

Pick a Favorite Year

When I look in my log books, I see that guy in the black-and-white photo, the one who just exited a Cessna 170, the one wearing a worn pair of tan leather Tahlequah Turf Creepers - moccasins sold by Para-Gear that nobody seems to remember. If the photo was in color, you would see that guy wearing a powder blue Pioneer jump suit and jumping a dirty yellow Security Crossbow with his thumb casually hooked into the clunky cast aluminum ripcord handle that would remove your teeth if it hit you in the face and with two, count 'em, two pilot chutes coming off of his back. Well, that guy is me in 1968. That was fifty-seven years ago, more than half a century in the past. I was 23.

With over 800 hours flown that year, my first year as a newly minted pilot, mostly flying jumpers at one of the few full-time parachute centers in the country at the time, my jobs also included training and jump-mastering first jump students, packing scads of parachutes, manifesting, and if there was time, emptying the trash cans and sweeping the floors. To be honest, I did little sweeping or emptying. Seven days a week - I did these things seven days a week. It was nirvana.

On the week-ends, there were jumpers from everywhere arriving in their campers and Volkswagens. There were late night parties nearly every week-end where the beer flowed and the music blared. Some of the top rock-and-roll tunes of the time were "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," "Love Child," "Born to Be Wild," "Grazing in the Grass," "Tighten Up," "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," "People Got to Be Free," & "Chain of Fools." It made no difference what your color or your sex was. A jumper was a jumper and his or her friends were your friends. A visit to anywhere that there were other jumpers would nearly assure you a spot on a couch, a cold beer, a meal and a good time. Assholes were quickly

ousted. Jumpers were a minority in the world, a special clique aware of their own uniqueness, and those who lied, stole gear or mistreated women (or dogs) were quickly shown the door. Now that I give it thought, if I ever belonged to a "tribe," the name of that tribe would have been "Skydivers." Our camaraderie and love of the sport tied us together and wove us into a fabric of commonness that wears well to this day.

Seven days a week then, I rolled out of bed, took a shower, threw on my clothes, jumped on my motorcycle, and headed to the diner for breakfast, then on to the airport. Every day was normally a surprise. You never knew who was going to be there or show up. It might be Susie Clements (Joerns) or Bob Sprague or Ron Radhoff or Bill Ottley or Lyle Cameron or Buddy Blue or Gene Paul Thacker or Gene Hunnell, the publisher of "DZ-USA," who came to report on a meet, but instead, got drunk on Saturday night, passed out and pee'd on my couch, or anyone of the early notables of the day just passing through or spending a week training. Every one of them would leave knowledge and good times in their wake.

Occasionally, down in Louisiana, the weather would sour for a few weeks. Then, we'd find ways to pass the time by maintaining airplanes, or if the wind was stout enough, tying a Para-Commander to the end of a long rope attached to a pick-up truck's bumper, and doing our own version of parasailing, or making hop-and-pops if the ceiling allowed. That's usually when I would be shamed into emptying and sweeping.

Some of the significant events of the year were the Tet offensive, Martin Luther King was assassinated, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, Nixon won the White House, students the world over protested the war in Viet Nam, the debacle called the Democratic National Convention unfolded in Chicago, North Korea captured the Navy intelligence vessel U.S.S. Pueblo and its crew and Apollo 8 orbited the moon among other things. And even

though I was aware of all of those things, they had little or no effect on my day-to-day life. They were just background noise quickly brushed off, and I must admit, ignored. I was focused on skydiving happiness. (And girls and beer.)

I was blissfully happy. Women were plentiful. I was flying and jumping nearly every day the weather was decent. My health was excellent. I was single. I owed money to no one. In fact, I was mostly broke, but I needed very little money anyway. I had no children (that I knew of) to support or to worry about. I laughed often and loud. I drank gustily. I feared nothing, literally. In fact, I felt invincible and untouchable.

Little did most of us skydivers know then that wonderful things were headed our way. Some signs of it started showing themselves in 1968 though. Jumpers slowly, quietly, began migrating towards the "big way" drop zones out in California. Bigger airplanes, bigger loads. The majority of us were content with our 3 and 4 place airplanes. The majority of us were not the "What ifs." The "What ifs" were busy sitting behind their sewing machines thinking up square canopies and lighter gear. The "What ifs" were thinking about jumping off of bridges and tall buildings. The fact is that I, for one, was so immersed in the fun and good time I was having that my imagination was entirely limited to round parachutes, women and beer.

Today, over half a century later, I find my mind polluted by events I cannot control. The pollution causes me great distress if I let it. Back then, I paid little attention to the television and the things on it. Fact of the matter is, I do not remember reading a single newspaper in 1968. No one at the airport ever, and I mean, ever, talked about the world or political events of the day. Jumpers back then arrived, put their rigs on and skydived. And laughed. And partied. They left the outside world, well...outside.

That was 1968. For me, it was simple and straightforward.
And, if I had to pick, a favorite year.