

SIR!

NOVEMBER 1942

MY FIRST JUMP

by

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IT has been three weeks since I started training. Now I am approaching the climax of the course. I'm about to experience my first jump.

We are ready now, and take our positions in the plane. In a few minutes the motors roar and this great transport plane clears the ground. Each of us is ready to bail out into space for the first time.

I can't help but feel it's all a dream. What am I doing up here. It all seems fantastic! I must be imagining things. Higher and higher the plane goes. I get a queer feeling deep in my stomach; I must get a grip on myself—stop this feeling of mounting hysteria. Now, above all, I must be cool. This is my big test. This is where all our wits are needed—my life depends on it.

I look out the windows; the ground is serene and beautiful. It seems to soothe my nerves, but the humming of those motors brings me back to reality. The vivid mental picture of myself standing in the doorway of the plane, ready to jump keeps coming back to me. I fight against it, but it's no use; I can't seem to stem the vision of that moment . . . of waiting for the command "Go" from the jump master. Will I be able to hold my nerve or will I give out at the last moment? I am really sweating it out, as the saying goes around here.

We are up about 1500 feet. The plane banks sharply and turns to the left. We spot our jump field through the windows. The plane levels off nicely and slows down to the usual hundred miles an hour. We know it's a matter of moments now, but they seem like hours. Everyone sits up rigidly; no one speaks. We anxiously wait for the jump master's next command.

Mental flashes keep passing through my mind and I start thinking of my Parachute training. Training that was much more intensified than my ordinary Infantry basic training.

Those long hours of calisthenics hardened me and gave me endurance beyond my wildest imagination. Those daily double time hikes started off as nightmares but soon I could go for miles without a whimper.

The trainasium is another man made torture device, which is included in our regular training. I never knew that my body could be bent into so many positions, until I had finished weeks of physical exercise on the trainasium! We worked and sweated and cursed but never could believe that this strange device could make big men weak and small men strong.

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I crawled upside down and backwards, through its squares of iron pipes, climbed its 30 feet of hand burning ropes, jumped off its high towers and platforms, forwards and backwards and ran up and down its inclined ladders, until I thought I was standing on my head.

But I don't regret one bruise or twist, one jump or rope burn, sore ankle or muscle, for I know that every bit of hard work made my chances of coming through my jumps without injury considerably better.

The art of tumbling and doing flips was first taught to us from the standing position on a mat. We worked at it for hours every day until we got it down to near perfection. We tumbled in the gym, then in sawdust, later on the hard earth. Then we were ready to do a series of four tumbles, such as, right front tumble, left front tumble, etc. and then reversed to right rear tumble, left rear tumble, right and left, etc. Next came the tumbling platforms; first, we tumbled from the four foot platform, then, the six foot, and finally, the ten foot platform. We tumbled so often and so hard that I thought my body would never recover from its many bruises and aches.

The mock tower, landing trainer, and the suspended harness were special devices which helped a great deal in developing our minds and bodies to coordinate every muscle; to control and handle our chutes in flight; to get to the ground safe and unhurt.

I recall vividly the 250 foot control towers and wind machines, and what all our instructors had repeated so many times to us. We were told that if we successfully passed this stage of the training, then we'd have no trouble making our jumps from a plane; that it was much easier up there. Although the training on the towers made our jumping easier, it was far from what we expected or were told; certainly not easier than making a free jump.

There were two types of towers; one was a free type, when the chute was released at the top you floated to the ground free. It taught us how to handle our chutes and make body turns, etc., but it was nothing like a real jump.

Sometimes we came down a bit hard and got a jolt; a few would get hurt, but that is always to be expected in this kind of work.

The other tower consisted of three special devices: the first was an ordinary bench which carried us up to the top of the tower, 250 feet high. It released us and we floated straight down, guided by cables at the sides, at about the same speed of a chute in flight from a plane. Its sole purpose was to get us accustomed to height, for after several rides, we got so we really enjoyed it.

Another device was the suspended harness, which carried us also up to the top of the tower suspended in the regular harness used with our chutes. It was automatically released at the top, and we would float straight down guided by cables, at about the same rate of speed as from a free jump, i.e., at about 30 feet a second. This gave us a jolt when we hit the ground. On this device we learned how to make body turns, and how to get in proper position before hitting the ground, so as not to absorb too much of the shock.

The other device on this tower was the shock

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harness, dreaded by all. We'd get into our regular harness lying on our stomachs; then we were carried up to about 150 feet, face down, with our heads lower than our feet. When the instructor gave the order, we'd pull the rip cord, releasing a catch, causing us to fall free for twenty feet, where we'd be caught by a steel cable that jerked us in all directions. During our fall, we'd change the rip cord handle from one hand to the other, counting, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand. If at the end of our three thousand count, our chute had not opened we'd know our emergency cord should be pulled. This would jolt and jerk us a bit, but it was a real thrill. It was as near to the real jerk we got when we dove from the plane as anything could be. (The jerk comes from the opening of the chute.)

Last but not least, I'm reminded of those long hours spent at our Parachute packing shed. Four hours every day, six days a week, for the past three weeks, doing nothing but learning all about chutes; every seam and section, every line and panel had to be learned and known from memory. The sewing of the harness, pack covers, and tying the break cord had to be done to perfection. The folding of the silken panels and stowing of the suspension lines was an art in itself; it had to be perfect. This gave us much needed confidence in our chutes. We handled them carefully and felt good in doing the job right—our lives depended on it.

SUDDENLY, I hear someone shouting above the roar of the motors, "Stand up and Hook up!" It's the command of the Jump Master. . . . I must have been dreaming; his shout brings me back to my senses. I can hear the thumping of my heart, beating faster as the leading man gets ready to go through this ordeal of a first jump. Mine isn't far away.

Number one man is in the ready position by the door, the jump master is in his position lying on the floor of the (Continued on page 40) plane, close to the door, and to the side of the leading man.

The jump master takes one glancing look at the ground below and shouts—"Go!"—and off we go, one behind the other. We jump in groups of six or eight, depending on conditions, and jump faster than one each second.

I vaguely remember leaping out the door before I knew or realized it. My static line hooked to the cable on the plane, pulled the cover off my chute. Then, when the weight of my body hit the extended line, the connection broke and I fell free . . . falling about 200 feet before my chute was fully opened.

I counted, but before I could finish, I felt a sharp jerk; it felt like my arms and legs were being torn from their sockets. But the full impact hit me in the chest, knocking my wind out. (Sometimes this causes blackouts). When I became conscious of everything about me, I looked up at my canopy. It was the most exhilarating sensation I ever knew, as I hung there, apparently motionless in space and silence. It was so still up there, I could talk in almost conversational tones to other men drifting down around me.

I began oscillating like a pendulum. I looked down. Suddenly the ground came into view, rushing up at terrific speed. (Actually we were dropping about 20 feet per second.) Previously, I felt as tho' I were standing still.



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I was swinging wildly as I struck the ground. I tumbled head over heels and settled on my stomach. The chute began dragging me. I dimly remembered what I had learned in training. I turned over on my back pulling my knees up against my stomach, and with supernatural strength, I pulled hard on my chute risers; pivoting my body and pointing my feet almost parallel to the risers. At the same time I dug my heels into the earth. With a fast jerk, I was up on my feet, running toward and around the chute, causing it to collapse. I released the harness from my body; then I sat down. It was a hard jolt, but I wasn't hurt. I ran my hands over the damp earth and I felt very good.

My first jump had been O.K. Any jump you can walk away from, is a good jump.

Each new jump gives us a different experience. We jump at various altitudes, starting at about 1500 feet and coming down to as low as 500 feet.

My last jumps were made at 800 feet. I've seven jumps to my credit. At present I'm training with the Demolition Class and there are many difficult jumps ahead.

Two of the worse kinds of jumps that can be made are night jumps and water landings. Then anything can happen. We just trust to luck and do our best.

I've made two tree landings and once overshot the field and landed in a swamp, but outside of minor bruises, all of my jumps have been good ones. I've walked away.

One thing I'll never forget is my first jump, and the fact that I'm still here!

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