

DON'T LOOK - JUMP!

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My first parachuting experience.

Published on
Booksie

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Strange how these things sneak up on you.

One night we were with friends, when the subject of parachuting came up. We all agreed we'd like to have a go. Floating free and all that..... But since I'm scared of heights, I didn't think I was a likely candidate. Because of this fear, it was an experience I was going to have to miss. I wished I wasn't such a coward.

Tony (husband) arrived home a few days later, beaming. "Parachuting," he tossed casually over his shoulder. "This weekend. It's all arranged."

"Lovely." I managed to quiver and quaver, hoping he was too preoccupied to notice.

He looked at me closely. "You *did* say you wanted to go."

"Yes, of course." I lied unconvincingly.

It was an all-in package to include two days' training then a couple of jumps from 2,500 feet.

We arrived at Peterborough and found Sibson airfield. There was just the two of us. It's amazing how all our friends suddenly remembered long-standing prior engagements, when the idea was put to them. I splashed out twenty-five quid on a pair of sturdy boots, an essential. I was told. I also had everyone sponsor me, a ruse to ensure that I didn't back out screaming.

The first morning found us sitting in a classroom with a Sergeant Major type who explained the correct position for leaving the aircraft and also for landing. Fear mounted in me, but I took all the tests and passed and we moved onto the next one - learning the parachute landing fall (henceforth referred to as the PLF). On the face of it, the idea is simple; keep the legs together, each one acting as a splint for the other; raise the arms above the head, jump off a box, bend legs together, flop over and land on a rubber mat. Easy.

I tried. I really did. "Legs together", bawled the S.M.

Muttering darkly that I couldn't help having bandy legs, I tried again, but my legs wouldn't touch. That was when Tony casually observed that it might be something to do with the soles of my boots. There was a quarter inch ridge around them. Consequently it was impossible to get my feet together. Thanking God my legs weren't as bandy as I'd thought, I shelled out for another pair of boots. I was going to have to do

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the jump now. No self-respecting Scotswoman would see fifty quid go to waste. As I thumped heavily onto the mat again, I tried not to notice Tony flinging his 6â€ 4â€ onto another mat, and landing with the agility of a cat.

The SM finally decided weâ€ d had enough of that, and we moved onto the position weâ€ d assume after weâ€ d flung ourselves into mid-air.

â€ Assume the position!â€ he bawled, while I privately pitied his wife. We stood, legs apart, arms raised and bent our bodies backwards until I thought my head would fall off. A few jumps out of the door of a mock-up and the SM declared himself satisfied.

â€ Thatâ€ s it?â€ I wondered, feeling no more qualified to jump than I had two days ago. We trailed off to the parachute shed to be kitted out.

â€ Youâ€ re going to be a problemâ€ , the SM said, looking despairingly at my size 8, 7 stone frame.

He was right. The crash helmet kept slipping forward and thumping me on the nose. The parachute pack weighed 56lbs, half my body weight. Sacrificing comfort for security, I had done my straps up so tightly around the groin and shoulders, that I was bent double. Tony patted me reassuringly, nearly causing me to collapse. There he was, standing upright, his pack like a little knapsack on his broad back. â€ Chin upâ€ , he said. No chance.

We were each given a number. I was number 3, Tony 4. That meant that 1 and 2 would be turfed out first, then we weâ€ d fly round and 3 and 4 would be jettisoned. This is your last chance to back out, I told myself. The SM had made it very clear that once you got on that aircraft, the only way you were coming down was under your own steam. Apparently it was very bad for morale to have someone clinging onto the fixtures and screaming that they didnâ€ t want to die. Then they would bring you back down and youâ€ d never be allowed to show your face at a parachute centre again. Tony looked at me. I had my pride. I knew if I could just get in the aircraft I would have to jump. I squared my shoulders, nearly cutting my bum off and climbed into the bright orange Pilatus Porter. Making idle chit-chat with the pilot, I asked him if he enjoyed parachuting. He snorted, â€ Not likely, Iâ€ m not crazyâ€ . How reassuring.

We sat in two rows, our knees around the pack of the person in front. The open doorway was just ahead of me to the right. I waited for the door to be closed. There wasnâ€ t one. We took off and I said goodbye to my reason.

â€ Number 1 â€ feet forward â€ go!â€ the SM barked. â€ Number 2 â€ feet forward â€ go!â€ Apparently, they went. Then came the worst bit, as the plane banked to turn into the next drop. I could see the ground looking like a kiddieâ€ s play mat. I found gravity pulling me towards the door and yelled to the guy behind me to close his knees round my pack. As if it wasnâ€ t bad enough to jump out, falling out would be terrifying, not to mention undignified. He closed his quivering knees and I held on. The â€ plane straightened.

â€ Number 3 â€ feet forward...â€

I found myself sitting sideways in the open doorway, assuming what I hoped was the correct position and pretending I was in the mock-up. â€ ...Go!â€

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One thousand

Two thousand

Three thousand

â Shit!â

You must go out counting to show that youâ re still conscious. I felt a jerk (Tony said later that I looked liked one too) I looked up at a marvellous sight â a yellow canopy billowing with air.

â Yeehaâ I whooped, and steered myself around in an excited little circle. I scarcely had time to enjoy it before I started worrying about the next bit. Remember your PLF, I told myself firmly. The ground rushed up to meet me. â Oomph! I said, or something along those lines, as the wind was knocked out of me. I was alive. I stood up and waved. Telemeters were trained on the drop zone from base, and if we didnâ t stand up and wave, it was assumed we were injured and emergency vehicles were dispatched. The temptation is to lie where you fall and light up a celebratory fag, but that has to wait.

After waving vigorously in the direction of the A1, (I found out later from the footage)I scooped up the parachute, although shovelled is more the word for it. Funny how there seemed so much more of it down here than there was up there. Somehow, like winding a hank of wool, I got it together. Before I started, I should have released the buckles on my harness to take the strain off me. By the time I remembered, it was too late; I was crouching in agony, both arms straight out in front, with a mountain of yellow silk obscuring my view. I found that by looking over my shoulder I could just see the packing shed. I set off like a sort of Minister of Silly Walks - sideways. (I found out later that several people had been called to the telemeter to watch my painful progress and film it for posterity). Glad I provided the entertainment. Several excruciating minutes later, I dumped my burden on the packing table in front of the Sergeant Major. Iâ d like to lie and say I did it with a flourish, but it was more with a sound like air exploding out of a tyre.

He glanced at me. I waited for his congratulations on a jump well-executed. â Your face is all red.â He said. He undid my straps and I crumpled out of the harness onto the floor. A cheery face loomed over me. â Now youâ re going to learn how to pack a parachute.â

Mutinuous thoughts seethed. I had just been through the most traumatic experience of my life, sweating and exhausted, and this man was telling me I had to pack a parachute. And what about the poor sod who was unfortunate enough to get the parachute Iâ d packed in my condition? This wasnâ t the bloody army. I hadnâ t joined up. I had paid good money. I was going to say â NO!â

â Come on, kid, donâ t give up now.â The SM said, offering me a huge hand. I grasped it and tried to smile but only manage to simper pathetically. I hobbled to the table and I learned how to pack a parachute. Itâ s amazing that there is no temptation to cut corners when youâ re packing a parachute. At the back of your mind a little voice whispers, â Do it right. It might be yours next time.â So I did it. All by myself.

I finally caught up with Tony, and also found myself, (to my surprise) enthusiastically discussing the next jump. And that evening, instructors, first-jumpers and the Red Devils all got happily sloshed together. Letâ s face it - I was hooked. And the second jump was wonderful, and the third and...

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