

## Introduction

### **Red Beans & Ripcords**

They're called "Skydivers" today. But we used to be called "Sport Parachutists." I prefer the simple term, "jumper." The places we jumped were and are called "Drop Zones." This is where you landed when you jumped. A drop zone's personality was usually due to whoever owned or operated it and the way they conducted business. The real "flavor" of a drop zone came from the various personalities that showed up on the weekends when most of the activity took place.

At the start of the Twentieth Century, a very few kindred souls like "Tiny" Broadwick or Georgia Broadwick, her actual name, were the real pioneers. She was nicknamed 'Tiny' as she weighed only eighty-five pounds and was 4 feet tall. Born Georgia Ann Thompson, at the age of 15 she saw Charles Broadwick's World Famous Aeronauts parachute from a hot air balloon and decided to join the travelling troupe. She later became Broadwick's adopted daughter.

Among her many achievements, she was the first woman to parachute from an airplane on June 21, 1913, jumping from a plane built and piloted by Glenn L. Martin, 1,000 feet over Griffith Park in Los Angeles. She was also the first woman to parachute into water.

Other "pioneers," particularly after World War II, began jumping in small groups at military bases and at civilian airfields scattered around the country until the early 1960's when the sport really began to take off. I was first initiated into the sport in 1962 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the home of the 82nd Airborne Division. I made a few sport jumps there, then I was transferred to Germany and made no jumps for several years until I got back to the states.

In 1966, I returned from my first tour in the military and decided to get out and follow my passion, sport parachuting. I worked at minor part-time jobs, and then threw myself head long into what, today, is called "skydiving." Let me give you a look at the state of sport parachuting aka skydiving in the early to the mid 1960's. For many jumpers then, especially civilians, it went something like this.

In 1957, the first commercial skydiving schools began to appear, but these commercial operations were few and far between. The National Parachute Riggers-Jumpers, Incorporated, was an organized regulating body that started in the 1930's and later became the Parachute Club of America. PCA renamed itself the United States Parachute Association in 1967. However, up until about 1965, whether or not you were a member of any organization was of little consequence.

In time, drop zones, commercial centers and various clubs begin to require a USPA membership. Jumpers had started to realize that the Federal Aviation Administration was increasingly looking harder and harder at regulating sport parachuting, and skydivers knew that they needed a national lobbying body to keep from being regulated out of the sky. The USPA also knew that skydiving was quickly gaining popularity and more stringent training guidelines and safety regulations were necessary.

But prior to 1965, it was pretty much a whatever-you-could-get-away-with affair. Parachutes, for the most part, were all military surplus and if it inflated and seemed airworthy, you jumped it. As a civilian, I never gave much thought to the condition of parachutes until about 1966.

Clubs sprang up here and there, mostly at rural airstrips. Those clubs consisted of small batches of people who gathered on week-ends to jump together with little attention to safety, and they were usually not a formal organization with a charter and rules.

You pretty much took someone at their word when they told you how many jumps they had or how experienced they were until such time as they did something to prove otherwise. For example, few people concerned themselves with log books in the early days. Later, log books would become extremely important to validate certain kinds of jumps and what you did during those jumps. Those log books provided places to enter the jump number, altitudes, maneuvers performed, whether it was a day or night jump, or whether it was a jump into water or a terra firma landing and other pertinent information.

In time, all of that information, which had to be verified by the signature of another jumper, would be important for certain awards or licenses. Not having the proper level of licensure could prevent you from performing different types of jumps such as making a demonstration jump over a crowd or into differing kinds of locations.

My reentry into jumping after leaving the military was a prime example of how loose things could be. Once home, I got a job and spent my spare time clubbing around at night visiting various honkytonks around the south Mississippi coast. At one of those clubs, I met a guy named Rusty and we became good friends. The very first time we struck up a conversation, he asked me out-of-the-blue had I ever skydived. I answered in the absolute. He then asked me if I wanted to join him the coming weekend at an "airport" up in Lucedale, Mississippi. I gleefully answered that I'd be there bright and early.

That Saturday morning, I showed up at the “airport” which was nothing more than an expansive field with what appeared to be a ramshackle hangar near the road. Just outside of the hangar sat a dirty, dented small airplane with the right door taken off. Some guy was sitting in the open door of the airplane strumming a guitar and singing songs to a gaggle of young girls gathered around him. Off to the other side of the hangar were parked four or five cars and a few people milling about. I parked my car, got out and looked for Rusty.

He hadn’t shown up yet, but one of the people wandering around the cars spotted me and approached. We shook hands. His name was Noel. He told me, without being prompted, that he was the senior jumper there. I took that as gospel.

In those days, when someone told me that they were a jumper, I pretty much didn’t challenge it unless they were wearing their helmet backwards. I just went along with the program. Shortly, Rusty pulled up and jumped out of his car and began introducing me to some of the others gathered there. “You ready to make a leap?” Rusty asked of me. I answered in the affirmative. “He then said, “Let’s find you some gear.”

No one asked me how many jumps I had made. First of all, the jumps I had made were two years prior and I had only made three sport jumps. Nowadays, you’re considered a student well beyond your fiftieth jump. Even back then, at the commercial centers, you needed to make at least five jumps with your parachute automatically opened for you. Once you were cleared to pull your own ripcord, you progressed along a path of making free-fall jumps of varying lengths, from five second free-falls up to 30 second free-falls, all very carefully observed and critiqued.

I had three jumps and Rusty was digging up some gear for me – no questions asked. Hell, I didn’t even know what Rusty’s qualifications were or how many jumps he had made.

Shortly, Rusty came along with a main parachute slung over his shoulder, carrying a smaller reserve parachute in his hand. “Here ya go!” Rusty said enthusiastically. I took the gear and began putting it on. At least, I remembered how to do that. He had also dug up a helmet that was at least two sizes too big for me. In the meantime, I was frantically trying to remember everything I had learned two years before. Then Rusty said, “Let’s do a thirty second delay.”

That meant that on my fourth sport parachute jump ever, we would exit at 7,200 feet and free fall for 30 seconds and then I would, hopefully, open my parachute. I said, "Okay." Now, if you've never jumped, here's a little reader-participation exercise to give you a very small idea of what free falling for 30 seconds is like. First, imagine you are falling. You're in mid-air and the earth is far below you. Now, look at your watch for thirty seconds. You'll get some sense of long that is. The funny part? It never seems that long.

Now, here's what I was about to do that day. I was going to strap on a parachute, actually two of them, that I knew nothing about. I didn't know who packed them or how long ago they had been packed. I was going to get into a raggedy little airplane with a pilot who I knew nothing about along with two other jumpers whose qualifications or experience I knew nothing about.

Then, I was going to graduate from making three jumps at 2,500 feet with a parachute that had been automatically opened for me two years prior, to flinging myself out of that airplane that day at 7,200 feet and flailing around in free-fall for 30 seconds, hoping that when my altimeter read 2,500 feet, I could find a ripcord to pull and save my life. Did I consider any of that? Nope. Not one shred of it. Here's what I was thinking that day: *I'm just going watch them and do whatever they do.* That's it.

When the time came to exit, it was as if some magical force entered my mind and body. I mimicked every move the other guys did. I was last out, so that gave me an edge in the impersonation department. Upon exiting, they went into a spread eagle. I arched hard and did exactly as they did. I was completely stable – comfortable.

It was as if I had done it a thousand times. There was an adrenalin rush as I fell, but it felt good. I really don't remember looking at my altimeter. Doing so would have meant taking my eyes off of the other two guys. I remember the rapid rustling of the fabric of my clothes and the sound in my ears. I remember the wind getting underneath my helmet and trying to pull it off of my head. I watched as they both moved their arms inward towards their bodies to grasp their ripcords and I did the same. As they quickly pulled their arms back out, ripcords in hand, and their parachutes began to open, I copied their movements. It was if I had been born to skydive.

I found my ripcord, pulled it and my parachute opened. I then looked up into a completely foreign scene as I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to be seeing. Whereas my parachutes at Fort Bragg years before had two slots to channel the air for steering, this one had two large L's cut from the fabric. But, it was full and round and that's all I cared about. I reached up and grabbed the steering toggles. Pulling one left would turn me left – pulling one right would turn me right. In no time, I hit the ground hard but was able to stand up immediately. The others came running over to me and we all began rapid-fire chatter about our experience.

The entire act was as natural as breathing. I was elated and hooked even more than before, already planning to go again. And, that's exactly what I did weekend after weekend for the next several months. I started picking up on the smaller nuances of skydiving and got proficient at packing parachutes. My mind was at all times filled with thoughts of the next jump.

The sport would refine itself over and over in the coming years with more regulations, better equipment, and jumpers who knew that if we were to survive as a sport, we would have to become much more sophisticated and less lawless. That would take time. Today, equipment development has progressed at light speed, with parachutes becoming smaller, lighter and, in some cases, faster and more dangerous.

Whereas the older parachutes merely let you down with little directional control, today's parachutes are square airfoils which mimic an airplane's wing. They reach much higher forward speeds and are extremely maneuverable. They have to be flown much the same way as an airplane. Landing accuracy has reached a point where it takes electronic measuring equipment to measure the miniscule distances that define who lands with more accuracy.

Aircraft sizes and capacities have increased to the point where as many as 100 jumpers can exit an airplane nearly simultaneously on one pass, instead of only three or four jumpers at a time as in the past. Even jumpsuits have improved. Additionally, most jumpers wear highly refined automatic openers that will save a life in the event of a collision or a black out that might incapacitate a jumper. The rules and regulations have increased as well. The United States Parachute Association is located just two hours from where I sit now, and has become a gold standard in how a sport should be run. But that's now.

The days of seedy airplanes and ex-military bulky equipment and poorly run clubs and drop zones are over. What is not over, if I could again put my feet into the boots of a first-time skydiver, is the thrill, the excitement and the camaraderie. I don't think that will ever fade away. I was in the thick of something new, crazy and wild in those days and I was completely immersed by it.

In 1966, the Viet Nam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy and a host of other world events would rock our society and I would barely be aware of it. Neither were my fellow jumpers. We were in our own world.

We ate, slept and breathed rip-stop nylon, airplanes, high altitudes, and landing accurately. And, we had the reputation of being fierce revelers.

We were totally wrapped up in the sport and thought about little else. While the world was supposedly falling apart around us, we went on obliviously doing what we loved. I would continue that journey for more than 25 years. No matter where I jumped, there were encounters with memorable characters at every drop zone. They shaped my life, and I have never recovered.

Mike Marcon