

One Giant Leap

By Gary Palamara



Sixty-two years ago, the youngest man ever to enlist as a Navy pilot was shot down over the South Pacific, during World War II. As the burning wreckage of his Avenger aircraft broke up in mid air, the pilot watched as his two-man crew bailed out, before leaving the stricken plane.

While the three, helplessly floated down to the sea, below their life-giving canopies, Japanese gunners from the island of Chi Chi Jima continued to target the men. Just two years into his naval career, the 20-year old pilot was soon rescued by a nearby U.S. submarine. He was the only one to survive the ordeal. For his heroic attempts to save both men and machine on that day, he would later be

awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The date was September 2, 1944 and this was George Bush's first experience with Skydiving. He vowed some day to try another jump under less hostile circumstances.

Almost sixty years after that infamous flight, former President George H. W. Bush once again found himself poised at the open door of a military aircraft and about to jump out. Although his first attempt at skydiving was from a crippled, out of control machine, this jump would be made from a perfectly good airplane and was totally voluntary. As he had done to commemorate his 70th and 75th birthdays, in 2004, George Bush wanted to mark the occasion of his 80th birthday with another skydive. So, on June 6, at 1:20 CT the 41st President of the United States was airborne over the campus of Texas A + M University and traveling at nearly 150 miles per hour.

5500 feet above the campus, the main shoot opened and the former president drifted safely back to earth to the



applause and cheers of the thousands who had gathered to watch the spectacle. The

event which became known as **41 @ 80** was planned as a fundraiser for charity and raised nearly 50 million dollars for cancer research and for the university.

Joined By A Golden Knights Veteran!

Unlike his previous solo jumps, because of strong crosswinds at the landing site, this birthday dive would be a tandem leap. Harnessed to the back of the president was a veteran of more than 4000 skydives, Army Staff Sergeant Bryan Schnell of the world famous Army Golden Knights. When you talk about precision skydiving, the Golden Knights are the best in the business and even though George Bush was an old Navy man, the Army's Official Parachute team, were the logical choice to safeguard the former president.



To the members of the Golden Knights parachuting is not just a sport or a means to safely exit a crippled aircraft, to the Army's elite team, parachuting is a way of life. In the late 1950s several state sponsored, Iron Curtain teams dominated the then fledgling sport of international skydiving. All of that was to change when in 1959 thirteen Americans came together to form the Strategic Army Corps Sport Parachute Team.

Right from the start, the members performed well in international competition and received many awards. Because of that success, on June 1, 1961 the Army activated the group as the official Parachute Team of the U. S. Army. Later that same year, they adopted the name the Golden Knights.

Fourteen Thousand Shows and Counting!

Each year, the Golden Knights complete more than 27,000 jumps before an estimated 12 million people and in addition to air shows they have appeared at other events such as Nascar and major league baseball games. To date, they have performed more than 14,000 shows in all 50 states and 48 countries around the globe.

But while the public thinks of the Knights as one large team, the organization is actually made up of several smaller groups. Each group has a distinct purpose, but they all live up to the Knights three-fold mission. 1) To perform aerial demonstrations for the public and to promote the army and it's recruitment effort, 2) to compete in national and international parachuting competitions and, 3) to test and evaluate new equipment and techniques for improved operations and safety.

From their home base of Fort Bragg, North Carolina a total of ninety men and women make up the Army Golden Knights organization. Within that structure, there are six different groups. For the most part, each group is separate, but depending upon need, some members of the Knights will perform with more than one team. The Gold team and the Black team each have between 10 and 12 members, and they perform the

bulk of the public demonstrations throughout the air show season. Each weekend, they wow air show audiences throughout North America. In addition, there is a Style and Accuracy team, a Freefall Formation team and a Tandem jump team. Team Six is comprised of the Aviation and administrative group and is responsible for team logistics, team transport and public relations. Together all of these separate groups make up the world famous Army Golden Knights.

The Tandem jump team promotes Army skill and professionalism by arranging high profile jumps with political dignitaries and famous celebrities from the worlds of sports, movies and television. In spite of what some might consider being a risky exercise, there seems to be an ever-growing list of famous celebrities willing to take that giant leap.

From A Venetian Tower To High-Tech Ram Air Chutes!



While, parachuting as a sport is only a few decades old, the idea of floating down to earth from a high location on a cushion of air has been around in one form or another for centuries. As far back as 1495, Leonardo da Vinci sketched detailed drawings of a manned parachute using fabric and a rigid frame for support. Jumping from a Venetian tower in 1617, the first successful parachute jump was made by the Italian, Fauste Veranzio. The first successful emergency skydive was made by Frenchman, Jean

Pierre Blanchard when he separated from his burning hot air balloon in 1785. Twelve years later, in 1797, Andrew Garnerin using the world's first non-rigid parachute successfully jumped from his hot air balloon at an altitude of 8000 feet.

Throughout the decades that followed, work continued on parachute design and safety. But it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that necessity and invention came together at the same time.



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When advances in aviation met up with the invention of man made fibers such as Nylon in the 1930s, the resulting union, proved to be a perfect marriage. In the early days of aviation, parachute manufacturers had been looking for a lightweight yet strong fabric to withstand the ever-increasing demands for strength, safety and comfort. The advent of mass-produced, lightweight fabrics streamlined parachute design and eventually gave birth to what we now know as modern-day sport of Skydiving.

The Golden Knights demand a level performance and control not found with the standard issue Army Airborne parachute. For that reason, the Knights use a chute that was invented and perfected in the 1960s and 70s. This rectangular, all nylon design is called a Para foil or Ram Air parachute. The unique design is extremely safe and lightweight, yet allows the user greater control over direction and decent speed. This level of sophistication improves accuracy during international competitions and air shows. In addition, the Ram Air canopy may be deployed over a wide range of altitudes from 2000 and 30,000 feet and provides approximately 350 square feet of surface area, which makes it perfect for Tandem jumping.

At The Show

The Golden Knights normally arrive at the air show site at least one or two days prior to the first scheduled show. Like all air show performers during that time, the Knights become familiar with the surrounding area and make themselves available for personal appearances and media interviews.

From time to time the Knights even allow reporters like me to tag along and watch their show from a more close up perspective. In June of 2005 it was my pleasure to get a birds eye view of the Knights' Gold skydiving team when they performed at the McGuire Air Force Base open house weekend.



For team transport and airshow lift the Knights ride aboard a Fokker Friendship C-31 twin-engine turbo-prop. The plane is painted white and accented with the team colors of Black and Gold. Inside, the Fokker has room for approximately 30 passengers and equipment. Up front in the cockpit, the pilots can either be military or civilian contractors.

During each performance, one of the pilot's jobs is to coordinate via radio with a ground-based member of the Knight team about the wind conditions at field level. In addition the pilots communicate with the show Air Boss, the tower, as well as keeping an eye out on the weather conditions at flight level.

Just prior to take off the Gold team assembles alongside their Fokker aircraft to perform what the Knights call a "Dirt Dive". This is where each part of their

performance is checked and rechecked in the exact show order. Any last minute details are worked out during the dirt dive.

No Doors, And Temps Near 20 Degrees

Once off the ground, the turbo-prop circles overhead at an altitude of nearly 13,000 feet. The mood inside the aircraft is professional and definitely upbeat. Each team member has checked and then rechecked not only his, but also his buddy's equipment, making sure that everything is ready for another safe and flawless show.

Towards the rear of the aircraft, the doors on either side of the plane have been removed to allow for easy access out of the plane. With the engines running outside at about 70% of their maximum, the wind rushes by the open doors at around 200 miles per hour. The temperature inside the aircraft drops on this sunny June day, to a wintry 10-20 degrees as the deafening noise makes verbal communications all but impossible. A well-rehearsed series of hand signals allows the lead jumpers, seated near the open doors, to communicate with the crew chief that is stationed up front near the pilots.

Just prior to the first jumper exiting the aircraft, a colored streamer is thrown out of the aircraft over show center.

Being buffeted by the 200 mile per hour slipstream, one of the Knights hangs his head outside of the aircraft and watches as the streamer falls to the earth. The purpose of this exercise is to estimate how the prevailing winds will interact with the jumpers upon their exit from the plane. By calculating the amount of streamer drift, a point in the sky is chosen for the first jumper to exit.



At most air show sites, the Golden Knights normally perform at least two shows. One performance opens the air show around 9 or 10 am. The second series of jumps come later in the day, when the team takes center stage as one of the featured performers.

Most military air shows open with a member of the Golden Knights team bringing in the "Colors". With the National Anthem playing in the background, flying the American Flag into show center is a great honor and not something that a member of the Golden Knights team takes lightly. Once on the ground, the color person coordinates with a ground based Knight before taking on the

duties of narrator for the rest of the show. The actual wind conditions are relayed up to the C-31 so the remaining jumpers can make any last minute corrections.

Don't Try This At Home

While the main focus of the Golden Knights is to help promote the Army, the team is also tasked with the job of instructing the crowd to the ways of sky jumping. One of the most breathtaking jumps during any Golden Knights show comes when a solo Knight performs what is known as the cut-away maneuver. Exiting the aircraft at 13,000 feet, the jumper heads earthward at a high rate of speed and then deploys their chute at approximately 10,000 feet. After hanging in the air for a minute or so, this jumper purposely cuts the chute away and then once again rapidly falls to earth.



This demonstration is to simulate what might happen in the unlikely event that a jumper's chute failed. Traveling down for another thousand feet or so, the jumper once more deploys their canopy and all is right with the world again. While this maneuver is instructional, the logical thought might be "What if the second chute fails?" Well, not to worry, the Knights leave nothing to chance. Every breakaway diver carries a total of three chutes.

To assist the crowd in visualizing the team's maneuvers, each jumper ignites a smoke flare that is attached to their boot. This flare most often emits red smoke, but can also come in other colors such as blue or green.

Best Of The Best

Becoming a member of the Golden Knights is the dream of many both in and out of the Army. For any soldier who enjoys the thrill of free-fall skydiving, what could be better than making an estimated 3-400 jumps a year, while getting paid for the privilege? But to become a member of this elite organization, the selection process is both detailed and exacting. Just for starters, all applicants who volunteer for the Knights must have a minimum of 150 free-fall jumps, they must have a spotless military and civilian record, and although being a member of the Army Airborne is not mandatory, they must be willing to attend the Airborne school if necessary.

The team selection process takes place during the winter months of each year. Once an applicant is picked for the team, they enter a six-week period of testing before actually becoming a member.



During that time the Knights will naturally evaluate the recruit's parachuting skills, but they also concentrate on his or her physical, mental and emotional states. How well an applicant works with the rest of the team is as important to the Army's mission as a flawless performance.

Once the final selections are made, a new member will be knighted as an official member of the Golden Knights team and will serve for approximately 3 years. They receive no extra pay for their duties. When talking to these young men and women, they'll tell you that it's an honor to serve the team, the Army and the United States of America.

41 @ 85?

When former president George Bush found out that the Army would award him a medal for completing only five freefall skydives he was definitely excited. But there was one small problem. Counting up all of the president's chute time, including his unscheduled 1944 leap to safety, his 80th birthday jump would only make four, not five skydives. With that in mind, on the morning of his last historic jump president Bush then only 79 years of age, decided to do a practice jump to help qualify for the award. Sure enough, later that same day, upon completing his fifth skydive, the Army awarded him the Basic skydive medal at the afternoon fundraiser.

If a former president of the United States makes up his mind to go skydiving, at 80 years of age, there is perhaps only one person who has the ability to stand in his way and say "NO"... his wife. Just prior to jump number five, when someone in the crowd asked former First Lady Barbara Bush if her husband the ex-president, would ever take another skydive, she nervously looked towards the heavens and replied "One way or another, this will be George's last jump."

Time will tell if George Bush jumps again on birthday number 85, but one thing is certain. If and when he does take another giant leap, the Army's elite parachuting team, the Golden Knights, will be right beside him making sure everything goes as planned.

For the Golden Knight's complete show schedule, please visit the Knight's web site at www.armygoldenknights.com

Footnote: On September 15 & 16, 2001 the Golden Knights were scheduled to perform for an open house weekend at McGuire Air Force Base in southern New Jersey. Those air shows were naturally cancelled because of the events of September 11th. For a short while after the attacks, it looked as though military air shows might be gone forever. But within weeks public Open Houses were rescheduled with heightened security. But for McGuire Air Force Base however, it was a different story.

Because McGuire's mission is so vital to the support of our men and women overseas, it was officially off the air show list until 2005. On June 4 & 5, it was my



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pleasure to be at the base when the Navy Blue Angels and the Army Golden Knights once again returned to the skies over New Jersey.

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Editor's Note: Gary Palamara is a freelance writer with a love of aviation. From 1968-'72, he worked with the Armed Forces Radio & Television Service while serving with the United States Air Force. For the past 30 years, he has been a freelance broadcast engineer. Gary is also an Amateur Radio operator. His amateur call sign is, AF1US. Reach him via his website, www.garypalamara.com

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Photo Captions for the above...

Photo One - *“Specialist Sean Sweeney Bringing in the National Colors”*

Photo Two - *“Former President George H. W. Bush flies through the air with members of the Golden Knights.” ** U.S. Army ©*

Photo Three - *“Former President George Bush talks with Staff Sergeant Bryan Schnell after completing his 80th birthday skydive.” ** U.S. Army ©*

Photo Four - *“Golfer Tiger Woods takes to the air with members of the Knights Tandem Team” ** U.S. Army ©*

Photo Five - *“The Golden Knights aircraft is a Fokker Friendship C-31”*

Photo Six - *“An inside look of the cockpit of the C-31”*

Photo Seven - *“Just prior to take off, the Gold team goes through every aspect of the show during the Dirt Dive”*

Photo Eight - *“As the team prepares for another show, the mood is upbeat and professional”*

Photo Nine - *“Specialist Sean Sweeney and Sergeant 1st Class Karen Vessels confer about the wind conditions at ground level”*

Photo Ten - *“The last three members of the Gold team prepare to exit over the skies of McGuire Air Force Base”*

Photo Eleven - *“With smoke trailing, two members of the Golden Knights spiral down to another perfect landing”*

Photo Twelve - *“Safely on the Ground, I prepare to exit the Fokker Friendship”*

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