A MEMORABLE DEMO JUMP

BY

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I made my first parachute jump on August 31, 1964, the day after I was graduated from Tulane University. I spent the next nine years falling in love, to coin a phrase. I made a total of 653 jumps in those nine years, not a noteworthy count, but the best I could do in those days of fun usually winning out over wages.

During this period, I would classify myself as a truly addicted skydiver. If I went a week or more without a jump, I'd start developing a condition we jumpers described as being "jump horny." I couldn't wait to get down to the drop zone and cast my young body out of an airplane.

Some of these returns to earth were more or less routine; others were particularly exciting or eventful. One jump stands out as being among the most memorable.

One of our club members had arranged for us to make an exhibition jump into the football stadium of Chalmette high school, right down the river from New Orleans. It was a fairly small drop zone, surrounded by stadium seats and chain link fences.

To make a parachute jump over a densely populated area of a city, town, or settlement, one had to make a qualification jump that was observed by an FAA inspector, who then granted the jumper permission to perform these demonstrations of the

jumper's skill. I remember one of these qualification jumps made by a fellow named Herb Golden. He was jumping for the chief of the local FAA facility, whose name was O.K. Haley.

Mr. Haley had brought along a large handkerchief, which he placed on the ground in the middle of the field where Herb was supposed to land. That was Herb's target, his ground zero. The dimensions of his acceptable landing area depended on how close to the target he landed on this qualification jump

Herb nailed it. I was flying the plane that day, and I saw him land very close to the target, but I didn't realize that he had made a standing landing with both feet planted right on the hanky. Mr. Haley wrote him a waiver, approving him for drop zones of one square foot or larger.

In addition, jumpers had to get a waiver for the specific jump, which mentioned the day, the location, the altitude, and the limits of the area within which they were to land. If anyone missed the drop zone, the waiver was automatically cancelled, and nobody else got to jump for the rest of the event.

So it was that we were concerned with a brisk wind blowing out of the northeast that morning. When the wind gods are active, it becomes much harder to land precisely in a confined location, particularly one that was not much larger than a high school football stadium.

We packed our rigs and were driven to the nearby Naval Air Station, where the jump plane was waiting. This plane was a Cessna 206, an excellent vehicle for jumpers. It had a large cabin capable of holding 6 jumpers and the pilot, as well as a huge cargo door at the rear that could be removed, leaving a

gaping hole in the fuselage, suitable for mass exits of warm bodies. It also had a mighty 260 horsepower engine, which allowed it to climb at a goodly rate and get us to jump altitude without much delay.

But first we had to drop a wind drift indicator. This was a yellow crepe streamer that was attached to a weight usually fashioned out of a coat hanger. This device descended about the same rate as a jumper under an open parachute. The idea was that the pilot would line up downwind of the desired landing area and try to keep the plane flying on what we called the "wind line." One of the jumpers would hang his head out the door and signal heading corrections to the pilot, putting the plane directly over the drop zone. Then he'd drop the streamer and we'd circle, watching its descent until it reached the ground.

It was easy to see the bright yellow streamer from 3000 feet up. It would be sitting there in plain sight, directly downwind of the target. Next, the guy in the plane who was spotting would establish a line going from the wind drift indicator to the center of the drop zone, to determine which way the wind was blowing. Then he'd look upwind of the target and choose some prominent landmark that was an equal distance upwind of the landing area, along the same wind line. This was known as the "exit point." Supposedly, if you opened your 'chute right over the exit point a little under 3000 feet, the wind would blow you directly to the drop zone, easy as you please.

On this day the WDI landed quite a considerable distance downwind of the target. The exit point was a truly scary distance in the opposite direction. Fortunately, there was a ferry

terminal on the bank of the Mississippi river that was in the right location, and this is what we chose as our exit point.

Since this was such a tight drop zone, we made a second pass up the wind line and dropped another streamer over the ferry terminal to see if it would actually drift onto the drop zone.

A couple of loads had gotten into the field earlier that morning, and we were optimistic that with good spotting from the jump master, we could exit the airplane from 7200 feet and make a 30-second freefall jump with smoke grenades attached to our ankles to make us easier to spot from the ground. All of us were planning to exit on the same pass.

I was one of the last two jumpers in the load. In fact, as I understood it, I was to be the *last* jumper out of the airplane, following a fellow named Joe Eustis. The trouble was that Joe thought *he* was supposed to be last out, following yours truly.

So there we sat, in that large doorway to the sky. All the other jumpers were long gone, and each of us was waiting for the other to exit, while the airplane flew into the wind at around 70 knots ground speed.

I don't remember who finally went first. By that time, we both realized that there was no time to waste, as we were probably going to be considerably past the exit point. In hindsight, it would have been a simple matter to tell the pilot to turn back and make another pass; but in the heat of the moment, the only thing we could think of was to get out of the door.

The first thing I noticed, immediately upon exiting the airplane, was that I was on the opposite side of the Mississippi river from the drop zone. With the wind blowing as hard as it

was, there was no way we were going to be able to divert to a landing upwind of the river. We were committed to making it down the wind line, somehow, trying to reach dry land on the far side of the muddy Mississippi.

I immediately assumed a "max track" position, in which my body was angled head down about 30^{o} below the horizon. In this position, the air striking your body is deflected backward, driving your body forward, some people claim, as much as 60 miles per hour across the ground. I'm not sure I was going that fast, but I know I was making pretty good progress toward the stadium, thinking about where I should open. I thought my best chance was to pull high and give myself some extra time to be blown in toward the target under an open parachute.

By the time I had worked that out, I was below 5000 feet, and I pulled a little bit above 4000. The chute deployed, leaving me dangling in my harness, right over the middle of the Mississippi river.

Now comes an image of the event that I'll carry to my grave. I unhooked the chest strap, allowing the risers to separate a little bit more, hoping that the canopy might spread just a little bit and give me a tad more lift. Then I looked down and saw the river between my jump boots. If I ever learn to paint, I may do a portrait of that moment.

Never have I seen a swifter, more menacing, roiling current in any body of water than I saw at that moment. I was looking down at a collection of frothing whitecaps rushing down toward the Gulf of Mexico, my tender young body drifting at about a 30^{o} angle to that current, moving at a pretty good clip toward Chalmette High, way out on the horizon.

Well, it might have been. Somehow, I couldn't tear my gaze away from the water, and from the prospect of meeting my doom as I splashed down and was dragged by my canopy under the surface of one of the world's mightiest rivers.

No one was wearing flotation gear that day. It didn't occur to anyone that we'd end up over the river. After all, the wind was blowing everybody from the exit point, diagonally *away from* the mighty Mississippi. I raised my legs, hoping to decrease my air resistance so that I'd be carried farther. Then I changed my mind and thought that the larger the surface area I could present to the wind, the faster I'd be blown over the ground.

Well, it's nearly fifty years later, and I'm here to tell the tale; so you've already figured out that I didn't go in the drink. I do remember checking my altimeter as I passed over the ferry terminal, noting that I was just a little below 2000 feet. I thought that if I continued to run, meaning that I'd face downwind to add the forward drive of the chute to the speed of the wind, I might just make it in to the target.

It's way too late to make a long story short, but I'll cut to the chase. I just made it over the fence. My canopy remained inflated in the wind and pulled me toward the middle of the stadium, as I opened my capewells, releasing the chute from my harness. I was down. I was alive. And I hadn't blown the waiver!

That's the story of one of a real adrenaline pumper, one that fed the addiction to excitement that kept me in the sport for lo those many years. My friend Elliot Mertz has started jumping again, after about forty years away from the drop zone. He's

trying to get me back into the life. But I've had enough of that kind of stimulation for one lifetime, and I think I'll just settle back and enjoy the retrospective pleasure of remembering those adventures and passing the stories along to the likes of you.