

Chapter One

The Golden Eagles

After jumping at Lucedale for a while, I received an invitation to jump with another “club.” They were the “The Golden Eagles” operating at a dinky airstrip near Ocean Springs, in south Mississippi.

Their drop zone was a swampy field way back in the woods half covered by scraggly young pine trees each about ten feet tall. It was a few miles away from the airstrip. The tricky part was not getting one of those trees up your behind on landing. Once you landed, you pulled what was left of your parachute out of the trees then spent the next three hours patching the holes the trees had torn in it before you could use it again. But we had fun.

One of that club’s jumpers was a U.S. Air Force Tech Sergeant named Swartz who was stationed at nearby Keesler Air Force base. He had a young family -- a wife and two little kids. A stocky, short, friendly guy, Swartz had decided that he wanted the family dog to jump with him. He spent hours sitting at a heavy duty sewing machine making a special harness for the dog, a scruffy half breed mongrel that looked kind of like Benji.

Well, Swartz made several successful jumps with the dog. The procedure was that Swartz would leave the airplane with the dog cradled in his arms. Then, at the right altitude, Swartz would push the dog away and its parachute would open. Swartz would then pull his own ripcord and the two would float down together.

The method Swartz used to open the dog’s parachute was the standard military way of automatically opening a parachute when someone jumps from a plane. The dog’s parachute had what is known as a “static line” attached to it. A static line is usually about twelve feet long. One end of the static line is attached to the aircraft and the other end is attached to the parachute pack with breakable cord.

When the jumper, or dog, in this case, jumped and got to the end of the static line, the cord would break and the pack would be opened and out the parachute would come. The method is still in use by the military today.

Now, it has to be stated that our equipment was questionable. All of it was military surplus, some of it twenty years old or older. Most of us had no money to buy new equipment and so relied on surplus gear. Swartz’s gear was no different.

The static line he was using was made of cotton instead of nylon like those of today. It was probably made in the 40’s.

So, Saturday morning comes and we all meet at the airport to load up. Swartz had the mutt all ready to go. Swartz's wife and kids are with him as well. I would be the first one to exit the airplane. We load up. I'll do a hop-and-pop -- that is, jump and immediately open my parachute. Then the airplane would circle back around, climb to a little higher altitude, and then Swartz and the dog would exit with the third jumper behind them. The dog didn't seem the least bit nervous.

While we were climbing out, I happened to notice that the dog had actually fallen asleep. Once at altitude, on jump run, I checked my spot, the place over the drop zone where I would exit. I gave the pilot a few minor heading changes to make, checked my gear quickly and sat in the door ready to go. When I was satisfied I was over the spot, I left the aircraft. I immediately pulled my ripcord and watched over my shoulder as my white, olive drab and orange canopy opened bringing me to a stop with a gentle tug.

I secured my ripcord, made sure I was drifting on the right line of descent and then hung under my parachute watching as the airplane circled back around to a position about five hundred feet above me. I saw Swartz sitting in the door cradling the dog. Once just past me, they exited.

Swartz arched into a spread and went into a short free-fall and then pushed the dog away as he opened his own parachute. The dog fell away, reached the end of the static line and the static line broke with an audible "pop!" The dog went into a spinning free fall and whistled all the way into the ground at terminal velocity. He never had a chance.

The three of us landed, minus the dog. I was busy aiming for the drop zone, and I never saw where he went -- neither did anyone else.

We all felt terrible. The wife and kids were back at the airport some miles away. A truck was waiting to pick us up and we all clambered in and rode in silence back to airport sans the dog. When we arrived, the kids came running up to the truck. "Where's Scruffy? Where's Scruffy!?" they anxiously inquired. We looked at Swartz. This was his problem to deal with. There was a long pregnant pause. He then shrugged his shoulders and said in all mock earnestness, "He ran away. We couldn't find him."

The kids started to cry. "But, Daddy, we love him!" Swartz was starting to crumble; I could see his mouth quivering. I piped up. "I'm going to go back and look for him later. I'm sure he's fine. I'll find him. I promise."

Step One: Open big mouth. Step Two: Stick foot firmly in. But, I needed time. "First, let's get something to eat. I'm hungry." That shut them up for a while. Well, something to eat was accompanied by several six packs and jumping ended for the day.

The kids ate their hot dogs quietly but every now and then one of them would tear-up and ask again about the whereabouts of the now dead dog. I quelled them by saying, "He's probably at some farmer's house having a great time." That was accompanied by other nefarious lies to assuage them. Swartz was keeping quiet and shooting me panicky "*What are we gonna do?*" glances.

After a while, Swartz outstretched his arms and yawned a fake yawn, and said, "Kids, let's go home. Mike will find the dog and bring him home."

And, with that, he had officially handed me the problem, which I wouldn't have had if I had kept my mouth shut.

I was single then, loved camp fires and on the week-ends usually overnighted in a tent at the airport. The cooler was full and I stayed behind to joke around with the other guys and drink more beer.

Then, around 10 p.m. insanity struck, and I decided to find a dog for the kids. I staggered to my car, drove to a convenience store and bought a newspaper. Looking in the classifieds, I found a lady who wanted to find a home for a dog. I figured the kids would be happy with anything that barked and, before long, they'd forget all about Poor Dead Scruffy.

I dropped a dime in a pay phone and called the number in the paper and explained that I was doing a wonderful good deed, "...those poor, poor children have lost their dog..." and asked if I could come right away and pick him up. The lady was hesitant, but a little more pitiful talk on my behalf and she relented.

I showed up on her door step in about fifteen minutes and took possession of said dog. Oddly enough, he sort of resembled poor old Scruffy. It was dark. I really didn't look at him that closely. He was sitting outside on the stoop when I arrived.

The lady didn't come out but spoke to me through the latched screen door. I thanked her, whisked the dog up and drove straight over to Swartz's mobile home. I knew Swartz didn't lock his doors at night.

I shut my ignition off before silently rolling to a stop in front of Swartz's place. I quietly opened the car door, gathered up the dog and crept up to Swartz's front door. It was dark inside. Swartz drank heavily and I knew he was dead to the world. I eased the door open with one hand and with the other shoved the dog inside and closed the door. I then headed back to the airport.

The next morning Swartz comes high-balling into the airport's dirt parking lot without the wife and kids. He hops out yelling at the top of his lungs, "Alright! Which one of you miserable assholes put that damn dog in my trailer last night?!"

We all just stood there looking sheepish and shrugged our shoulders. Trying to stifle a laugh at that moment was one the hardest things I ever did.

“That miserable little son-of-a-bitch has a bad case of fleas and he crapped all over my living room!” ranted Swartz pacing back-and-forth. “And to top that off, the kids were playing with him this morning when I got up and I think he’s got the ringworm!!”

That did it. We all broke out laughing and holding our sides. We knew Swartz was in a pickle. He couldn’t do anything in retaliation even if he knew who did it. Somebody might tell the kids what really happened to poor old Scruffy.

After a while, Swartz looked me dead in the face. He knew who had done it. After a few seconds of silence, he broke out laughing himself, twirled his bushy mustache a little and said, “Thanks anyway.” We put our gear on and jumped the rest of the day.

A few months later, on a Saturday morning, we were all sitting around waiting on the weather to clear. Swartz’s kids were chasing each other around the cars laughing and giggling. The new Scruffy had long since been freed of fleas and it turned out that there was no ringworm, after all.

Just then, a battered, red Ford pick-up rolled into the dusty parking lot and a tall, lanky, grizzled hulk of a man with a weather-beaten, craggy face got out of the truck and shuffled over towards us.

We figured he was just a local “whuffo” (“What fo ya’ll jump out of dem ‘planes?”) coming to watch the action.

Turned out it was a local farmer. He walked up to Swartz and said, “Got a minute? I got sumpthin’ in the truck I want to show ya.” Swartz shook his head and followed the man back to his truck. I ambled along behind.

When we got to the truck, the man pointed in the bed and said, “Thought maybe you boys wud know sumpthin’ about this.” There, lying in the truck bed was Scruffy’s harness. No dog. Just the harness attached to a still unopened parachute. Swartz’s face turned three shades of white and he gulped. I started to chortle.

“Jest found it in the woods.” Said the man. “Belong to ya’ll?” Swartz was quick on his feet. Some color returned to his face as he glanced over his shoulder to see where his kids were. They were still running around the cars in an endless game of chase.

He thought for a minute then Swartz said, “Nope. Looks military to me. Maybe it fell out of one of the planes from Keesler?” The farmer thought about that for a minute and said, “Well, it had to fit somebody mighty small.” With that, he spat a brown plug of chewing tobacco juice on the ground with a splat and he got in his truck and left.

Swartz’s response? “Jesus. That was close.”

I was laughing my ass off. And, it was the end of jumping with animals for Swartz. The whole episode reminded me of a time at Ft. Bragg when a bunch of guys decided to throw a chicken out the back of a C-130 just to see if chickens can fly.

They don’t, by the way. And there’s nothing left to fry afterwards.