

#3 Jump School – Part Two - Fort Benning, Georgia

Writer's Notes - Not clear where stories split [Jump School – Part One]???

The instructors took great care to ensure each man understood the procedure of exiting the plane safely. Such great care, in fact, that they joined the students in the aircraft during the last week of training, no longer as instructors, but as fellow paratroopers. They would rely on the same men who were now their students to perform correctly for the safety of the group.

The bond between instructors and students became stronger with every passing hour as the men honed their skills under the watchful eyes of the teachers. The men did not resent being made to repeat procedures over and over again. The instructors never had to repeat a request or suffer resentful looks or remarks. By the beginning of the second week, all the men who were going to quit because of attitude problems were gone. What was left was a group of gung ho soldiers determined to become the best there were at what they did.

The first week had been a bear physically for Lou. Being young and in relatively good shape to begin with were the only things that saved him from a recycle. Starting with a four mile run before breakfast that first day was only the beginning of the intensive physical training. Everything was done at a fast pace, from double timing everywhere to jumping up after an exercise and hustling to the back of the line to repeat the process again and again. There was just enough spare time for resting and eating sufficiently to keep the pace going. It was not the life for a contemplative person. It was a physically demanding man's world, where strength, endurance, discipline, and courage were a requirement of the job. They did not baby anyone. Either do the job or leave. Either keep up or leave. Quit if you must, but get the hell out of our way.

In that second week, the physical training became easier, not because the instructors slacked off, but because the level of training remained the same while the conditioning of the men had improved. It was necessary for everyone volunteering for Airborne to pass physical fitness tests before they were ever issued orders for training. Seven days of intense exercise could not whip a man into top physical conditioning if he wasn't already in terrific shape to

begin with. Lou was proud of his accomplishment, but he did not try to fool himself into thinking there wasn't a lot of room for improvement. Many of his peers had breezed through the physical part of the training with ease compared to Lou. Very few of the men were used to running six miles before breakfast, which they did every other day now. Then after breakfast, for twice around the Airborne track they were given credit for running two Airborne miles, the trip down the hill and back up to the company area being too small a distance to count for anything. It was this attitude that Lou enjoyed. Lou did not question the general's statement that this was what they could expect physically throughout their stay in the Airborne.

This lifestyle was fine with Louis. He was tired of school when he joined the Army. Tired of being around men who spoke well but did nothing. Tired of reading about what other men had done with their lives. There was a physical side to Lou's being that college could not satisfy. It would do no good trying to deny that side of his nature, and sports did not seem to be the answer. Lou was tired of braggarts and intellectuals. His definition of right and wrong demanded that he join in his country's conflict and stand beside such men as himself.

At one point, Lou had begun to regret joining the Army rather than enlisting in the Marines. He had been surely tempted to join them because of their reputation as a fighting force. It was their reputation for brutalizing their own men during training that made Lou hesitate. To Lou, this method of turning boys into men seemed particularly stupid. They forced men who were not qualified mentally to become something they were not. Being an all volunteer group ensured them a large number of willing men whom Lou was sure made good soldiers. They were highly motivated and disciplined, and for this they were recognized as one of the finest fighting forces in the world.

Yet Lou had heard and read stories about hazing and physical abuse during training. This did not appeal to Lou, and if anything he thought it stupid. He simply could not get the reasoning behind such behavior. It was like fraternities that humiliated new members. If a man allowed himself to be humiliated in order to join a group, he was by Lou's definition a wimp. Such organizations were filled with boys with no sense of pride looking for other boys with no sense of pride to join them. They couldn't recruit real men, because any real man would have

too much pride to allow someone to humiliate him and get away with it. A real man would tell them to piss off.

And Lou could not picture joining an organization that would allow the brutalization of its men as a means of discipline. If some drill Instructor ever hit Lou, he would have needed a good insurance policy because Lou would have hunted him down if it took him years. It was a side Lou was not proud of, but it was real. He hated injustice more than anything and was willing to pay whatever price to correct having been wronged. Lou did not understand how the Marines got away with such behavior. How come the recruits who were abused didn't just take a weapon and kill their abusers? Were they too scared or intimidated? Lou did not understand the psychology that went into making men accept such behavior; he just knew he didn't want to find out. They were unlike him in some way he did not understand, and so Lou had opted for the Airborne.

The Airborne was proving to be his type of organization. Take the best soldiers available and make a volunteer organization they can join if they choose to do so. Train them hard and have them perform a task that requires skill and courage just to prove they belong. If they do not prove worthy, kick them out. Discipline would come from within the man, not from the organization. No one had to intimidate a man to get him to do the job. Hell, if a man could be intimidated, get rid of him now, before he got into a situation he could not handle. Let the quitters quit. Don't encourage a man to go on if he doesn't want to. What if he quits when you really need him?

The men with whom Lou was serving were not the type that could be physically or psychologically intimidated. Lou had a sneaking suspicion that these men would not back down from anything or anyone. Someone attempting to harass them would know there were lines that could not be crossed. At some point in time, a senior NCO or officer might choose to chew one of them out verbally, but they would know better than to ever physically touch the man. These men were disciplined enough and had enough pride that they could take a lot of chewing on without flinching, but they were not the type of men to be humiliated or assaulted.

You could see the real change in the men during that second week. Each of them had found a home, a mission, that suited their talents and sensibilities. Until now, something had

been missing in their careers and lives. They had not been sure whether the Airborne was that something, but now they were. The runs had gotten longer, and the chants had gotten louder. Attitude, Attitude, Attitude. This is what made the Airborne special. All these men had attitudes. They were the leaders, the adventurers, the crusaders. The Airborne was their way of proclaiming to the world who they were and what they stood for. In any group of men, they would stand apart from the rest, but in the Airborne they could belong.

One thing Lou had noticed during the training was the social behavior of the group. As a whole, it was not very friendly at the beginning. These men were individuals who had a strong sense of self and did not require others for comfort. Friendships formed slowly as each man watched and judged the men around him. Now the group was loosening up and the men accepting each other as equals. Since nobody wore name tags, it became normal to get to know a man by his first name.

After six months of being addressed as Private Merrins, or Merrins, or Private, it felt strange to be addressed by his first name by everyone but the instructors. To them, he was good old B68. No one bothered mentioning their rank, but like most of the men he could not help but think that Bill was either a senior NCO or officer. He was a lot older than anyone else in the company, and he admitted that he was over thirty but quite a way short of forty. Bill stuck out because of his age, but he kept up with the others and performed his drills without hesitation or any show of favoritism. Like Lou, he was one of the three who had difficulty learning to fall properly. Of course this meant they had formed a special kinship for each other, each keeping a close watch on the progress of the other.

Monday of the second week, the company moved over to the big towers. There were three thirty foot towers that stood in a row. Atop each tower was an enclosed platform with a door on one side. The door was shaped to resemble that of an aircraft. From the top of the door a wire was strung to a raised landing area about fifty yards away. The landing area was a mound of dirt that rose about ten feet above the surrounding meadow.

All the men in the company knew what the towers were used for, having observed the antics of the class a week ahead of them in training. When they had practiced exiting an aircraft during the previous week, the mockup was at ground level, and the jump out terminated in the

sand located about a foot below the door. The tower was designed to get the students used to the feel of the harness when the chute deployed. The company's four platoons were divided up, three to each tower. The fourth platoon was led off to the landing hill where they were broken into teams to handle the three landing areas.

The men in Lou's platoon were led over to the first tower. At the base were big bins which contained jump harnesses. The men were each issued a jump harness with instructions that at the end of each training session they were responsible for returning the harness to its proper position in the bin. They each had a number attached that corresponded to a number painted on a peg in the locker.

The men all climbed into their harnesses under the watchful eye of the instructors. Every buckle and clip was checked carefully, with the student being jerked left, right, up and down as the instructors tugged and pulled on each harness, adjusting straps and ensuring that nothing would pull apart at the wrong moment. Standing there in the shadow of the tower, Lou felt a little apprehensive about the height. The previous week, the highest Lou had been off the ground was about three feet. No sweat, Lou thought. The platoon was formed up, and the instructors began leading the men up the stairs to the platform. The steps wound their way upward, inside the massive legs of the tower. There were banisters on either side of the steps, although most of the men did not use them.

Ten feet up from the ground, Lou looked down. He was beginning to get nervous, his right hand reaching out and grabbing the banister. The group kept climbing at a slow but steady pace. With each step, Lou's legs lost strength, his breathing becoming more and more ragged. He tried focusing on the butt of the man ahead of him, but invariably his eyes wandered outward and down to ruminate on the ground below, far, far, below. Inside, the stomach began to protest the altitude, churning the morning's breakfast and nauseating Lou. The group stopped moving, leaving Lou stranded twenty feet above the ground.

Lou stood there trying to decide if he could go on. The wind blew gently through the legs of the tower. The sky was clear, and the morning air crisp and cool. Lou swallowed hard as he stood there with his eyes closed, trying to slow the rapid beating of his heart and quell the fear in his mind. *I am safe. I am safe. There is nothing to fear. Nothing is going to happen.* He

looked around at the other men in the group. Most of them were relaxed or maybe a little excited. Lou did not see anyone who appeared to be in the same condition he was in. His old fear of heights was threatening to take control of him, and Lou was fighting his own psyche.

Looking across the way, Lou could see the men in the next tower standing and waiting their turns to climb to the platform. He heard a shout of "Airborne!" and from the tower he was staring at a man bobbing up and down on the wire leading down to the landing area. The trip from the tower to the landing area below was swift. The wire was rigged so that upon leaving the tower the student dropped quickly down and out toward the landing area. There was enough slack in the guide wire that when the student was ninety percent of the way to the landing area, the arc of his ride put him below the level of the landing area. His forward momentum then carried him up and over the landing zone while his body was actually decelerating. The student was instructed to bend his legs upward to keep from hitting the landing area too hard with his feet. His arrival was greeted by other students whose job it was to ensure his safe arrival by slowing and then stopping his body completely. The student was quickly released from the guide wire, then took off at a double time to rejoin his platoon at the jump tower. The catches that attached the student's harness to the guide wire were quickly being reeled back up to the tower for the next student.

The whole process excited Lou, and it had a calming affect on him. I can do that, he thought. Now more shouts of "Airborne" rang out as one man exited Lou's tower and another exited the other tower. Lou's line made a small move forward and upward. He knew that he had his fear under control now. It was something he had faced many times in the past and each time had been capable of overcoming. The fear would always be there, that was not something Lou had any control over. He was still nervous as he got closer and closer to the top of the tower, but now there was no hesitation in his step or doubt in his mind. The momentary panic he had felt was under control, and the shot of adrenaline in his system was now directed to the job ahead.

Once on the platform, Lou tucked his fear of height into hibernation as he observed the men in front of him hooking up to the guide wire. Each harness had two risers attached at the shoulders, and each riser had a closed ring attached to it. When a student took up a position in

the tower about three feet away from the door, the instructors, who stood on little platforms on either side of the student, quickly attached the risers to a bar that was attached to the guide wire. The bar positioned the harness risers on either side of the students head, just as they would be during an actual jump. As soon as the student was safely hooked up, the instructor would shout "Stand in the Door!" The student would shuffle forward and position himself the same way he would in the door of the aircraft. For this first jump, the instructor was letting (or making, depending on your point of view) the student stay in position for about five seconds, before issuing the command "Go!" The student would spring up and out, immediately assuming the proper position while shouting out "One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, etc." on the way to the landing area.

Lou got to watch four of his classmates exit the tower before it was his turn. Standing there watching, one would likely get the impression that it was fun, and that everyone was enjoying the exercise. When it came to his turn, Lou stepped quickly into position. It took about a minute from the time a man exited the tower for the bar to return. As Lou stood there waiting, he once again began to get both nervous and excited. He could see out the door at the landing area below, but being safely back from the edge of the tower, he felt safe. The bar arrived, and Lou was hooked up quickly. "Stand in the Door!" the instructor shouted. *Go to hell*, Lou's mind screamed, and he shuffled quickly into position.

Five seconds is a very long time. Lou had assumed the correct position quickly and now held it in anticipation of the next command. It took forever for that command to arrive. Lou thought he might just pass out from fright. Thirty feet is not very high if you have no fear of heights. To Lou it might as well have been thirty miles to the ground below. He took a deep breath and held it. His mind went blank as his muscles fought to maintain him upright. His grip on either side of the doorway was the only thing keeping him from falling on his butt as his mind tried to force his legs backwards, away from the edge.

"Go!" Lou shot his body out of the door with all the force of a cannonball. He snapped his body into position waiting for it to hit the ground below. The harness jerked tightly around his legs as it and the guide wire worked together to stop his fall. He tucked his head into his chest and closed his eyes tightly as his body began to bounce its way down to the landing area.

His relief as the guys in the landing area stopped his momentum and released his harness from the bar was immense.

Once a student completed a tower jump, he reported immediately to an instructor who stood off to the side with a clipboard and grading the student's effort.

"You owe me twenty push-ups for not shouting "Airborne" when you exited the tower, and another twenty for not counting off time. You exited the tower well and got into a good position immediately, and for that reason you passed for that jump. Now get down and do your push-ups and then do it again B68."

"One Airborne, two Airborne, three Airborne ..." Lou sang out as he sounded off his penance. A good first jump under the circumstances was more than he had hoped for, and he was now sure he could complete the rest of his practice exits. It would not be easy, but some things never are. Once he was done with the forty push-ups, he got up and double timed it back to the tower. He noticed a harness hanging in the bin on its peg with a helmet carefully placed underneath it, the number B16 facing outward. Looking around he spotted a figure walking away from the towers, the soldier's helmet missing from his head.

Lou double timed it up the stairs and took his place at the back of the line. "Who quit?" Lou asked the men in front of him.

"Larry something. Said he couldn't do it again. Must be scared of heights," one of the men said.

Lots of luck, Larry, Lou thought. The man had guts, first to volunteer for the Airborne, then to have the courage to quit. It was something to think about, something to take his mind off the tower and the ground below. What separated men like Louis from men like Larry? Was it easier to quit or easier to go on? Who was the wiser of the two? Would Lou have the courage to quit, if that were the correct course of action for him?

It would have been nice to have an opportunity to talk with Larry and find out how he arrived at the decision to walk away. It could not have been easy, but what would be the consequences for him in the future? How would it affect his self-esteem? Would he question his courage or just accept the fact that there are things all men might fear enough to cause

them to turn and run away? These things occupied his mind all the way until he again stood on the tower, waiting to be hooked up.

"You get a pass on that first jump, B68?" the instructor at the door asked Lou.

"Airborne, Sergeant," Lou sounded off.

"Okay, then for this jump we will give you a "go" as soon as you get set. Shuffle to the door quickly and get set right away 'cause I ain't going to give you a lot of time to look around this time."

"Airborne, Sergeant, and thanks," Lou said sincerely.

"And B68, try and sound off like you got a pair this time."

"Airborne, Sergeant," Lou replied.

Once Lou was hooked up, the sequence of commands to get him off the tower happened quickly. "Stand in the Door." Lou shuffled forward quickly. The instant his hands hit the door he felt the hard tap on his shoulder and the shouted command "Go!"

Lou exploded from the tower with a shout of "Airborne" and instantly began his count after assuming the correct position. It happened so quickly that he was safely on the ground before he even had a chance to get nervous about exiting the tower.

"Very good, B68," the ground instructor said. "Good exit, good position, and this time you sounded off like a man. I give you a second pass for that jump. Drop and give me twenty for that first jump again, and we'll call it even."

Lou smiled as he dropped to the ground and began his litany of "One Airborne, two Airborne..." Only one more good exit and he would be done with the big towers.

Lou had to wait until after lunch before he was given an opportunity to complete his third try. He was one of only three in his platoon who completed three jumps successfully on the first three tries... Perhaps the others were not scared enough to be motivated to get it right so quickly. Some of the men were beginning to develop a phobia about the tower. The most common complaint regarded the discomfort caused by the straps on the inner thighs after the jump out of the tower. Lou could not really remember any discomfort, meaning either his straps were properly tightened or he was too distracted by other things to even notice that particular problem.

Upon completion of Lou's third jump, the ground instructor congratulated him, told him to do twenty push-ups as a means of celebrating his success, and then to relieve one of the guys in the landing party. That individual now had the right to begin his tower jumps.

Being in the landing party was actually a lot of fun, especially for the men who were done with the tower. You had a fine view of the tower door and the men exiting it. All the men staring up could study their facial expressions and observe their technique as they exited the tower. Those having completed the tower could now make expert critical analysis of each jump, predicting to the others the chances of the man getting a pass for each effort. Lou could feel the nervousness of the men who had not yet begun their tower training.

Tower training lasted two days. It took that long for everyone to get three acceptable exits, and even then the last ones to complete the training were not quite perfect, but close enough for survival. A total of four men quit during the tower training, which sort of surprised Lou.

The run Wednesday morning was six miles, but none of the men in the company minded in the least. It was difficult to worry about running, when everyone knew the company was moving over to the jump towers to begin training right after breakfast. The day had broken beautifully, the early morning temperature around freezing. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and there was a gentle breeze coming from the north. It was the first day Lou really paid any attention to the wind, because until then, it had not been a factor to be considered in his training. This would be the first day that the wind was a critical factor.

Comments like "light wind," "good day for jumping," "weather front moving in from the west," and "no rain forecasted through Friday" could be heard from every table in the mess hall. Suddenly weather was the most discussed subject among the men. This struck Lou as funny. Most of the men were infantrymen, like Lou. One thing he had learned during the course of his training was to completely ignore weather forecasts. The weather occurred as it may but did not influence or delay training. If it rained, they got wet. If it was hot, they trained anyway. And if it was cold, they froze. During training, the drill instructors dictated what clothing and equipment the men would need for the day's work, and come hell or high water, each day's training kept to the schedule.

It was the wind that held every man's attention. If the wind was too high, training would be cancelled. Jumping with a wind over fifteen miles per hour was not allowed. It was considered too dangerous for training purposes, and it was the one thing guaranteed to stop any jump schedule. A day with no wind was acceptable but presented its own problems, as everyone was taught how to land while falling sideways with the flow of the wind. It was difficult to fall correctly if there was no wind present since the direction of the fall was directly down into the ground. In such circumstances, the men were instructed to follow the same procedure and hope for the best. Windless days were looked upon with some dread by the instructors, and this had been passed along to the men.

When the company formed up after breakfast, Lou could see the men around him trying to judge the wind. Staring at the flagpole, wetting a finger and holding it up, sniffing with a nose in the air, etcetera. Totally weird, Lou decided, taking off his helmet so he could feel the wind blow through his hair.

"You got a problem, B68?" one of the platoon's instructors called out.

"No, Sergeant," Lou replied, quickly settling the helmet back on his head.

"Drop and give me twenty," the instructor shouted.

"One Airborne, Two Airborne..."

The company moved to the far end of the meadow where the jump towers were located and spread out for an hour of PT under the shadows of the imposing structures. Each tower was one hundred fifty feet tall. There was a central tower that rose straight up into the air. At the top, there were four steel arms that extended outward from the central pillar at right angles from each other. At the end of each arm, the men could see the circular steel frames where their parachutes would attach. The circular frames were connected to long strands of steel cable that wound their way down each arm to the central column and then further down to large drums at the base of the towers where the wire was stored. The drums were attached to a series of motors that would lower and raise the circular frames. On their way up, they would lift the students to the top of the tower, only to release them to the wind and the ground below.

After PT, the men were broken into platoons and separated into groups around the field. Lou's instructors then lectured on what was about to occur. It was really quite simple, but Lou's attention hung on every syllable. During the talk, everyone's attention was diverted by the sound of approaching motors. The instructor stopped talking and looked over at the approaching sound. All the men in the platoon craned their necks to follow the progress of the approaching vehicles. Three ambulances spread out to take up positions around the tower. Three men got out of each vehicle, each wearing a helmet with a large red cross painted on it. The instructor continued his lecture.

"If you get hurt, do not move." The phrase ran through his mind as the company was moved off to the side of the towers. There was a wind sock at the top of each tower, and the men were positioned on the side away from the prevailing wind. Once everyone was assembled, a jeep drove up bearing the commander of the jump school. The company stood at attention as the general took up position at the center of the company.

"Instructors, take your post!" Four instructors double timed it to the closest tower. Two of them went to one of the big lockers located under the tower. One returned with a chute and harness to where two instructors were standing under one of the tower's outstretched steel arms. The other instructor began operating the motor that lowered the circular steel skeleton to the ground.

Once the circular frame was within reach, the three instructors quickly went about the task of attaching the parachute to the frame. On a signal from one of the men, the frame was raised slightly until the harness was hanging with the leg straps barely off the ground. The general had turned slightly to view the procedure. He now turned down and faced the company.

"I need a volunteer!"

"Airborne!" echoed from every man in the company, bringing a smile to the general's face. Every man volunteered at the same instant, but only Lou took two steps forward at the same instant. It was not something he thought about it was instinctive. If he had not been located in the front row it never would have happened.

"B68. Did I say take two steps forward!"

"No, general!"

"Drop and give me twenty, troop!"

"One Airborne, Two Airborne..." while the whole company waited for him to finish. As soon as he was done he stood up at attention and took two steps back into formation. Way to go Lou, he thought as the general's voice again rang out.

"B68. Did I tell you to rejoin the formation?"

"No, general!"

"Drop and give me twenty, troop!" There was a smattering of snickers as Lou dropped quickly to the ground.

"One Airborne, Two Airborne..." Shit.

Lou's arms were beginning to shake as he finished the second set of push-ups. He stood at attention, not moving a muscle, hoping the general's attention would move to more important matters.

"B68. You want more push-ups?"

"Airborne, Sir!" Lou shouted.

"B68. Report to the Tower!"

"Airborne, Sir!" Lou shouted, saluting the general.

"All the way!" the general replied, returning Lou's salute. Lou turned and double timed it over to the waiting instructors with every eye in the company following his progress. Lou found himself smiling.

"Way to go, B68," one of them said as he approached the group.

"Yeah, congratulations," said another.

"Turn around and step through the leg straps. Good," the instructor said as the three men quickly fastened and tightened all the straps. Lou was still excited from having been selected first, but he was also beginning to get a little nervous.

"Listen." the chief instructor said in a low, level voice standing directly in front of Lou. "You know what to do and you know how to do it. Relax, this will all be over in a couple of minutes. Remember who you are and do us proud. Understand?"

"Airborne, Sergeant!" Lou replied in a quiet voice, staring the sergeant directly in the eyes.

"Follow our lead," he said offering Lou his hand. Lou shook it. The instructor turned and came to attention facing the general. All four men, with Lou in the center of the group came to attention. Saluting the general, the chief instructor bellowed "Station One ready, Sir."

"Proceed."

On that command, the wire began lifting the frame, Lou dangling beneath the spread-out parachute, quickly into the air. Lou was amazed at how quickly and smoothly he was carried upward. He kept his eyes on the horizon in an attempt to keep from looking down at the ground below, but when a man is afraid of heights, the ground acts as a magnet to iron eyeballs. The trip to the top only lasted seconds, but the mind is an amazing machine, able to consider a million different facts in milliseconds, and not for the first or last time in his life, Lou was allowed to contemplate many different aspects of the experience.

The view was spectacular as his eyes quickly surveyed the whole area in front of him. He could see further and further with each passing second as his altitude increased. The men in the company formed a symmetrical pattern on the ground below. It was quite amazing in its perfection and something that could be appreciated only from this height. They were in perfect rows and columns, and Lou could see the upturned face of every man as they followed his progress up to the top.

Staring down at the ground, Lou was amazed to find that the ever increasing height did not seem to bother him, a phenomenon his mind quickly sought an answer to. He remembered reading somewhere that a person's fear of heights was related to the mind's perceived height by his attachment to the ground below. On a high diving board, it was the perception of being attached to the ground by the ladder leading up to the board that caused the mind difficulty, and that person, simply floating ten feet above the ground, would not have the same fear. Lou had doubted that explanation at the time he read it. Yet it was the only explanation that Lou could think of to explain why he was actually enjoying the ride to the top of the tower. Of course the other explanation could also apply, that he had just lost his mind.

As quickly and smoothly as the ascent had begun, it stopped. For an instant everything was quiet as the wind blew gently from Lou's right.

"Are you ready?" the voice of the instructor drifted up clearly to Lou. The instructor was using an electronic megaphone.

"Airborne," Lou shouted out as he set his eyes on the horizon.

"How far?" the instructor's voice rang out again.

"All the way!" Lou replied as clearly and distinctly as possible.

Lou felt himself pulled up slightly. It took him an instant to realize he was now drifting down and away from the tower.

Lou already had his hands up on the risers. "Keep your legs together, eyes on the horizon, knees bent," the instructor's voice counselled as Lou drifted toward the ground. The ground quickly accelerated as it approached Lou suspended in the air above it. At least that was Lou's perception of what happened. Within an instant it was over. Lou's feet hit, and he went into a side roll. The next thing he knew, he was on his feet gathering in the parachute. He double timed it over to the instructor standing off to the side with his ever present clipboard.

"You sounded off clearly, you kept your eyes off the ground, you kept a good body position in the air, you landed correctly and did a good body roll, you recovered quickly, and you got a lot of balls, B68. I give you a pass on your first jump. Report under the tower, then return your gear to the staff and drop and give me twenty."

"Airborne!" Lou shouted and hurried off to complete his required tasks.

Another voice said, "Good job, B68. Nice landing. Made us look good, B68." The instructor's praise felt good as Lou dropped to the ground. "One Airborne, Two Airborne..." Lou returned to his spot in the formation.

"A good start to a perfect day," the general said to the assembled company. He turned and faced the company commander. "Carry on."

Once the general had moved off toward his jeep, the men were once again broken into platoons for training. Lou's group moved over to one of the towers. As on the previous apparatus, three platoons were assigned to each of the three different towers, and the fourth

platoon was divided into work groups to assist the instructors. The work groups' job was to help attach the student to the circular frame and to help retrieve and prepare used parachutes.

It took a while to get things organized and running. Because it took longer to get a man attached and launched and then to secure the landing area afterward, each platoon was allowed to keep only five men in line waiting at any one time. The other men were allowed to sit in a group off to the side, observing the proceedings. It was the men's responsibility to keep the right order for their jumps. Lou would jump first in each rotation, having earned the right by being the first off the tower.

Lou got in three jumps that first day, all of them acceptable. The company's luck with the weather continued for the next two days, and not only did everyone get an opportunity to get in three acceptable jumps, but there was time left for extra jumps for anyone who wanted them. Lou was able to get in two extra jumps on Friday. Only one man quit during the jump tower training, although four had to be removed from the meadow by ambulance, all with leg or knee injuries.

The Sunday before the last week of training, all the men in the company were issued their first set of jump boots. Some of the men had shown up at the school having already purchased their own. These had been confiscated quickly and put away until after training was completed. One of the men had been stupid enough to actually wear a pair the day he reported in for training. To say that it was a mistake was an understatement. Carrying a sign saying "I am a communist" or "I screwed your wife" or "Ho Chi Minh is God" would have been much smarter. Like everything else, the right to wear jump boots had to be earned, and God help the leg caught wearing unauthorized boots. That man had joined Lou in the kitchen on KP, but Lou did not have to keep doing it once his class began training, while Stanley had to keep doing it every night after training until that Sunday, when he and everyone else in the company were issued their jump boots.

Lou felt sorry for poor Stanley because every instructor knew his number and took every opportunity to drop him for twenty. Stanley was smart enough and tough enough to gut it out, and in the process he earned the respect of the men in the company. In the process he had slimmed down and toned his upper body.

Jump boots were made of black leather, like every other Army boot, but extended much higher onto the leg than did a conventional boot. Supposedly they provided much better protection to the ankle of the wearer. Lou doubted that for no other reason than that they had made their jumps off the towers in regular boots. The real reason was to give the Airborne a distinctive look to their clothing. Even dressed in everyday fatigue pants with their cuffs tucked inside the boots, the fatigues took on a striking appearance. Of course someone not in the military might not notice the difference, but everyone in the military would spot it in an instance.

The military dress uniforms were always worn with dress shoes that were black and looked like many civilian shoes. They were considered a part of the uniform and no one was authorized to wear any other footwear with their uniform but members of the Airborne. Airborne soldier's dress uniforms required the wearing of the distinctive high topped boots. Members of the Special Forces and Rangers were also authorized to wear jump boots with their uniforms, but of course they were all jump qualified. It separated the men of the Airborne from other members of the military in much the same way the black uniforms and high topped boots had separated Germany's elite Storm Troopers from members of their Regular Army.

Actually the term "issued" did not quite cover what really happened when the men received their jump boots. The Army had already issued the men their standard boots and felt no obligation to replace them. So everyone got a new pair of boots, still in the original box from the company, but the cost of the boots would be deducted from their next month's pay. Since everyone graduating from jump school would begin receiving jump pay upon graduation, this represented only a small burden for the men, and they did not object to this procedure in the least. They could have, but of course then they would have been granted the privilege of leaving the Airborne.

Everyone spent that evening polishing their boots to a bright shine and walking around in them trying to break them in before the morning run. Of course if they strutted a little or passed by the body length mirror at the entrance to the barracks a few more times than normal, no one was in a mood to say anything about it.

It had already been made abundantly clear to them that jump pay was not meant for booze and women. This is what regular pay was meant for. The extra pay they received for jumping out of airplanes was meant to go for more important things. That money would go for extra laundering expenses, tailoring expenses and clothing expenses. For the first time in his training, Louis had been introduced to the word "strack."

As far as Lou could find, there was no such word in the English language, or the American language for that matter. Therefore there was no definition for the word, yet every paratrooper in the American military knew what it meant. It meant that their boots were spit shined better than anyone else's boots. It meant that they saluted their officers better than other troops saluted theirs. It meant that Airborne soldiers looked sharper than other soldiers in every way and on every day. Buckles were brighter, dress uniforms spotless, work uniforms starched and ironed, faces shaved and teeth brushed. They were required to out-march, out-shoot, out-fight and if necessary out-shit any other man in any other outfit in the world. Attitude, Attitude, Attitude. Lou loved it.

Monday morning of the third week of training started out with clear skies, a light wind, and starlight. The men were awake early and started their morning run before the sun crested the surrounding hills. Most of them had gotten little sleep the night before, and the instructors had come earlier than normal for the men, knowing they were anxious to begin the day and nervous about what it would bring. Lou was not sure if that was the reason the instructors chose to do three laps around the Airborne track that morning. He had a sneaking suspicion that they wanted to tire the men prior to the first jump in order to relieve some of the pressure that had been building since the finish of ground school the previous Friday. The weekend had given the men plenty of time to rest and contemplate the first real jumps they would be making today.

The morning run had been like a party to the men. The singing and rhythmic running had a special feel to it, and even eight miles could not dampen the men's spirits. In the mess hall there was a difference. The talk was quieter, more subdued. Lou took pains not to eat too much. The first men to jump would be lifting off at 1000 hours, and Lou did not want a lot of food in his stomach. He had a problem with motion sickness, and never having been in an

aircraft, never mind exiting it from 2500 feet, had his stomach a little queasy. The men had spent much of the weekend discussing and contemplating today. Now that it had arrived, everyone was beginning to get tense.

It was 1100 hours, and Lou sat on the tarmac of the airfield with the other members of the platoon. The other three platoons had already been loaded onto the aircraft and dropped over the landing zone. The men on the ground could see the air drops off in the distance, as each platoon made its jump. The aircraft was just approaching the airfield for landing. As soon as it landed, it would taxi over to the platoon. The sight of the men of the company exiting the aircraft in the distance had been both stirring and a little scary. From a distance, the sight of the men leaving the aircraft one after another in quick succession made Lou and the others feel good. Now their ride was taxiing down the runway, and Lou had a strong desire to split.

The men began staggering to their feet, helping each other up when necessary. They moved slowly, awkwardly. All the men had been fitted with parachutes before the first platoon had been loaded aboard the aircraft, even though some of them would not be jumping until later in the morning. The instructors explained that being in harnesses for long periods of time was just something the men would have to get used to, since it was too crowded aboard the aircraft to put on chutes. Today's ride to the landing zone would take only ten minutes, but for some jumps the men would be in their harnesses with their parachutes attached for many hours. Now after wearing the chutes for only ninety minutes, Louis was looking forward to removing it.

The aircraft came to a halt about a hundred yards from where the men were lining up in two sticks of twenty students each. Each stick had an instructor at the head and tail ends of the group. They would lead and follow their students out the door. Walking was difficult, and the men appeared to be waddling as they made their way toward the aircraft.

The aircraft was a C-141 with four propellers, two mounted on each side. The pilot let the rear ramp down to facilitate the loading of the men. They would exit the craft through its side doors, located on either side of the plane. As they moved aboard, the airmen assigned to the aircraft assigned a spot for each of the men to sit as they entered. With the tailgate down and all four engines idling, it was noisy and cool inside the aircraft.

The seats upon which they sat were fold down contraptions attached to the sides of the aircraft. Each paratrooper was led to his position and helped to sit down by one of the airmen. With the parachutes attached to their backs, it was almost impossible to lean back and get comfortable. Having waited most of the morning for this moment, Lou wondered if the other men felt the need to piss as bad as he did just then. Since leaving the hangar after getting outfitted there had been the opportunity to go, Lou was just glad he did not drink coffee like a lot of the men in the platoon and had had the foresight to go just before being outfitted.

The engines began to rev up, and the plane began to move forward as the pilot raised the tail, enclosing the men within the aircraft. Never having been in an aircraft before, Lou found the movement quite disconcerting. The plane moved forward for what seemed like a long time. Lou had watched its movement on each of its flight and knew the pilot was taxiing to the end of the runway. Sure enough the plane turned once and then shortly again to take its place at the end of the runway.

They stopped completely. Immediately all the engines began to rev and the noise level rose quickly. Lou stared at the men sitting directly across from him and tried to read their faces. Was this right? It sounded like the engines would surely explode at such high RPMs. He could feel the aircraft strain against the brakes. Suddenly the pilot released the brakes, and the aircraft leapt forward. Looking out the small windows on the opposite wall, Lou could see the passing landscape speed up. They left the ground. The aircraft shuddered as the wheels lifted into their wells below. The nose of the plane seemed to be pointing almost straight up in the air and stayed like that for a long time as they climbed quickly toward jump altitude. As they began to level out, the noise level dropped considerably.

Lou looked around nervously. *Open the door and let me the hell out*, he thought. His stomach was doing flip-flops, and he had an overwhelming desire to throw up. He swallowed hard several times and opened his mouth taking large gulps of air. An airman who was watching the men closely handed Lou a paper bag. Looking around he saw several of the men with the bags at their mouths, throwing up. Lou kept taking deep breaths and focused his attention on remaining calm. He felt hot and sweaty. What he needed more than anything was some air.

Lou got his wish with a vengeance. The doors on either side of the aircraft opened one after the other creating a swirling blast of cool air. It felt good to Lou and he immediately felt a little better. "Get Ready!" Lou could barely hear the command, but each man in the stick passed the command backward. All the men's eyes were now focused on the jumpmaster standing in the rear of the aircraft.

"Stand UP!" he bellowed while giving a hand signal to the men. Even if Lou could not hear him, it was evident from the movement of the men closest to him what was going on. Lou had trouble leaning forward to get his feet positioned to stand up. The man seated on his left had already gained his feet and reached over to assist Lou to his feet. The aircraft was not quite as stable as Lou had anticipated, and he struggled to maintain his balance. There was little room for standing until everyone was on their feet. Then the men reached down and grabbed the forward edge of the seats and lifted them upward, folding them neatly onto the side of the aircraft. They also provided handy places to grab onto for balance.

"Hook UP!" Lou grabbed the end of his static line and hooked the end to the guide wire above his head, giving it a firm tug to insure it was securely latched. He moved it back and forth along the wire to insure it moved freely and then gave it another tug. It really wasn't necessary to be so fanatical about it since it was so easy to do, but Lou noticed he wasn't the only one doing it. The guide wire jumped up and down as the men tested and retested and retested the retest to ensure they were hooked up.

"Check Equipment!" Lou took his time examining the static line of the man in front of him, tracing the line back and forth across the pack. This had already been done twice before entering the aircraft, but Lou took his time and made sure everything was alright before tapping the man in front of him on the right shoulder firmly. At about the same instant the man in back of him tapped him on the shoulder. Things were getting serious now, and Lou was amazed at how quickly the time seemed to be flying.

"Sound Off!"

"One ready!"

"Two ready!" All the way down the stick.

"Sixteen ready!" Lou shouted while thrusting his right arm skyward with the palm out facing the jumpmaster. He was sure the man could not hear him, so Lou tried to make sure he could see his hand. The count continued behind him until all the students had reported they were ready. Lou's field of vision was limited and he strained to listen for the next command. It came quickly.

"Stand in the Door" The stick shuffled forward a couple of steps and then stopped. Lou's heart was pounding. *What the hell am I doing? This can't be for real. It's just a practice run.* Lou could feel sweat run down his sides despite the chill in the air.

"Go!" Lou barely heard the first command, but the line of men began shuffling forward. "Go!" a second later, "Go" and then "Go". The men shuffled forward at what seemed like an ever increasing speed. As Lou approached the tail of the plane the wind and noise increased with the shouted command echoing ever louder in his ear. His first glimpse of a man exiting the aircraft was in the stick opposite him. The man stood at the door for an instant and then shot out and was replaced. Lou's attention quickly focused forward as his line moved quickly forward. "Go!" He heard the command loud and clear. Suddenly the man in front of him turned to his right and stood in the door. "Go!" and the man disappeared. Lou shuffled to the door, reaching for the sides of the aircraft. *Let's stop and think about this,* his mind shouted as he stared out at the ground far below. His hands had barely touched the sides of the aircraft when the jumpmaster shouted "Go!" and tapped him firmly on the shoulder.

Lou sprung through the door and snapped into position. The blast from the engines slammed into him as he began shouting "One thousand one." He focused on the ring attached to his emergency chute and moved his right hand onto it as he sang out "One thousand five." Suddenly the harness tightened around his legs. Lou looked up quickly and checked his chute. It was fully deployed above his head. Lou let out a big sigh of relief.

Now there was time to look around. The sound of the aircraft was quickly disappearing as Lou looked at the ground two thousand feet below. Lou could plainly hear the sound of the wind through the chute's nylon cords. One of the men nearby let out a long rebel yell. Lou laughed out loud. He felt great and felt like shouting himself. "Get your legs together and look at the horizon," a voice yelled up to him. There was no way to know who the instructor was

talking to, but Lou immediately began focusing on the next problem. Getting to the ground would be no problem. Surviving was the problem. Orange smoke began drifting across the LZ. The instructors had popped smoke grenades, and the rising smoke told the men floating down which way the wind was blowing.

Lou was going to land on his ass and back if he weren't careful. He reached up and grabbed the right riser, causing his chute to rotate, and when he was traveling facing at a right angle to the smoke he released his grip. The chute stopped rotating, and the ground began rising upward at an alarming speed. "Eyes on the horizon gentlemen. Legs bent. Don't be reaching for the ground, let it come to you. If you are injured landing, stay down." There were several voices drifting from below, but not very far below now. Lou raised his eyes to the horizon and a second later rolled on his side as his feet hit the ground.

Lou was on his feet gathering his chute. His legs shook slightly from the excitement of the jump. He felt great. All the men were gathered up by the instructors on the ground and moving off toward some woods. On the way down, Lou had spotted the road through the woods with a line of trucks waiting to transport the men back to the airfield. As they entered the wood line, many of them stopped to relieve themselves. There were a lot of shouts and laughing as the men exited the landing zone.

The men were disappointed that they were not able to get in their second jump that day. The trucks took them back to the airfield where they dropped off their chutes. They were then driven back to the company area and given the rest of the day off. The most serious injuries that day were suffered by the men in the form of blisters. The early morning run in their new jump boots had taken its toll. Once the medics had made their rounds of the barracks checking the men's feet, most began working on their boots, which had been scuffed while running and during the landing.

The initial feeling of excitement and exultation wore off, and the feeling after supper was much more subdued than Lou would have expected. One of the instructors stopped by the barracks and informed the men that there would be a meeting at 2000 hours instead of the nightly inspection. The men wondered what that could be about, but Lou saw that most of the men were sitting around quietly.

"Paratroopers," the instructor addressed the men sitting around the barracks at meeting time. "I want to talk with you briefly about today's jump and about tomorrow. It is traditional for the instructors at the jump school to address their students at the end of the first day. It really pleases me that there were no injuries today and everyone is back here safely. I wish it were always that way, but unfortunately the opposite is true. It is normally one of the reasons these talks are held. The other reason is that over the years, instructors have found that the first jump tomorrow morning will probably be the hardest jump of your career. Most men make the first jump based on a combination of excitement, adrenalin, and ignorance. Having survived the jump, everyone is excited and feeling good just having survived the experience.

"Tonight a lot of you will begin to feel very apprehensive about tomorrow's jump. You will begin to replay today's experience, remembering the blast of air as you exited the plane, the feeling of relief that your chute opened. For many of you it will have been the first time in your lives you did something that could have led to serious injury or death. I am here to tell you that if that begins to scare you, it is a normal reaction. Some of you will not jump tomorrow because of that fear, and that too is all right. It takes a lot of faith to thrust yourself in harm's way. To do so out of ignorance is one thing, but to do it with the knowledge that you now possess is much more difficult. For some of us in the Airborne, jumping is never easy; it is something we choose to do in order to belong to this fine brotherhood of men. From our experience, we at the jump school know what it is like to face the second jump. It was not easy for me or for most of my fellow instructors. We want you to know that in the hopes it will put any bad feelings you may have in perspective. Airborne!" The Sergeant turned and left the men sitting there. A short time later, it was lights out.

Lou was exhausted from not having gotten much sleep the night before, the eight mile run that morning, and the excitement of the day. Within minutes he was in a deep sleep.

Tuesday once again started very early, before the sun rose. "Up and at 'em men," an instructor yelled as the overhead lights in the barracks came on. Lou was instantly awake and moving. Usually his feet would hit the floor before the end of the first sentence. As he popped into an upright position, every bone, muscle, ligament, and joint in his body protested. *Hell no, we won't go*, his body screamed. His legs ached. They had been a little sore the night before

from the morning run. Now the poor things seemed remiss about accepting the weight of the rest of the body. *Let's just crawl around today*, they seemed to say. *Let the arms do half the work.*

All the men had days like this before in their military careers. The Army was good at pushing the body further than it was used to going and creating havoc as the body responded in protest. This morning was different in that everything ached. Looking around, Lou could see that he was not the only one hurting. By now the barracks should have been a beehive of activity as men hustled off to take care of their bodily needs before the morning run. Instead most of the men who occupied the top bunks remained seated on them. The men on the bottom bunks were doing better although Lou spotted one or two of them sort of crawling to their footlockers where they immediately climbed into a sitting position.

"Some of you might be a little sore this morning, troopers. This changes nothing. Get your asses out of bed. Formation in fifteen, I repeat, fifteen minutes." Lou could see why so many men found the second jump the hardest. He guessed that many of the men who quit after the first jump just never made it down from the top bunk that second day. "Airborne" he whispered as he crawled down on to the floor.

"Gentlemen, the uniform for the day is to include field jackets." It must have been the instructor's last announcement since he quickly turned and left. Good, Lou thought. It was darn cold in the morning, standing in formation in a tee shirt. Most mornings it was at or below freezing, and everyone was anxious to run just to get warm. At least today they would not freeze their balls off before they began their run. Of course, Lou would be able to run about ten yards before his legs gave out.

"Attention!" The sound of heels clicking together was very distinctive as the men snapped into position. "Right Face!" A crisp blur of motion as every man in the company executed the turn with precision. "Forward..." The men waited for the command, "March!" Each man stepped off with his left foot in perfect time, each stride the same length. They might be too sore to run far, but they could march. Infantrymen could march all day and into the night.

Lou waited for the command to double time, wondering how his body would respond. Instead, the company continued its march down the hill and around the track. Halfway around the track, near the bleachers, the company was led into an open area. Orders were issued, and the men spread out in formation for PT. The march had taken thirty minutes and was made in silence, which was unusual. Lou's body had slowly begun feeling better as the muscles received a rich supply of blood in response to the exercise of walking.

Instead of the normal dozen exercises performed at a rapid rate with a high number of repetitions, the instructors led the men through thirty minutes of slow stretching and warmup routines. During that time, two of the other training companies passed by them on the track. Watching them, Lou was impressed with their energy and lung capacity. There was no doubt which company was in its first week and which was in its second. The difference was easily discernible in the way the men in the second company held themselves and in their ease of stride. The better conditioning and increased pride added an aura to the men.

The men in the company were reformed into marching order and moved onto the track. A minute later the command was given to double time. Lou's body felt loose and strong, having been awoken gently during the stretch and warmup exercises. Lou was glad when the company did not turn up toward its home on the hill but continued on for another lap around the airborne track. "B12, report. C10, report. D12 report." Men left the formation and reported to the instructor calling out their numbers. Lou saw them drop and begin doing push-ups. Lou wondered what that was about, but the group was left behind as the company moved on.

Lou spotted Larry sitting at a table eating breakfast and walked over and joined him. "What'd they call you out of formation for?" Lou asked even before his ass hit the bench.

"Scared the shit out of me, Lou. I got some pretty bad blisters from the run yesterday, and they really began hurting during the run. I noticed the instructor eyeballing me all morning. I was starting to limp during the run. I thought for sure they were going to tell me I had to drop out and be recycled. I was ready to argue about that. I have gone too far and worked too hard to be recycled because of some damn blisters. The first thing they did was drop us and make us give them twenty. Next thing there were three jeeps pulling up to our group and we were all ordered to climb aboard. Then I knew for sure I was being recycled. The jeeps did not come

back here but instead took us to the battalion aide station located on the other side of the compound. We were led inside and past the waiting area to a room that had a bunch of chairs. During the whole time Sergeant Dog and Grunt were with us and they hadn't said a thing." Dog and Grunt were nicknames the men had assigned to a couple of the instructors. Lou wondered if they knew.

"We were seated and told to take off our shoes. A doctor came in accompanied by a couple of medics. He examined our feet, gave some orders to the medics, and left. They soaked and cleaned and dressed our feet. Mine were taped up to protect my heels. Afterward we were loaded back in the jeeps and driven back to the area. Kenny finally asked if this meant we were being recycled. Both Dog and Grunt broke up laughing. They explained that this happened every week. Hell, you can't run eight miles in new boots without some of the men getting bad blisters. They knew last night who they would send to the infirmary this morning."

"Shit, why didn't they send you guys there first thing this morning?"

"They explained that to us," Larry said. "They didn't want us to miss the morning stretching exercises. Since they expect us to jump with the group today, it's important that we loosen up properly to avoid injury. They felt our suffering would be worth the price later today. From what they said, everyone is sore the day after the first jump. Every company goes through what they call the day-after routine on the second day of jump week. Goes with the territory, they said."

The conversation made Lou feel good about the unit again. The instructors were there to look after the men and showed both good judgement and compassion in doing so. Once again, Lou wondered if the Marines would handle things the same way.

When the company arrived at the airport, there were two aircrafts waiting with their rear ramps down. As the men moved into the hangar to put on their gear, the flight crews walked around the outsides of the planes, inspecting each carefully. Half an hour later, as the men began leaving the hangar, the planes started their engines. The first two platoons to jump were walked directly onto the aircraft without delay. Within minutes, their planes left the runway and took flight toward the landing zone. While they waited, Lou noticed the instructors huddled around an Air Force officer in deep discussion. Off in the distance, the two aircraft

began discharging the men simultaneously. Like magic, parachutes began to blossom in the air behind the flight of planes.

"Listen up, men" the instructor shouted. Everyone turned toward him.

"There's bad weather heading this way. Not today but sometime tomorrow, late. It looks like a system that will hang around for a few days once it gets here. The commanding officer of the school has decided to get in three jumps today. It is not unheard of, but it is still unusual. We allow a whole week to get in your five jumps in order to work around bad weather, but this time of year things can get shut down for a few days. Enjoy yourselves."

The first jump that day didn't bother Louis much. For whatever reason, it was no harder than the first one the day before. The whole thing had a surrealistic feeling to it. Flinging oneself out of an aircraft had to be in the abnormal psychology books somewhere. The most difficult thing Lou had to deal with was the motion sickness from flying. After managing the take-off, he had absolutely no desire to land in one of these buckets of bolts.

Lou's landing went well once again. Just as he rolled to his feet, he heard one of the men landing nearby give a short yelp. Looking around Lou spotted the man lying motionless on the ground. He had only taken a step toward the man when two instructors skidded down next to the man on the ground. "Don't move, B16. If you can hear me, son, don't try to move." An ambulance was already moving slowly over the uneven ground of the LZ, working to avoid the men walking off the field. "Get moving, B68" one of the instructors said quietly. "You got a long day ahead. We'll take good care of this man."

"Airborne," Lou responded as he turned and gathered up his chute. All the men gathered at the waiting trucks for the quick ride back to the airfield.

Two hours later, Lou was walking off the landing zone again, feeling good. Jumping wasn't that hard. If he could figure a way to get out the door without having to ride in the damn plane it might even be fun.

The third time the men arrived at the airport, there was a chow line set up. Lou was starving. He had only had a light breakfast of a couple of pieces of toast, not wanting to have much food in his belly during the plane rides. Limited himself to an apple with a glass of

lemonade for lunch. He would rather be hungry than emptying a full stomach into a bag at five thousand feet.

The company had lost six men that day. Four had chosen to quit. This amazed Lou. These were men who had what it took to jump the first time. After that it was a piece of cake. Just remember what you did the first time and then do it again. What's the big deal? It was scary, and Lou knew he would never really fall in love with the jumping, but he knew he could do it, so there was no reason to worry about it any longer. There was a real difference between men who made it into the Airborne and other men. Of course they were told it was because of something extra that gave them character. It also might have been that all the men in the Airborne were lacking something that made them different from other men, something simple, like intelligence, gray matter, or common sense.

Two of the men had been taken away to the hospital, and no one had heard how they were doing. Again the mood of the men had shifted. Everyone was in high spirits. Some of them were wondering aloud if it might not be a good idea to get all their jumps in today. Why take a chance on the front arriving earlier than expected? One of the instructors pointed out that it got dark around four thirty, being the middle of winter and all. Unless the men wanted their last training jump to be a night jump. The general consensus was to go for it. What the hell? The ground was in the same place at night as it was during the day.

The third jump went without a hitch for Lou. It was dark by the time the men reached the company area even though it was only around six in the evening. The mess hall was open, and all the men headed there. The atmosphere was joyous. The men assembled there were only one jump away from qualifying. More importantly, each of them had three jumps in one day, which was a rare feat indeed. Three jumps for each of them to rehash with friends and comrades. Lou listened in a group that included Jim and six other men.

Each man's story was different than the others', with a unique perspective of each jump and an individual framework from which to describe the experience. Someone who had not experienced the incident might well think each of them was talking about a different event, and in reality, they were.

Because the men had gotten back so late that day the nightly inspection was cancelled, was not necessary. After dinner, the men immediately set about cleaning and polishing their jump boots. Once that was done, the men cleaned and straightened out their individual living areas and then joined in the daily task of putting the barracks straight. They required no supervision and cleaned to their own standard. When they were done, the barracks was again immaculate. Things were strack.

"Time to get up troopers." Lou sprang from the top bunk. He was sore but nothing like yesterday. "No PT this morning. No breakfast. Sun up at 0630 hours, and the first man will exit the plane at 0631. Trucks will be here in thirty minutes. We will leave you if you aren't ready." Everyone started moving.

The morning air was cold, and Lou went back in and grabbed his gloves. There was a steady wind from the north, the first thing his mind registered as he exited the barracks. He hoped it was not too high to cancel the jump.

The men stood on the tarmac, stamping around and trying to keep warm. They all faced south, not in honor of Jefferson Davis, but to keep the wind at their back. Suddenly the engines of the two drop planes began turning. Lou felt an immediate sense of relief. They had been waiting there wondering if the wind was too strong, and the pilots had seemingly provided the answer. Of course, maybe the pilots had been informed the jump was off and were taking their rides back to the barn.

Then the instructors got the men moving toward the plane. This morning, Lou's platoon would be one of the first two to jump. As the line of men began moving toward the aircraft, Lou stepped out of line and kneeled down. He began tightening his right boot's shoelace. By the time he was done, he had to hustle to catch up with the string of paratroopers and had fallen to the back. He kept a straight face as the airman sat him on the seat next to the door.

Once they were in the air, the jumpmaster came over and squatted down next to Lou. "How you doing, B68?" he asked.

"Fine, Sergeant," Lou replied with a smile on his face.

"Boot tied tight?"

"Yeah."

"I used to have problems with my boot strings periodically. I was wondering how long it would take to see your face in this seat. First one out the door, right?" Lou just smiled, and so did the instructor.

It was still almost night on the ground, but here at cruising altitude it was daylight. They had remained below the clouds but the day was definitely upon them.

The sergeant was right of course. Lou wanted to stand in the door at least once in his Airborne career. After jump school, there was a chance that the next orders would send him directly to Vietnam. Do not pass go; Do not collect two hundred dollars. Or there was a chance he would injure himself. The past two days had brought home the fact that an injury might occur on any jump. The company had not lost any men that first day. Yesterday they lost a total of eight. Some of the injuries were minor, and those men would be jumping with the next class in a week, only needing one more to complete their training. Five of the men were in base hospital, their futures on hold and in the hands of the medical people.

It was a great experience. As he took his position, he had an opportunity to look down at the ground below which was barely perceptible in the early morning light. Looking forward, Lou could make out the approaching landing zone, the near end marked by something burning brightly on the ground, possibly a flare. The sergeant had put him in the door early enough that he got to stand there for almost thirty seconds, waiting for the command.

"Go!" Lou was out the door. The chute deployed quickly, and when Lou's attention once again focused on the ground, he noticed that he was not over the landing zone. The flare was still a good fifty yards away and Lou was hanging in the air over woods. Of course all the men had been briefed on how to land in trees. The instructions included a line on prayer. Then to his relief he noticed the end of the landing zone was approaching quickly beneath his feet.

His obvious movement in relationship to the ground was good news and bad news. The good news was that he would make the landing zone and avoid the trees; and the bad news was that the wind was obviously much higher than on the previous four jumps and the landing might be just a touch more exciting. Lou reached up, grabbing his right riser to get the chute to turn. It did, and he did with it. Suddenly the ground was at his feet. He had been so engrossed in the task of getting his chute turned that he had lost focus on the ground. Luckily he had kept

his legs together with the knees slightly bent. He landed sideways and instinctively gained his feet. He ran down his chute that was trying to billow out in front of him and gathered it up. He released a couple of straps and stepped out of the jump harness.

Hot damn! Jump qualified! Airborne Infantry! All the Way! Thank you, Jesus!

Lou was more than just a little excited. He could see the other men landing and jumping up. There were yells and shouts and arms thrust in the air in triumph. There was also one poor soul being dragged along the ground by his chute. There was an instructor running right beside him, watching to see that the man was all right. Suddenly one side of the parachute bellowed forward as a quick release was freed and the chute collapsed. A little side show to the morning's drama. The men were hustled off the field toward the trucks. Once near the tree line, they all stopped and took up positions to watch the show. None of the men in Lou's platoon had been given an up-close opportunity to see the other men jump, always having been relegated to jumping last. Fifteen minutes later, the planes were spotted climbing into the air in the distance. The men lost sight of them for a time as they passed behind some of the surrounding hills, but they all knew the direction they would be approaching from. The men were all on their feet, moving around and trying to keep warm in the cool morning air.

"There!" a voice rang out even though everyone's eyes were already directed toward the approaching aircraft and the whole group had spotted them simultaneously. They had gathered at the near end of the LZ and so had a clear view of the man standing in the door of each aircraft. The first men from each aircraft exploded out the doors, four men at once since each aircraft was jumping two sticks of men. The men exiting the aircraft on the away sides became visible as the planes flew on past them. Parachutes started blossoming all over the place. Lou was amazed at how quickly the men exited the aircraft and the way they positioned themselves. Watching them exit, he could see how violently their bodies were moved when they hit the air stream. Within fifteen seconds, the planes had discharged the men and begun climbing and banking away from the LZ. The sky was blanketed with the blossoms. They floated down gently from above, but as they neared the ground Lou could see that the perception was an illusion. They were actually dropping to the ground at quite a fast speed. The wind was blowing steadily, and the men in the air were traveling with it. Lou would have to guess the

wind speed was near the maximum allowable for a jump, about ten miles an hour. The violence of the landing was amazing. The nearest jumper landed only thirty yards from the group on the ground. He made a loud thumping noise as his body slammed into the ground even though he made a near perfect landing. He was on his feet in an instant and began jumping up and down like a madman. All the men in the group watching let out a cheer of "Airborne!" and began clapping. Men were thudding to the ground all over the LZ.

Lou realized that maybe he had been lucky not being able to see what was happening before his last jump was done. During his jumps, he had been too busy worrying what was happening to him to pay any attention to anyone landing around him. He had always been near the end of the stick so that by time he hit, most of the men were already moving off the LZ. Being first today did not seem to change his awareness. The men landed much faster than they had off the jump towers. Lou knew this from his own experience, but he had not realized how much faster. No wonder men got hurt jumping, he thought, as one of the ambulances started moving out onto the landing zone.

The landing zone was level, covered with short grass. The ground was frozen only slightly, but it was as hard as concrete when landing. Lou's body could attest to that. He spotted Jim moving off the field, limping slightly. He grabbed his own gear from off the ground and moved over to meet him.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, man. Maybe a little worse for the wear, but all right." There was a big smile on his face and joy in his voice. Lou managed to slap him on back as he moved past.

"Airborne, Jim." Lou said with a smile. He moved alongside his friend. The men had a lot to talk about that day.

By noon the weather had deteriorated, bringing winter to the deep south. There was a short period of freezing rain. The wind began blowing hard and continued for the next two days. The men of Lou's training company were happy, even though it meant morning runs under inclement conditions. The early morning jump was all that saved them from not being able to graduate on time that Friday morning. It probably would have been Sunday at the earliest before the weather would clear enough to allow more jumping.

Friday morning came cold and windy. All the men were in their best dress uniforms, pants bloused inside the tops of their jump boots. No one was surprised to see that Bill, the oldest member of the group, was a major. There were a couple of second lieutenants also present. Five of the men were NCOs, all of whom had combat infantryman badges attached to their uniforms like the major. This meant that they had all been in combat. Joining the Airborne ensured them of another tour there in the near future.

Lou was the only man in the company that did not have any stripes attached to his sleeves. To him it was an embarrassment, and he did have to suffer some good-natured ribbing from the rest of the men. Rank did not seem to be a big issue among the men. One of the men addressed Bill as "Major" and was informed that it would not be necessary to address him that way until after the ceremony. Bill walked through the barracks and shook the hands of most of the men. To him, they would always be classmates.

The men were allowed to invite parents to the graduation ceremonies, but few of them had. The men were from all over the country and most did not come from even middle class families. There was also the problem of not knowing whether you would be graduating until after the last jump.

The actual graduation ceremony was brief and not very colorful in comparison to some Lou had seen, but he would never forget it. All the men received their jump wings from the instructors during the ceremony. Lou was glad for that since over the past three weeks they had earned his respect. The instructors passed quickly through the ranks, pinning on the wings and shaking the men's hands.

The company marched back to the barracks one last time. When they were dismissed from formation, the men ceased to exist as an official military group. They were now individual soldiers, each whose next job was to find their way to their next duty station in the time allotted on their individual orders. The men quickly entered the barracks to gather up their gear and make arrangements for transportation.

There were final handshakes and promises to write, and then it was over, the men spreading before the wind to different landing zones located all over the world. They were Airborne and would remain brothers forever. So it was written. So it would be. END