

# Jumping out of a Perfectly Good Airplane

by Peter Panacy

Winter 2012 Jump School Graduate

As I took off from Denver International Airport on my way to Oklahoma City, I thought to myself, "the next time I take off in an airplane, I will not be landing with it." I was on my way to the World War II Airborne Demonstration Team's base of operations in Frederick, Oklahoma for the 2012 Winter Jump School. I had found out about the team from a World War II reenacting unit based out of California. A number of my fellow reenactors had gone through the school and spoke of it with the highest praise. Being somewhat of an adrenaline junkie myself, I knew it was only a matter of time before I too went forth with the school.

I had the fortune of attending the school with a good friend of mine from our reenactment unit. In addition, I also rode down from Oklahoma City to Frederick with another student, who was a prior jumper with the army, as well as an ADT instructor. Knowing my time was limited before the school started, I picked their brains for whatever information I could. The instructor told me that he believed that at least twenty-five percent of the class would not make it to the jump phase. The fellow student who had prior airborne service told me that his favorite spot in the stick was number one in the door. Both bits of information would come to help me down the road.

My arrival into Frederick Army Airfield on the outskirts of town was the culmination of months of preparatory work back home. I spent hours reading all the notes telling prospective jumpers how they needed to be in good shape and capable of handling rigorous workouts, extreme heat and cold, and very little sleep. While I knew I could handle these challenges, I still prepared myself extensively in the weeks and months before school. I would be glad at having done so.

We arrived on a Friday afternoon and I quickly settled into my barracks at the old hangar. While I wanted to take a look around at the aircraft and the building, I knew that stowing my gear and setting up my bunk would be the best bet given that I had some time to do so. I came to learn that time was in short supply at jump school and taking advantage of whatever time available would be vital. The barracks area itself was nothing more than a drafty wood plank room with cots lining the walls. The majority of bunks were claimed when I arrived, so I and the two students I had driven from the airport with grabbed the last adjoining bunks. There was a heater but it didn't provide much heat. Thankfully, I brought an all-weather sleeping bag and three wool blankets. I did not like the idea of being frozen over each night. The latrines were a long walk away and reminded me of some of the latrines I had seen in other old army barracks. They would suffice for me.

There was a roll call and brief initiation on Friday night. We went over paperwork and payments for the whole group as well as having our gear and helmets inspected for airborne use. Fortunately, my gear was up to par and I had little else to worry about. We were also given instructions on the schedule

and expectations. We students were told that a number of us were probably going to drop the course due to various reasons. We were told that for many, executing the proper parachute landing fall, or PLF, in the sand pit would be vital to making the jump phase.

Day one of training started with a 5:00am reveille and subsequent barracks inspection. Nineteen students met for our first formation at 6:00am and then enjoyed a brief but hearty breakfast. Following the meal, the students met for their very first formation. Our Command Sergeant Major grouped us in typical rank and file formation and gave us some basic instruction as to how we could march and maneuver as a unit. For some, it probably seemed a little silly to drill these men in military fashion, but I recognized it as a key team building method that gave us some sense of camaraderie among the student class. Furthermore, it gave us confidence that we would need later on.

The next four days seemed like an ongoing blur of drill, physical exercise, PLF practice, and classroom instruction, interrupted by brief periods of sleep and food consumption. In the classroom, we learned the basics of parachute operations. Instructors gave us lessons on the types of parachutes we would be using, their characteristics, components, and capabilities. We were also instructed on how to handle such parachutes while we were in the harness. Later classes would stress emergency situations and the like. Like many, I hoped that I would never need to experience such a situation but I was glad that I at least knew what to do. In addition to the classes, we were given practical instructions as well.

A lot of time was spent in a simulated harness within the hangar nicknamed "suspended agony." Here, the student jumper would be hoisted up in a harness hanging from the ceiling where he would learn the maneuvers necessary to being in a parachute. Emergency situations were drilled into his head over and over again so that they became second nature. Each instructor did his best to ensure that students were as keenly aware of what was expected of him. Further training included an actual deployment of the reserve parachute strapped to the jumper's front. Some of the prior airborne service guys told me that they never received such training in the army. We were lucky to be able to have such training hands on. Again, I hoped that would be the only time I would ever deploy a reserve but I was happy to know how to do it.

We had high winds on Monday which made drag training both exciting and dangerous. Drag training would give students a proper idea on how to handle themselves after ground landing but still under the influence of high winds blowing an open canopy. With the high winds, jumpers would be given instructions on how to properly collapse their canopy after landing, running it down, and securing it. After a classroom instruction, we hit the field and were dragged about mercilessly until each one of us had a chance to collapse the canopy safely. Almost all of us were pretty bruised up and sore but were happy to know that we would most likely never experience such heavy ground winds on a jump. Training and camaraderie kept us going.

Then there was the PLF pit. The PLF pit is nothing more than a glorified sandbox with a stepping platform at the end. Here, students were taught and critiqued on the proper way to land without breaking ankles or legs. The proper PLF creates five points of contact: the balls of the feet, calf, thigh, buttocks, and pushup muscle behind the shoulder. It has to be done in a rotating motion so that the

force of impact is absorbed by the softer portions of the body and not by the knees, buttocks, elbows, or head. Failure to do the proper PLF in the pit made students sore. Failure to do it in a jump could result in serious injury or death. Needless to say, we spent hours each day practicing PLF's until most of us were bruised, sore, and almost beaten. Each time, instructors would call out what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong. It took these countless hours to unlearn the body's natural tendency to brace itself against a fall using an extended arm or knee. As the pain increased, our numbers started to decrease.

I believe some of the students within my class thought they were signing up for a paratrooper "fantasy camp" of sorts. Despite the warnings of physical exertion and mandatory preparatory work that had been sent out in the weeks and months before school, some of the men showed up overweight and lacking in physical ability. While some were able to push through it, others were not as capable. The first two students who dropped the course appeared to do so from lack of mental preparation. One complained of the cold nights and stated that if they continued, he could not go on. He quit a couple of days into the school. Another dropped out the next day. Just like that, they were gone. Another student could not continue due to a physical condition he did not foresee. Unlike the prior two dropouts, the remaining classmates were all disheartened to learn of this particular student's departure. He was a good student who was there for the right reasons. Hopefully he would be able to return for a later school.

As the long days continued, we all moved towards the test day with nervous anticipation. We were told how our PLF performance would be one of the major deciding factors of our upcoming test. With many of the students struggling to perform adequate PLF's in the pit, I wondered which of us would be able to push forward to jump status. I was worried that none of us would make it. The problems we experienced were typical among new jumpers. We were asked to perform four basic PLF's: two fronts and two rears with each moving either to the right or left. While the maneuver called for the landing to be spread out among the five points of contact, most of us still displayed the habit of driving our knees into the ground or missing the calf and thigh muscle altogether. Many left an elbow out driving it into the ground and some failed to tuck their head in allowing it to smack the ground as well. Needless to say, we all were pretty beaten up. A few of the students were more frustrated than others. A couple students were too injured to continue. I had hoped all of us could make it, but signs were pointing otherwise.

On Wednesday, we were given our tests. The day started out as per usual with reveille, inspection, breakfast, and formation. We had the opportunity to practice our PLF's one last time in the pit before being sent off to test. Each student performed the four PLF's in front of three judges. The remaining students were placed in a waiting area where they could not watch the student being judged. I can attest to my nervousness knowing that all of the students had struggled with their PLF's up to that point. Whether or not we could adequately land each of our PLF's would determine who would advance to the jump phase. I was lucky to be second in the class which gave me a lot of spare time to relax and rest afterwards. For those who had to wait longer, I can only imagine what was going through their heads.

The PLF test was followed by the harness test. There, we were reviewed by the same judges only this time we were demonstrating practical ability while under a simulated canopy. The test covered everything we had been taught including emergency landings, reserve deployments, proper exit position, and such. Before the test, I was nervous and wondered whether or not I could remember all the procedures. However, our training was so thorough that the test questions and scenarios were automatic for me. I imagine that was what the judges were hoping for and why they had trained us so intensely. I knew I did well on that phase.

Lastly, there was the written test. The written exam covered everything that we had been taught in the classroom, ranging from terminology to all the procedures that we had physically demonstrated. Possible scenarios and descriptions were also a part of the test. While I thought the test was rather easy, I attributed my knowledge to the fact that I had spent what little time I had the previous two days studying my notes and reviewing with other students. It proved to be a vital component to my success. I hoped that other students had the same results.

The hardest part before the jump phase was the waiting for our results. Previously, we had simply been given instructions on how to perform the basic tasks necessary to becoming a parachutist. These, while not simple, could be corrected at the point and did not necessarily affect whether or not students advanced to the jump phase. The tests were fairly straight forward as well. Waiting for the results however was not. I remember most of the students talking about how they performed on their PLF's, what they thought about the written exam, and the various mistakes they made in the harness. I had confidence in my own results but was still not sure whether or not that would be enough.

Students were called in individually to the First Sergeant's office to review his performance and test results. As I entered the room, I had no idea as to my results. I only had confidence in my abilities. Sitting down, they reviewed my test results and PLF's. Then they told me I had been accepted to jump phase and asked me if I was ready to jump tomorrow. I felt a huge weight coming off my shoulders and the only comparison I could make was like being accepted to a major university or landing a competitive position at a large corporation. I was humbled yet exuberant. Naturally, I told them I was ready and excited to proceed. I knew I was.

Unfortunately, the majority of the class was not as fortunate. Out of the original nineteen students that had started the course, only six of us had made it to the jump phase. Two had given up early in the course. Another three were forced to quit due to medical reasons. The rest simply did not make it to jump status. The majority of these were because of poor PLF's in the test phase. They would be given the opportunity to test again the following day, but given the tight schedule they would not be able to graduate with us after we had completed our five jumps. Fortunately, most of the students who could not advance to jump phase elected to stay on and at least give the PLF test one more shot. I hoped all would make it. As it turned out, none of them would.

There was a mix of emotions after each one of the students had spoken with the ADT command. Those who had made it to jump status were relieved and excited, moving from member to member exchanging congratulations. Students who had not made it to jump phase were clearly disappointed but

most were considering retesting the following day and at least having a shot to make a couple of the jumps even if it meant not graduating with the class on time. A couple of students however washed out at that point, feeling that there was no possible way they could improve on their PLF's. All of us tried to convince them otherwise but to no avail. They were gone by the following morning.

That night, I had a difficult time getting to sleep. As I lay in my cot, all which went through my mind were the thoughts of whether or not my equipment would work as it was intended, whether my training would be sufficient, and if there may be any accidents during the jump. Most of all, I wondered if I could muster enough courage to make that fateful step out the door at 1,500 feet.

I was up early that morning of my first jump. I took a shower and thought to myself, "If something goes wrong up there, this could be my last shower." I quickly stopped thinking such negative thoughts and focused on the little things that one tends to remember in a trying situation. I reviewed my exit position from the plane, the proper body position and count, what to do in the air during descent, and preparations for landing. I was as ready as I could be and felt that I could not let myself down because everyone else around me was counting on me to do what I was supposed to do. It was daunting but comforting at the same time.

We sat in the briefing room shortly after breakfast to receive the jump manifest. As the senior jumpmaster read off the manifests, I was nervous to know where in the stick I would be. I was not in the first stick. The jumpmaster then read the second stick and behold, I was number one in the second stick. I would have to stand in the door and wait for that command to go. From what a number of prior jumpers had told me, the man in the door has the best shot at a proper plane exit. I was happy about that but nervous at the same time.

From there, we drew our chutes and began to gear up. My jump buddy turned out to be our Command Sergeant Major who had made countless jumps during his lifetime, both in the service and as a civilian. It was comforting knowing that he knew his stuff and was helping me suit up. My confidence was growing. Following the initial checks and settling into my chute harness, I made my way through the two required rigger checks, both of which went fine. I was ready to go. The entire time, I waited with my right hand on my reserve rip cord. I did not even realize I was doing it. The training was that thorough.

Finally, the order came from command to load aboard "Boogie Baby," the C-47 that would carry us to the appropriate altitude and deliver us into the air. I sat down in my appropriate seat for the brief flight, just opposite the loading door so I would have a perfect view of the distant ground below. As I sat, I smiled but I know I must have been as white as a ghost. I cannot begin to describe the nervous anticipation. There was no turning back now. As the engines revved and roared, the plane began to move. I thought to myself that this would be that flight where I would not land with the airplane. Then I said a quick prayer for myself and the jumpers around me. We were off the ground and flying.

Flying in a C-47 by itself would be a tremendous experience on its own. Jumping out of a C-47 was going to be surreal. As we climbed to altitude, I am sure that each student jumper had his own thoughts going through his head. Each of us students was quiet. If we did say anything, it was usually a

quick statement about one little thing or another. The majority of the conversation was between the experienced jumpers, all of whom were smiling and enjoying the flight. I am sure they were a little nervous too. Jumping out of an airplane is not a natural act.

Finally the order came for the first stick to get ready. Then they stood up and hooked up, followed by their equipment check and sound off for equipment check. Each jumper called out his number in the stick from the highest number down, simultaneously tapping the jumper in front of him. Watching from my seat in the second stick, I was able to review the proper procedure and recall just what I needed to do being number one in my own stick. The first guy in the first stick had prior service jumps and he looked excited and calm. I wanted to be that way. Then he stood in the door; no hesitation on his part. I wanted to be that way too. "GO!" yelled the jumpmaster and the entire stick moved out the door in quick, albeit bouncy, succession. The act seemed violent as the men jumping appeared to be "sucked" out of the door rather than propelling themselves out.

No sooner had they departed came the order for the second stick to prepare for their jump. This was the moment we had been waiting for and had spent countless hours in preparation. We were given a six minute warning, then the command to get ready. The jumpmaster then ordered us to stand up, and then hook up. We then had to check equipment followed by the call to sound off equipment checks. As the numbers moved forward, I anticipated the guy behind me yelling "two okay." Once he did, I reached forward and shook the hand of the jumpmaster and yelled my call, "All okay jumpmaster!" No hesitation. There was no turning back from here. Then the order came to stand in the door.

I shuffled up to the door, not wanting to look down towards the ground but rather at the tip of the wing. I placed my left foot slightly behind me and set my hands on the outside of the aircraft. My right foot crossed just over the edge of the fuselage with my toes in the prop blast. I could feel the wind and my stomach churning in anticipation. I was on the threshold between safety and danger. What lasted only a few seconds seemed like an eternity. I was scared beyond belief as my brain told me over and over again that this is not a good thing. My gut however, did not even think about the possibility of backing away. I did not want to show any signs of weakness. I just wanted to get the order to go and I knew I would be out the door. It seemed to take forever.

"GO!"

Without even thinking about it, I thrust my left leg out the door and pushed myself out with my hands, putting myself into the ninety degree body position with my arms and head tucked into my chest. "One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, rrrummmph," I felt a jerking tug on my body and my free fall stopped. "Four one-thousand." It was immediately quiet, minus the distant rumble of the C-47 flying away. I looked up and saw my canopy had deployed properly. I grabbed my toggles and released the right toggle and my risers spread open, just like we had been told. I checked the sky for other jumpers, assessed the wind and my position. After my training instincts had fallen off for a moment, I was able to take it all in. I looked at the sun rising to the east. I felt the cool wind against my face. I admired the view. Then I started to laugh. I kept laughing the entire way down. As I turned myself into the wind and prepared myself to land, I was still laughing. I landed with a near

perfect left-rear PLF. I was dragged a short bit but was able to gain control of my canopy quickly thanks to our drag training from earlier. I was still laughing.

As I packed and stowed my chute, I could not help myself from continuing to laugh and smile. I had just jumped out of perfectly good airplane and lived to talk about it. As I walked to the collection area to the west of the drop zone, I met with one of our instructors. Later, he told me that I had this half goofy look on my face. I felt like a young child who just got off the best roller coaster in the world. All I could say to him was, "I want to go again. I want to go again." I wanted to go again.

I was able to complete four more jumps to earn my wings. Each jump, I was nervous in the airplane. I thought each time that this was a bad idea but each time I exited the airplane, I thought to myself how badly I wanted to go again. I continued to feel the fifteen minutes of nervous aerial anticipation, followed by six minutes of gut checking preparations in the plane, and then three and a half seconds of sheer and violent terror. Then there was pure beauty and bliss. As I landed from my fifth jump, I thought to myself, "I've got my wings. I'm a qualified parachutist. How awesome is that?" After gaining control of my canopy on the ground, I ripped the student name badges off my helmet. I was not a student any longer and I hated those badges. As I walked back to the collection point at the drop zone, I must have had the cockiest look on my face. We all did.

Our graduation ceremony, held shortly thereafter was a tremendous honor. I was pinned by an old veteran friend of mine Jed Jednizak who had fought with the 101st Airborne in the Battle of the Bulge. It was hard to fight back the smiles and tears as those wings were pinned on my chest. Then, the commanding officer of the school asked me the question, "Are you ready to receive your blood wings?"

"Yes sir!" I said with a smile. With an open handed smack, he drove the wings deep into my chest. It was official. I was AIRBORNE!

Coming home was something else. I felt tremendous pride and confidence in myself and in my own abilities. I had just done something that very few people in the world had ever done, and I had done it well. Yet I felt a great deal of sadness and letdown as I drove away from Frederick. True, I was excited to go home and see my girl and our dog. I was happy to sleep in sheets again in a warm home. However, I thought of all the work I had put in over the prior nine days and how rewarding it all was. It would have to be some time before I could come back. Unfortunately, jump school is not a quick drive down the road for me.

As I got to the airport in Oklahoma City and checked my bags, I thought about everything that had happened. There were some dropouts, a few injuries, many tough moments, and quite a few prayers. It was all worthwhile and tenfold what I had put into it. When I boarded the airplane for my flight back home, I was a little disappointed that the stewardess did not call out "six minutes!" or "get ready!" Instead, the order, "Please stow your carryon baggage in the above racks or below the seats in front of you." That was a letdown.

The entire trip however was not a letdown. When I got home, I wanted to brag to everyone about what I had done. Instead, I just wore my confidence with pride. I had jumped out of a perfectly good airplane and lived to tell about it.

I was Airborne.

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**An editor's note from the ADT commander:**

I was very appreciative of the letter that we received from Peter about his experience during the WWII Airborne Demonstration Team (ADT) 2012 Winter Jump School. I decided to post his letter on the website, in order to help our potential students in understanding that the ADT Jump School is not a fantasy camp. It is an intense training environment that provides the engrained responses for a potentially "life and death" situation. It isn't Skydiving. It is static line parachuting, as close to the way it was done in WWII as we can safely make it. If your parachute fails, you have only seconds to respond and save your life. The sport of Skydiving kills numerous participants every year. Our parachuting team has lost none. If you are a potential safety threat to yourself or other jumpers, if you cannot provide the appropriate critical responses when evaluated, if you cannot land with your feet and knees together and perform a parachute landing fall after 4 days of sustained training, we will not allow you to harm yourself or others.

BUT, the Jump School fees include a membership to our team until 31 December of the year of your Jump School. We will continue to work with you and train you as long as you continue to participate with us in our routine training. We will do our absolute best to work with you and provide you the best parachute training available in the world. The Jump School that Peter participated in had an unusually high drop-out/failure rate. Our attrition rate during Jump School is normally around 20 to 25% for various reasons from: personal reasons; physical ailments; failure during the testing phase to show proficiency in executing the emergency procedures; to the lack of ability to successfully conduct 4 parachute landing falls during evaluation. Those personnel that fall within that 20 to 25% are always invited to return and continue training. Many of them go on to complete their training months later and become very successful members of our team.

We are a non-profit organization and every position on our team is unpaid: to include our pilots, our mechanics, our chaplains, our lawyers, our doctors and medical personnel, our riggers, our recruiters and event coordinators, our PR personnel, the numerous personnel that maintain our facility, and the instructors that give up 10 days for each Jump School to help every student succeed and achieve a dream.

I hope this letter was helpful in making your decision to become a part of our team. I look forward to every Jump School. I hope to see you there. I would like to close this note by quoting a friend and fellow ADT member: *"part of the reason guys want to go airborne is because they want to be part of a special elite and feel a sense of accomplishment in doing something that very few others have achieved. If we expect anything less, do we really honor the veterans who look to us to keep their legacy alive."*

Raymond R. Steeley  
Colonel, WWII ADT  
Commanding