

SEE YOU IN THE BLACK



THE UNITED STATES ARMY PARACHUTE
TEAM - THE GOLDEN KNIGHTS

MIKE MARCON

Chapter Six

Let the Show Begin

Back at the state fair, within the pavilions below – the great exhibition halls - some that are acres in size – are stall-upon-stall and display rings that hold the prize farm animals waiting to be judged. Usually suspended from the ceilings are enormous loudly humming fans that do little more than mix the one hundred degree, stifling air into a swirling aromatic tempest filled with the mixed, earthy aroma of hay and sawdust, along with that of horse, sheep, hog, and cow dung. Used to the heat, and the familiar smells of their farms back home, are fresh-faced, stoic, very busy 4-H boys and girls who are wearing concerned looks of anxiety. They will be dressed in crisp, white shirts, new blue jeans and freshly shined cowboy boots as they go about the earnest business of buffing, combing and shampooing their pedigreed, coffered sheep, their plump and smooth-skinned pigs and their roan-colored calves. Each of them is sure, or at least hopeful, that they will bring the glory of a blue, satin ribbon back to their rural farm communities.

Walking along the worn paths of trodden sawdust and broken chaffs of hay, you might begin to notice that the milling crowds of fair goers are beginning to move in one direction – towards the exits – and you begin to hear the rising strains of patriotic music beginning to play. As you turn and walk into the bright sunshine outside, you see the heads on the mass of people all around you looking in one direction now, and that is up.

Outside, standing in front of a gathering throng of people, a mixed crowd of women and girls of all ages in fluttering dresses, some wearing slacks, and men, many obviously farmers or the like, wearing faded overalls and battered baseball caps that sport the logos of feed and fertilizer companies, along with hundreds of young children and teenagers is a middle-aged man. He stands by himself casually dressed in tan golf slacks and a red polo shirt wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses and what looks like a straw Panama-style hat. He is holding a microphone to his lips. He looks like he's waiting for something. He is searching skyward. He cocks his head and he cups his ear with his free hand, as the high-pitched drone of an airplane begins to grow louder overhead. The crowd, watching the man, takes his cue and he raises his hand and points skyward. Across the crowd, heads swivel and begin to look upwards. Behind them, the noise of the airplane grows more intense. Then the man with the microphone says excitedly, "*HEY! Kids! Shield your EYES!*" He puts an emphasis on the word 'eyes.'

The man holding that microphone is a local radio disc jockey who has worked with the Knights before. He will do the initial introduction for the team

today. It's not only the kids who are shielding their eyes now. Mom, dads, sisters, brothers, old men, and everyone else in the crowd are watching the sky. Waiting.

One or two seconds pass.

"Look directly overhead!" beckons the announcer in his polished way, carefully enunciating every word. *"Now... let's listen for the standby call from the jumpmaster."*

High above, the low drone of the Dash Eight's engines can be heard clearly, and the crowd peers intently into the sky's midday haze searching out the aircraft's dark form.

Then, over the surrounding loudspeakers comes the crackling call relayed from the aircraft's intercom. *"Stand-by!"* says a disembodied voice.

Then... *"Go Knight, go!"* commands the voice.

Back on the ground, the DJ, with an increased and excited tenor in his voice, yells urgently, *"WE'VE got jumpers away! And he's coming towards the earth at ONE...HUNDRED...AND...TWENTY...miles-an-hour!"* The announcer knows just how to stretch out and emphasize every word as he speaks, creating more and more excitement in the crowd.

In the sky above, from the aircraft's open left door near the tail, a single jumper has exited while causally saluting his comrades within the fuselage.



And now, falling away leading a trailing column of crimson smoke to mark his earthbound descent, holding a relaxed and partially outstretched body position, he begins a sixty second free-fall from 13,500 feet overhead the

gathered crowd below - all of whom have now turned with necks craning to get a better look skyward.

“There is he is!” shouts an excited six year old boy, his red baseball cap titled off center on his blond locks.

“That jumper is Sergeant First Class Danny Hellman from Cincinnati, Ohio! He’s an Airborne Ranger.” says the DJ with a pitched voice.

The announcer pauses for a second before adding, *“The smoke is coming from a canister attached to his ankle.”*

As you look away from the jumper whose shape is now becoming more distinct the closer he gets to the ground, for one brief second, you pan the crowd around you, and you realize that, for an instant, the crowd is silent, and the only sound to be heard are the patriotic strains of Lee Greenwood’s singing of *God Bless the U.S.A.*, which has begun to play over the public address system. As Greenwood’s voice rises to, “I’d gladly stand UP! next to you,…” goose bumps stand on your forearms, and...

...the DJ interjects, *“Now, he’s coming through 5,000 feet, ladies and gentlemen, and he’ll be looking for the target.”*

Your gaze snaps back to the falling figure and his trail of red smoke above.

“When he gets to 3,000 feet, folks, he’ll reach behind him and pull out a small leather ball, his ripcord, and a pilot chute will deploy and then his main canopy will...”

Suddenly, blossoming beautifully, at twenty five hundred feet in the sky is the black-and-gold parachute of Hellman. The smoke that he wears briefly swirls around the canopy in a vaporous, cloud-like explosion obscuring a clear view of both Hellman and his parachute. When the smoke dissipates, you can clearly see written down the center of his canopy is one word in large, black letters - “ARMY.” Hellman then pulls another cord, and in his wake, an enormous, red, white, and blue American flag unfurls from its pack and slowly materializes into a recognizable shape flying behind him as a rippling banner trailing in his wake.



At that very moment, with perfect timing, Greenwood's voice rises to a melodic pitch with the final words, "...cause there ain't no doubt that I love this land, God bless the U.S.A!" Some veterans in the audience not quite sure what to do at that moment, render an awkward salute, or simply take off a work-worn cap and place it across their hearts.

"And, THERE YOU HAVE IT, ladies and gentleman! The high-flying black-and-gold of YOUR United States Army Parachute Team...the GOLDEN KNIGHTS!"

For another second, you take your eyes away from the black-and-gold canopy now brilliantly cast against a cloudless blue sky as an excited murmur rises from within the crowd, mostly comprised of the high-pitched voices of children pointing upward and excitedly urging a mom or a dad or a sister to, "Look! Look!"

Above, Hellman maneuvers to set up for a landing on a large, four-armed canvas cross which is laid out in his landing area directly in front of the crowd. Swooping first to the left, then to the right, as the smoke trails from his boot, he is turning his canopy to gain position to land, and the DJ continues to work the crowd...

"Now, when Sergeant Hellman lands, he will tell you all about what the Golden Knights do, but I can tell you that he is able to control that parachute by changing the shape of it. The 'chute is actually a wing. It's a glider and he steers it the same way that the Wright brothers flew their airplane 100 years ago, by warping the shape of the wing."

Hellman continues to set up to land, making turns in one direction then another, in part showmanship and the rest that of an experienced canopy flyer. He continues to descend.

“Now, ladies and gentleman, you’ll notice that Sergeant Hellman exited the airplane slightly behind us today. He did that to offset his departure point so that when he opened, he could drift with the wind towards his target.”

Again, Hellman executes a series of steep, swooping corkscrew turns above the crowd.

“And now Sergeant Hellman is spiraling quickly down to lose some altitude. Doing that, he can reach speeds of SIXTY miles an hour boys and girls! Did you know that?” asks the DJ.

A few small heads in the crowd nod no. One or two fresh faces turn to one another, their mouths slightly agape in surprise. Here and there, a small child is sitting atop a father’s shoulders pointing skyward.

The DJ’s voice begins to rise an octave or two once again, as he says, *“Boys and girls! As Sergeant Hellman comes closer to the target, he can actually hear you! So, let’s make some noise and talk him in.”*

There’s a mild somewhat muted response from a few voices in the crowd.

“No! NO! Let’s make some NOISE!, all of you, and get him to the target!”

And over the top of the now loudly cheering crowd, the DJ yells, *“COME ON IN, DANNY!!”*

The crowd reaches a mild crescendo now as the DJ continues, *“Watch him now as he lands into the wind...”*

Hellman is braking and slowing the parachute by simultaneously pulling down on his steering lines bringing the trailing edges of the canopy inwards and down to slow the canopy’s speed.

“...just like an aircraft WOULD!” shouts the DJ.

Hellman, who has flown the entire approach to the ground with his dangling feet crossed at the ankles, relaxed in the saddle of his harness, now spreads his legs and feet apart and readies to land. He lands easily dead center in the target’s cross.

“RIGHT ON TARGET!, exclaims the DJ, as the crowd claps and cheers thunderously.

- X Marks the Spot -

At the county fair, as Sergeant Hellman descends towards the ground, he sets up for a landing in front of the gathered crowd. The large red, white and blue American flag he has deployed flutters, trailing behind him, the national colors rippling in the air as he makes several steep banking turns, first left, then right, with his canopy. The inflated cells of his parachute, more shaped like a section of an aircraft wing rather than the parabolic shape of earlier round parachutes, breaths softly in-and-out but the canopy's surfaces remain semi-rigid as he turns. Manipulating the canopy's control lines, he applies his brakes slowing his descent and adjusting his altitude by lowering and pulling in the canopy's rear edges produces the same drag effect as an aircraft's trailing edge flaps.

Now he is focused on his landing which will have to meet two Golden Knight standards. The first is landing in the center of the X formed by two fabric crossed arms. And the second is not falling down when he lands. He must land softly and nearly casually almost as if he just stepped down out of the sky. In an incidental way, beneath himself, he notices a ground crew member standing nearby reach to straighten one arm of the cross that a breeze has lifted.

Now, one hundred feet above the ground with touch-down just seconds away, his legs are slightly spread apart and hanging from his harness. Hellman adjusts his feet so that he can see the target, and insures that his vision is not obstructed. Now, for the last 100 feet of this jump, everything around him - the thousands of people awaiting his landing, some cheering and clapping, the announcer, his head raised skyward watching Hellman, speaking to him across his microphone urging him to the ground, the fair's tinny, old-fashion calliope music playing along the midway now in the background, the whining sound of the Dash Eight's turbine engines as it loiters in the distance preparing for another jump run, any and all of those distractions - completely vanish from Hellman's mind.

Every bit of it, all of it, the crowds, the announcer's voice, the sound of the music down the midway, will immediately return in a single subconscious flash as his boot first touches the ground. It will all flood back into his consciousness in the millisecond that he lands. Hellman never realizes what has just happened in those highly-focused last few seconds of fierce concentration. It's second nature for him, as it is for every Golden Knight, to block everything out but meeting the constraints of his mission at the moment - the mission now being to show the team at its best. No matter the theatrics and the skill displayed in free-fall, the landing must look easy, and above all, professional. It must achieve admiration and the spectator's awe. It must be dead center.

Now, on the ground, it is also a trained reflex action that he undertakes as he smiles and waves gustily at the crowd, while his crew reaches to gather the large flag before it hits the ground. As he waves, he loosens and steps away

from his harness as another crewman hands him his maroon beret, his sunglasses and his clipboard. Then he will step away from the cross that was his target, and not give it a second thought. But the target will remain in place throughout the remainder of the show as an aiming point for the jumpers yet to perform; it has served its purpose for the moment, and it lays still awaiting the jumpers of the next part of the show. But make no mistake, the target, the cross, the X, is more than just a passive point to land on. It symbolizes something much greater.

When asked about accuracy landings during demonstrations, John Hawke, who served the team as a Sergeant First Class on the Gold Team from 1991 until 1995, responded this way, in part,

"The lesson that each of us learned as new guys experiencing nervousness about our first "tight" target area came from the wisdom of older teams members: "The target is always the same size." Translated, no matter the physical size of the landing area - be it from natural or man-made features or a crowd, and no matter the magnitude of the event - think about a bowl game stadium - if you could put your canopy on target you would be safe. Actually, to the crowd you were a lot more than safely on target. For the 3 seconds you had after touchdown to smile and wave before making room for the teammate coming in behind you...you were a star. I say 'star' with a small "s" because they wouldn't remember your name, rank, or landing position on target on the way home...they would simply count you among the ten or so lads that attacked that 10' x 10' canvas target with a parachute for a couple of minutes before game time. We were just fine with that."

Today, as it has remained for many, many years, it is common practice for the team to lay out a cloth panel in the shape of an X or a cross for the demonstration team members to shoot at when they land. The team prides itself on dead center landings and not falling down during the landing when putting on a show. But the X does more than mark the spot; it symbolizes the team member's ability to nail every landing regardless of the conditions or location. Some of those locations have included semi-enclosed event stadiums during both night and day shows, in-fields at race tracks, downtown intersections between high-rise buildings, many a football field, unforgiving, hard surface airport tarmacs aplenty, even precariously landing on the deck of a bass fishing boat.



(Ret.) Sgt. 1st Class Karen Morrison performed an aerial demonstration for the Warriors on the Water, an annual military appreciation bass fishing tournament, and finished by landing on the back of a bass fishing boat at Jordan Lake in Raleigh, North Carolina in 2008.

And always to contend with, there may be crosswinds, structure created turbulence, sudden gusting, even last second obstructions, perhaps a piece of moving equipment, or an errant child or spectator, or another jumper may come too close.

In days past, canopy accuracy wasn't for sissies...

As time has passed, the ability that team members have now to make consistent precision landings with a high degree of accuracy, and make them look easy nearly anywhere they wish, has improved greatly. In large part, this is due to the parachutes in use today. They are "ram air" or the more commonly used term used for them today, "square canopies." But regardless of the kind of parachute a jumper uses, it's the constant and arduous training the team undertakes that really puts them on target time-after-time.

Things have come a long way...

In his book, *No ETA: The Pioneering Days of Skydiving*, Dick Fortenberry recalled that as a young jumper with little experience in 1958, during an inner service competition on Yomoto Drop Zone at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, during an accuracy round, he landed ninety-nine yards from the target! Back then, for many skydivers, landing within 30 yards of a target was an accomplishment. Whereas, today, landings made in accuracy competitions are measured in fractions of centimeters. During demonstrations by the Gold and Black teams, dead center landings are the norm and expected.

There are several reasons that canopy accuracy in Fortenberry's time wasn't for the faint of heart.

The first was that, compared to the canopies of today, the older round parachutes used for skydiving were simply surplus aircrew survival parachutes with rudimentary modifications that gave the parachute a little more controllability where it concerned the ability to traverse over the ground towards a target and to help alter the effects of prevailing winds. The real key to making accurate landings was *where* in relationship to the target the jumper exited the airplane based on his assumptions and observations (best guesses!) of where the wind might take him after opening. Knowing when and where over the ground to exit the airplane was, and still is, called "spotting." The exit point was appropriately called the "spot." The 'spot' that the jumpers would exit the airplane was a location, a reference point on the ground below, chosen after a decision had been made by the jumper after having thrown and observing a crepe paper streamer, a wind drift indicator (WDI) and watching it settle to the ground. Once thrown, the jumper would watch the WDI's drift to get a sense of how the wind between his exit altitude and the ground was behaving, so that after the WDI landed, he could give a pilot directions as to how to correct a flight path on jump run prior to exit. Often, a jumper watching the WDI settle to earth might get an indication of a "dog leg" or a shift in the upper winds that might cause him to prepare to alter his descent as he floated to earth after opening his parachute.

But the problem with the early parabolic parachutes, even if highly modified by altering or removing certain of the canopy's panels (gores) to develop more forward speed, or giving a flat-circular canopy more stability during turns, the ability to accurately control a parachute and land precisely where the jumper wanted was still very limited. A jumper could turn a canopy 360 degrees to face in any direction and use the prevailing wind to advance on a target, or to "hold," that is to face into the wind using the forward speed of the canopy to advance against the wind and cover less ground, but only to a certain limited degree. The best speeds that most early parachutes could maintain would be in the seven-to-nine mile an hour range. And many days, winds over a drop zone could easily overcome a canopy's abilities.

All of this was also affected by other factors such as the jumper's weight – heavier jumpers descended faster, lighter jumpers descended slower – and the weight differences impacted canopy performance. Accuracy, both in competition and the demonstration arenas, could be very tricky and, at times, bone crushing. Especially, during competition. During competitive events, the injury rate for jumpers shot up significantly given the individual competitor's desire to win at all costs.

In the photo below, Sergeant Danny Byard, of the U.S.A.P.T. is about to make a "dead center" landing at the 1962 National Parachute Championships

held at Olathe, Kansas, using a highly modified “Conquistador” parachute manufactured by Pioneer Parachute Company.



An informed observer would note that he is facing the target, indicating that he was “running” at the target, and that his body position at the time of impact was nearly in a full “stretch.” In other words, at some point, very close to the ground, he was probably moving towards the target at a high rate-of-speed (combine the prevailing wind speed with the canopy’s own forward speed). The ‘stretch’ indicates that he knew he would be slightly short of actually making “dead center” contact with the small, ten centimeter disc (approximately four inches in diameter) and that he needed a extra few feet or inches to reach it. So, he extended his legs laterally and would make contact, hopefully with the center of the little round disc, striking it with the heel of his boot. The angle of his canopy seems to indicate that he had corrected his approach course to the left at the last second. The angle also illustrates that his rate-of-descent was fast in that his canopy was spilling air furiously in those last few feet. In other words, he hit hard and fast. Most experienced

jumpers knew how to walk away from this sort of a landing unscathed. Others weren't so fortunate.

At the time, Byard, D-11, had 1,130 jumps. This dead center was one of two consecutive dead center jumps he would make at the Nationals that year. (For the record, out of 2,180 total jumps made in both the style and accuracy events at the Nationals that year, there were nine jumpers significantly injured with broken legs and ankles, dislocated shoulders, torn ligaments and other orthopedic injuries – all from making accuracy jumps. Again, not for sissies. Byard would place 18th overall.

“Stretching” during an accuracy event is a common practice among accuracy competitors. However, today, the act of performing a ‘stretch’ is less dramatic and dangerous than it was then, as jumpers using square canopies now are more likely to have or use a steeper and much slower approach to the disc with much more control capability.

Stretching would often be practiced to comical effect by less experienced jumpers around the world such as in the photo below taken sometime in the 1960's in Britain during a local competition.



The show at the fair continues...

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! What a great job by Sergeant Hellman! Let’s give him another big round of applause for a job well done!”

And the crowd responds with more cheers, clapping and whistling.

“*GREAT WORK!*” says the DJ.

As Hellman lands, several members of the Golden Knights ground crew rush to catch and gather the flag to keep it from touching the ground. Landing perfectly, his knees slightly bent on impact but not falling down, he stands straight, faces the crowd and removes his helmet then waves enthusiastically to the gathered crowd.

The DJ approaches Hellman to turn the microphone over to him. In a few minutes, Sergeant First Class Danny Hellman will turn to address the crowd and begin narrating the remainder of the day’s show. It’s a very safe bet to say that not one person in that crowd will have any true idea of the history that Danny Hellman represents.



[See You in the Black is available on Amazon in hardcover, paperback and Kindle.](#)

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Thanks!