twelve-hour flight from England. After the paratroopers missed their drop zone, their landings were scattered thirty-five miles from the objective. This forced them to march thirty-five miles across the desert in their woolen winter underwear and full field gear. When they finally reached their objective, the airfield at Tafaraoui, it had already been taken by an American armored column. As my tanker friends liked to say, "Go, armor!"

The first and most important thing to remember about a Parachute Landing Fall is that the feet and knees must be held firmly together at all times, legs bent slightly at the knees. Upon landing, the instant the boots touch the earth, a paratrooper is taught to collapse into the PLF. Every day, up to and including the morning of our first real jump, we practiced hundreds of PLFs. The stress the school places on learning the PLF is justified by the simple fact that almost every injury resulting from Airborne training missions occurs during landing.

The PLF consists of five points of contact that all Airborne candidates are expected to memorize the first day of ground training. The five points of contact are the balls of the feet, the outside of the calf and the thigh, the hip, and the side muscles of the back. The idea behind the PLF is to spread the impact of the landing throughout the body, like a judo fall, so that the shock of the landing isn't absorbed entirely by the feet and legs. Of course, the instructors are probably secretly chuckling to themselves even as they diligently teach the five points of contact, because they know that for almost every inexperienced parachutist, and for a great many experienced paratroopers, there are really only three points of impact. The three actual points of impact are as follows: heels, ass, and back of the head.

The long days, the incessant verbal abuse from the Black Hats, the brutal training, even the gig pit—all of these things are fleeting and, therefore, bearable. What is almost unbearable is the crushing weight of history and tradition, these things that live on long after the last of a generation has died and been buried. The ghost of every paratrooper whose family ever received a rolled-up flag and a cursory letter of condolence marked our every step. Their very presence flew in the face of the conviction secretly held by every Airborne candidate—that he or she is young and therefore immortal.

All of the drop zones at Fort Benning had been named after locations where the 82nd and 101st had jumped into combat. They were faraway, mythical-sounding places like Arnhem and Normandy. The Sicily Drop Zone was to be the site of our first real jump. The name alone brought to mind images of a peaceful Carthaginian sky torn apart by the terrible buzzing from the propellers of several hundred C-47's. Out of these ponderous aircraft had spilled thousands of boys—young and immortal and scared out of their wits, just like us. Their parachutes blossomed in the sky like a thousand poppies, white against a gentle pastel blue. Soon, treacherous winds caught them and scattered them about like dandelion seeds. Landing amid a terrifying hail of enemy gunfire, many of their tallow bodies bloomed a deep, ruby red and then rotted in the blistering Mediterranean sun.

Three thousand

The third week was Jump Week. By Jump Week the Black Hats were treating us almost like human beings. But by then, it didn't really matter how they treated us. They could have set up deck chairs in the gig pit and poured us mint juleps in crystal tumblers and it wouldn't have made any difference. By this point, we *wanted* to jump out of those planes and nothing the Black Hats could have said or done would have changed that. If it came down to it, we would have crawled over broken glass just to do it. And that's exactly what they wanted.

I didn't sleep well the night before the first jump. I dreamed that I'd jumped but my parachute didn't deploy. I was unable to open my reserve and was hurtling toward the ground at a rate of thirty-two feet per second squared. I awoke with a start just before crashing into the ground, my entire body and the starched cotton sheets of my bunk soaked in sweat.

The Screaming Eagles of the 101st Airborne were involved in perhaps the most famous battle in twentieth-century American military history—the Battle of the Bulge. The battle took place in and around Bastogne, Belgium, near the border with Germany during the German counteroffensive of December 1944. Ironically, the paratroopers of the 101st were unable to jump into position for their most celebrated engagement because of snow and fog. Instead, they were rushed to the front

on trucks. The German offensive had caught the Allies off guard, and Bastogne had been surrounded by enemy troops. The 101st circled the wagons and dug in. On the map, the image this created was that of a bulge—hence the name. When the Germans demanded their surrender, the American commander, General Anthony McAuliffe, delivered his famous reply, “Nuts.” The German officer entrusted to take the message back to the German command was unfamiliar with the vernacular, so the GI driving him to the line had to explain that it meant “Go to hell.” That he understood.

The morning of the first jump, they got us up well before dawn—just like they had every other morning. We had chow and then marched to the airstrip. The mood was somber; the bravado some class members had previously displayed had disappeared. Fear made us all equals. In front of the hangar was a low wooden platform that was used for eleventh-hour PLF practice. The instructors lined us up and ran everyone through PLFs from the front, back, and both sides—in case anyone had somehow forgotten.

They broke us into “sticks,” which were the fifteen-soldier squads we’d be jumping with. I was fifth in my stick, and was greatly relieved that I wasn’t first. The first guy would have to stand in the open doorway when the plane got to be about thirty seconds from the drop zone, his hands resting on the outer skin of the aircraft, poised to hurl himself out into the nothingness. I wasn’t too keen on that. Directly in front of me in my stick was the air force chaplain, the rabbi. I was greatly comforted by this, for some reason. When the Black Hats finished organizing us by plane and stick, we filed silently into the hangar.

The hangar was massive—about the size and dimensions of a football field with a convex, twenty-five-foot-high, corrugated metal roof. It was big enough to hold a couple full-strength battalions, maybe even a regiment. The floor was lined with sturdy, high-backed wooden benches like the pews of a church. Unlike a church, the rows ran lengthwise from front to back, so that they faced the sides, not the front. There were six-inch shelves protruding from the seat portion of all the benches. I found this feature very curious at first, but then realized it was a place on which to rest the parachutes after they’d been strapped to the backs of the paratroopers.

Once inside, we turned right and lined up in front of the equipment room at the entrance to the hangar to receive our main and reserve parachutes. At this point the reality of the situation rolled over me: every

step I took, it became harder and harder to turn back. The specialist passing out the parachutes wasn't a Black Hat, but the wings on his chest and the patch on his shoulder attested that he, too, was Airborne, even though he didn't look old enough to shave. The idea of two hundred people jumping out of airplanes for the first time had put him in an unusually chipper mood for a man who'd probably gotten out of bed at four in the morning. After he handed each person one parachute and one reserve parachute, his freckled face would become consumed by a toothy grin and he'd say, "Go get 'em, Airborne!" or something along those lines. In response, they'd mutter, "All the way," or grunt a halfhearted "Ooh-rah."

When I got to him, he said, "Sixty-nine, my lucky number." He handed me my equipment and said, "Good luck, cadet."

I mumbled, "Thanks," and followed the rabbi and the others from my stick to a bench. I wondered why he'd wished me good luck. I hadn't heard him say it to anyone else. Did he know something? Had he given me a defective parachute? Had my dream been some sort of premonition that I'd soon be plummeting earthward, trailed by a useless streamer? I dismissed these thoughts as fear-bred paranoia. What else could I do?

While we were donning our equipment, a first lieutenant with a cocky smile strutted up and down the aisles passing out Dramamine pills. When he got to me, I waved him off, saying, "No, thanks."

He stepped back, aghast, feigning personal insult. "C'mon, cadet," he said, "what are you going to do if your uncle Ralph comes acalling while you're up in that bird?" He pantomimed a person becoming violently ill.

"OK," I said, rolling my eyes and holding out my hand, "give me a couple."

He dropped two tiny white pills in my palm, winked at me, and then continued on his merry way. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits around there except those of us who were actually about to jump out of airplanes. I stashed the pills in my shirt pocket and went back to checking my equipment.

Shouting "Geronimo" during a jump was begun by a soldier in the 501st Parachute Battalion named Aubrey Eberhart. Private Eberhart made his famous cry during a training mission in order to prove to a buddy that he was fully in control of all his mental faculties while exiting the aircraft. Of course, the simple fact that he was jumping out of a perfectly good airplane while in flight seems to contradict this notion.

What really gets to a soldier in these Airborne training missions is all the waiting. If the Black Hats had just marched us to the airfield, handed each of us a parachute, stuck us on a plane, and then dropped us, it wouldn't have been so bad, maybe. As it was, our equipment was issued; we strapped it on and then sat around the hangar for three hours. After they moved us outside, instead of immediately boarding the airplanes, we waited on the tarmac for another ninety minutes. When they finally loaded my group onto the C-130, we sat on the runway for almost an hour before taking off. The entire time, nearly six hours on end, my heart was knocking against my ribcage and the adrenaline was pumping throughout my body. We hadn't even taken off yet and I was exhausted.

Still, we were lucky we took off at all. One planeload of our classmates got canceled on the runway due to mechanical difficulties. They had to shuffle off the C-130 and back into the hangar to start the whole process over again.

Our plane had been in the air for about twenty minutes when the jumpmaster barked out the first warning order, "Ten minutes!"

The C-130 wasn't configured like a commercial airliner, with lots of short rows of seats all facing forward. Instead, there were four long columns running from front to rear. Two rows were against the walls of the aircraft, facing inward. The other two rows were in the center with their backs to each other, facing out. The seats were small, hard, and uncomfortable, with no armrest or divider of any kind between them. According to our training, when the jumpmaster called "Ten minutes," we were supposed to shift our bodies from side to side, bumping into the soldiers next to us in order to awaken anyone who might have fallen asleep, as if that were possible. While we were doing this, we were to repeat the warning order—in unison—three times: "Ten minutes! Ten minutes! Ten minutes!"

I was seated in the left outside row, near the front. My stick would be one of the two going out on the first pass, which was something of a relief since it would take three passes to empty the plane and I was tired of waiting. At this point, nobody was looking at anybody else. For the most part, we were all just staring at the floor, occasionally stealing a glance across the aisle.

Opposite me sat a light colonel who was jumping with our class as a "straphanger." A straphanger is a soldier from an active airborne unit who has missed his unit's last jump and must make a jump with another outfit in order to maintain active Airborne status. Despite already having his wings, the colonel looked every bit as nervous as the rest of us. He caught me glancing over at him and shot me a dirty look.

"Five minutes!" the jumpmaster called out.

"Five minutes! Five minutes! Five minutes!" we echoed.

There were doors on either side at the front of the plane; my stick would be going out the door on our side, and the stick opposite us would exit on the other side. When we were nearly a minute away from the drop zone, the jumpmasters on both sides threw the doors open. Light flooded into the dark interior of the plane, causing those of us in the front to squint and shade our eyes. The roar of the wind was deafening. I'd thought that opening the doors during flight would suck everyone toward them the way it happens in air-disaster films, but it didn't. I glanced to my left at the rabbi. His head was down and he seemed to be praying. The marine sergeant on the other side of him patted him on the shoulder and said, "Say one for me, Padre." Say one for all of us, Padre.

I could feel my heart pounding against the straps of my parachute, and my mouth had gone dry. For the past two weeks, the Black Hats had drilled into our heads the importance of facing into the wind after our parachutes deployed. The reason, they explained, was that if the wind were blowing at all that day and we "ran with the wind," it would drive us into the ground like lawn darts. Not a pleasant experience. To avoid this, the Black Hats taught us to spit into the wind to see which way it was blowing. As dry as my mouth was, I knew there wasn't a chance in hell of my working up a decent spit, so I was desperately trying to come up with ways of determining wind direction without spitting.

Standing in the aisle in front of me, one of the Black Hat jumpmasters—a short, muscular Special Forces sergeant first class from Brooklyn named Dubinsky—began clowning around. It was apparent he was doing it to loosen us up, but I suspected he was doing it to entertain himself just as much. He stumbled around clutching his stomach, saying, "I'm gonna be sick. I'm gonna be sick." Lurching toward a wide-eyed PFC across the aisle from me, he began to feign vomiting. He'd picked the right pigeon; the private reflexively raised his hands in front of himself, like puke on his hands was any better than puke on the front of his uniform. This reaction seemed to delight SFC Dubinsky, as he fell back laughing dementedly.

"Hey, sixty-nine," he said, walking over and addressing me by my roster number. "What's sixty-eight?"

"I don't know," I lied. I'd heard this one at least ten times over the past two and a half weeks.

"You do me and I'll owe you one," he said, erupting into laughter again.

"That's a good one, Sergeant Airborne," I said, trying to muster up a semiconvincing laugh.

He looked at me soberly and deadpanned, "No, seriously, you do me and I'll owe you one." Nothing like a little homoerotic humor to loosen things up right before a jump. Don't ask, don't tell!

The jumpmaster giving the commands on our side of the plane, a master sergeant, held up the index finger on his right hand and shouted, "One minute!" We echoed him faithfully, three times. Then came the command we'd all been dreading. He gave the thumbs-up with both hands and bellowed: "Stand up!"

The speed with which we sprang to our feet belied our trepidation. When I first stood up, I felt my knees buckle momentarily and nearly give way. Not a good sign. I told myself, "Just get through this one; worry about the others later." The guy behind me in the stick was a second lieutenant who'd played football for San Diego State, or maybe it was San Jose State. He was a burly guy, and I could hear him breathing heavy and grunting, like he was psyching himself up for homecoming game. The adrenaline coursing through me made my whole body tremble; I felt like I could lift a bus off someone or perform some other feat of freakish strength.

The jumpmaster held his hands up with his index fingers curled down to the thumbs like OK signs and shouted, "Hook up!" I clipped the end of my parachute cord to the metal static line that ran the length of the plane, a foot above head level. This was it; I was hooked up. There was definitely no turning back now. I got this weird jittery feeling all through my body.

The jumpmaster called, "Thirty seconds!" My breathing came fast and shallow, like I couldn't pull in enough air to satisfy my lungs. Half a minute to go. Was I ready? It was too late for questions now; there was no escape. Everyone was lined up, hooked up, itching to go and be done with it.

"Check equipment," the jumpmaster called. We immediately began going over ourselves for unsecured cords, loose equipment, any safety hazards, just as we'd been taught. When he'd finished checking himself, each soldier had to examine the equipment of the person in front of him to make sure the other guy's parachute had been fastened properly, that it was clipped to the static line, that the cord attached to the static line ran down into the parachute. When the trainee at the rear of the stick finished examining both himself and the soldier he followed, he slapped that soldier on the ass and shouted, "OK!" The slap was to let the man in front know that he and everyone behind him was OK, in case he

couldn't hear over the noise of the plane. This process then repeated itself up the line until it reached the lead soldier in the stick. When it got to the first guy, he took a step forward, and with fingers together and flattened out like a karate chop, he pointed at the jumpmaster and shouted, "All OK, jumpmaster!"

The jumpmaster then directed him to "stand in the door." This was when I realized I was very happy I wasn't the first guy in the stick. The point man, a sweet-natured buck sergeant from Panama named Cabrero, inched his way to the door. When he got there, he had to stick the front end of his foot out the door so that it was hanging out there in the breeze. Then he placed his hands, palms down, on the outer skin of the aircraft, poised to launch himself into the clear blue sky. Now we just had to wait for the plane to reach the drop zone so the jumpmaster could give us the order to go.

It took about twenty more seconds for the plane to move into position, but it felt like two hours to me, and it must have felt like two days to Cabrero, hanging partway out of the plane as he was. Finally, the pilot switched the light on the front bulkhead from red to green. We were over the drop zone. The jumpmaster smacked Cabrero in the ass and screamed, "Go!" As soon as he did, Cabrero was out the door, tumbling through the atmosphere.

Those final seconds in the plane were a blur. The other thirteen guys in my stick and I did the Airborne shuffle at a double time toward the door, and then leaped out. It was like some sort of mass psychosis. The guy that followed Cabrero went, then the marine sergeant, and after him the Padre. As I approached the door, I tried to keep my mind blank except for the mantra I repeated in my head over and over: "Just get through this first one. Just get through this one. . . ." Over the shrieking wind, I could hear the second lieutenant / football player behind me breathing harder as we rushed forward. When I got to the door, I heard SFC Dubinsky shout, "I'll see you in hell, sixty-nine!" Yeah, thanks for that shot of confidence, Sarge. Then I was gone.

Four thou—

Sunlight exploded around me, and the roar of the wind evaporated. Even though I was plummeting earthward at a geometrically increasing velocity, it didn't feel like I was falling at all. It felt like I was floating. Everything switched from the real to the surreal, as if I were trapped inside a Dali painting. The earth orbited around me and there I was, fifteen

hundred feet above the planet, frozen for the moment in time and in space. I lived three or four lifetimes in that one moment.

After that first second of blind terror, a feeling of peace suffused me. I breathed in and then let it out. Straightening my body, I pulled my legs together, placed my hands on the reserve parachute on my belly, and counted. We'd been taught to count since the first day of Ground Week. But it's one thing to do it on the ground or after exiting the thirty-foot tower, and quite another when you do it for real. What makes counting so crucial is that if the main parachute hasn't opened within four seconds, the ripcord on the reserve chute must be pulled immediately. From the height at which we were jumping, seven seconds was considered to be the point of no return. If either the main or reserve parachute hadn't deployed by the seven-second mark, there simply would not be enough time for it to break the fall. The Black Hats had impressed upon us through mind-numbing repetition that if a parachutist failed to act within seven seconds, he'd become a human lawn dart, and they'd have to dig what was left of him out of that baked Georgia clay with a tin spoon from the field mess kit.

My parachute still hadn't deployed. I was almost to four and I was becoming concerned. I had my chin tucked into my chest and was looking down through my feet as I'd been trained. The funny thing was, at fifteen hundred feet we had been flying below the clouds. But when I peered between my feet, the only things I could make out were clouds. I couldn't discern any green or red or brown from the ground beneath. Then something odder still happened. I saw the plane, far away and much smaller now, passing between my boots.

Then I felt a tug at my back, and I was violently flipped right side up. I looked overhead, and all I could see was sunlight streaming down through white silk. Letting out a sigh of relief, I reached up and grabbed the risers to my parachute. Now if I could only work up a spit.

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