

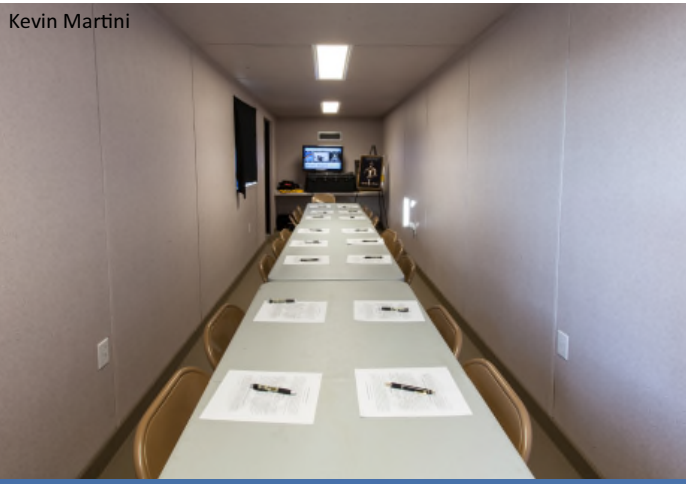
Knights Away!

Tandem jump with the
US Army Golden Knights

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Skydiving. Some people consider it crazy, some consider it an amazing rush. Merriam Webster defines it as “The sport of jumping from an airplane at a moderate altitude and executing various body maneuvers before pulling the rip cord of a parachute.” Either way, I am about to find out for myself. It’s around 8:30 in the morning on a beautiful south Florida morning at Homestead Air Reserve Base as a large group of people are ushered into a tiny office trailer. There is just enough room to fit the 10 or so jumpers around a table, a television, and the handful of family and friends who have come along to support their loved ones. Waiting for us at each position at the table is a four page document and a pen. The room is full of the sounds of chairs dragging

against the linoleum floor, meaningless chit chat, and laughter. A lot of laughter. After a couple of minutes I recognize that it is a strained and nervous sort of noise. Filled with the kind of jokes, conversation, and laughter that only come from a mix of stress, nerves, and excitement. Can you blame anyone? In a matter of an hour we are all going to thrust our bodies out of a perfectly good airplane at 13,000 feet.

SFC Noah Watts, the tandem team leader, enters the room and stands in front of the group. A tall and fit man, he quickly commands the attention of the room without saying a word. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen, as you may already know, I am SFC Noah Watts” he begins. His cadence and delivery are distinctively “Army”, however

he presents each sentence with a natural sense of humor. Before diving into an instructional video, SFC Watts makes one point clear. “If you remember anything from this session, I want it to be this. Arch, Relax and Have Fun.” He says this again, only this time with a smile. “Arch, Relax and Have Fun.”

We watch the presentation video which consists of some exciting footage of various famous people who have had the honor of jumping with the Golden Knights in the past, broken up every minute or two with the expected warnings and legal mumbo jumbo. Once the video finishes, it’s on to the legal waiver sitting in front of each person jumping that day. As SFC Watts begins to go over each section I notice a glaze fall across the faces of some of those

in the group. I think everyone has sat patiently for just about as long as possible given the anticipation of what the near future brings. SFC Noah deftly picks up on this as well, and his words per minute increase to a level where I honestly believe a trained court stenographer would have a hard time keeping up. Nothing is being missed mind you, but I wonder in my head if he could recite this document in his sleep. “Sign here”, “Initial here”, “Print your name here”, “Have your neighbor witness and sign for you.” Five minutes and two pages in, I question if I am skydiving today or closing on a new house. We finish up, pass our completed waivers to the front, and are told that our next stop is the equipment room, where we’ll be fitted with the necessary gear. We are just about to get up, when a voice from the rear of the room cracks “Now honestly, how many of you can stand up without the chair coming with you?” The room erupts

into laughter, but I have a sneaking suspicion that there are several in the group who are doing a mental double-take as they slowly stand up.

SFC Watts leads the group out of the room and starts across the 30 or so feet of open ground we need to cover to the tandem equipment room. It’s a bit like herding cats. As soon as the energized group is out in the open, they quickly fall into individual discussions, or find themselves looking up to watch one of the demo teams drifting down for landing. The tandem team has a schedule to keep, so SFC Watts does a good job getting everyone’s head out of the clouds and back on terra firma where they need to be. We enter the equipment room, and after a few seconds of waiting for our eyes to dilate from expo-



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sure to the bright Florida sun, we are greeted by the pleasant smile of Liz Hoffman as she is engaged in a sort of rhythmic dance with her arms repacking a parachute. Due to the fast paced schedule a full day of tandem jumps demand, the individual members of the team simply do not have the time to repack their own parachutes. That job and responsibility falls squarely onto Liz. A job that demands 100% attention to detail combined with being able to perform said job masterfully quick. You see, not only are everyone's lives completely in her hands as she packs each parachute, but for everyone to get the chance to make a tandem jump before the sun goes down, Liz has to pack each parachute quickly.

A few moments pass before the rest of the tandem crew enters the room. Smiling and in good spirits, they begin to call out the names

of the jumpers they have been assigned to. Once located, each group begins a casual banter that includes the requisite introductions. I start to understand why Liz is required to move so quickly, because the tandem team moves just as fast equipping each jumper with their kit. Each person is given the gold and white jump suit, helmet and goggles, gloves (if desired) and of course a harness. I glance over at SSG Jon Ewald who is working to fasten and adjust the harness on a young woman who has a deer in the headlights look all over her face. Clearly she's nervous, but a few calming words from SSG Ewald, followed by a couple of well-timed jokes puts her at ease. You can tell this isn't the first time that any of the team has had to deal with fear and anxiety, and they know just what to say.

It's only a matter of 15 minutes

before the first group of four jumpers is ready to go. They are led outside, and into the waiting cargo vans along with their respective tandem instructors and videographers. Those of us in the later jump groups can only look on with jealousy and anticipation as the two vans pull away on their way to the airfield and the awaiting jump plane. Some choose to pass the time sitting in quiet reflection. Some meander about chatting with one another, while others stand in the tough Bermuda grass craning their necks skywards, watching either the Gold or Black demo teams practicing, or looking for the small black dot of the Twin Otter flying high above. No matter which they choose, the time passes slowly. Obviously Homestead ARB does not defy the space/time continuum, but standing on the ground waiting for your turn to go feels like you've awakened early on Christ-

mas day. Knowing that you have another hour before you can wake your parents and begin the festivities. All you can do is lie there, stare at the ceiling, and wait.

After what feels like two hours, we hear the radio crackle to life with the sounds of Otter pilot CW5 Kelley Caudle announcing they are inbound to the target. "Roger" replies SFC Tom Bovee the landing zone safety officer, "You have a hot target. Winds are at two five zero at five to ten knots." The faint drum of the Twin Otter can be heard, and I finally find the little black dot in the vast sea of blue sky. Moments later, I spot even smaller black dots being left behind by the plane. I watch as the team and their passengers fall from the sky. The large white drogue chute is easy to make out against the Florida sky. Squinting a little, I am actually able to make out the silhouette of the solo videog-

rapher falling along with the tandem jumpers. The speed at which they are falling is perceptively high, made even more obvious when the tandem jumpers deploy their main parachute. The solo videographer continues to fall away from them so quickly I hear myself verbally say "WOW" without intending to do so. A few seconds later, I hear the faint WHOOSH sounds as each of the parachutes fill rapidly with air. All jumpers are out and safely under canopy.

In no time at all, the solo videographers start to land after making several high speed spiraling descents. They need to get on the ground quickly so that they can in turn film the landing of their assigned tandem pair. Next up are the tandem groups, stacked one on top of each other in the sky, like the spiral shaft of a parking garage. High above me, the screams

of exhilaration come wafting down. High pitched screams, hoots, and wooooooo's make their way down to the landing zone as the parachutes get larger and larger in the sky. Family members and friends on the ground begin to respond with cheers and applause of their own, as one by one each tandem jumper come in for a safe and soft landing in the grass. Several members of the ground crew rush to each person to quickly spill the air from the parachute, as well as to share in the excitement that each person has just enjoyed.

With little time to spare, the team members quickly assist the jumpers to their feet and listen to them regale how amazing the last 15 minutes of their lives were. The tandem instructors hoist their parachutes over a shoulder and walk with a purpose towards the equipment room and Liz's waiting hands.

All the while talking, laughing, and of course, high fiving the jumpers who just went along with them. Once into the equipment room, they grab a freshly packed parachute, the next jumper they are assigned to, and begin the process all over again. At first I expected it to be methodical and repetitive, however I was pleasantly incorrect. Each member of the team took the same time and care on the next group of jumpers as they did with the first. SSG Rich Sloan approaches me and introduces himself. He helps me select a jump suit, finds a helmet that fits my abnormally large head, and then assists me into my harness. The reality of what I am about to do begins to set in, and I am reminded of some of the faces of those I saw go before me. The harness weighs quite a bit more than I expected, and I am actually reassured by this.

SSG Sloan heads off to help others when I am introduced to the second person who will hold my life in his hands this day. "Kevin?" asks SSG Jared Zell as he walks up and shakes my hand. We exchange pleasantries as he begins to tighten and adjust my harness. I chuckle out loud and comment "hey...at least buy me dinner first" because a few key adjustment locations feel as though I'm being fitted for a tuxedo. SSG Zell laughs politely, clearly this is not the first time he has heard that one, but I appreciate the laugh, after all, it was a pretty dismal joke. SSG Zell moves quickly and competently, and before we have time to talk very much more he is finished. The harness has now gone from reassuring, to heavy and tight. Next I am introduced to SGT John Lopez, the videographer assigned to my jump. He escorts me

outside into the sun where we chat for a minute or two. He explains that he will be falling with us in the sky, taking pictures and video of my free fall, all of it in high definition glory. We then move into a recorded video interview. One question, "do you have anything to say to your family or loved ones?" gives me pause. After an uncomfortable stare into the empty camera lens, I could only think to say "my last will and testament is that my wife gets everything." We both chuckle, and wrap up the interview because it's time to load up into the vans.

After a five minute ride over to the airfield, we exit the van and then pause on the flightline. Each member of the Knights checks, and double checks each other's gear. Sitting off in the distance I notice something bright and shiny, and my attention is drawn off of the gear

check. The team had just taken ownership of a brand new DHC-6-400 Twin Otter. It was sad to see it sitting tied down, because the thing just looks like it wants to be up in the air. My hopes of getting a chance to jump from it were dashed as it was explained that the pilots were still in the process of going through the required check rides and supplemental training that comes along with a new aircraft and more importantly, a new glass cockpit. In almost perfect timing, the Otter that I will jump out of begins to start, and a minute or two later, taxis over to where we will board. We are then escorted in pairs, each jumper with their respective tandem instructor, over to the plane. We board, strap on our seat belts and before you know it, feel the power of the Otter's twin turbo prop engines pulling us down the runway and into the air.

My ears pop several times, and the ambient air temperature drops as we ascend higher and higher in to the sky. The mood in the plane is jovial, but also tense at the same time. The loud drone of the engines makes it hard to hear one another so conversation is a struggle. At around 10,000 feet SSG Zell announces that it's time for me to be attached to him, and I'm invited to do something that I have no adult memories of. I'm asked to sit on another man's lap. It's humorous and every bit as awkward as you can imagine. Next I hear words that I honestly never thought I'd ever hear another man say to me. "I have you buckled in at the hips, but now I need you to lean back into me." I chuckle, smile an awkward smile towards SGT Lopez as he snaps a quick picture, and then lean backward into SSG Zell. He attaches

the main D rings, and then tightens everything down. At this point I can almost feel each breath, and I swear we're so attached I can even detect his pulse. I only hope he can't feel my leg bouncing up and down with excitement and nerves.

We're only a few minutes away from the big plunge, and SSG Zell yells in my ear that it's time to go over our exit procedures. We practice where I need to hold my hands, and the ever important 'Arch, Relax, and Have Fun'. I go over this another couple of times in my head, trying to make sure that I don't screw this up. Before I know it, we're inbound towards the landing zone, and are given a hot target. The exit door slides open, and the pair who will be jumping first stands and makes their way over to the door. I hear a few muffled shouts and then in an instant they are gone. SGT



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Lopez, SSG Zell, and I are up next. We have to perform a combination crab/duck walk up to the precipice, stopping with my toes dangling over into the void. I can feel the power of the windstream as the Otter pushes through the 13,000 foot air at around 100 MPH. From behind, I hear SSG Zell screaming over the wind "Ready? One..... two.... and...." during which time we rock forward at the one count. The majority of my body weight dangling in the air. Then backwards on the two count, safely back inside the plane. I should stop and explain something here. They may say this procedure is so you and the videographer can be sure to exit at the same time, however I'm convinced this little maneuver is there simply to A, scare the crap out of you, and more importantly B, give the tandem instructor the momentum he may need to make sure I get out of the plane, in case fear paralyzes me. Thankfully this day, fear was not the victor.

I hear the three count and we ears, or the fleeting vision of the Otter plunge forward, and even now, I'm climbing higher and higher away from me (reality is it's not climbing, I'm having a hard time trying to find the right words to explain just what happened next. I've built this jump up in my head countless times, all the while I kept imagining that it must feel like the first drop of a roller coaster. The way your stomach flies up into your throat. Or like the lightness sensation you get when driving a car over a parabolic hump in the road. I couldn't have been more wrong. It's like all the flying you've ever done in your dreams. No sudden sensation of falling, no uncomfortable feeling of imminent death, you're just there...simply present in the atmosphere. The only indication of movement is the sound of rushing wind flying by my



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That all lasts for a split second before I think, "Oh crap... don't forget the arch! The one thing they said not to forget...hurry!" as I arch my back hoping it wasn't too late. All of these thoughts went through my head in what felt like 2 minutes, however a quarter of a second was more like it.

Of course I wasn't too late with my arch, and a second later I feel the slight tug of the drogue shoot slowing our decent. SSG Zell slaps me on my shoulder, letting me know that I could release my hands and that I was now free to move about the cabin. What follows next was simply sheer exhilaration. Freedom.

Awesome. Rushing to the ground at 120 MPH simply feels like floating. I was screaming, what in my head had to be very manly guttural noises, mixed in with "heck yeah" but I have a feeling that SSG Zell's ears might have been full of the annoying screams of the Geico pig commercial. Thankfully, the rushing air prevented him from either confirming or denying exactly what sounds were made. During our free fall, videographer SGT John Lopez was orbiting around Jared and I, snapping pictures, as well as documenting this ride in HD video. Even though the only sound heard in free fall is the wind, you can clearly make out my mouth screaming "THIS IS AWESOME!! WOOOOOOO". SGT Lopez's mastery of control in free



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fall was extraordinary. Effortlessly moving left or right, up or down, wherever the creative desire for "the shot" took him. At one point he rolled over onto his back and I had to chuckle to myself, in between the manly yells, that he appeared to be relaxing in a reclining chair made of nothing but air.

All too soon I begin to feel the drag induced by the main parachute being deployed and I brace myself. Just like the feeling of free fall, I've built this moment up in my head, expecting a sudden and jolting stop. I was once again incorrect. The deceleration was dramatic; however it was smooth throughout approximately 5 seconds. The only pain or discomfort I feel comes from the harness taking up my weight. It's a

fact of life that most harnesses pinch in areas that most folks wouldn't appreciate very much, especially us men. To say it was painful would be over dramatic. It was unpleasant, and I can't say I enjoyed it, but I also can't say that it "hurt".

Once under canopy I can fully appreciate the view. The chaos of free fall is quickly replaced with the serenity of canopy decent. I am able to converse with Jared easily at this point, but most of the time was spent simply enjoying the ride. Beautiful white puffy clouds to the left and right, F-16s parked on base, the other members of the tandem team descending both above as well as below us. SSG Zell makes gentle swooping right, and then left turns. All of which ensure proper spacing

from other members of the jump, but that doesn't matter to me. I'm convinced he's doing it simply for my sheer enjoyment, and I love every second of it. A few times the need to descend rapidly is presented, and we enter into a tight spiraling turn. Centripetal force draws our bodies parallel to the ground, and we dump some excess altitude in a hurry. This force not only shifts our perspective of the world, it induces a higher G-load than I anticipated. I feel my body shift deeper into the harness, once again bringing with it the discomfort of the leg loops. Along with the G-load, a second sensation that I didn't expect has made its presence known. I should preface this by saying I'm not prone to motion sickness. I do



not get queasy or dizzy on airplanes (both large and small) or on roller coasters. However, about the time we finished our first spin, in came the twinge of dizziness. It never got bad, and I know if I asked, SSG Zell would stop, but I didn't want him to. We finish our second revolution and Jared rolls us out of the spin, once again on a slow comfortable descent. I think it took my eyes and ears about a full second to sync

back up with the rest of my senses. We begin our approach to the landing zone, and I can hear the people on the ground hollering up to me. Even without really knowing one another there was a sense of camaraderie as I hollered and applauded back. Looking ahead to where we would land, I could see SGT Lopez standing on the ground, his hand waving largely over his head. The tandem jumpers need

to land near their videographer, as video of a landing 100 yards away is nowhere near as exciting and I feel SSG Zell click his heels together in acknowledgement of SGT Lopez's signal. We turn right from base, and onto final approach, gliding nice and easy towards the soft grass. "Legs up!" I hear SSG Zell call from behind and I lift my knees up to my chest. We're getting closer to the ground, and everyone else, moving forward at a sprinting pace when I hear Jared call out "Legs out!" At this point all I had to do was extend my legs straight out from me, and keep my heels up as high as I could. I must have done this right, because only a second or two later we were sliding on our butts across the ground as if we were sliding into second base. Members of the team run up, pulling cables to spill the air from our parachute, as SSG Zell works quickly to disconnect himself from me. I'm back on the ground, standing on my own two feet and all I want to do is go again. SGT Lopez comes up with his camera to ask how my ride was and without thinking I give him a high five. Damn the camera man, I'm excited! We conclude the camera interview, grab our assorted gear and start walking over towards the equipment room. SSG Zell and SGT Lopez have to drop their gear, grab a fresh parachute and a fresh jumper and go do it all over again. I enter the room and in a few quick minutes remove the harness, helmet, and jump suit. I steal a sip of water from the drinking fountain, grab my camera, and head back outside just in time to see the next group load into the vans and pull away. I look at them, look up at the sky and find one emotion growing slightly under the excitement and adrenaline. Jealousy. 🤔