

Leap Frog

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By : **Robert Fontaine**

A first-time skydiving adventure.

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As I was relating a different tale to a friend once, he told me, "Robert, you don't have to start all of your stores with 'So, we were out drinking one night'." That part is already assumed. Not quite sure what he meant. So, anyway, we were out drinking one night in the fall of 1985. After way too many beers the conversation turned, as it usually does with guys, to jumping out of airplanes.

"You know what we should do? We should all just do it. We should all just go skydiving. Fuck it." Someone eventually slurred from the corner of the table. Everyone in the group all looked at each other and, at the time, no one could find any flaw in the concept. It all sounded like a very reasonable, rational, and relatively exciting thing to do at the time. Being the adventurous type, I was all for it and told everyone I was going to hold them to it when they all sobered up in the morning. In unison, they all poo-pooed me and vowed to be there. I just had to let them know when and where.

Hell bent on following through with the idea, the next day I found a phone book and called the closest local flight center that offered skydiving classes. The voice on the other end of the phone explained that even though the weather was cool and turning colder they were still instructing and taking people up on the weekends; at least for the immediate future. Present with me during the call and the previous night's festivities, was a tall mustachioed electronics technician named Ed Jenkins, who went by the name "Red." Red happened to have a car and offered to drive and check the place out. We drove about 45 minutes out of town where we found the single story, concrete structure sitting between a grass runway on one side of the highway and a Holiday Inn on the other. The flight center also served as a glider launch and landing port, evidenced by the giant tube-like trailers that ran for about a hundred yards along the fence line. At the time I thought it odd that the airfield catered to both skydivers and gliders since neither the glider, nor the parachutist, had much of an option to deviate from their final approaches to the ground without some unpleasant result. I didn't inquire during our visit and they didn't offer any explanation. I assumed it was just accepted and shrugged it off.

Red and I entered the gray steel door of the building and into the main lobby. Dark wood paneling covered the walls while twenty year old leather office chairs and couches dotted the square room. Decades of cigar and cigarette smoke hung cloudlessly in the stuffy air and had tainted all of the previously white surfaces a dark yellow. A handmade counter of plywood and glass sat in the rear center of the room. Behind it was a smiling, physically fit, curly haired man who introduced himself as Scott. We mentioned that we were interested in jumping and he assured us that we had come to the right place.

He pulled out a few flyers and brochures as he explained the process. We would spend the morning in class to learn how to drop from a plane while not getting tangled up in all of the strings and fabric designed to keep you from nose diving into the dirt. He didn't say it exactly that way but the intent was the same. We could also get a package deal. The training and first jump was \$90 and we could get two more for \$15 each. The concept of three jumps and school for \$120 seemed too good to pass up. We talked for about twenty minutes and asked the most common battery of questions, such as the potential for plummeting like a dart in the case of, well, whatever. He assured us we would learn all of the safety procedures in class and that this particular center had logged thousands of successful jumps. He gave no mention of the unsuccessful ones and handed us a few flyers and brochures to pass around back at the ship. We assured him we would be back the following weekend with a crew ready to take flight.

During following week Red and I began discussing the adventure with others on the ship, including the ones from the evening when the seed was planted. Eventually a poster was designed from the cut up brochures the flight center gave us and hung outside the chow hall to promote the idea amongst the rest of the crew. The

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ship was abuzz and we had many people call and said they were interested. Meanwhile, while the original gang began to mysteriously, and unfortunately, have other plans. The next Saturday it was put up or shut up time, we had five volunteers out of a crew of about 500. Red and I were the only ones sitting in the car ready to go from the previous party weekend.

The air was crisp when we arrived at the airfield. We all craned our necks upward into the blueness of space and scanned the sky to determine if the right conditions existed to execute the operation as we exited the vehicles. While none of us was qualified to know what we were looking for, it seemed the appropriate thing to do at the time. We worked our way into the lobby and found Scott behind the makeshift counter as he had been the previous weekend. He informed us that we would be the only ones training that day and he would personally assume the role as instructor. Anyone wanting to forgo the training was welcome to pay up and head directly to the aircraft. We all opted for the training. Over the next two hours we learned skills such as how to tilt your head while reaching for the rip cord, what to do when your lines get tangled above you as the chute opens and many other valuable doâ s and not to doâ s. By the way, the reason you tilt your head toward your shoulder to see your chest is because you lose your aerodynamic property if you look straight down and will end up ass over heels in midair. The one question I had that went unanswered was in regard to the statistical possibility that things would just go terribly wrong and a person would not be able to recover. Scott just shrugged his shoulders and said â not much.â Maybe he knew, maybe he didnâ t. It seems to me that someone would want to keep track of that type of thing, but I doubt that it was any of the people operating that facility, as they were all focused on the positive aspects of flight and making it as safe as possible.

It was about noon when we left the dark paneling of the classroom behind and exited into the bright Washington sunshine. In the time since we had arrived, a thin layer of clouds had moved into the area and bright patches of white dotted the sky above. As we climbed into our jump suits, Scott and the pilot studied the sky intently, just as we had when we exited the car. The difference being that they knew what they were looking for. The term jump suit actually referred to the indiscriminately colored coveralls pulled from a huge rolling laundry basket along the edge of the building. I found a smart blue-grey one that fit snugly over my leather jacket and then grabbed a white motorcycle helmet from the shelf against the wall. In the end we all looked more like a group of â specialâ kids let out for the day on a field trip to an auto mechanics shop than the elite Navy Sealsâ Skydiving Team â The Leap Frogsâ . No, I didnâ t make that up; thatâ s really what they call them; The Leap Frogs.

The pilot classified the cloud cover as industrial haze and gave us the â all clearâ for takeoff. The frosty grass crinkled beneath our feet as we trudged across the field to the plane. Scott stopped half way to our destination at a large gravel circle measuring about twenty five feet across. He reached down, unfurled a giant orange tarp in the shape of a long triangle, and connected the tip of the triangle to a post in the center of the circle. He explained that from the air it looked like an arrow and someone would be on the ground pointing the arrow in the direction we should face in order to be able to land in the circle.

With nods of understanding we continued across the grass to a small white single engine Cessna. Three fixed wheels protruded from the bottom of the cab and the wings extended outward from the top. Stabilizer struts extended up and out from the underneath the cab on each side and connected at about the midpoint under each wing. A small bar, or handle, had been mounted to the top of the strut on the passenger side. Scott opened the cab door from the bottom and flung it out and upward as it connected to a latch on the underside of the wing while the pilot ran through the preflight checks. He proceeded to tell us what we were to expect once we were in the air. Once the door was opened in flight and latched to the wing, we were to move one at a time to the edge of the opening and sit on the floor with our legs dangling outside the aircraft. He would then connect the static line, which is a long thin web strap with a metal clip, to the back of the parachute. The strap and clip would pull the rip cord once the person was far enough away from the plane. He explained that it could not be connected until we were in that seated position because if something were to happen and the chute

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opened while the door was open the wind would grab it and suck the person and whatever else out of the plane. I still wonder whom the first person was to discover that important tidbit of information the first time around. That person would then have had to communicate that safety morsel to the next round of test subjects. "Oh, by the way, don't connect the static line until because!" Anyhoo, we were also told that there was no law against it and we were free to not use the static line and pull our own cord if we desired but he highly advised against it. Earlier, he had also mentioned that we could pack our own parachutes if we wanted. No takers for either option.

Once the static line was connected, we were to grab the bar attached to the strut with our left hand, step on the foot peg below the cab, reach out and grab the opposite end of the bar with our right hand, step off the peg, and hang from the strut. From there, all that was left was to let go on his command. We were also told that if we did not let go after the second command he was going to stomp on our fingers. There was no way they were going to land the plane with someone hanging from the strut; if a person could even hang on that long.

With that final lesson we split into two groups. Red and two others were in the first group, leaving me and another shipmate to watch in anticipation until round two. They all climbed aboard and we watched as the small plane blazed down the grass runway and soared into the sky. Well, "blazed and soared" may be a little strong for a single engine Cessna. I would venture to say more like "sputtered and whined" may be a more appropriate choice of words.

The plane circled and eventually we observed a dark speck fall from the plane, followed moments later by the expanding bright orange sail unfurling below the banking plane. A few minutes later Red touched down in the gravel circle, guided by the man controlling the large arrow. He screamed once followed by the heartiest laugh possible as he pulled in the mass of rope and fabric. We all congratulated him upon arrival back at the group that had gathered on the ground craning our necks upward to watch the spectacle. He was still giddy with excitement as he stood with in watching the other two make their descent and peg the landing with the same exuberant results.

By the time all jumpers were safely on ground and the plane had landed, an hour or so had passed and the clouds had gathered more bulk. The pilot opted to postpone all further jumping for the day and my anticipation would have to be curbed until the next day. The second and third attempts for the others would have to be delayed as well. I knew I would have to be satisfied with the stories that Red and his counterparts would tell over and over again at the bar in just a few short hours.

We all met again Sunday morning, with the exception of my counterpart whom did not show up and missed the ride. He may have sensed something was amiss, couldn't hang in after the drinks Saturday night, or for whatever reason was otherwise engaged. We will never know because I had not seen him on the ship from that day on. Sunday promised to be much shorter since we had all taken the class and most of us had successfully made their first drop. The sky was also crystal clear yet still rather cold. My primary mission once we arrived was to ensure that Scott knew that I had not jumped the previous day and needed someone on the big orange arrow to guide me in. He assured me it would be taken care of and wandered back into the office. We found our flight suits where we had left them and were soon back in position as if returning from a football time out.

We walked once again across the field to the plane and were Scott proceeded with an abbreviated lesson similar to the one on Saturday. Since there were only four of us Scott decided we could all fit and directed us to file into the plane. I was first which meant I would be the last one out and would have more time to think about what I had gotten myself into; as if I hadn't had enough time already. I gave Scott one last reminder that this was my first flight and I was counting on someone on the ground to assist me. "Just get in the plane, it's taken care of," he assured me. The first thing I noticed upon entering was that, with the exception of the pilot, there were no seats. The instructor had a stool bolted to the floor so he could sit

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backward facing into the cabin and control the jumpers. All four of us were able to pack in and were assured that we would be fine as the plane would soon be much less crowded.

The cabin doors were closed as the pilot rolled the flying sardine can to the end of the field, turned and took off, nose high into the blue. We leveled off at four thousand feet and began to circle around the airport while the pilot and instructor gauged the winds within the drop zone. Sooner than I expected the passenger door flew open and locked in place at the bottom of the wing. The rush of wind and sound of the engine were both much greater than I had expected. I am not sure why I should have been surprised. I guess I had never opened a car door at eighty miles per hour or sat six feet from a fully revved airplane engine in open space at the same time.

The lead person moved into position, sitting on the floor, feet outside while the instructor connected his static line. One moment later he was out of my view and hanging on the strut. Scott screamed "Go!" and the plane tilted a little to the left as the man released his grip. That was immediately followed by the extremely loud sound of metal slapping against the outside skin of the plane directly across from me. I soon understood that it was the metal clip of the static line that had successfully pulled the rip cord and was being pinned to the side by the wind. The line was pulled in and Scott called for the next person. The scene repeated itself two more times until I was the only one left in the rear of the plane.

Scott finally called for me and I moved into position. There were a few things my friends had failed to warn me about. First, when you stuck your feet outside the aircraft the wind wanted to carry them, and you, away with it. I struggled momentarily as positioned my left foot on the peg below as the static line clip was fastened to my back. "Now grab with your left hand, stand on the peg, reach out and grab the bar farther out with your right, step off, and look at me so I can take your picture." He voiced loudly over the rush of wind and engine noise.

An immediate blast of cold wind took my breath away for a moment as I grabbed the bar and prayed I didn't slip. I hung from the strut, looked up, and forced a smile as he snapped a picture and screamed "Go!" Having maintained my death grip thus far on the bar, I had no choice at that point but to let go and splay my arms and legs out in the shape of a giant "X" as I had been instructed. I fell flat and straight in what could only be called picture perfect form. Moments later I looked up and watched the bundle of orange fabric display itself above my head. As I watched I noticed one slight problem had developed. The lines had become tangled in one another and the chute appeared to be about one eighth of the normal size. I reached up and grabbed the handles of the steering lines as we had been instructed in class and began pulling them up and down vigorously to reposition the lengths of cord extending up to the canopy. The few seconds it took for the lines to unwind and straighten out seemed an eternity but things soon began to take shape nicely.

Crisis averted, I was able to finally see the expanse before me to the distant horizon and absorb the silence and tranquility of floating slowly back to earth. An odd item of note was that I had expected a bit of strain in the crotch area as the harness fought against the forces of gravity and drag, with my body stuck in the middle. The whole kit was extremely comfortable and unrestrictive which was good. Wonderment over, I had to get back to the task of identifying the landing zone and find the arrow that would guide me in. Moments later I was pointing in the right direction to compensate for the wind and was once again able to enjoy the spectacular view as the details of the terrain slowly came into focus beneath me. I began to get a bit concerned as I drifted over the highway and above the Holiday Inn parking lot. I was rather curious why the arrow remained pointed in the same direction. From the ground I had seen the person move it around the circumference of the circle, changing direction every few seconds. It was only when I got closer did I notice that there were about half a dozen people standing around the arrow looking up but none of them had the arrow in their hands.

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I decided on my own to make a hard turn to the left at what I am guessing would be about five hundred feet. I could tell from the forward momentum and distance that I had to travel that I might have a spot of trouble landing on the airfield, much less in the gravel circle. I crossed back over the highway only to notice multiple rows of power lines running parallel to the highway along the fence line. I don't know how close I actually got to striking them but I know I did lift my legs. Power lines cleared, I then found myself swooping head long into the top of a long gray glider trailer. I managed to arch my back as I yanked down on both steering cables to slow down. My feet slid out from under me as I slid on the slick grass, safe and sound on my ass and elbows. All of this occurred in front of the latest class of freshman skydivers standing across the way at the edge of the circle.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” their instructor shouted as he ran in my direction.

“What the hell am I doing? What the hell are you doing? This is my first jump and I believe *you* were supposed to be manning the arrow!” I shot back.

“Wait, this is really your first jump?”

“Yes!” I shouted.

He turned to the class and said proudly, “Look at this, first jump, no arrow, and lands safely on the airfield. I told you this was easy.” And walked off as I gathered my chute and headed for the office, a bit miffed but exhilarated. I met the others, who were still red faced from laughing so hard at my antics. I laughed as I explained the predicament and the course of action I had taken to avert complete disaster.

“Ready to go again?” someone asked.

“Hell, yeah!” We all shouted enthusiastically.

Moments later we were all back aboard the aircraft and shuttled into the drop zone. That time I was prepared for the slapping of the static line buckle, the wind against my legs and face, and the confidence that I knew how to untangle my chute if the lines got crossed as it opened. Scott had also assured me that there would be someone on the ground guiding me in safely. I was skeptical. All went as planned during the second release with one small exception. When I let go of the bar I looked down at my chest to see where my rip cord handle was instead of tilting my head to the side. The static line had pulled the cord for me but I needed to learn to pull it myself and maintain control of my body in flight. I had not had to deal with that during the first jump because all I needed to do for that one was to maintain the shape of a flying “X”. The second jump I actually had to perform a task before nestling in for the serene ride to the ground.

The slight head movement produced exactly the same effect Scott had explained in class. I remember seeing the ground in front of me as I looked at my chest, followed a moment later by sky and a view of the departing plane. Then the ground came into view again and once again I saw sky and a slightly smaller view of the plane as it continued to head off. I tumbled one more time before the parachute grabbed the wind and pulled on my shoulder harness, pointing my feet toward the ground as they should have been from the beginning.

I found the airfield and rather reluctantly pointed myself in the direction of the arrow. It changed direction as I descended which assured me that there was actually someone on the ground paying attention. I followed the arrow's instructions and was guided to a safe landing in the center of the circle to great much cheers and smiles as I headed back to the building.

Having completed all three of their jumps, my friends waited patiently on the ground as I ascended for my third, and final, drop. For that last one I opted not to have the arrow. After all, I didn't kill myself the

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first time and the second time I had hit the target spot on so, by then, I was an old pro. I prepared for the drill, stepped out of the air craft and promptly let go when given the signal. Third timeâs the charm as they say, as I maintained stability, tilted my head, and pulled the dummy rip cord from my vest. The chute opened flawlessly. I made my own decisions regarding when to turn and even did a few banking moves just to show off a bit. I landed smoothly in the center of the circle to much fanfare.

We thanked Scott for the experience of a life time as we stowed all of our gear and drove away, having checked that one off the list (probably more like quitting while weâre ahead). I am not sure where we went after that but I can only assume it involved drinking and the development of plans for our next adventure.

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