#2 Jump School – Part One - Fort Benning, Georgia

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

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He took a bus from St. Louis down to Fort Benning, Georgia. The Army had provided enough money for him to fly, but Louis preferred to spend less money for transportation and pocket the difference. As he was a Private E-2, the monthly stipend from the Army was not much. Louis wished he had received his promotion to Private First Class. When he had agreed to go to Officer Candidate School, his superior officer saw it as unnecessary paperwork. Lou could expect to be a Second Lieutenant within three months. Of course there had been a slight change in plans since then, and now Lou would be going to jump school as a Private E-2. Besides the money, there was another reason Louis did not take the flight down to Fort Benning: He was not really sure about the idea of flying and chose to put off that particular experience for as long as possible.

Louis had a fear of heights from a very early age. Standing two feet off the ground on a ladder made him extremely nervous. Standing in a hay loft ten feet off the ground brought him close to panic. He had never let this fear dominate his life; he just chose to stay away from heights whenever possible. Perhaps his most vivid memory regarding this fear was the ten-foot diving board at the public swimming pool. There is no way Lou would have chosen to go off the board as a means of having fun. Just standing on the ground staring up at the board gave him the willies. Of course, going to the pool as a member of a Boy Scout troop made going off the board inevitable. Lou was just unfortunate that it needed to be done on the first night the troop went swimming.

The trip to the pool had started innocently enough. Every boy in the troop needed to pass a swimming test before being granted permission to use the deep end of the pool. The test was simply to swim back and forth the width of the pool. Although this would not seem to be much of a test, it was an extremely large pool with a width of sixty feet. This was quite a feat for some twelve year olds. Lou was one of a handful of boys who were able to complete the swim on that first night. Once the testing was over, the guys in the troop who did not pass

the test or chose not to be tested moved down to the shallow end of the pool. Lou and the other swimmers were allowed to stay at the deep end and entertain themselves. It began with the guys diving off the edge of the pool and swimming all the way to the bottom, ten feet down. After tiring of this, one of the guys suggested moving over to the three-foot diving boards. Lou had thought this a not so good idea, but he did not say anything for fear of being labeled a sissy. Besides, three feet was not a very high distance to dive from. This thought kept Lou calm all the way until he got up onto the board.

Knees shaking, Lou walked to the end of the three-foot board and stared down at the water below. It seemed a hell of a lot further than three feet. He could imagine himself hitting the water with his face and the pain it would cause. Without a word, Lou backed up, took a run for the end of the board and plunged feet first into the water. It was not until three tries later that he was able to make himself enter the water head first, and then only when one of the other guys had done it first. By the end of the night, Lou was feeling pretty comfortable diving off the low dive and was rather proud of himself. It was when the lifeguard announced that there were fifteen minutes left to closing that one of the guys dared Lou to go off the high dive.

Being cocky has its pitfalls. Lou accepted the challenge instantaneously before his brain had time to engage. The first regrets did not begin until Lou got out of the pool and turned toward the platform where the ten-foot board was located. He was not actually scared until he took his first step toward the platform, knowing that now there was no way to back down. Accepting a dare was about as sacred as first holy communion, and it could not be broken except by special dispensation from the Pope. Seeing no Pope present, Lou continued his odyssey to the platform. Terror did not envelop his brain until he actually climbed up on the first step of the ladder leading to the board. As his second foot left the safety of the concrete apron surrounding the pool, Lou's life flashed in front of him. He climbed bravely and quickly up that ladder, finally opening his eyes only when his hand felt the railing of the ladder ending. Grasping the railing on either side of the board in a gentle but firm death grip, Lou stepped up onto the high board.

The view from the sky was actually quite spectacular, enough so that Lou felt like raising his arms high, all the way to his mouth, to keep from throwing up. Of course that would have

required letting go of the side railing, and there was no way that was going to happen. Lou turned and looked down the ladder, wondering if he had the courage to make it back safely to the ground. No way, Jose! It seemed that the only way down now was for the fire department to come and get him. Lou looked over to his friends standing on the side of the pool looking up at him. They looked like ants standing there, although Lou could now hear their shouts of encouragement. Looking around, Lou could see that everyone in his scout troop was now looking up at him in anticipation of his death dive.

He had seen others going off the high dive during the course of the evening. Most of the kids using the high dive opted to go off feet first. This seemed like a rather reasonable option. Lou turned again and began walking to the front edge of the board. The view was wide from his perch high above the ground, and Lou could see everything plainly. He cursed his own stupidity, and reaching the end of the board, he looked down. Panic would generally describe the feeling the view brought to him. His heart was pounding, and he could not seem to get his breath. He would have backed off the board if his feet could move, but they couldn't. There was no question about whether he would survive the jump to the water below. He knew he wouldn't.

It was not so much a dive as a faint. Falling head first through the air was sheer horror, and the thought of its ending—a certain heart stopping slam into the cold water—did not make the experience any more desirable. Lou plummeted like a rock to the bottom of the pool, actually stopping from slamming into the bottom by using his hands to avert disaster. Down in the depths of the pool, Lou realized two things. First the good news, he had enough sense to hold his breath before he hit the water. Then the bad news, he had not taken a particularly deep breath and now was running out of air. Turning quickly underwater, Lou planted both feet on the bottom of the pool and pushed off with all his remaining strength. His head broke the surface at the same instant his lungs almost burst, and he gasped in huge lung full of air. He turned and swam leisurely toward the side of the pool where his friends were standing, sure that his arms would give out and that he would sink several feet short of his destination.

The guys in the troop congratulated him, treating him like some sort of hero. The first member of the troop off the high dive, a real feat of derring-do. Lou was amazed that their

view of what happened and his were entirely different. He promised himself he would never do it again, but of course he did it many more times on scout swims after that day. He never did like to go off the high dive, and it never became all that easy, but Lou never let that stop him.

It would seem strange to anyone who could crawl into Lou's mind and look around to find out that he had volunteered for the Airborne Infantry prior to ever signing his enlistment papers. A fear of height would seem to preclude this particular choice of combat arms. Lou did not look forward to jumping out of airplanes. His hope was that it would not be any worse than the ten-foot diving board, but he knew that hope was thin. Still, it was a means to an end and part of his Army career plan. Since the country was at war, Lou had decided it was his responsibility to participate. That meant combat. Lou did not want to go into combat surrounded by men who had been drafted or placed there as a matter of luck. He only wanted to serve with men willing to face the job with energy and enthusiasm. These men could be found throughout the Army but were heavily concentrated in the Airborne units.

There was a certain mystique attached to the Airborne. Louis had read with fascination of men who purposely jumped out of airplanes to engage in combat against the enemy. According to the history books, it was a great idea that, when it worked, could devastate the enemy's well-laid plans and fortifications. On the other hand, there were instances where the attacking Airborne units were devastated before ever having an opportunity to inflict damage on the enemy. It was not the success or failure of such ventures that caught Lou's imagination, but the psychological makeup of the soldiers who volunteered for such missions. Almost every military organization had its elite forces made up of volunteers who were brave and daring in their execution of warfare. In the modern armies of the world, these units were invariably airborne.

If Louis was going into combat, these were the type of men he wanted to share the experience with. There were doubts in his mind of whether he could measure up to the standards set by such units, but all he really asked for was the opportunity. Failure would not mean the end of his dreams, but it would be a definite disappointment. He was committed to

an all-out effort to meet this goal. If it meant jumping out of an airplane, then that is what he would do.

The date of his arrival was the 2nd of January 1967. To come to this point in his military career at the start of a new year seemed a sign of the way the year would be. The problem was in trying to decipher whether it was an auspicious sign or an omen.

Having arrived at the gates of the sprawling military complex, Lou asked directions to the location of the jump school. The Military Policeman on duty directed Lou to a bus stop within the compound where he could pick up a ride that would eventually drop him off at or near his destination. The base also had a cab service that Lou could use if he were in a hurry and willing to pay a small fee. Lou's orders read that he was required to report on this date, no later than 1600 hours. Since it was only 1100 hours, Lou felt no particular hurry. A taxi would be more convenient, especially considering the weight of his duffel bag, which held all his worldly military possessions. Coming down on the bus from St. Louis, the duffel had not been a particular burden until they reached Atlanta, Georgia. He lugged it around the city while taking a walking tour in the area near the depot. After a short time he realized his mistake, feeling dumb for carting around all his possessions on his back. Part of that was being surrounded by civilians. Lou no longer felt comfortable with that segment of society, not the way he felt around other soldiers.

Within a military complex, Lou did not feel uncomfortable lugging his belongings around. Everyone he met or saw had similar experiences, and if his journey brought some smiles to the faces of the men around him, it was most likely caused by a remembrance of similar circumstances. It was the way military men all over the world arrived at their new posts. In many ways it was a very lonely feeling. As far as Lou knew there would be no one at the jump school who he knew. Arriving there, he would have a clean slate except for the information that had been forwarded to the new command concerning his military records. It felt like being born again with no history to act as boost or hindrance. Lou would be judged by the men around him without any prejudice about past performance. The men he served with would only know those things about him that Lou chose to reveal. Each new assignment was like that, and whereas at first it had caused some concern on Lou's part, he now enjoyed the

start of each new assignment. Since joining the service the previous June, this was the beginning of his fifth assignment. His first was basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in his home state of Missouri. After that, he attended the leadership training school at Fort Ord, California before beginning his advanced infantry training course at the same base. After that there was a shortened five-week stay with the 54th MP Company at Fort Ord where he served as a shotgun guard at the stockade.

The weather was mild, with the temperature approaching seventy degrees, as Lou awaited the arrival of the base bus. When he had left St. Louis, the temperature was struggling to reach the freezing mark. The bus came within ten minutes, and Louis was treated to a ride of almost forty-five minutes before it came to a stop outside the area where the jump school was located. The buildings of the school were old World War Two barracks of the type Lou had grown accustomed to at Fort Ord, California. Two stories, all wood structures. Lou did not need to enter one to know its layout and how it would look. One thing for sure was that the inside of each would be spotless, as were all such training structures within the military. Lou knew he would spend many hours helping to keep the building looking that way.

A sign led him to the battalion headquarters where he reported in for duty. There he learned that because of a break in the training schedule caused by the holidays, the next new class would not start for ten days. Lou knew what that meant before even being told. Being a Private E2 put him at the lower end of the food chain in the military. Being in such a position within the organization almost guaranteed Lou ten miserable days of duty. The Airborne did not disappoint him in this regard. Lou spent the next ten days, including his weekend, pulling KP duty. To say that life was miserable during that period would be to embellish the truth to make the situation appear much better than it actually was. The days started at 0400 hours and lasted until somewhere around 2000 hours, depending on the mood of the chef and the amount of cleanup after the evening meal. Except for short breaks of ten minutes spread throughout the day, life became a series of mind numbing tasks to be completed quickly and never to the total satisfaction of the cooks.

During the days prior to the start of the next training class, the various members began arriving in ever increasing numbers from units all over the country. Every one of them was at

least a private first class, and some of them held much higher ranks. It made no difference what their ranks were; upon arrival they were designated as trainees and treated as such. In some ways this made Lou feel good that everyone was treated as an equal, but the fact remained that he was the only member of the class without at least one stripe to his name.

In some ways, being designated a trainee would have been nice, since the real name used in addressing the new men was invariably "Leg." As in "Straight Leg," an Airborne epithet that denoted anyone who was not Airborne. This name applied to anyone who had yet to earn the right to wear the parachutist's insignia above their left shirt pocket, including generals, senators, women, animals, and presidents. Within the Airborne, you were either a member of the brotherhood or you were nothing. For his first ten days at the school, Lou was nothing. Those waiting to begin class were not allowed to fraternize with the students already in training, a fact which left the new arrivals without a clue to the type of training they would be facing. If they had not kept him so busy and tired, this might have worried Lou, but just surviving ten days of KP was preparation enough for anything the school could throw at him.

Finally the first day of class started on a bright Georgia Monday at 0500 hours. By then, all the members of the class had arrived and broke down into companies, platoons, and squads. Each member of the class was given a helmet with a letter and number painted on it in big white figures. Lou's number was B68. For the remainder of the class, it was the way in which members were addressed. He was no longer Private Merrins, but B68 instead. None of the men were allowed to wear fatigue jackets with any markings on them. There were no name tags, rank insignias, or unit designations displayed. This meant that every member of the class was an equal, and no favor could be curried based on rank or previous experience.

Once the men were assembled, they were immediately informed that for the first formation of every day the uniform was to be a white tee shirt. The company was dismissed and told to reassemble in five minutes. Everyone raced to the barracks to discard their fatigue jackets and olive tee shirts. Five minutes later, everyone reassembled breathlessly. Those unfortunate enough to be more than a second late were asked to drop and give the company twenty. Ten pushups was the normal penalty for small infractions throughout Lou's training experience. This was a small hint of things to come.

Some of the men had taken the opportunity not only to change shirts but also to rid themselves of their steel helmets. Lou had been tempted to do the same thing. Watching to see what others did was of no help since half the men opted for storing their helmets and the other half did not. Lou finally decided that if they were not required to wear the helmets, they would have been informed of that prior to being dismissed. Now that everyone was again in formation the chief instructor informed everyone who had chosen not to wear their helmets to drop down and give the company twenty. Once that was accomplished, they were dismissed and given one minute to retrieve their helmets from the barracks. One minute proved to be an insufficient amount of time for a majority of the men, so that most of them again owed the company twenty pushups before being allowed to rejoin the formation.

Once the company was assembled, the formation was placed into motion with the appropriate orders, and, once on the move, the pace of the march was increased to a double time. Double time is the equivalent of civilian jogging, and it is done in concert, everyone, at least in theory, remaining in step with each other. It was evident that everyone in the formation was initiated to this means of transportation. Within minutes the platoon sergeants were belting out Jody chants.

There are few things that alleviate the rigors of jogging long distances better than Jody chants. Being among several scores of men chanting out verses of poetry in perfect time with the cadence of the run quickly focuses the mind away from the chore. Jody chants were always about the same basic things. Fighting and Fucking. The new chants that Lou learned that day focused on the code of the Airborne, which seemed to be about even more fighting and fucking.

The trip started in the company area and wound its way on a wide path through the woods. Finally the path ended and opened into a wide meadow. The meadow was divided into several distinct areas that were used for various training functions. The area that immediately caught everyone's attention was marked by tall metal towers clustered at the far end of the meadow. The infamous jump towers of the Airborne. All the men knew that within weeks, they would be using those towers to practice parachute landings. It would be the final part of their training prior to actually jumping out of an aircraft.

Surrounding the meadow was a wide track. Once the company reached the track, it made a right turn and began following it around the perimeter of the meadow. Looking across the meadow, Lou saw first one company and then another ahead on the course. The training company continued its journey around the circumference of the field, never slackening its pace or lessening the volume of its chants. It took twenty minutes before the pace began to impinge on Lou's consciousness. Looking around, he quickly assessed the condition of men surrounding him in the formation. Most of them were sweating only lightly, and only a few seemed to be sucking air. Of course, they only appeared to be approaching the halfway point, and Lou wondered exactly how far they would be expected to cover.

As the company approached the area of the track where it had entered, the lead platoon moved back on the path toward the company area. This brought little comfort to Lou. It wasn't his legs, which were beginning to burn from the effort of running, nor the gasping breaths, a sign that he was beginning to reach the end of his endurance, but the damn steel pot that seemed now to weigh a ton on his head. Running was always a big part of training, and Lou had grown used to it. In advanced infantry training, his company ran almost every morning, but never wearing a steel helmet. Those runs were usually limited to a mile, although sometimes the CO would increase that to two miles. Turning back toward the company area, the formation had already exceeded that distance by quite a margin. Lou was beginning to get a headache from the weight of the helmet bobbing up and down on his head. He was tempted to take it off and carry it in his arms but decided against it.

The company had traveled downhill to reach the track surrounding the training area, meaning it would have to travel uphill on its return. This fact had not hit Lou until the company approached the first of several inclines that led up to the top of the hill. For Lou and the other men in the class, it was gut check time. Some of the men around Lou were already having difficulty maintaining the cadence of the run. The loss of their running rhythm did not bode well for their chances of finishing. Lou's vocal contribution to the Jody chants had fallen off considerably. His breathing was labored, and it was easier to mouth the words and save his energy for other matters, such as surviving.

Some of the men surrounding Lou were handling the run without any difficulty. Lou envied their physical conditioning. Being out of infantry training for almost seven weeks had its effects on his conditioning, and Lou wished he had been assigned to Fort Benning straight out of infantry training. Then he had been in top shape. He accomplished the trip the top of the hills, but not without becoming physically drained. By time the company was brought first to a regular march and then to a halt, Lou's legs were wobbly.

On the way, several of the men had dropped out of the formation along the side of the path. The formation moved on past the fallen men without so much as a missed beat. Lou wondered what their fate would be. He found out as the company was formed up at attention. Lou was wondering why they were not dismissed or at least put at parade rest, when the stragglers started showing up. Many of them were staggering from the march up the hill. They were allowed to rejoin the formation without comment. Once all of the men who were going to rejoin the formation were present, everyone was informed that they had one hour to groom and get breakfast, and they were then dismissed.

The formation broke up, and everyone headed off in different directions. Lou took his time heading back to the barracks. After toweling down, switching tee shirts again, and replacing his fatigue jacket, he headed over to the mess hall for some breakfast. In advanced infantry training, he had learned the value of eating a big breakfast. The days had included hours of rigorous exercise. It did not matter whether you were hungry; eating was the only means of providing energy for the body. The chow line was short and it only took a few minutes to fill his plate. He sat at a table with a group of men he did not know. Everyone ate quietly and quickly, much as they had been taught in basic training, where silence and speed were monitored. The other men who had opted to eat first were in a hurry to return to their barracks to shit, shower, and shave.

Lou taught his body to wait until evening before needing to alleviate itself of waste products, after their raw materials were claimed and dispersed into the body. He had seen many a man struggling to take a shit while the rest of the company was in the process of moving out. When both movements were in conflict, the company always won, leaving the

individual sort of hung up in a most uncomfortable manner. Many a man walked around with toilet paper stuffed in his pocket awaiting an opportunity to correct the problem.

Lou had showered the night before and would wait for the evening to do so again. He didn't always understand everyone else's obsession with showering after a little exercise. Having worked in the fields in his youth, Lou had learned that it did no good to worry about getting a little sweaty in the morning if it was just the beginning of a long day of more of the same thing. The fact that the company would be moving the mile or so back down the hill to the training area did not deter many of the other men from showering. Most of the men had headed for the showers first and would be arriving for breakfast without enough time to eat properly.

Shaving was not a problem for Lou. He did so every day but if he missed a day, even a sharp-eyed Drill Instructor was apt to miss the fact. His facial hair did not sprout excessively like some of the men's. Lou did not mind that fact. Most of his adolescent life he had suffered from a case of hideous acne. There was no denying that for years, looking into the mirror had been a difficult proposition. Shaving had always been a painful experience involving many nicks to the plethora of bumps on his face. Being so ugly during his teenage years had done wonders for Lou's self-esteem. Maybe this particular adventure was a result of that experience.

Sitting there having a leisurely breakfast, Lou was able to reflect on the men around him. One thing he had noticed as the men of the company assembled over the past week was the physical makeup of the men surrounding him. Being only five feet seven inches tall, Lou had worried that he would be the shortest man in the outfit. That had not been the case, with some of the men being shorter than he. The group was not composed of hulking giants as he had anticipated. Physically, they appeared to be a normal looking group of guys. He had always pictured the men of the Airborne as being physically intimidating, much like his image of Marines. In one way he was happy it wasn't true, but in another it was disappointing. Maybe the Airborne is just like any other group of men, Lou thought. They seemed normal in almost every way. Lou had expected the group to have a lot of individuals who were very loud and aggressive by nature, like many of the guys on the football team in high school and junior college. There was a smattering of such individuals, but they by no means were the rule. Like in

high school, they were in the minority. Most of the men were friendly, relatively quiet individuals who seemed to get along with each other quite well.

As Lou looked around the room, he observed that the racial makeup of the outfit was clearly abnormal. Fully half the men in the room were Negroes. That there would be a large number of colored people in his class did not surprise him. What shocked Lou was the ratio of them to white men.

His previous military experience had brought him into contact with a number of colored men, many of them drill instructors or Regular Army sergeants. Few of the men in Lou's basic training class had been Negroes. Neither his advanced leadership class nor his advanced infantry training had contained one colored person. Of course, other than himself and the drill instructors, everyone else was a member of a California National Guard outfit. Lou knew most of them were college boys seeking protection from serving in Vietnam by serving the great and wacky state of California. It was evident that there were either no Negroes in California or that they were not patriotic enough to consider guarding the beaches of the state for six years as a worthwhile endeavor. None of the men awaiting officer training school while serving with the MP Company at Fort Ord had been colored either. There had been several serving with the regular MPs in the company, but only a few, and they kept to themselves. Now every other man was colored. It seemed strange to be serving with so many Negroes. Where the hell had they all come from?

Bunk assignments had been made by staff members at the school. It was immediately evident that segregation would not be allowed within the barracks, for the races were mixed in such a way that there could be no doubt that it was purposeful. Two soldiers in Lou's barracks had decided they did not like the sleeping arrangements and had convinced one of the other men to switch bunks. This change was apparent to the sergeant responsible for their barracks, and things were quickly put back into order, with appropriate punishment to those who thought they knew how to run things better than the sergeant. The sergeants could not dictate who people associated with on their time off, but like Lou, most of the men were kept so busy awaiting the beginning of their class that there was almost no free time.

Working on KP for ten days had allowed Lou to note something of a social phenomenon while serving meals. There were three classes of men undergoing Airborne training at any one time. Because it was a three-week course, a new class started every week, with one company finishing its training at the end of each week. Looking around, Lou observed that the seating arrangement he had noted the previous Monday was intact, with the room quickly dividing itself according to race. In an hour, the mess hall would serve another class of trainees, and he doubted that the seating arrangements would become quite different.

The change Lou had observed was most obvious with the graduating class during their jump week. The men in that class had a different look about them. A leaner, meaner look. They were noisier than the other classes. They looked sharper and more confident than the other trainees. One big difference was their seating arrangement within the mess hall. There were no tables with all Negroes or all white folk anymore. Men came in, grabbed chow, looked for someone they knew, and sat to eat with them. It did not matter if they were white or brown or somewhere in between. Something had brought them together that was stronger than any racial bond.

Not that the whole company was made up of just white people and Negroes. There were other races represented within the company. Right now, everyone was keeping close to people of their own, seeking comfort in the familiarity of those that looked most like themselves. It would be interesting to see if this group would undergo the same transformation over the next three weeks and how that process would occur.

The company formed up, made a left face, and began double timing down the hill to the training area. Within minutes, Lou was sweating profusely and glad he had not taken the time to shower. The company was led again onto the track, where they began jogging around the circumference of the field. On the far side of the field was a large, flat parade area with bleachers and a review stand. Lou was sure this was where each class was paraded upon graduation. Lou's class was moved to this area, and quickly directed to seating in the bleachers. The men were happy to be given the opportunity to rest.

There was a podium with a microphone on it. The instructors arranged themselves along the back of the platform and took up a position of parade rest. They did not appear to be

sweating or breathing hard despite having accompanied the men on the run down to the field. They stood there easily, with stern looks on their faces, waiting. Suddenly a voice rang out "Attention!" The instructors snapped to attention, and everyone in the stands quickly followed suit. Lou observed a man climb the stairs and approach the microphone. He moved confidently to his spot and issued the order, "At ease."

"You may be seated," he said. Lou and the other men sat. "I am General Downing. I am the current commander of the jump school here at lovely Fort Benning, Georgia. I want to take this opportunity to talk to all of you before you begin your training. Each of you is wondering about the challenges facing you in the weeks ahead and whether you will measure up to the standards of the Airborne. I cannot answer those questions for you.

"I will tell you that most of you will make it through the training. Not because it is easy, but because of the type of men you are. The Airborne has a tradition of toughness that makes volunteering for such an assignment attractive to only a very small population of men in the Army. After advanced training in combat arms, most men are already intimidated by the task facing them. People tend to think of the Airborne only in terms of jumping out of aircraft. This is an important part of your training, and it is what makes you different from most of the men in the armed services. It is important, but it is only part of what will make you different from other soldiers.

"Being able to parachute into combat is a dubious honor at best. Everything that you will be taught here at jump school will be geared toward making your survival of a jump at least a plausible outcome. There is no way to make it safe since even leaving an aircraft in flight has its perils. Mother Earth is a hard mistress and will generally receive your arrival by air without welcome. Unlike a bird, you will not land gently, and it is imperative you take your training seriously. Some of you will not graduate because you will be injured during your qualifying jumps. I wish this were not true, but since taking over this command two years ago, there has never been a class to graduate that did not lose at least a couple of men due to injury. I have yet to have any student killed in training, but from my experience that is more an act of kindness on God's part than anything else. If you are injured, you will be allowed to repeat the course, unless the injury is serious enough to preclude your jumping.

"The Airborne is an all volunteer unit. You are here today because you volunteered and your conduct during your stay in the military has been acceptable. There are people not here today, who like you volunteered, but whose conduct in the past made them ineligible for Airborne training. Tomorrow most of you will be here because you volunteer to be. Such a commitment must be made on a daily basis by the men of the Airborne. Unlike our brethren in the Marines, whose motto is "Once a Marine, always a Marine," you are free to leave the Airborne at any time.

"It is a tradition in the Airborne that you wear a steel helmet at all times during training. There is a number on that helmet that allows the instructor to keep track of your progress. You are not allowed to remove that helmet at any time without the permission of your instructor. If any member of the company should choose to quit, all he need do is remove his helmet and report to his instructor. If you choose to quit, no one will try to change your mind. Nor is there any loss of honor associated with choosing not to remain Airborne. The fact that you have volunteered to try brings honor to you, and the life of the Airborne is not for everyone.

"The physical training required by the school is rigorous. If you are unable to meet the physical requirements, you will be dismissed from this class. If that happens, but you still wish to become Airborne, you will be reassigned to a special company here on base that will provide you with the necessary physical conditioning. You may think during the course of your training that the amount of physical conditioning is excessive, but it is not. Nor will the training you undergo upon graduating grow easier.

"Every Airborne unit must be prepared to go into action anywhere in the world at a minute's notice. During the course of your career, there is no question about whether you will see combat. The only reasonable question is when. Our country is currently at war in Southeast Asia in the Republic of Vietnam. Some members of this class will be reassigned to units there upon successful completion of the school. Others will receive assignments to other units here in the states and overseas, but as long as the conflict in Vietnam continues, the use of Airborne soldiers there will continue. This fact is not to be taken lightly when you are deciding whether to continue your training.

"Your stay in the Airborne will only be part of your experience should you choose to make a career in the military. It is rare for any man to serve in the Airborne for his whole career. There are several realistic reasons for this.

"The risk of serious injury while living the Airborne life is higher than normal. Some of this is due to the practice jumps required to remain on jump status. Many such injuries cause only temporary loss of jump privileges, but if the injury is serious enough, it can lead to permanent loss of jump status. Anyone who is not capable of participating in Airborne assaults will be transferred out of an Airborne unit. There are no exceptions to that rule. An Airborne life does not revolve around jumping but is more focused on preparing for combat. Once on the ground, Airborne forces must act as light infantrymen operating behind enemy lines. In order to survive in such an environment for even a short period of time requires training and discipline. The training is hard, realistic, and continuous. It is a mentally and physically demanding lifestyle that only the young and energetic thrive on. The attrition rate due to continuous rigorous training is higher in the Airborne than in the rest of the Army.

"An Airborne unit might be sent anywhere in the world. Because of this, your training will take you far from your normal military station for extended periods of time. You will train in the heat of the desert during the hottest part of the year and on frozen tundra during the coldest part of the year. You will train in the mountains and in the jungle. For married men, this means extended periods of time away from the wife and family. For the single men, it means long periods of time away from women and partying.

"After several years in the Airborne, many men just lose the enthusiasm necessary to function well in such an intense environment. They get tired of spending days and nights on field exercises, of standing inspection every week, of keeping their uniforms spotless, and of trying to meet the high expectations of those with whom they serve daily.

"In three weeks, those of you who successfully complete this course will belong to the finest fighting force in the country. Some of you will choose to go on for further training in such specialized groups as Rangers and Special Forces. All such elite groups belong to the same brotherhood you are endeavoring to join. I sincerely wish you gentlemen the best of luck, and I look forward to serving with you. Good day."

The company first sergeant sang out "Attention!" The men sprang to their feet as one.

The general turned and faced the instructors. His voice rang out "Airborne!" as he saluted.

The instructors returned his salute with a resounding "All the way, Sir!" The general did a military left face and marched off the platform. The men's eyes followed his progress as he walked off toward one of the other training areas.

The men remained at attention as another officer moved over to the microphone. "At ease, gentlemen," he said. "Be seated." He issued his commands in a pleasant tone of voice. Once everyone was seated, the officer continued, "I am Captain Billups, and I am in charge of this training company. I too want to take this opportunity to welcome you to the jump school here at Fort Benning.

"I will very quickly explain to you a little about the training you will be receiving over the course of the next three weeks. All of you have completed at least basic and advanced training in your primary MOS, be it infantry or some other area. Because of this, we here at the school consider you already-trained soldiers. You will not be receiving training in military tactics or weapons. This school is about preparing you physically and mentally to join the Airborne family. We will teach you a way of life different from anything else that exists in the military.

"You can be expected to be treated courteously and with dignity at all times. The instructors are not here to harass or embarrass you. They are here to teach and lead you through the necessary training. They have your welfare and safety in mind at all times. If any of you feel that you are being mistreated either mentally or physically during the course of the training, you will be allowed to talk with me at any time.

"You are expected to behave in a military manner at all times. When asked to do something, you will do so quickly and with enthusiasm. You will treat each other and the instructors with respect. During the training period you will be required to move from place to place at the double time. That includes moving from the barracks to the mess hall. There will be daily inspections of the barracks each evening. For the next three weeks, you will eat, breath, and shit Airborne.

"If for any reason you feel unable to continue the training, you will be allowed to leave without questions being asked. If you do not obey an order, you will be dismissed without prejudice. If you are unable to meet the physical demands of the course, you will be transferred. If you are unable to jump from the towers, you will be transferred. If you find yourself unable to jump from an aircraft, you will be transferred. If you bring dishonor to the company or the men you serve with, you will be dismissed.

"This is what makes the Airborne unique. You are all trained soldiers who have asked for the opportunity to join the finest fighting force in the world. As long as you display the ability and attributes necessary to be a member of the Airborne, you will be welcomed. It is an honor that you bestow on the Airborne and the Airborne bestows on you. To those of us who have chosen to serve our country in this manner, it is our greatest source of pride. To leave the Airborne will be difficult, but to be removed from the Airborne or bring dishonor to it is unthinkable. You too will feel this way before you leave here."

Lou wondered how the speeches impacted the men around him. What had been said seemed to have come from somewhere deep inside the speakers. It didn't seem like bullshit like many of the speeches he had listened to throughout his military service. There was always someone trying to sell you the military point of view. Why you were doing what you were doing, and how you were expected to feel about it.

These speeches stirred something deep within Lou's psyche, somewhere close to where his soul resided. He felt good about himself and sure that he had made the right decision on choosing this path into the future. These were the type of men he was interested in serving with, and this was the lifestyle. There was no comparison between these men and the children he had served with during advanced infantry training. The difference was between boys who would never be men and men who would never be less.

Any doubts about his ability to persevere had disappeared. He would rather die than not be able to join these men. This attitude might very well lead him to hell and back, but it felt good. Looking at the men around him, Lou could almost sense the change in attitude. These were not the type of men who would back away from a challenge or a call to arms. One could sense their energy level increase and see the way the set of their jaws hardened. Looks of

determination and smiles had replaced earlier looks of discomfort and weariness. Let the games begin, Lou thought.

Following those two talks, the company began its training in earnest: an hour of physical training, or “PT,” that included all the standard Army exercises. All the men were familiar with them and performed the drills as one, the only difference being the word "Airborne" thrown into the count for each exercise. It took some getting used to and expended extra energy. The first day was a combination of lectures and exercise period, timed to keep the men's minds and bodies occupied. After the noon meal, the men were given an hour to rest and relax. This was followed by a prolonged afternoon training period. The company's training ended at 1800 hours, which left two hours for the men to eat, clean up, and prepare for the daily 2000 hour inspection. By moving at the double time and keeping focused on the job at hand, the men were prepared for the inspection and passed without difficulty.

Lights out was at 2200 hours, and so there was an hour to relax. Lou sat on his foot locker, shining his brass belt buckle. The man who used the bottom bunk sat next to him on his own locker. Until now neither man had really talked to each other, a condition that did not bother Louis in the least. He was by nature a reticent person, slow to join a conversation without an invitation and comfortable with silence. Social interaction was not his forte.

"Name's Jim," the man said.

"Lou."

"I'm tired," Jim said.

"Me too," Lou replied.

"Where you from, Lou?"

"St. Louis, you?"

"Nashville, Tennessee."

"I'm an eleven bravo," Jim announced.

"Same."

"I ain't never flown before," Jim stated.

"Me neither," Lou confessed.

"You always so talkative, Lou?" Jim asked.

"Nope," Lou said with a smile.

Jim laughed. "Me, I'll talk to anyone who will listen. Man what a first day. I'm in pretty good shape, but they really pushed us today. You looked really bushed after dinner, but you seem to be perking up a little."

"Yeah," Lou replied. "Been out of training for a while, but I'm feeling pretty good right now. I think I'll be okay if I make it through tomorrow. What did you think of those first two talks this morning?"

"Liked what I heard, but my momma says, talking don't mean nothing. I come here right from AIT, getting tired of being treated like an idiot child. I like the way the instructors behave here, treat you like a man, like you one of them. Thought maybe those officers this morning shucking us, but now I think I might just found a good outfit. Feels good."

"Yeah, I feel the same thing. I been getting sort of disappointed about the Army. Lots of guys just sort of putting in their time, not taking it seriously. This feels real. The people around here feel real. Serious. Know what I mean?" Lou asked.

"Yeah, also feels good to have so many brothers around," Jim replied.

"I noticed that," Lou replied. "Why do you think that is?"

For a minute Jim did not answer. Lou thought that maybe he had insulted the man in some way. Having Negro friends was something new for Louis. "I don't know," Jim answered. "I joined, well, I hope this doesn't sound stupid, but because I want to fight for my country. I don't want to wait tables or drive a jeep. I want to serve like other men."

Lou laughed. "If that's stupid, then just call me Stupid. Let's not tell the others," Lou said, lowering his voice, "just in case we are the only ones here who feel that way."

Jim laughed, "Yeah. Just you and me, Brother, just you and me."

The days passed. Jim and Lou became close friends, and soon their circle of friends included any man who chose to join them. The feeling of awkwardness that Lou felt talking to Jim because of racial differences quickly disappeared. Jim was just another soldier seeking his destiny in the company of other men. Fate, in the form of an Airborne instructor, had placed them together. The intense training was a shared experience that gave the men a feeling of kinship with each other. It quickly became apparent that race meant nothing in their quest to

become Airborne. Each would have to make it on their own, but they could rely on each other for support and friendship.

The actual training to become Airborne qualified was really quite simple and assuredly tedious. It started with the simplest of all techniques: falling down. The student stood sideways on a concrete wall, a foot above a sand filled arena. On a command from the instructor, the student would hop sideways to the sand below. Knees bent, feet together. As the feet hit the sand the student was taught to allow their sideways momentum to continue, causing them to fall on their side. The impact was distributed first to the calf, then the thigh, hip, and thorax, lessening the stress of the impact on the body. Simple exercise, right?

The instructors were patient, always singing out the same refrain without rancor or pity. It was a simple phrase that Lou learned to hate over the first two weeks of training. Usually it consisted of a simple, "Again, B68." Sometimes the instructor would add, "Better, B68. Again." Everyone was run through the exercise until each of them accomplished the landing three times to the satisfaction of the instructor. Lou was in a group of twenty recruits who performed this exercise with one student quickly replacing the next in place on the wall. As each student successfully accomplished three acceptable landings, they were allowed to sit off to the side and wait for the others to finish the exercise. After a period of time, the line began getting shorter and shorter, which meant that the men who were having trouble completing the exercise began to repeat the exercise at an ever increasing rate. Finally, there were only three of them, and one was Lou.

It was really such an easy exercise that Lou was embarrassed when he couldn't seem to get it right after many tries. The other students were watching them closely. Lou was beginning to wonder how long it would be before the instructor finally lost his patience and flunked the remaining three men out of the class. “Yeah, I went out for the Airborne, but flunked out because I didn't know how to fall,” Lou imagined himself explaining to his family. Finally the instructor told the whole group to take ten. Lou and the other two moved over to where the rest of the group sat on the ground.

Mentally, Lou was braced for the ridicule he was sure to receive from the group. At first they were all quiet, which made Lou nervous. "Don't worry about it," one of the men said.

"Yeah. You got it right a couple of times. You're just getting uptight. Just don't give up."

"Hey, I'll help you practice this evening if you want," one of the guys offered.

"Relax" said another. No one said anything negative or laughed. It didn't make Lou feel good about not being able to perform a simple fall, but he was glad the group seemed to be behind him and the others having trouble.

The group was lined up again for the same exercise, except this time they were facing in the opposite direction, landing on their left side instead of their right side. Lou was amazed when he was successful after just three practice falls. He was the first one in the group to sit. He was glad when the other two guys who had trouble earlier both successfully completed the exercise. Once everyone had completed it, the instructor called out Lou's number. Jumping up quickly he reported to instructor.

"Quite a difference when you fall to the left, B68," the instructor said. "You got any explanation for that, B68?"

"No, Sergeant," Lou replied.

"You ever seriously injure the right leg?"

"No, Sergeant," Lou said. *Hey, wait a minute*, Lou's mind said. "I did twist my right ankle pretty seriously in basic training. Almost had to recycle, but it's fine now."

"Well, that probably explains it," the sergeant replied. "It's funny, but we see it all the time. You just don't trust the ankle yet, even though it seems to be completely healed. If it weren't, you never would have been able to land on it thirty times today. It's something you will have to overcome, because you may have to land on that side off the tower next week. We'll work on that later. The company always allows time in the afternoon for everyone to work on individual skills. I'll meet you here then, and we'll get it straightened out." There was no doubt in the man's voice, and now that Lou had an explanation for the problem, he had no doubt about his ability to overcome it.

After learning the simple technique of falling down correctly, they moved on to a height of three feet. At that height, correct technique became more important, and most of the men were able to accomplish their training goal with little difficulty.

The instructors had lectures about the parachutes the men would be using. They were introduced to a couple of the men whose job it was to pack the chutes. It was explained what controls were in place to ensure that the chutes were packed properly. One such control was the fact that periodically a chute was picked at random from a rigger's stock and used by him for a jump. It was a real incentive for them to pay close attention to their job.

Military chutes were not very sophisticated. They were meant to open after being released by a static line attached inside the aircraft. The canopy, once deployed, was a simple circular dome that deployed ten feet above the jumper's head and was capable of slowing a man down enough that his landing, if executed with proper technique, would be no different from jumping from a ten-foot ledge. Practice jumps were made from an altitude of 2500 feet, which was high enough that if the main chute did not deploy, the jumper would have time enough to deploy his emergency chute.

The men were taught how to put the chute on. The harness attaching the parachute to the jumper was a primitive but effective contraption. The jumper stepped into it, placing each leg through a separate loop of canvas straps, which were then brought up tight in the crotch area. The harness then extended up the body and over the shoulders with other straps reaching across the body. Once all the straps were securely in place with the harness tightened to jumping tautness, it was difficult to walk. The main chute was now in position on the jumper’s back, giving him a definite Hunchback of Notre Dame look. Then an emergency chute was attached to the jumper's harness on his abdomen.

The emergency chute was exactly that. It was not a duplicate chute, and its deployment when the main chute was already open could lead to catastrophic consequences. It could become entangled in the main chute, making both chutes ineffective. Because it was attached in front of the jumper, even if it deployed properly, once activated it would put the jumper's body in a poor landing position, almost guaranteeing a difficult landing. This chute was smaller in diameter than the main chute by quite a margin. It was not nearly as efficient at slowing the jumper’s fall as a main chute, and the force of impact with the ground was twice that of a normal landing, not a pleasant thought.

The main parachute was attached to the jumper's harness by two canvas straps called risers that attached to the harness at the shoulders on either side of the jumpers head. By raising his arms directly over his head a jumper could grab hold of the risers. The jumper could not control the flight of the parachute, like some of the new parachutes that were being developed for jumping from really high altitudes. The wind would determine where the jumper was going to land. By pulling down on one of the risers, it was possible for the jumper to turn the parachute so that he could position his body for landing. Ideally this meant the jumper was facing sideways to the wind so that his body touched down while traveling sideways. Then he had to merely execute a perfect side roll.

While all this sounded good in theory, Lou knew from his reading about many such military assaults that the realities of the situation could be quite different. Landing in a rock strewn field could be difficult on the body. Landing in water, or trees, or on houses could all be hazardous to one's health. Perhaps knowing too much was worse in some ways than not knowing enough.

During World War Two the British would parachute spies into enemy held territory to work with the various underground resistance groups located throughout Europe. At first they sent their spies through the Army's jump school in the hopes of reducing the dangers of such activity. The problem was that this sometimes slowed the delivery of such men to Europe and did not guarantee they would land safely. Many of their people were getting hurt during practice jumps even under the best of circumstances, sometimes causing the cancellation of certain projects. It was finally decided that the spies would have just as much chance of surviving a single jump by simply strapping a parachute on their backs and having them exit the aircraft. It worked, with no significant increase in serious injuries to their forces. The same principle applied to aircraft pilots and bomber crewmen. When their aircraft was shot out from under them, it was simply a matter of either the chute opened or it didn't, and they either landed safely or they didn't. Not a lot of time or energy went into making them jump qualified.

This did not lessen the need for learning proper jumping techniques by members of the Airborne. By being in top physical condition and using proper landing techniques, it was possible to make multiple jumps without injury. One just had to accept the fact that there were

certain hazards associated with the activity of military jumping that made each jump an interesting possibility. Having a largely uncontrollable parachute was one of them.

The risers were attached to the jumper's shoulders by means of a quick release device. It was possible for the jumper to reach up and disconnect the riser. These devices served two functions. First, if a jumper found himself attached to a parachute that had only partially deployed, he could reach up and disconnect both risers using the quick releases and therefore free himself from the malfunctioning chute. It would then be possible to release his emergency chute without worrying about it becoming entangled in the main parachute.

The other reason for having quick releases came after the parachutist reached the landing zone. Upon landing safely, a soldier would get quickly to his feet and deflate his chute, remove his harness, gather his equipment, and prepare to fight. What had been discovered was that many a man had difficulty springing to his feet loaded down with equipment, and sometimes the chute did not collapse, but rather with a good wind began dragging the soldier along the ground. So they had come up with the idea of quick release devices. Of course Lou wondered what would happen should one decide to let go at the same time the primary chute was being deployed. After having a chance to work with the equipment, Lou discovered the truth about these particular quick release devices. It would take himself and the rest of the men in the company along with some explosives to actually get them to release. Maybe the manufacturer assumed that fright would give the men unbelievable strength, but it soon became apparent that mere mortals did not possess the strength necessary to release themselves from the risers. That was okay with Lou, who was willing to take his chances staying attached to the parachute.

Once everyone became comfortable with the necessary landing techniques, they moved on to learning the proper way to exit an aircraft. Sounds really easy to someone not familiar with the procedure. Head for the door and step out, right?

Each group was loaded into a mock fuselage and lined up facing the rear. The door to be exited was located on the side of the fuselage. The instructor shouted, "Everyone out in twenty seconds," and stood back as the string of men tried to exit the door as a mob. Men in the rear pushed forward as the man at the door tried to spot a place on the ground to land.

Men got tangled up, and someone tripped. The man who had fallen was almost carried out by the man behind him who was being moved forward by the weight of men pushing from behind. After everyone had more or less made it out safely the instructors began teaching them how to do it correctly.

With twenty men jumping one after another while the aircraft was quickly covering the length of the landing zone, it was important that everyone exit in a coordinated, efficient manner. If the stick was slow getting out the door, the last men in the stick would be jumping outside the chosen landing zone. The aircraft was going as slow as possible but was still covering the distance at a ground speed of over one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Twenty seconds over a landing zone ensured that the string of men would already be very spread out when it landed; any longer and the men would be dispersed over such a large area as to make their re-assembly once on the ground a major undertaking.

A man tripping during an actual jump could be a catastrophe. His chute might deploy inside the aircraft. The men behind him could not move forward until either he continued his jump or he was unhooked and moved to the side. They could not simply jump over him or move around him, because his static line would become entangled in theirs and might activate their chutes early. The aircraft might be well beyond the landing zone before things could be straightened out, leaving a whole stick of soldiers hung up as the aircraft tried to circle back and find the landing zone again. In combat situations, this meant the disruption of squads and platoons as combat teams.

Next, the group was introduced to the standard jump commands. The jump master stood by the forward facing door and bellowed out voice commands while signaling the group with hand commands. "Stand up." The men struggled to their feet and turned, facing the jumpmaster. "Hook-up," the jumpmaster bellowed while signaling to the group. The men reached up and attached the ends of their static lines to the guidewire overhead. "Check Equipment." Each man was responsible for tracing the course of the static line of the man in front of him, making sure there were no kinks or knots. They checked the harness assembly one last time to make sure everything was hooked together correctly and tightly. The last man in line would check the man in front of him, tap him on the shoulder when done, and then turn

around. The man he had tapped would turn around and check his gear before both turned back toward the door. "Sound Off."

The first man would holler, "One ready!" at the same time as he raised his right hand with the palm facing the jumpmaster.

Immediately the second man would yell "Two ready!" while repeating the hand signal. One after another the men in the stick would sound off and signal the jumpmaster that they were indeed ready to jump.

"Stand in the Door!" The first man in the stick would move forward and take a good jump position in the door of the aircraft. The jumpmaster would have a handful of the first man's harness to make sure he did not leave the aircraft before the green jump light informed him they were over the landing zone. "Go!" The first man would explode out the door, his place taken immediately by the man in back of him. An instant's pause to set and then "Go!" The men in the stick shuffled forward, neither pushing nor delaying. Once in motion, the stick moved forward quickly. The men were taught to shuffle forward, first left foot then right foot even with the left foot, then left foot forward again. The feet sliding along the deck of the aircraft so as not to trip over other people's feet. A ballet of movement, ending with an explosive exit from the aircraft door, each man disappearing in the blink of an eye. No hesitation, no thought to the consequences. Just set and "Go!"

The men practiced exiting the fuselage. It was important to take a good position in the doorway prior to the attempt.

The jump out had to be of sufficient force to ensure that one's body was far enough away from the aircraft that when the force of the air grabbed it and tried to slam it back, it would stay clear. The correct position was one foot forward, legs bent in a slight crouch, one hand on either side of the door. Once the command "Go!" was issued, along with a firm tap on the shoulder, the paratrooper exploded forward, using his legs and arms to slingshot himself into the air beyond. Once beyond the door, the man snapped his body into a tight position meant to stabilize his body in flight while the chute deployed. The men were taught to put their legs together and cross their arms over their emergency chutes. The arms and legs were held tight, in the hope that they would not become entangled in the static line. The head was

positioned forward, the chin tight to the chest. Lou thought of the consequences of the static line encircling one's head. Not a pretty thought. The men were taught to count aloud to ten. Within ten seconds of leaving the aircraft, the main chute would deploy, bringing one's free fall to a screeching halt. If this did not occur, the jumper was to pull the ripcord on his emergency chute immediately. At 2500 feet, there was enough time for the emergency chute to open if you did not delay in activating it. Don't do it before the count of ten, but don't hesitate once past ten. There was not a large margin for error in this decision making process.

The men practiced exiting the fuselage over and over again for hours. Each man could practice the maneuver individually. Explode out and assume the correct position. Exiting as a group was the real challenge. Knowing that each man in the group was relying on the next to do it right, and that if he messed up it could have severe consequences on the others, brought a certain amount of stress to each practice session. The thought that he would be doing this for real in another week or two added more pressure. For the first time in their training, all the men were suddenly forced to face the reality of danger. CONTINUED…