

WE'RE THE PARACHUTE TROOPS

Breath-catching experiences of America's new sky battalion, told for the first time by the Army's No. 1 jump-fighter. If you want to know how it feels to hit the ground, try stepping off the top of your motorcar at 15 miles an hour...

by Capt. William T. Ryder,

WITH WILLIAM A. H. BIRNIE



I SUPPOSE you'd call me America's No. 1 parachute trooper. Anyhow, I happened to be the first man to volunteer when Uncle Sam recently decided to go in for jump-fighters, the first one to be accepted, and the first one to bail out of an airplane.

A couple of hours after I engineered that first jump—my muscles were still aching plenty—a friend of mine with an odd sense of humor called me on the telephone. "Congratulations!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I just heard you did it."

"Thanks," I replied, "but why all the rush?"

He laughed merrily. "Maybe I won't be able to congratulate you tomorrow. Maybe you'll get killed." Then he hung up.

My friend's crack has stuck in my mind principally, I think, because death is one subject we never mention in the new 501st Parachute Battalion, as we're called. We operate under a gentleman's agreement not to talk about the unpleasant possibility that something might go wrong on the way down tomorrow—or the day after. Nearest I ever heard anyone come to it was when a new volunteer turned to a veteran of a couple of weeks and said, "Suppose my lines got fouled and . . ."

"Brother," interrupted the old-timer dryly, "you belong back on the parade ground if you want to go around supposing."

EARLY PARACHUTE INFANTRY

That's typical of our outfit. Take it from me, Uncle Sam today is breeding the toughest, guttiest jump-fighters that ever bailed out of a bomber with a grin and a wisecrack. Naturally, we don't kid ourselves. Down inside, we all know that ours is not only the newest, but probably the most perilous branch of the United States armed forces. I don't mind admitting that my heart skips half a dozen beats every time I stand at the open door of a plane and stare down . . . and down.

Sure, some Army and Navy pilots take a couple of jumps during their training period, but that's only so they won't get cold feet if they ever *have* to bail out. The general attitude among pilots is: "Why waste time practicing something you have to be perfect in the first time?" We're the only fighters who make a cold-blooded habit of jumping day after day, week after week. Ever hear of the famous Caterpillar Club? The only qualification for membership is *one* jump in an emergency. Most of us have forgotten how many times we've stepped off into space. Personally, I stopped counting when I passed No. 13 without a mishap.

Parachuting is never ping-pong, any way you look at it, but the way we have to jump is enough to give a life-insurance salesman a permanent attack of the jitters. Civil authorities won't let stunt men bail out below 2,000 feet, because it's supposed to be too dangerous. But it doesn't take an expert rifleman to pick off a parachutist floating down like a partridge from that height. So we do most of our jumping from 750 feet.

If you tumbled out of a plane at 750 feet without a chute, you'd hit the ground in approximately 8½ seconds. Remember that figure a minute. Now climb back up and imagine you're jumping with one of our rigs.

You're wearing two chutes. A secret device should open the main one on your back automatically in 1½ seconds after you bail out. If something goes haywire, we figure you need 4 seconds to realize it and pull the rip cord of the emergency chute on your (*Continued on page 82*) chest. Then another half second passes before that second chute catches the air.

That means a total of 6 seconds has elapsed before you start floating safely. And, at that instant, you are exactly 2½ seconds—and between 200 and 250 feet—from a particularly messy death.

Of course, if the first chute opens properly, you glide comfortably down in 40 or 50 seconds. But, in an emergency, you don't have much time to hold a debate about the right thing to do. You just do it—or else.

I GOT in on the ground floor of American jump-fighting early last summer. Uncle Sam was quick to take the hint when the Nazi legions goose-stepped into the Lowlands and France behind dozens of daredevil *falschirmjager*, as German parachutists are called, who had already seized strategic bridges and forts.

I was serving with the 29th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning, Georgia, when I heard rumors that the War Department was planning to canvass our regiment for volunteer jumpers. To me that spelled adventure and opportunity.

So I handed in my name. After a few days

EARLY PARACHUTE INFANTRY

of anxious waiting, during which my wife talked of sending me to a psychiatrist to have my head examined, I was told that I had been the first man accepted.

My first job as a parachute trooper was to help select 46 enlisted men for the pioneer test platoon. More than 200 men volunteered, possibly because word had gone around that jumpers would receive extra pay—at least \$54 a month, instead of the usual \$36 for first-class privates. But our standards were tough. We rejected everyone cold who wasn't between 21 and 32 years old, unmarried, agile, and athletic, free from any trace of heart trouble and high or low blood pressure, and who hadn't served at least one year in the Regular Army.

If a man filled all these qualifications, we questioned him and his company commander to find out whether he was blessed with all-round soldierly qualities, superior intelligence, and the ability to think clearly in a crisis. After all, we didn't want anyone signing his death warrant by signing up with us.

The men we finally accepted were as hardy a bunch as I've ever met. Many of them had grown up out-of-doors on near-by Georgia farms. They included some of our regiment's crack athletes—boxers, golfers, rifle experts, basketball, football, and baseball stars. As I looked them over that first day, I felt instinctively that they were men who could look at danger and thumb their noses.

But there were few heroics during those first six weeks of training before we were deemed ready to bail out of a plane.

At first, I spent most of my time rolling around in the billowing dust of the Benning airfield, practicing calisthenics and tumbling like a spring football candidate. That was to harden my muscles and teach me to fall artistically, because landing from a jump is like stepping off the top of a sedan traveling at 10 or 15 miles an hour.

One morning a private looked up from the dust after a neat flip and grinned, "Say, if I don't make good as a parachutist, I can always go in vaudeville." His buddy laughed. "If you don't make good here, you won't have a chance to try anything else."

After two weeks of strenuous conditioning, I was introduced to the mysteries of the chute itself. I spent hours learning how to fold that 28-foot canopy and stow it away in the chute bag as neatly as a Chinese laundryman would. It's an art, I discovered. Today I can do the job in 30 minutes, but the first time I needed two hours. Each jumper, by the way, packs his own chute. That's sound, psychologically, because you're sure to handle that silk mighty carefully if you know your life depends on it.

Next, Warrant Officer Harry (Tug) Wilson, a veteran jumper whom we borrowed from the Air Corps, hauled me up in a chute harness suspended from the roof of a hangar. Hanging there with about as much dignity as a sack of potatoes, I was told how to manipulate the riser lines of my chute.

"You can maneuver a chute just like a roadster," Tug explained patiently. "If you want to slide to the right, pull on your right risers and collapse that side of your chute. Pull on your left risers, and you'll slide to the left. Pull on all of them at once, and you'll speed up the rate of your descent. That trick will come in handy if someone starts using you for target practice."

Tug had an answer for everything. Coming down over water? Simple. Just unhitch your harness and hang onto your lines until you're about ten feet above the surface; then hold your nose and drop. Free of its load, the canopy will drift off to one side. Heading for a tree? That's bad. Better go to work on those risers and miss it. Trees aren't half as cushiony as they look.

Final lap of our training was a week at Hightstown, N. J., where we all jumped with

EARLY PARACHUTE INFANTRY

both guided and free chutes from a 125-foot tower like the one you may have seen at the New York World's Fair. That gave us a taste for the real thing. Theory mastered, we all began to itch for the day when we could try it out by jumping from a plane.

BACK at Benning, the big day dawned bright and clear. First event! The men lined up on the airfield to watch a plane drop a cargo of rifles attached to a chute. This demonstration was supposed to prove that a modern chute is as reliable as an elevator.

But the fates stepped in and staged a heartbreaking accident. The plane released the cargo at 300 feet, but the chute never opened. You could hear the thud half a mile away. The rifles looked like pretzels—when we dug them up.

The private next to me gulped. “Man alive,” he murmured, “that’s the damn’dest sight I ever seen!”

Of course, there was an explanation—some mechanical flaw. *Our* chutes would be brand-new, checked and double-checked. Nothing at all to worry about.

I scanned the men’s faces to see how they had taken it. Thirty seconds passed in silence. Then one youngster stepped forward. “Well, sir, let’s get ahead with our own jumps.”

I breathed easier.

As an officer, I insisted on the right to make the first jump. A dozen enlisted men went up with me. At 1,500 feet—usual altitude for a novice jump—the pilot throttled the big transport plane down to a flabby 95 miles an hour. Bundled up like an Indian squaw, I moved over to the open door. Below me—miles below me—cruised an ambulance, ready for me . . . if.

Tug thumped me on the shoulder. “Okay!” he shouted in my ear. “JUMP!”

This was the moment I’d been dreaming about for weeks. For an instant I felt a ridiculous urge to turn to Tug and say, “What’s that? I didn’t quite catch it.”

Actually, I was lucky. I had to think about the other men in the plane. If I hesitated, how could I expect them to bail out when their turn came up?

So I jumped . . .

. . . into a battering, merciless tornado. As the chute opened, sledge-hammer blows collapsed my lungs, sent black spots dancing before my eyes. I was still fighting for breath when chaos ceased, and the universe fell gradually into focus. Now I could see the plane hurtling on ahead of me. Everything turned strangely peaceful, silent, motionless. I looked up and saw the silk glowing golden in the morning sun. That chute, take my word, seemed mighty friendly.

But the exhilarating sensation of floating in space ended abruptly. When I was about 50 feet off the ground, the whole earth seemed suddenly to come to life and leap savagely at my feet. Reaching up and grabbing my lines, I braced myself—and waited. The jolt of landing bowled me off my feet, and I rolled head over heels before I succeeded in spilling the air.

The ambulance raced up as I struggled out of the harness, and the driver inspected me, rather expectantly, I thought. Then he grinned, “No business today?” I shook my head. One thought kept pounding through my brain: I’d done it. Others would follow me. Dozens of them, hundreds, thousands . . .

America’s parachute troops were really on the way!

NOW it was the men’s turn to bail out. A veteran of one jump, I went up with the first batch of twelve to serve, I hoped, as a morale-booster. That trip taught me a lesson about human nature: No matter how carefully you pick your men, there’s always something you can’t predict. Unnaturally silent, they took their places in line accord-

EARLY PARACHUTE INFANTRY

ing to positions they had drawn the night before. First man, whom I'll call Jones, was a quiet, apparently nerveless fellow who had turned down several bids for his No. 1. He *wanted* to bail out first.

But something happened to Jones's nerve when he reached the gaping door of the plane. Standing beside him, I saw his face go white, his hands tremble. He stared down and gasped. Then he turned to me with glassy eyes. "I can't do it, sir."

My heart sank. I thought of the gag about the foreign parachute plane manned by a crew of twenty—one pilot, one copilot, one radio operator, one mechanic, one parachutist, and fifteen men to push him out.

"Go to the back of the line," I ordered, hoping Jones would borrow some courage from his buddies. The next man stepped up, and I noticed he didn't look down at all. I slapped his shoulder. "Ground floor, please!" he shouted as he lurched forward.

Jones was the last man to reach the door. Muscles taut, he swayed forward; I thought he was going. But he stepped back. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled, eyes on the floor. "I didn't think it would be like this."

He sat huddled in a corner of the plane until we reached the ground. I took the other men aside and warned them against calling him a quitter, but I don't think it was necessary. Brave men, I've noticed, seldom accuse anyone else of a lack of bravery.

Next day, Jones was transferred back to his regiment. His record in the Army was excellent, and my bet is it will continue to be. Jumping just wasn't in his line, that's all.

All the first jumps went off beautifully, but I knew that record wouldn't hold up long. It didn't. On his third jump, Private Aubrey Eberhardt, a Texan who stands six feet five inches tall and weighs a cool 200 plus, found himself plummeting to earth upside down, his feet tangled overhead in his chute lines. If he landed that way, he knew he stood an 80-20 chance of cracking his skull or snapping his neck.

Fortunately, his nerves were as steady as a watchmaker's hand. He reached up calmly and tugged away on those lines with all his strength. That gave him enough lag to enable him to extricate his feet, and he dropped into an upright position about 150 feet off the ground.

Next day, another jumper realized he was falling much too fast. He looked up, and what he saw chilled his blood. His lines were tangled and his chute was only half open. In a split second he jerked the rip cord of his reserve chute, but he was already too close to the ground. Before it opened fully he crashed with a thud that knocked him cold and sprained both ankles. Lucky boy, he had picked the only spot of soft, marshy ground in the whole field. Otherwise . . .

Nothing has gone wrong on any of my jumps—yet. If and when, I hope I stay as cool as one Navy rigger I know.

HE DECIDED one day to test one of the chutes he had been packing for pilots. He asked a flier to take him up to 2,000 feet. The pilot happened to take him to 2,300 feet before the rigger bailed out.

Then came a fantastic accident. As he jumped, the rigger fell, not below the parachute, but directly into it. The wind whipped the silk around his body like a shroud, and he started falling helplessly. He clawed at the silk, trying to pull it around under his feet, but the lines kept catching on the heels of his heavy shoes.

There was only one thing to do—and like a flash he did it. Bending down, he unlaced his shoes, took them off, and tossed them over his head. Then he freed enough of the silk for the air to catch the loose folds. When the chute billowed out over his head, he was 300 feet above the ground—precisely the *extra* distance the pilot happened to

EARLY PARACHUTE INFANTRY

give him before he jumped.

Unfortunately, every jumper isn't so collected. A friend of mine saw a pilot make a forced jump with a single chute released by a rip cord on his left side. It never opened. My friend, reaching his body, made a sickening discovery: In his frenzy, the pilot had clawed through his jacket down to his bare skin—on his *right* side.

Suppose some foreign power tried to invade this country. Would our American jumpers prove courageous enough to seize airfields, railroads, bridgeheads, and fortifications in territory occupied by the enemy?

They say that only a battle proves a soldier. But I've watched that test platoon take plenty of punishment without losing its enthusiasm. I've watched the men bail out in dozens of perfect mass formations less than one second apart. I've watched them blaze away with pistols on the way down, and launch an attack on the ground less than two minutes after the first man bailed out.

As I write, nearly 400 selected volunteers are pouring into our battalion from infantry regiments scattered across the country. If these men turn out to be anything like the pioneers, my money is on the American parachute troops right now.

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE
FEBRUARY, 1941: p. 14