

SEE YOU IN THE BLACK



THE UNITED STATES ARMY PARACHUTE
TEAM - THE GOLDEN KNIGHTS

MIKE MARCON

Chapter Ten

Knights are Found, Not Created

Back at the fair, the team has arrived on Friday, a day typically set aside for pre-show activities such as giving interviews to the media, entertaining dignitaries, and perhaps the Tandem Section is present with its free-fall videographers and they are conducting and recording tandem jumps with pre-selected persons of note - perhaps regional celebrities, politicians or even a football coach. Typically, Gold or Black Team members will also accompany the local Army recruiters as they pursue their duties in the surrounding communities, perhaps visiting a classroom, there to answer questions about skydiving and Army opportunities.

But all of that was yesterday, and today it's Saturday and the weather is, as they say in aviation jargon, "CAVU." (Clear and Visibility Unlimited) And the show is on.

With the show set to begin at noon, there is time that morning for members of the team to rise, perform their morning grooming, eat breakfast and gather for "lobby call" in the minutes before loading up in the vans and cars to drive to the airport where the Dash Eight and the flight crew are waiting. Once there, the team members may perform "dirt dives," dry runs, on the ground to practice the day's scheduled performance. Dirt dives, when watched, may appear as strange dances as jumpers extend their arms and move purposely and slowly in-and-out of circles of other jumpers reinforcing the moves they will make once in free-fall. It's an important practice among skydivers who will create large multi-jumper formations in free-fall; 'dirt dives' mimic the moves they will make to build formations in the air quickly and smoothly, so that they may reinforce muscle memory and set in motion a mental schematic of their place and actions in the formations they will build.



Then, the team will receive a safety briefing from the Assistant Team Leader just before boarding the aircraft prior to take-off.

In the moments before boarding, each team member will don his equipment, and the team members will perform checks on other member's parachute rigs, smoke brackets, canister rigging and general well-being. This sort of "looking out" for other team members is highly ingrained in each Golden Knight from day one of their time with the team, and will extend itself throughout their lives, even as team members become alumni.

- The Road to the Black Jacket -

During the research needed to tell this story, this singular trait of the brotherhood of the Golden Knight, that is the act of looking out for one another, became overwhelmingly evident while examining the lives of past Knights. All one needs to do to is attend one of their reunions, and see the affection that they still display for each other as the event unfolds. They never lose their deep regard for their teammates as they go on living their lives after team service. One of the facets of a Golden Knight's personality that develops early in their assignment to the team is the protective nature that Knight's develop for other team members, even before they pass Assessment and Selection and are awarded the coveted black jacket that signifies that they have earned their spot on the team.

The origins of a new Golden Knight being awarded the black jacket - affixed with the unit patch and their name on the front and the team name written in large, gold letters across the back - as a sign of acceptance to the team after successfully completing the Assessment and Selection process, is somewhat lost to history. In the early days, Knights were authorized to purchase their own jackets from a local supplier in Fayetteville, near Fort Bragg. But later day Knights are awarded the jackets as a recognition of merit and of their new status as team members, the jacket being presented in the last week of try-outs. The jackets also signify the end of a grueling and extremely daunting period of time designed to discover what new team applicants are made of.

"Try-Outs" is the term that the Assessment and Selection process is more commonly known as, and the origins of the practice are hazy. Nevertheless, historical records show that 'try-outs' began in various forms, in terms of duration and routines as soon as the team was given official unit status in 1961.

From the first day of their assignment to the team for the yearly try-outs, normally conducted over eight weeks in the late fall, candidates are not only evaluated and indoctrinated as demonstration parachutists, but they are given instruction in public speaking and interpersonal communications; they learn team building and leadership skills; they endure days and nights of activities intended to measure their ability to remain calm in the face of intense pressure, and each applicant is continually monitored and judged not only for their parachuting

skills, but as importantly for their diplomatic abilities and their capacity to integrate into and support the team and the other members.

Only a fraction of those who apply, and who are accepted to attend try-outs, will be chosen to join the team. Those who are picked to join the team have earned their slot through their performance which is judged by peer reviews and cadre observations. In large part, their selection is based on two things beyond their skills as parachutists – their spirit and their dedication.

During the 1986 try-outs, team cadre required the new applicants to write brief essays that outlined their motivation for wanting to join the team along with what words of advice they might offer to those who wished join the team in the future. The exercise took place about midway through the eight week try-outs and was intended to gauge how well the new candidates could express themselves. The following passage, taken from one of those essays, says quite a lot about the mindset of the candidate who wrote it, and the thoughts also served as a sort of admonishment to those might wish to join the team.

“Stop! Think about yourself for a minute. Ask yourself, “Do I have the qualities to be a Golden Knight? Is my determination strong enough to see me through the rigors of this program? Is my dedication equal to that of the best of the United States Army? Will my desire to be the best of the best see me through try-outs and the years to come as a Golden Knight? Will the job I am seeking give me the fulfillment which it has given Golden Knights in the past?”

When selected to attend try-outs, typically, there may be as many as twenty candidates, perhaps more, vying for a slot. In effect, they are competing with one another in a test that will result in only a small number of them being selected for the team. Those that are not selected will be returned to their originating unit, perhaps to try again to make the team in a repeat attempt later. The selection process is rigorous and along with cadre reviews of their performance, they are also judged by their peers regularly in a weekly elimination process.

During interviews with alumni, it was stated over-and-over again by those who had undergone the selection process, that one of the most difficult tasks each potential Knight had to perform were the “peer reviews” - reviews that might lead to the elimination of another candidate. Why?

Conventional thinking might dictate that the attendees would operate in a highly competitive fashion doing whatever it takes to eliminate those who perform poorly, or those who are simply in the way of one being chosen over another. But that’s not the case. They are urged, taught, from day one, that being a Golden Knight means, above all else, that the mission and interests of the team through “teamwork” is paramount to team success, and that that must reflect itself in a team member’s behavior. Conventional thinking doesn’t take into account that a candidate realizes quickly that, at least for a Golden Knight, ‘teamwork’ also means putting the welfare and interests of your peers before your own.

Therefore, try-out candidates are faced with a troublesome conundrum, meaning each candidate is expected to write-up a weekly report and grade their peers; then they must consult with the team cadre as to who should be cut from try-outs and who should move forward with the selection process. The result is that whatever group of candidates who became Knights from that cycle had, in large part, been selected by those that they would serve with over the next few years. When alumni were interviewed about the peer review process to eliminate those who would move on in team selection, there was always a sense of regret and sadness expressed about having had a hand in eliminating someone that they had come to know as a friend.

The irony is that in order to succeed and become a team, each candidate needed to ensure that his or her peers were helped to succeed as well. It meant watching each other's backs. It meant developing a helping spirit. It meant attention to detail. It began to produce a "brotherhood," and the peer reviews meant eliminating someone every week during the eight week selection process from that brotherhood. But the process would produce the best members for the team, and that is why it is in place. And it has a carry-over effect. It would show itself during every performance and every jump and throughout their shared camaraderie the rest of their lives.

"Knights are found, not created." Sergeant First Class Christopher "Ace" Acevedo, Jr. spoke those words during his remarks at his retirement ceremony from the Army and the Golden Knights in 2021. His words say much about who a Knight is before coming to the team.

The Golden Knight is the quintessential American soldier. And in the same spirit of the Old Guard of The Unknown Soldier, the Golden Knight commits to live a life of discipline and the keeping of moral character, patriotism and adherence to American values. Once the parachutes of the Golden Knight's deploy anywhere over the world stage, team members understand unequivocally that soon the ground will rush to meet them and once they have landed, they will shoulder the responsibility of being the finest of the United States Army.

The story of how a soldier comes to the team is varied.

In the early days, it was a simple matter of being asked or invited to join the team. Then, quickly, as the team grew and the missions expanded given the ever growing demand to have the team perform, the team leadership began to assess more and more what they wanted to see in its members. And that created a process of qualification which has become more and more refined and demanding over the years. In the early days of the team's existence, members came from many of the military sport parachuting clubs at various posts around the world; but over time, those clubs would cease to exist. The clubs were fertile U.S.A.P.T. recruiting grounds, and team candidates coming from the clubs usually had hundreds of jumps to their credit prior to joining the team. With the closing of the clubs, of necessity, that action required soliciting applicants for team positions from the general ranks of the Army, even those with very few jumps, as few as

100. The current attitude of the leadership regarding that is simple: “We can teach a soldier how to skydive; we cannot teach him the willingness to self-sacrifice for the good and the glory of the unit. He or she must bring that with them.” That is very much what Sergeant Acevedo meant.

Another variance was bringing members on board directly and specifically to serve the team as skydiving competitors in the various disciplines such as style, accuracy and formation relative work. Over the years, there has been a special emphasis on maintaining the competitive edge and adding to the team’s overwhelming successes in the competitive world. Grooming and keeping individual competitors has had such a priority that some members of the team have been retained in that role for many years at a time.

But, who is a Golden Knight? Regardless of the role they serve on the team, whether it is as a demonstrator, or a member of the competition section or the aviation group, including those who serve the headquarters and support roles, who is a Golden Knight at the core? Furthermore, today, with the most rigorous try-out process in place since the team’s beginnings, what motivates a soldier to apply and then undergo the eight weeks of training and stress that might eventually culminate in being eliminated from the program?

Does that motivation stem from the romantic picture of the airborne hero impressing the adoring crowds? Or does the Golden Knight come to the team to enhance a military resume’ or gain bragging rights?

An examination of the thoughts and feelings of those undergoing try-outs sometime around the mid-point of the team’s sixty year history sheds light on a future Golden Knight’s reasons and motivation for committing to the team’s mission and the personal dedication it will take to fulfill that; their motivations for wanting to become a Golden Knight are quite similar regardless of where they came from or what their backgrounds are.

A close examination will show that the successful team candidate during try-outs, now an arduous program that involves very long hours, highly-stressful daily routines, and hundreds of evaluation and training jumps made, illustrate one thing: that successful team members aren’t made at try-outs; they already are, in their hearts and minds, Golden Knights before they arrived.

From the beginning, as Golden Knights competed in parachute meets across the country, they were and are revered in the sport parachuting community by their civilian peers - even as they leave competitions with armloads of trophies to carry back to Fort Bragg. But few civilians look beyond the professional and determined aggressiveness that team members’ display. Exhaustive studies of parachute publications of the early period of sport parachuting, dating back to the late Fifties and continuing to this day, showed that in the hundreds of international and national magazines – *Parachutist*, *DZ-USA*, *Sky Diver*, *Spotter*, *Canadian Parachutist* and many more – the Golden Knights were written about

consistently either for their high and consistent competitive results or for some achievement, record broken or record established.

But the fresh faces and soldierly bearing of the men in black or gold jumpsuits along with the comfortable air they front as they compete and perform shows around the country is not the whole picture of the Golden Knight.

For that, you would need to look at them far into their futures. You would need to see them many years later as they traveled great distances every few years to attend their Alumni reunions. It would be there, as they arrived, looking for familiar faces in the crowd, and finding them, rushing to greet each other as brothers and sisters, that would you witness what it truly meant to be a Knight.

If you circulated among them at a reunion and listened to their tales as they caught up with one another filling in the details of the years spent apart, and if you listened very carefully, and if you watched very intently, what you would soon realize is that when they first came to the team those years ago, it was their devotion to duty, their love of country, their desire to a part of something special and important, and the need to be part of a bigger picture that got them there. For that time, they were professional soldiers. Along the way, they would become a brother and sisterhood. As such, their hearts would be made truer and stronger; and even if the time they spent on the team was short; through devotion to teamwork, devotion to each other, devotion to the mission, they evolved as human beings - as men and women.

So, the real character, the heart of the Golden Knight does not lie within the organization, the jumps performed, the statesman like bearing, the appearances made, the records broken, the competitions won – none of that – it resides within the breast of the volunteer soldier and the allegiance to a brotherhood – and without that, there would only be free-fall parachutists – not Golden Knights.

But the real point is that these men and women, before they ever became Golden Knights, while they were everyday soldiers, even as they were civilians prior to enlisting, already carried within them the seeds of what it would take to become a Knight and join the fraternity of the Alumni.

Sergeant Acevedo was merely pointing out that the cadre of the team during Assessment and Reelection would bring to the surface and polish what already exists within the character and behavior of an applicant who wants to become a Knight. If those personal characteristics aren't there, that would be discovered as well, and those not meeting the standards would be returned to their originating unit. That happens as cadre observe and work with candidates during try-outs and as candidates undergoes peer reviews.

- But how are Knights "found?" -

For the candidate, it begins with a desire and an innocent appearing five page application that, among other requirements, stipulates that an applicant must have a minimum of 100 free-fall jumps and have at least four years remaining on

his or her enlistment or be willing to extend or re-enlist to meet that requirement. Initially, they are not required to be airborne qualified, but if accepted to the team, they must agree to attend jump school and become airborne qualified.

During a representative year, 2010, the team received 20 applications for try-outs. 16 soldiers were selected to attend. Selectees included two women that year.

The candidates would endure 16-to-18 hour training days with a typical day beginning at 4:00 a.m. They wake up, form-up and conduct physical training, then take care of personal hygiene, have breakfast, perform barracks maintenance and then head out by bus to Laurinburg-Maxton Airport where they underwent much of their training. Their days consisted of extremely demanding physical exercise and varied tasks to achieve the endurance to prevent injuries and to maintain an exceptional Army image. And throughout each day, weather permitting, they would take part in hundreds of intense, rapid-paced parachute jumps and critiques in the areas of precision free-fall maneuvers and canopy accuracy designed to indoctrinate them in the ways of performing the acts necessary to conduct demonstration shows. They would also receive training in the myriad interpersonal and social skills necessary to conduct the U.S.A.P.T. primary mission of representing the U.S. Army as roving ambassadors.

The cadre that year were Staff Sergeant Tom Dunning, the Team Leader, along with Sergeants First Class Tom Bovee and Greg Windmiller and Staff Sergeants' Derrick Coleman and Scott Janise. These men would oversee and conduct a structured course to hone the candidates' individual skydiving and accuracy skills, help them master free-fall maneuvers, teach them narration skills, impart to them team history, and foster team building. Not every candidate was up to the challenge. There were candidate resignations along the way due to medical problems or personal conflicts.

It should be noted that in the early 1960's, records indicate that try-outs were somewhat ad lib in nature, but over time, became more structured. There have been rare occasions in the past when certain individuals, given their outstanding abilities as civilian skydiving competitors, were specifically invited to attend try-outs, and after enlisting in the Army and completing basic combat training were directly assigned to the team. Also, in the past, it was generally accepted that those making application to attend try-outs needed a certain high level of jump experience to be eligible to attend. That doesn't seem to be the case in recent years, what with the bar now set to a lower level of prior skydiving experience at the time of application.

What follows are the diary entry memories of a 2010 "try-out" as the Assessment and Selection program commenced and then progressed in the late summer and early fall of that year. Actually, the road to the jacket started many months previous as potential candidates made their applications to the team, then waited anxiously as the months passed to receive the letter of acceptance along with orders to report to the team.

The acceptance and orders to attend try-outs would have looked something like these of an applicant in 1991:

AFPT-CO 1 August 1991

MEMORANDUM THRU Commander, Combat Operations Test Activity,

Fort Bragg, North Carolina 28307

Activity, Fort Bragg, North Carolina 28307

SUBJECT: United States Army Parachute Team, 1991 Annual Tryout

Program

1. Congratulations! Your application for the United States Army

Parachute Team Annual Tryout Program has been approved.

2. I request that your command prepare Special Duty orders authorizing you to participate in the 1991 Golden Knight Annual Tryout Program from 30 September 1991 until 27 October 1991.

3. Special Instructions are as follows:

a. You must report to Commander, US Army Parachute Team, no later than 1200 hours on 30 September 1991. Report in BDU's.

b. Government Quarters are available.

c. You must have a copy of your current hazardous duty (JUMP) order. If you are not on jump status your unit is responsible to insure hazardous duty orders covering the tryout period are published.

d. You must be placed on separate rations by your unit for the duration of the tryout program.

e. If you are not presently on jump status, you will report with a current copy of an approved airborne physical.

f. You must bring your health records.

g. You are encouraged to bring sufficient funds to cover you through the Tryout period. Mess facilities are available, but are not feasible.

h. US Army Parachute Team uses a series of progressive

elimination from the program to narrow the candidate field at approximately the second, third, and fourth week point. Personnel not selected will be returned to unit of assignment immediately.

No leave will be approved by the USAPT Commander.

4 . EQUIPMENT: upon arrival you must have the following airworthy and serviceable equipment:

- a . One altimeter
- b. One pair gloves . (army issue black)
- c. One pair free fall goggles
- d. Two grey sweat suits
- e. Two pair athletic shorts (black)
- f. One pair athletic shoes suitable for running
- g. Sufficient white T-shirts and socks
- h. One set BDU's, field jacket, boots. headgear
- i. Appropriate civilian attire
- j. Dress greens with all authorized awards and decorations

5 . You must arrive physically fit and be prepared to take the APRT IAW Army standards physical fitness test.

Once the group of candidates had reported in and the wheels began to turn, the first order of business would be a Physical Fitness test. This is a primary hurdle, and it is pass it or “Get on the bus, and return to your unit.” No slack. No excuses.

Each candidate came to try-outs with previous skydiving experience. Most were already “airborne qualified” having attended and graduated from the Basic Airborne Course at Fort Benning, Georgia. As per their orders, those that are not airborne qualified had to commit to attending Airborne School.

The diary entries began with a review on week one.

Zero Week

“Exhausted yet? Muscles ache? Feeling overwhelmed with course study materials? Getting used to it is our only option as the first week, the administrative

week, of Golden Knights Assessment and Selection comes to an end. Now the real training starts.

The Golden Knights Assessment and Selection Program began just 7 days ago. However, if you ask a “tryout” they would tell you that the initial time spent in the rigorous Assessment and Selection program has felt like 7 weeks already. From day one, we have begun to form friendly bonds and exceptional teamwork. As candidates, we spent “zero week” processing paperwork, arranging our barracks, receiving our equipment issue, sitting through aircraft safety briefings, taking various classes and getting some one-on-one instruction in the vertical wind tunnel.

With the administration and basic instruction courses out of the way, it was time to get to the meat of the program. Although the weather was threatening to end our planned jump day, we managed to end the week with a total of 90 accident free precision free-fall jumps. Week “zero” has been demanding on all of us. However, we all look forward to the challenges that the cadre have promised us for Week “One.”

- The Nuts-and-Bolts and the Subtleties... -

Approximately 40 miles southwest of Fort Bragg is Laurinburg–Maxton Airport. It was active during World War II as a Troop Carrier Command training airfield. Now, a civilian airport, it was chosen as training site for the team many years ago as it is located away from the busy airspace of Pope Air Force Base, which is adjacent to Fort Bragg and the installation’s busy drop zones used primarily for the training jumps of various airborne units such as the 82nd Airborne Division headquartered there. It is a one-hour bus ride from the team headquarters located at Fort Bragg.

It is generally a daily occurrence that the “try-outs” will board a waiting bus early in the morning and head to Laurinburg-Maxton to undergo whatever the cadre deem necessary most days during the eight-week cycle of Assessment and Selection. Training doesn’t stop for the one-hour ride, neither does it cease for weather holds. The cadre see to it that candidates are constantly kept busy acquiring the skills necessary to perform as prospective team members. Once there, the team aircraft will fly in from Pope and jumping will commence as candidates are taught and critiqued. But jumping is not all that happens as they are evaluated and trained.

As the weeks go by, their training at Laurinburg-Maxton, back at Bragg, even in their barracks, and during their bus rides to-and fro, will encompass every aspect of their lives necessary for the Golden Knight to function not only as a demonstration parachutist but as a representative of the U.S. Army.

And the ability to narrate a show is one key skill that every prospective Knight must learn. The bus ride to Laurinburg-Maxton presents a perfect opportunity to practice narrating shows, so it is a common practice that candidates will rise to stand in the aisle facing their compatriots and use that time to learn the script and practice narrating to one another. And during the annual Assessment and Selection Program the candidates will undergo media training as it is a vital part of their integration into the public eye. Each show season, members of the team will travel to numerous locations and along with greeting and mingling with the public, they will conduct interviews with the broadcast and print media at every stop.

Team cadre, Sergeant First Class Bovee, reflected on this aspect of the candidates training:

“It is my job to see that each of these candidates are prepared and feel confident and comfortable speaking with these mediums. It begins with the very first day they arrive at the team and are processed for the program. As they process into the unit, Sean Capogreco took individual photographs and Mike Battise had them do a brief standup interview telling us a bit about who they are. I gave each of them a list of



“Key Messages” that they can study for upcoming interviews, and it gives them something to fall back on during interviews with the media. We don’t want to scare them off or intimidate them, but we need to get a baseline on their experience with media interviews to show us where we need to work with each individual. We compile a DVD of each candidate’s interview process to be critiqued and to assist them with areas they are finding difficulty with. Looking at yourself on video is one of the greatest training aids available to teach you about

yourself. It shows them if they are rolling their eyes, stuttering, swaying back and forth or adding a lot of unnecessary pauses.



Later during the week, we took them outside in front of the team Headquarters facility to conduct a more in-depth screening and have them give us a bit of a biography on themselves. The majority of them seemed to feel a little more at ease, but a few seem to struggle when the camera was turned on. It’s funny how something as small as a camera intimidates them so much more than falling out of an airplane at 120 miles-an-hour

Last week we hit them with the real live media crews. Linda, Earl and Eric came down from the Pentagon Channel to do interviews with the candidates for an upcoming segment about “New Guys.” So they were put to the test to use the tips,

suggestions and skills we armed them with to face the TV. Overall they really did quite well and I was very proud of them.

This week I gave them all pocket media cards with the several Golden Rule's when dealing with the media; the number one rule being, "Everything is always on the record!" It also gave them new key messages and the Communications Wheel to remind them how to bridge their answers back to the key messages into their spots. Mike had set up bright lights and we miked them for their first mock sit down television interview. It is a great feeling to see how they are progressing and I'm sure they will almost be pros by time they reach graduation day."

The next diary entry...

Week One

"As week one finally comes to a close, our logbooks are forty jumps fatter and our minds are filled with as much information as they can possibly store. Everyday brought new challenges. From rigging smoke safely to properly spotting the aircraft, we never had a boring moment. The cadre have slowly increased the intensity. At one point a cadre remarked "This course is like taking a drink of water - from a fire hose." We are beginning to believe it. The amount of information required to be a successful demonstration parachutist on the Golden Knights is astounding. Like little sponges, we are absorbing every bit of it.

The Baton Pass maneuver rounded off our week with climbs to 12,500 feet over Laurinburg, North Carolina. It was nice to escape the ninety plus degrees of heat, humidity and grumpy cadre on the ground. Even if for just a few short minutes. Every candidate's tee-shirt was tinged in pink from our first smoke jumps, mingled with the sweat of knee-touch walks and the hit-it position."



“Try-outs” in the “Hit-It” position. How long can you keep those feet up?

“Week one brought new meanings to information overload and fatigue. According to the cadre, week one was the easy week!”

As we move toward week two, we take with us valuable lessons in teamwork. The cadre made it clear, painfully so, that no one man will stand alone in this program. We succeed together, or we fail as individuals. Every member of GKAS class of 2010 has a role to fulfill. We must learn to trust that our teammates have completed their given tasks. We are learning to bond and to do that quickly; the alternative is the wrath of our instructors! Week one ended with a five mile run and a full day of gorgeous weather for our training. One more week down...several more to go. Week Two? Bring it on!”

At Laurinburg-Maxton, everything is done at a double-time pace, on-the-run, and there is no peace for any candidate. Teamwork, teaching the candidates to work together, is a major goal. From the moment the bus arrives in the early morning, the activity is fast-and-furious and intended to create stress as well as to teach. Candidates are urged forward by bull-horn while unloading their equipment, which not only includes their parachute gear but tables and chairs and water coolers and cases of smoke grenades, even tents, to see them through the day. And those things must be set up correctly, right down to the erection of a wind sock.



Beginning of the day set-up inspection

Every move is watched by the cadre. Small mistakes are caught and corrected via a number of remedies with the goal always being not to punish, but to give a

“try-out” time to “reflect and correct.” Some of those corrections include varying forms of physical training, while others are a bit more creative in nature such as the digging of holes; the thought being that the action of shoveling dirt in the August heat will create a resolve to do better and avoid the shovel in the future.

Week Two

“How long does it take a UV-18 Twin Otter to climb to 2,500 feet, discharge its cargo, land, and be ready for the next load? Not long enough! At 95 degrees, Friday was the hottest day of week two, And possibly the hottest day of try-outs yet. A perfect day for the cadre to test our endurance. The plan was simple; pack where you land, re-rig your smoke bracket, slam down some water, get your gear checked and be waiting on the aircraft.”



On average, the turnaround was about nine minutes. Our cadre were constantly reminding us “If you miss the aircraft, you don’t jump; if you don’t jump, we cannot evaluate your performance; if we cannot evaluate your performance, you will go home.”



Needless to say we were moving faster than we ever did.

Week two wasn't all speed and sweat. We had the unique opportunity of being shadowed by the Pentagon Channel. Between packing, jumping, and CRW (Cutting, Raking, Weeding) we also had interviews. It was a different experience trying to get our tasks completed with a camera and microphone mere inches from us. We were assured the situation is no different when traveling with the demonstration teams. Feeling comfortable in the presence of cameras and microphones is just one more stressor of an already demanding program.

Every morning is nearly the same routine. Physical training at zero five hundred hours, followed by breakfast and loading the bus. Our bus ride, of course, is filled with narration practice, our safety briefing, and a weather forecast. We set-up the drop zone with at least two of the cadre timing us and motivating us to move faster. Then begins the training.

Long days filled with parachute packing, debriefs, critiques, and coaching. It is always a relief when the red bullhorn sounds with "Break It Down." Granted the bus ride home will be filled with practice interviews, more narration training and debriefs. But we are all relieved to know the day is done, even more so when it ends an entire week. Bring on Week Three !"

Week Three

"Week three went like any other week in GKAS, with one exception. The workload increased, the amount of people to shoulder that load decreased. Since the beginning of GKAS we have decreased in size from sixteen candidates to twelve. However, the standards haven't decreased, As a matter of fact, they have gotten higher. Every week more and more tasks are piled on our already full plates. From narration additions, to new projects, to increased amounts of week-end details.

Week three gave us a second chance to use the Paraclete wind tunnel at Raeford for training. Thursday was a complete bust due to weather. Thankfully, SFC Krause, Team Leader of the Golden Knight's 8-way Team, was happy to share tunnel time with us. We practiced the diamond formation. Each tryout had about ten minutes in the tunnel perfecting the skills required to fly a "tight" diamond formation. SFC Windmiller also coached us on how to watch the diamond leader closely for subtle changes and heading corrections. Changing the angles and headings properly as a unit was challenging, but we all gave our best. As SSG Dunning puts it "We're not



looking for the best you can do, we're looking for the best it can be done."

Bad weather also gives the cadre some time to begin to share the subtleties of the social mores and standard operating procedures that the prospective Knights will need to know as they interact with the public on the ground. According to one past cadre, during the down times, briefings were held to tell the new guys what they would need to know in the future. The following typifies how far reaching the team's attention to detail is, and what is expected of every Knight in every situation. Where it concerned dress, uniforms and other interactions on the ground and around the public, according to John Hawke who served as cadre and was the team from 1991-1995, these were some of the subjects covered:

"For semi-formal events we had a "blue blazer" with the Golden Knights pocket patch on the front and we wore those over "Dockers" (khaki chinos) instead of the issued polyester slacks. Business casual events called for a GK "pullover" (polo shirt), usually a specified color Navy Blue, White, Gold, or Black over "Dockers" or "nice jeans."

"Rainbow" meant you could wear whatever you wanted, appropriate to the event. Pool or beach parties meant Hawaiian shirts, shorts, and sandals for example. "Rainbow" could also refer to a sub-component of the uniform like "Gold pullover over rainbow." Which meant one would wear the specified color pullover on top with anything goes underneath - golf shorts were very common here. Complete "Rainbow" also meant you could not wear anything GK (except your jacket).

And we were taught about event types.

There was semi-formal. These events did not happen often; maybe three times while I was on the team. There was often a head table and prepared remarks, etc.

The Hangar Party at airshows. Usually held on Friday nights. These were walk-around events and we were expected to alternate back-and-forth between working the room alone or in pairs and small groups. These were usually informal, and you got to meet other performers and the folks sponsoring or running the airshow.

And there was attending the Survivors' Party - always held on Sunday nights, where you mingled with airshow staff, performers, family, and guests only. It was always "Rainbow" and very relaxed."

And the cadre covered the business of eating and food...

"Generally, food was called "FRED," actually an acronym, which stood for "Free Eating and Drinking." The Advance Man would always let you know if FRED would be at an event, so you knew whether or not to eat before "lobby time" - the time set to meet in the hotel lobby prior to leaving for a show.

Sit-down meal. We would split up and sit one or two per table so we could socially engage with the other guests. The "Army Ambassador" role was not just for

airshows. We would usually go fill up at Taco Bell or the like beforehand because you almost never got to eat your meal - everyone else at the table was engaging you in conversation. This was especially true if the uniform was a white pullover, because it never failed that there would be something messy served for dinner.

Buffet serving line. We would often be invited to get in line first, which we would politely decline and line-up like everyone else. Humility over special treatment.

Always carry a napkin or two in the pocket. We would hold the plate in our right hand and eat with our left, so if we needed to shake someone's hand we could switch the plate to the other hand and shake with a clean right.

Organized activities had protocols...

There was often a matted photo presentation and or remarks by the Team Leader, and sometimes the airshow staff had something for us as well.

Intros. Similar to line-up on the show site but less formal but with no drill & ceremony. The Team Leader would thank everyone for inviting us, give kudos to everyone working so hard to put on the show, and then introduce the team. He would almost always start with the Assistant Team Leader, then randomly choose one team member at a time to introduce as he gave our name and rank, hometown and often what our job on the team was, for example, cutaway, narrator or videographer. Then, the first to be introduced would shake the Team Leader's hand, if accessible, and begin a line abreast formation facing the audience. Subsequent teammates would walk up and shake the hand of everyone in line, and take their position in the line. Then the Team Leader would close with "...your Army Parachute Team." at which point we would fan out through the audience and make our way back to our previous location."

And Hawke related that there was even a standard operating procedure for leaving a room or an event.

"The Team Leader would start with one of two hand signals as our cue to leave.

"3-2-1" made with the last three fingers on one hand closing one at a time meant you had 10 minutes to politely break off a conversation and make your way to the vehicles. The other signal was the shaka signal meaning to hang loose or leave.



"Hang Loose" made with the Hawaiian "shaka" sign meant you could stay if you wanted, but it was okay to leave.

We would get rides home from other teammates with rental cars who were staying at the hotel, or we'd take a cab back, or whatever worked. If the event was at our hotel or within walking distance, "Hang Loose" was almost always the exit method.

More from the dairy...

“Saturday of week three we were rewarded with a surprise visit from Miss Anna Capps, an eleven year old from Whiteville, North Carolina. She, her father and Grandfather (John McCrae of Scotland Aero Services) stopped by to visit us at our training area in Laurinburg. It was a great learning experience for us as tryouts, as well as for Anna. We experienced what it is like conversing with young Americans about parachuting and the Army. We autographed posters for Anna and her family and talked her through packing a parachute. She was very excited to assist us. It was a small yet valuable glimpse of what the future holds after GKAS.”

Week Four

“Week Four continued to challenge us in every way possible. More tasks to complete and higher standards to deal with. It seems just as we get used to the heat that is poured on, the cadre find a new way to turn it up. In particular was learning how to deal with a crowd of spectators that are demanding autographs, photos and answers to their various questions. Mr. Thacker of Raeford Parachute Center and several other Golden Knight Alumni visited us this week and observed training. They interacted with us in a simulated spectator environment giving us the chance to learn how to deal with the many situations that arise during a demonstration. This gave us a chance to make mistakes and have them corrected without actually doing so in a true spectator environment. The lessons learned on “Raeford Day” will forever be invaluable.

We continued Diamond Formation training and Diamond Tracks. We also began learning how to perform an end of show line-up and a photo line-up. All of this extra training culminated in a parachute demonstration to open the Parachutist Over Phorty Society’s (POPS) competition at Raeford Parachute Center. A Columbus Day week-end opener that none of us are soon to forget. If performing in front of a hundred or so spectators and landing in an open field makes our hearts race this much, then how will we ever be able to pound a dead center landing in a tight target area in front of tens of thousands? We don’t have the answer for that, but we also can’t wait for that experience to come. This demonstration gave us a glimpse of what may be if we are still here at the end...and it felt awesome! We were rewarded by our cadre with a lot of praise and a Saturday off. Finally we are seeing the fruits of our labors!

This week was demanding. We were worn out, bruised and battered. But the Demonstration at the end was worth the price we paid in sweat. There is no doubt now in any of our minds that everything we learn here has purpose and direction. SSG Dunning is fond of reminding us that “everything” the cadre does has a reason. We truly see that for what it is now, and we look forward to more

reasoning in the upcoming fifth week. One more week closer to earning our jackets! Week five? No Sweat!”

Week Five

“Week five has come and gone. As always, the tasks get tougher and the standards increase. It’s a formula we now know well. That doesn’t make it any easier. We have moved on to Mass Formation training. This involves all candidates (the ten of us that remain) and a cadre jumping in one large formation. It’s a nice change of pace from the daily routine of maneuvers with individual debriefs and in-depth critiques. Simply put, the Mass Formations are actually quite a bit of fun. We spend our evenings discussing and imagining what unique formations we’ll do on the next training day. It almost feels like we are skydiving back at our home drop zones. Well, just during the dirt dives and the jump itself. Everything else still hurts!

Some weather rolled in about mid-week putting a serious damper on our training. Naturally the cadre did not miss a beat. When we can’t jump there are always projects that can be completed. Like digging a pea-gravel pit ten meters wide and one-and-half feet deep. It started slow with nothing more than hand shovels to dig with. There was no doubt that at the rate we were going it would easily take a week or more to dig the hole. Thankfully a resourceful member of our team managed to make a trade with a local front-end loader operator. Our hole was dug and ready to be filled by the end of the weather day. We are pretty sure this greatly disappointed our cadre who seemed to enjoy watching us dig. SFC Bovee in particular! Trust us when we tell you that five good idea fairies (our cadre) standing around telling us how to dig better is no fun at all!



At the end of the week, we were surprised by four bus loads of second grade students and their teachers. We spent quite a bit of time interacting with them through packing demonstrations, autograph signings and taking several photos. It was definitely a learning experience for us and the children as well.

Our weekend was filled with more tasks than we have ever had. All of this with less people to shoulder the load. Painting projects in the barracks, yard work at the headquarters, equipment repairs and refits. It's a never ending cycle. Looking forward to week six is a set of mixed thoughts. What can they pile on us next? One more week down, bring on week six!"

Week Six

"Six weeks have elapsed. Seems an eternity to us as candidates. No doubt even the cadre are feeling some wear. The good news is we can see the light at the end of the tunnel. We know the next week should yield our jackets. We also know many of the things we are doing now are geared to prepare us for graduation. These are all good, motivating thoughts to carry with us. It keeps smiles on our faces and our spirits high. Even though we have been reminded that we can still leave, without a jacket, and well before graduation. So we stay on guard and keep a positive outlook toward the future.

Tony "Smoke" Stewart of NASCAR fame stopped by for a visit this week. It was interesting to watch the Tandem Team and our cadre interact with a VIP. He was treated as if he was just one of the guys. Respectful, but laid back. An outsider looking in would assume that Mr. Stewart and the team are old life-long friends. He took the time to chat with us lowly candidates. He even popped a smoke canister and played the part of "Honorary Cadre" for a few minutes by yelling at us through the infamous red bullhorn.



Naturally, we all had a good laugh at our expense, which is usually the case. The cadre explained that there are occasions where we will be in the presence of well-known people. They explained it is important to remember that the team is known for treating all tandem passengers and visitors the same, regardless of their status. It was certainly proven when “Smoke” visited!

Our week was topped off with several Mass Formation jumps.



Try-Outs working on a 10-Way over Laurinburg.

Long debriefs and in-depth critiques based on video footage helped us improve from jump-to-jump. The cadre never missed a single detail. From grip positions, opened flaps, and smoky goggles. Attention to detail in everything was of the utmost importance in Mass Formations, second only to safety. The rumor is we will be performing a Mass Formation for our graduation jump. We want to make it perfect. The critiques and debriefs are very welcome. Week seven approaches. Night Jumps and Jackets! Bring it on!”

Week Seven

“As we, the nine remaining candidates, lay down to sleep on Wednesday evening, we knew that jacket day was soon. However, the exact time and experience was still an unknown. We all had our thoughts on when and how our

coveted jackets would be presented. None of us could have guessed what the devious cadre actually had in mind.

We were resting peacefully in the early morning hours on Thursday when it happened. Sometime between 0300 and 0330, we awoke to blaring heavy metal music on our P.A. system, nearly twenty rapidly flashing strobe lights strewn all over our room, and strategically placed cadre in every corner with bullhorns and microphones. The chant of "Get up, get your PT's on!" was barely audible over the wailing of electric guitars and screaming metal singers from the Eighties. The cadre were everywhere spreading confusion, the entire barracks felt like a madhouse. Although chaotic, the cadre had a good handle on the event, that we later learned was very carefully orchestrated down to the minute. We all managed to sneak small whispers to one another "This has to be jacket day." The only question was, "Can we deal with one more day of the suck?"

Physical training ensued, reminiscent of week one. Sprinting, crawling, push-ups, bear crawls, you name it, we did it. The session seemed like it would never end. After about two-and-a-half hours, we were told to shower and load the bus for the drop zone. The bus ride was a much needed break. Once at Laurinburg we set up the drop zone as quickly as possible in an effort to please the cadre. Problem is there is no pleasing the cadre on jacket day. The smoke session began again...

In what had to be our millionth hit-it drill we all heard the distinctive sound of the C-31 Fokker Friendship aircraft in-bound from the west. Glancing skyward we could get a small glimpse of the plane through a red smoke haze as it flew directly over the drop zone. A small object with a few pilot chutes attached exited the left door. "A bundle!" one of our teammates exclaimed. "The jackets!" yelled another. We all took off in a dead sprint in an effort to retrieve the bag that contained our tickets to freedom from the oppressive cadre. We knew in our heart of hearts that the bag just had to have our jackets in it. We approached, covered in sweat, dirt, smoke residue and grass trimmings. We opened the bag expecting to see the black wool of the Golden Knight's jackets. Instead we saw white tee-shirts. Each one individually labeled with each candidate's name and a message on the back. It stated "I completed tryouts and all I got was this lousy T-shirt." Our hearts sank. So many weeks of grueling misery, and this morning to top it off – a T-shirt? Where were the jackets? Surely this is jacket day. We looked at our cadre. Every face had a wide grin, obviously satisfied with themselves for crushing our very last hope.

So, we returned to our target area and the PT began yet again. Knee touch walks, flutter kicks, hit-it drills, sprints, the low crawl. Even with our hearts crushed we knew we had to give 110 percent. Letting the cadre be satisfied with their devious little plan was not going to happen. We knew our jackets were well deserved and today had to be the day. Then it happened! The C-31 Friendship returned. We could barely see it through a billowing cloud of red smoke. We

could scarcely hear it through the consistent yelling of several cadre. But it was there, there was no doubt in our minds. This time a larger more distinctive bundle was released, followed by two jumpers. Again we took off in a dead sprint. Across a closed runway, through a freshly harvested cotton field. Nearly one mile to retrieve the new bundle. We quickly raced the bundle back to the drop zone. The cadre were there near our target waiting for us. Scowls on their faces and their arms crossed. Finally SSG Dunning gave us the okay to open the bundle.

The cadre at this point began looking like a proud fathers at Christmas watching their children open their gifts. We opened the bundle. Inside were several black plastic bags wrapped around our jackets! We ripped the plastic off and began reading the names on the jackets. They were ours, no more tricks. The cadre had finally rewarded us with what we had worked so hard to receive. Regardless of the fact that we had just ran nearly two miles we donned the jackets and congratulated each other.



A ripple of emotion made its way through our small team. It's hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced GKAS, but when you see that jacket with your name on it, it gives you such a sense of pride and accomplishment that it is unparalleled to anything we have experienced previously.



Sergeant Bovee is surrounded by the new Golden Knights of 2010 on Jacket Day

The jacket is a long standing tradition in the Golden Knights. It symbolizes the end of assessment and selection. But what it means to the candidates is that the program is over and that as a group, we have gained the respect of our cadre and the acceptance of the entire team. What it means to the cadre is that through the last eight weeks they were able to transform nine people from weekend skydivers, into demonstration-ready parachutists, worthy of the title "Golden Knight." Golden Knight Assessment and Selection is complete. We graduate soon and move into the next phase of our training. We will be assigned an "Old Guy" and begin our "New Guy" year on the demonstration teams. Thank you to our families for standing behind us and maintaining faith in our abilities. Thank you to our cadre, whom we know sacrificed their personal lives daily to get us through this program safely and prepared. Winter Training is next. New Guy Year? No problem!"



On November 2nd, 2010, Sergeants' Brian Sealing, Dustin Peregrin, Adrian Hill, Thomas Melton, David Echeverry, Thomas Pryjda and Richard Sloan along with Specialist Matthew Navarro and Private First Class Jeshua Stahler made their 180th jump of the program into their graduation ceremony. Throughout the duration of the 2010 program, the candidates and cadre completed 2,350 free-fall parachute jumps.



During the graduation ceremony, each new member of the Golden Knights recited the last line of the Golden Knight Creed as they were “knighted” into the Army’s only Department of Defense parachute team by Lt. Colonel Joe Martin, the Golden Knights’ commander. During a long standing tradition, each new Knight came to kneel before the team Sergeant Major and Commander to be knighted with the team’s Excalibur Sword and stated, “When I have gained the respect, admiration and gratitude of the American public and my team mates, then I have fulfilled my mission as a Golden Knight.”



LTC Martin "knights" SSG Adrian Hill and SGM Young presents him a team coin.

The new members of the team, along with the entire team would shortly deploy to Homestead Air Force Base, Florida and their training there will be key to integrating them into the Black and Gold demonstration teams helping to make them cohesive, competent members of the team.



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

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