

SEE YOU IN THE BLACK



THE UNITED STATES ARMY PARACHUTE
TEAM - THE GOLDEN KNIGHTS

MIKE MARCON

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See You In The Black

The United States Army Parachute Team

The Golden Knights



What is the true meaning of the phrase, “See you in the black?”

Some years back, esteemed air show announcer Frank Kingston Smith, coined the phrase after he had finished narrating an air show where the U.S. Army Parachute Team had appeared. As he readied to depart the show, he shook hands with the team leader of the Army’s famous aerial demonstration team, nicknamed the “Golden Knights.” When he did, he said, “See you in the black!” The team leader shook his head slightly and smiled knowingly, understanding perfectly well what Smith had just implied with his cryptic parting words.

Smith did not say, “Good-bye.” or “See you later.” He said, “See you in the black!” It wasn’t a farewell, it was an expectation, and an acknowledgement of fact. And when he said it, he had no illusions about seeing the Golden Knight parachutist to whom he had just spoken fulfilling that belief every time he would announce another air show in the future; any show where the United States Army Parachute Team made an appearance.

“See you in the black...” implies one thing, a thing synonymous with the precision skydivers of the team – excellence. You see, at every demonstration jump the team makes, a cross made of canvas, one with ten-foot arms, is laid out on the ground as a target. At the center of the cross, where the arms intersect, is painted a black circle. Smith’s valediction was, at the same time, not only a statement of fact, but a way of life for the Golden Knight he had just left. Smith’s experienced observation was that the man he had just shaken hands with was a professional of the highest order. He knew that no matter the location of the next show he would narrate, if the Golden Knights were scheduled to appear, jump after jump, the men and women of the team would perform flawlessly nearly 100 percent of the time jumping from an airplane thousands of feet in the air, and *landing dead center*, ‘in the black,’ consistently. Performing that way every day on every jump, with every step they take, from their first day as a Golden Knight until their last is a standard they have set for themselves, one that they demand of themselves.

This is the story of how Smith knew that, and one that tells the story of the past and the present of the United States Army Parachute Team. It will begin as the team did, with the exploration of a vision; the idea of one man, an Army general who singled out a handful of ordinary soldiers who all had one thing in common beyond their war fighting skills, and that was that they were all sport parachutists – skydivers. That general’s vision, coupled with the ability and drive of the nine men he initially choose in 1959 to shape the formative parachuting team as competitors, would quickly begin a transformation into what the team has become. Today, the U.S. Army Parachute Team is not only one of the top competitive skydiving teams internationally but, perhaps, more importantly, one of the U.S. Army’s most important recruitment tools. Moreover, the team and its members act as the face of the Army and its ambassadors as they perform for millions of spectators and potential soldiers worldwide, year-after-year.

What began then as nine men and a one-star general scrounging to create a presence has, today, become a polished, well-funded organization of professional soldiers and parachutists who not only compete and win consistently in skydiving competitions around the world, but they have become one of the most respected aerial demonstration teams ever created. As soldiers who come from ordinary backgrounds, they daily walk among presidents, statesmen and kings bestowing on the military they serve the best possible impression and imparting diplomacy of the finest kind; and they do this because they expect of themselves everyday what Smith imparted when he said, “See you in the black.”

This is the story of their progression into excellence, a place where the U.S. Army airborne soldier is expected to land on-target, dead-center, in the black, every time; it is also the story about how they are chosen and trained to

do that, what life is like for them, and why all of them, past and present, see their time as a Golden Knight as one of the highest points of their lives.

- Overview -

For sixty-three years, members of the U. S. Army Parachute Team have been achieving an evolution of excellence serving as the Airborne Ambassadors of the U.S. Army.

Initially named the “STRAC (Strategic Army Command) Sport Parachuting Team,” the organization was formed in 1959. Brigadier General Joseph Stilwell Jr. was responsible for gathering the first nine soldiers with the original intent being to compete against Soviet bloc countries during the Cold War. Consequently, his new U.S. Army team began to dominate the international competition skydiving circuit, an arena in which the Soviets had earlier prevailed.

The STRAC team was officially renamed the United States Army Parachute Team and activated as a regular Army unit in May of 1960 and issued its TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment) status at that time. On April 7, 1961, orders were issued assigning its first three commissioned officers as the command section and the original nineteen parachutists who would work in interchangeable roles as the competition, demonstration and research and development sections.

1961 the team had a meeting to select a team nick name and they chose “The Golden Knights.”

- The Mission -

Acting as United States Army Airborne Ambassadors, the U.S. Army Parachute Team conducts worldwide parachute demonstrations, competes globally and operates a tandem skydiving program to connect the U.S. Army with the American public, and enhance the Army’s recruiting efforts, while simultaneously providing technical expertise as needed in support of military free-fall programs.

Serving under the leadership of the Army Marketing and Research Group and Marketing Engagement Brigade, the U.S.A.P.T. performs live parachute demonstrations for the American public and international audiences. The Golden Knights have performed shows in all 50 states and 48 countries. Through demonstrations and public speaking engagements with the Army’s target audiences, at air shows, schools, sporting events and hospitals, the team is able to direct potential applicants to on-site Army Recruiters.

The team is comprised of these sections:

Battalion Command Group

Battalion Commander, Battalion Command Sergeant Major, Battalion Executive Officer.

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Command Group Company Commander/Operations Officer, Company First Sergeant

S2 Safety and security related issues.

S3 Senior Operations NCO, Training/Schools NCO, Battalion Medic, APM (Airborne Program Manager), Tandem Coordinator, DZSO (Drop Zone Safety Officer), Event Coordinator, and Show Coordinator.

Administration

The Administration section is responsible for Personnel and Administration functions in of the support team. This section is vital in the daily operations of the unit. The section coordinates, prepares and monitors personnel actions to include awards, soldier evaluations, finance, promotions, transactions, issuing leaves and passes, arranging retirements and budgeting.

Parachute Maintenance

The Parachute Maintenance section is responsible for ordering, repairing, and issuing of all parachuting equipment. While each of the jumpers will pack his or her own main parachute, the reserve or auxiliary parachute must be packed by a certified parachute rigger every 180 days, whether its used or not. The Parachute Maintenance section also ensures all jumpers stay current and proficient in all matters of safety and training. In addition, the section tests and evaluates new equipment and procedures. Its positions include a Safety NCO and a parachute rigger.

Supply

The Supply Section of the team provides the staffing for all logistical support of supplies, equipment and service requirements. Supply Personnel are responsible for furnishing the support of a supply room, property book office, S-4 and a clothing issue facility. Authorization, payment and accountability are all administered through this section. The supply section is an integral part of the overall success of the parachute team's mission. Its positions include a Property Books Officer and supply technicians.

Media Relations

Media Relations is a multi-faceted shop specializing in maintaining liaison between the team and the news media. This well-equipped shop

captures images of the team in all aspects of their jobs, acquired both on video and with still photographs; those are then archived and prepared for distribution to the media and public at large. A graphics artist designs and builds all the creative products for distribution such as brochures, posters, certificates and any print production. A team journalist coordinates the press rides and interviews for the shows, special events and parachute competitions as well as covering the team's accomplishments and providing whatever information the press may need for their reports. A darkroom technician is in charge of producing the high-quality photo printing the team requires. A videographer captures and edits footage of all special events from video footage brought to him by the team's many free-fall cameramen. He also compiles specially requested video for the media, and produces the yearly team movie used in the press packets.

The Demonstration Teams

The U.S.A.P.T. maintains two demonstration teams, the Black and the Gold teams, in order to meet the demand for Golden Knight performances and appearances. On the road over 250 days a year, each team performs in front of millions of people throughout the world and across the nation. The demonstration teams have two different shows that are conducted. The first is the Mass Show which entails one jumper exiting the aircraft, opening his parachute and flying our national colors. That soldier will then land and narrate the show for the audience, while the rest of the team waiting above exits the aircraft maneuvering together to form one large formation.

The Full Show consists of four separate acts performed after the solo narrator lands. These are The Baton Pass, which features two jumpers exiting the aircraft separately and flying together to exchange a wooden baton to be presented on the ground to a person of note. The Cutaway performed by a solo jumper which illustrates what would occur if the jumper's parachute were to malfunction. The Diamond Track in which two jumpers demonstrate the amount of lateral movement jumpers can obtain in free-fall, and that culminates in a dramatic cross-over pass before they open their parachutes. And, finally, the Diamond Formation which is comprised of four jumpers exiting the aircraft and maneuvering their bodies together to form a diamond pattern in the sky.

The Tandem Team

The Tandem Team provides the unique experience of tandem parachuting to persons considered "centers of influence." A tandem jump utilizes a highly-trained and experienced team member who will use a special harness and parachute to hook himself to the harness of his passenger; and then, along with a video cameramen from the team, he will jump while attached to his passenger from a high altitude. This gives the passenger the unique experience of making a free-fall jump, and then making a safe canopy

descent to the ground, all the while securely nestled within his tandem master's control. This close-up and personal experience with the soldiers of the tandem team coupled with the experience and excitement of making a controlled free-fall jump translates into highly favorable public relations and profitable publicity events for the Army.

The Competition Teams

The Golden Knights competition teams have continually been given the highest accolades in parachuting competitions. That respect is based on a continuing record of accomplishments and winning. The team competes in several kinds of disciplines including accuracy, formation free-fall and canopy piloting events. The Golden Knights have compiled an impressive record over the course of competing in national and world championships. Additionally, the team has set or broken hundreds of world records, including many military records. These competitions now include in-door competitions held in specially constructed vertical wind tunnels that allow jumpers to accurately mimic the act of free-falling after jumping from an airplane.

The Extreme Team

Called "Golden Knights Extreme," or alternatively, "GKX," this team performs for audiences across disciplines such as BASE jumping, where jumps made from high structures or bridges, Wing Suiting where jumpers don special winged suits and use the relative wind gliding to cover vast distances in free-fall before opening their parachutes and Vertical Formation Skydiving where groups of jumpers assume standing or head-down body positions while creating differing formations in free-fall. These Golden Knights are considered cutting-edge and creative skydivers who keep the team fluent in and abreast of new developments in sport parachuting.

The Aviation Section

The Aviation Section, known as "Team Six," is comprised of military and civilian pilots, air crew and maintenance personnel who ensure that the teams arrive safely and return from their destinations while enabling the jumpers to use the team aircraft as jump platforms.



The 2023 United States Army Parachute Team

Lt. Col. Charles A. “Andy” Moffit, Commanding



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Thanks!

