

# Ripcord

Based on the well-known Ziv-United Artists, Inc.  
television series starring  
Larry Pennell and Ken Curtis



THE HISTORY OF THE  
CITY OF BOSTON  
FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT  
TO THE PRESENT TIME  
BY NATHANIEL BENTLEY  
VOLUME I  
CONTAINING THE HISTORY FROM  
1630 TO 1713  
PUBLISHED BY  
J. B. BENTLEY  
1856

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PLATE I

1630







***RIPCORD***



# ***Ripcord***

by **D. S. Halacy, Jr.**

*illustrated by*

**Al Andersen**

*and*

**Robert D. Smith**

*Authorized Edition based on the well-known  
ZIV-United Artists television production*

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Skydiving may be done only after instruction by properly certified instructors and under strict safety regulations. It should be understood that some of the jumping and related activities included in this story should be performed only by professional highly skilled divers or under the supervision of professional jump-masters.



## **Contents**

1	Sky Divers	11
2	Streamer	31
3	Para-Scuba Divers!	48
4	Airborne	71
5	Jumper in Trouble!	92
6	Air Show!	110
7	High Dive!	129
8	Rescue Mission	151
9	Human Bomb	169
10	Jump Team!	191



## **1 Sky Divers**

It was a beautiful spring day, a perfect day, Ted McKeever thought with a grin. The sky was blue, there was barely enough wind to ripple the sock on the hangar far below. Ground temperature was up to almost 70 degrees, but in the cabin of the Cessna 172 at seven thousand feet the air had a nippy bite and the wind blasting in at the doorway was downright cool through his spotless white jump suit.

In the doorway, both gloved hands gripping the frame as he stood tensely, Jim Buckley was enough shorter than Ted that the boss sky diver could see the white **X** marked on the landing strip below. From their altitude it looked like a letter of type on a page. The arms of that **X** were thirty

feet long, but when trying to spot-land it seemed to shrink to microscopic size.

The wings of the Cessna rocked slightly and Jim Buckley cocked his head over his shoulder to nod at Ted. There was a grin on his face that seemed to reach the gleaming helmet on both sides. He jerked down his goggles and swung back. A second later he dived cleanly out of the plane. Right behind him, Ted grabbed at the doorway and propelled himself into space with the easy grace of long practice.

With the blast of air, the thrill came as it always did. The breath-snatching exhilaration of free-fall had chilled him to the marrow the first time he tried it, and the tingle was still there. He smiled his satisfaction to himself as he spread his arms and legs in a modified frog position and soared down through the thin, cold air after Jim Buckley.

Fifty feet below, his partner dropped in the long slanting arc, his body in stable position, arms and legs steering him on a perfect heading. Ted lifted his right arm and did a slow 360-degree turn and leveled out, speeding along above Jim Buckley.

"You're looking good," he said, using the throat mike. "I've got the camera on, Jim, you can start your series of maneuvers."

"Roger!" The cheerful answer crackled in the headset. "I'll show you the form that's going to win the International meet for the U.S.A!"

An arm came up, his legs cocked slightly, and Buckley's soaring body began a fast turn to the left—a human glider slashing through the sky at two miles a minute under perfect control. Ted nodded his satisfaction, following the maneuver himself so the helmet camera remained focused on his partner. Jim might not take first place at the big meet coming up, but he'd be up there close to the top.

"For an old man," Ted joked, "you do pretty well. Gain a little more speed, and be sure to roll out precisely after three hundred and sixty degrees."

"Hey, I'm not a new jump student you're checking out!" Jim called so loud Ted thought he could hear him without benefit of the radio. "Watch closely," Buckley went on, arms and legs moving again for a perfectly co-ordinated turn.

As Jim completed his figure eight, Ted checked the target below them. The **X** was bigger now, a lot bigger than it had been at seven thousand feet. The 120-mile-an-hour wind plastered his jump suit to his arms and legs and the strain on the heavy helmet made him tense his neck and shoulder muscles. This was the life, he thought, and the contented grin came back. Up here you could forget the paper work and the discouragement of the office in the hangar below. Ted was a sky diver who jumped because he had an urge to *live*, and each time he almost regretted the popping of the chute above him that meant the end of the free-fall.

He watched appreciatively as Jim Buckley soared up and over in a perfect loop, raising one hand in a brief A-Okay sign as he regained level flight. Then Jim's voice was sharp in the ear-phones again.

"Two thousand feet, Ted. If you want to hit that target, pull your ripcord on my command!"

"You're on your own," Ted shot back. Flipping off the camera, he dropped his eyes for a glance at the altimeter and stop watch on his emergency



pack snugged against his chest. The stop watch flicked past thirty seconds; Jim's series had been right on schedule.

Banking to the right he sped past Buckley, watching the pilot chute bite air as his partner pulled the D-ring with a smooth in and out movement of both arms. A split second later Ted followed suit. He could hear his own pilot chute spring to life at his back, tugging the main chute out of the pack with a whirring of nylon that was a good, live sound. He was still stabilized when the muffled boom of the mushrooming canopy cut across the air to him. There was no wrenching jerk; that was the beauty of their new chute with its special sleeve that deployed the shroud lines to their full length before the canopy could spread itself.

The flat bowl of earth that had rushed up at them like an engulfing blanket of green and brown was suspended peacefully below. Ted grinned wryly; the gentle ride was always an anticlimax after the dive itself, but there was still plenty of work to do. With gloved hands steadying him on the risers, he leaned his head back and squinted



against the low sun to spot Buckley. Looking up through the blank gore of the chute they had designed, he could see his partner floating under his bright red and white canopy.

“Bet you miss it, Jim,” he taunted. “You’ll land a hundred feet from the target!”

“That’s going to cost you a cup of coffee!” Buckley yelled down at him confidently. “I’ll not only be within the **X**, I’ll be right on the center.”

Two hundred feet over the target, Ted knew that he would score. He had played the risers skillfully, and the surface breeze was only about five miles an hour since the evening breeze wouldn’t spring up for perhaps an hour yet. Air whooshed audibly out of the missing panel that formed a steering vent of his chute, moving him forward at just the right angle to plant his jump boots on the intersection of the two arms of the target **X**.

As he sucked in his breath and his boots hit the turf, he heard an exasperated groan above him. Ted flexed his knees and then straightened, feeling the thrill of a perfect landing shiver up from his legs. Nylon spilled with a liquid rustle

as his chute collapsed, and he watched Jim Buckley land standing up about thirty feet from him.

“Okay,” Jim called resignedly, trying to hide his disappointment. “A cup of coffee only costs a dime. But what some people won’t do for a dime!”

“No, I’ll buy,” someone called across the field. “For both of you. That kind of jumping calls for a treat.”

Ted looked up from field-packing his chute to protect it from cuts and tears. A lanky man in a gray business suit was walking across the turf toward them, nodding approval as he came. Ted frowned, then his face relaxed as he recognized the man.

“Hi, Mr. Gentry!” Jim Buckley yelled. “Did you see this guy cut me out of the landing pattern up there? How about you FAA boys doing something about that?”

“Sorry, you’ve got no case, Jim,” Gentry said good-naturedly. “I watched the whole drop. McKeever’s just lucky. Say, don’t tell me that’s a camera mounted on your helmet, Ted?”

“Right. This partner of mine won’t admit he

looks like a clown falling out of a tree when he dives, so I've got to prove it to him," Ted said, unstrapping the helmet.

"How goes it?" Jim asked. "Are you back for your second diving lesson—we hope? Kinda late in the day, though."

"No," Gentry said. "The Federal Aviation Agency doesn't pay me enough to indulge in that high living very often."

"Careful with those puns," Jim warned with a grimace. "We tossed the last guy out of the Cessna with an anchor instead of a Mark I chute. Let's go get that cup of coffee you promised to buy."

"Right," Ted seconded wholeheartedly, leading the way toward the Ripcord hangar. "To what do we owe the honor of this visit from the FAA, then? Did we break the sound barrier in our hopped-up Cessna?"

"No, but be careful you don't," Gentry said, laughing. "It's these six-foot gliders that you're air-launching every day. You know some of the natives are getting restless." His voice turned serious.

"Uh-oh," Jim groaned. "What did we do now?"

It can't be the chute-packing—we're both licensed riggers as well as jumpers."

"No, you boys are okay; I've got no complaints myself with you and your operation." Gentry grinned sheepishly as they neared the hangar. "You probably know I took those jumping lessons on official business. Checking out Ripcord, Incorporated you might say. And you passed the test with flying colors, incidentally."

"Well, how about that," Jim Buckley said in a hurt tone. He swung open the door marked OFFICE and they went inside. "Gentry, you deserve the horrible coffee you are about to buy. Spying on us, eh?"

"You're under our jurisdiction, you know," Gentry said apologetically. "The FAA has a problem coming up and I guess you know what it is, men."

"Sure," Ted answered for him. "Reckless divers. Suicides are bound to happen in chutes poorly packed and used by divers with no more idea of jump safety than the village idiot. Sky diving is safe, *if* it's properly taught, and *if* all the safety regulations are followed to the letter. Even then,

some of the things a skilled professional does shouldn't be tried by the amateur. We know that as well as you do, Gentry!"

"I know you do. But have you read the paper today?" Gentry's face was grave as he sank onto one of the stools at the short counter. "A jumper in Nebraska spread himself all over the prairie doing a delayed drop. They didn't even have to repack his chute, because the fellow forgot to open it."

"Blessed are they that delay too long," Jim Buckley intoned softly, "for they shall make a lasting impression!" Leaving Gentry, he followed Ted into the hangar and they parked the chutes on the rigging table to await repacking. Then they rejoined the FAA representative. Jim slid three coffee mugs along the counter and reached for the percolator.

"Don't get me wrong," Jim said. "I'm sincerely sorry for the poor guy. But what can we do about it?"

"See that it doesn't happen here," Gentry said tightly. He stirred his coffee without looking at it. "If much more of this happens there will be

increasing pressure on us to stop sport parachuting, period. You men know that.”

“Amen,” Ted said, nodding. “We’re with you, Gentry. But you know how careful we are. The worst any of our students has done is to break a leg. In more than nineteen hundred jumps, I’ve gotten only a couple of sprains myself and I do things most jumpers will never try. Why not get after the dangerous sports like skiing or motorcycle racing?”

“Thank goodness those aren’t our concern!” Gentry said with a smile.

“Listen to him brag about all his jumps,” Jim kidded. “When he hits two thousand he’s going to write a book about it.” He ducked aside as Ted aimed a playful punch at his head.

“You’ve got a fine record at Ripcord,” Gentry admitted. He tapped his chest. “I don’t want to hurt your business, believe me. But a little more bad publicity and we’ll have to do something. It’s a shame some careless thrill-seekers have to prove they have guts—”

“Please,” Jim protested with a woeful look. “Not while I’m having my coffee!”

"All right, we've got the picture," Ted told Gentry. He finished off his coffee and put the mug down. "Up to now we've been doubly careful; starting now we're *triplly* careful. It's hard enough recruiting sky divers for our U.S. team tryouts without you boys cracking down on us."

"That's right," Gentry said. "You do captain the U.S. team, don't you? How does it look for this year?"

"You want the story I give to the news writers and potential contributors?" Ted asked wryly. "Or the actual facts? The jumpers who could win for us don't have the time or money, and vice versa. So far Jim and I have lined up half a dozen top men but we ought to have twice that many. This year with our new chutes we could just win that meet for a change."

"Here's luck to that," Gentry offered. "Too bad you can't get Uncle Sam back of you."

"Don't think we haven't tried," Jim put in. "I guess the old carnival curse is still on the parachute jumping game. Okay, we're with you on cracking down on reckless diving. Ripcord, Incorporated has far too much at stake!"

They had a lot at stake, all right, Ted agreed silently as they thanked Gentry for the coffee he had insisted on buying. As they saw him out to his car the sky wasn't quite as blue, and the rising breeze was cold. Even the shiny Cessna coming in for a landing didn't give him the lift it usually did. Ripcord, Incorporated was having its trials.

Senior member of the parachuting firm, Ted had formed Ripcord, Incorporated two years ago after a run of exciting assignments for spot-jumping on special jobs. When you could make the best sport in the world your business, who wouldn't jump at the chance? Jim Buckley had been the best thing that happened to the fledgling firm. An ex-paramedic, the expert jumper had handled a tough rescue assignment with Ted in the Grand Canyon so well that Ted formed the new venture almost on the spot. For more than a year Ripcord had prospered beyond their most optimistic hopes.

There were smoke-jumping jobs, survey work for the government, and even jumps with skin-diving equipment instead of coveralls. In between,



they tested chutes for the Acme Parachute Company and got their own jump school started. They managed to squeeze in a trip to Europe for the International Parachuting Contest and brought back an unexpected third place for the United States. They brought back some new ideas, too. The special, triangular-slotted, steerable chutes they used had been one idea; the deployment sleeve the chutes were packed in was another.

Packed in the usual way, a parachute canopy would pop open with a loud report before the shroud lines were fully extended. This sudden opening often snapped the jumper like the end man on crack-the-whip when he reached the end of the lines. But with the sleeve, the canopy remained unopened until the shroud lines were extended their full length. Then the sleeve pulled from the canopy and it opened much more smoothly, without the loud boom and the violent jerk on the jumper.

Ripcord had pioneered other new ideas, too. Built into the white jump helmets were small two-way radios that permitted Ted and Jim to contact each other, the pilot of the jump plane, or men

on the ground. Many times this improved communications system had paid big dividends in a ticklish jump operation.

The helmet camera was an outgrowth of an assignment to film the actual in-the-air operation of experimental chutes for a manufacturer. Instead of a hand-held camera, Ripcord worked out the installation of a compact movie camera right on a jump helmet. Light and streamlined, the mounted camera permitted the jumper to have both hands free for maneuvering.

There were other devices, such as the warning buzzer fitted in the helmets used by students at the sport parachuting center that Ripcord operated. It could be set to alarm at a safe altitude and thus remind the jumper it was time to pull the ripcord. Ted and Jim were specialists in their field, specialists with pride in what they did. Their goal was to make parachuting a science and not a stunt.

The progress they made had taken money, and plenty of it. The Cessna cabin plane and the developmental work on the new chute had cut deep into their limited funds. But there had been

the prospect of government orders for the chute, and even the pleasant possibility that the military services would furnish trained team members for the international competition. And then suddenly it seemed as if Ripcord ran out of luck almost all at once.

“You look like your reserve chute failed to open, chum,” Jim Buckley said as they headed back into the hangar. “Cheer up, things could be a lot worse.”

“So I cheered up, and darned if things didn’t get a lot worse,” Ted quipped. “Let’s go repack those chutes, Jim. I feel like I’m undressed until I get that done.”

“Right, boss. We repack the chutes. Never know when we’ll need them, eh?”

“Right,” Ted said, opening up the chute he had field-packed out on the turf after his landing. “We may even have to sell them, at the rate our luck is going!”

He tried to snap out of his gloom as they worked with the twenty-eight-foot nylon canopies of red and white nylon, but the tough breaks

weighed heavy on his mind. Accidents happened, of course. You could even break your neck slipping in the bathtub, so parachuting wasn't nearly as dangerous as most people thought. But ever since the unfortunate rash of accidents in the service when some paratroopers tried long, delayed drops, free-fall had been a bad word as far as the military was concerned. Instead of orders for Ripcord's Mark I chute that Acme was making, there was a letter regretting cancellation. And it didn't look much like there'd be any military jumpers on the United States team when it went overseas.

Ted grunted as he stretched the shroud lines carefully and Jim shot him a quizzical glance from the other side of the table. Ted forced a grin and made himself relax. Things would shape up, he was sure of it. Besides, as long as he had a plane to dive from and a chute, everything else was a detail. He started to whistle softly.

"Now there's a pleasant sight! It's good to see you guys working for once." Pete Andrews, their chubby pilot, tossed his helmet at his locker and unzipped his flying suit. There was a perpetual

smile on his round, cherubic face and, cool as it was, he was sweating.

"Some people have it and some don't," Jim Buckley cracked. "We higher types are privileged characters. Did you get lost?"

"Nope," Pete said amiably. "Just checking out the navigation gear. We've got company up there, by the way. An old Piper Cub staggering around almost in the stratosphere. What do you suppose he's doing way out here in the country?"

The warning bell in Ted's brain rang loud and clear at the beefy pilot's words. For a reason he didn't fully understand, the faint buzz of the light plane's engine knifed apprehension through him. Dropping the wooden packing paddle he was using to smooth the nylon gores of the chute, he crossed the hanger almost at a run.

Scanning the sky outside, he made out the plane. It *was* fairly high, perhaps ten thousand feet, and his brows knit together as he studied it carefully. Then, suddenly he was racing for the radio in the shack that was the Ripcord tower.

He yanked the mike off its hook, flipped the switch from Stand-by to On and rasped, "Piper

Cub, this is Ripcord tower. Come in, Piper!" Tensely he waited for the answer that didn't come and then repeated his message urgently. Seconds later he was racing back toward the hangar yelling for the others.

"Pete, get ready to go again! Jim, crank up the Cessna, will you, while we suit up. I feel trouble in my bones!"

Pete grumbled a protest, but Ted shoved him toward the locker and then raced to get a chute from the shelves back of the table. In thirty seconds he and the still-grumbling Pete tumbled from the hangar. The yellow plane was still circling high above, and the warning was loudly hammering under Ted's helmet.

## **2 Streamer**

Jim Buckley was on the ball. Racing from the hangar while the other two tugged chute harnesses tight, he had climbed aboard the Cessna. As Ted grabbed Pete by the arm and hurried the chubby pilot from the hangar the engine coughed into life and the prop spun into a transparent disk. There was a rising breeze coming across the field now, and Ted shot a worried glance skyward.

“I still think you’re crazy!” Pete puffed as he tried to keep up with the pace. “So a Piper Cub flies overhead, so what? You think he’s going to bomb the field or something?”

“Less talk and more speed,” Ted commanded as they neared the Cessna. “They’ve got the door

out of that plane—that means a jumper, I'm afraid. And there's too much ground wind for a safe landing. Get aboard!"

He boosted Pete aboard and vaulted himself inside. Quickly Jim swung out of the pilot's seat and made room for Pete. "You just think up a new sky-diving stunt, Ted?" he asked.

"No, but the joker upstairs in that plane will end up in the trees if he jumps in this wind! Get back to the radio and keep trying to raise the pilot. Tell him we'll have his license, his skin, and his airplane if he drops anybody on Ripcord's field!"

"What are you going to do, drive him out of the sky?" Jim asked, grinning as he rested one foot on the step.

"If we have to," Ted shouted. "Take off, now. Both of you guys!"

He moved forward and settled in the seat alongside Pete as the pilot shoved the throttle ahead. The acceleration plastered Ted against the back of the seat, making it easy to fasten the shoulder straps. Twisting, he tried to see the plane overhead but without success.



With a powerful whine, the Cessna broke ground and Pete eased back on the stick in a fast climb. At the end of the strip they banked slightly left and the altimeter started to unwind. Tensely Ted kept up his vigil and as they hit the three-thousand-foot altitude he was rewarded. Through the upper windshield he could see the yellow plane at the far end of the field. The Piper was on a straight heading, lined up with the landing strip. Ted grabbed the mike hanging alongside and pressed the switch.

“Piper Cub, this is Ted McKeever in the Cessna below you. If you plan to drop a jumper, give it up! The ground wind is more than fifteen miles an hour at this time; Ripcord’s field is closed to jumping. Do you read me? Over.”

While he waited anxiously for a response Ted gave Pete an urgent thumbs-up signal for more altitude in a hurry. They had reached four thousand feet, but the Cub was perhaps twice that high.

“I bet he doesn’t have a radio,” Pete said pessimistically. “I’ll give him the sign language.” He rocked the wings of the Cessna violently in an

effort to get the attention of the other plane. By now the Cub was starting a slow turn at the end of the field, still flying level and throttled way back. For a moment, Ted lost it as the Cessna turned away. When he could see it again, a loud groan escaped his lips.

“The knucklehead is out on the step!” he said angrily. “Look, Pete!” He pointed to the dark blob that was a passenger in the other plane, huddled on the step beneath the open door.

“I see him,” Pete said. He rocked the wings again in warning, but there was no acknowledging signal from the small plane carrying the jumper.

Ted’s eyes flicked across the instruments as he grabbed the mike again. They were at six thousand feet now, and he made another desperate try with the radio. It was no use and he slammed the mike back onto its hook. They’d have to try to get close enough to wave the pilot off before the jumper could dive into the wind below. Ted hated to think of the publicity if the parachutist hurt himself in the trees downwind of the field, and if he landed in the lake—

Up until the last second, he thought they might get there in time. They were closing the gap fast, coming up on the Piper from below and behind. The jumper had a foot on the landing wheel now, and both hands braced on the wing strut, a small figure with a white face half-hidden by the helmet and goggles.

“You’d better shoot a flare or whatever other brainy stunt you plan on, boss,” Jim Buckley’s voice crackled from the earphones. “Looks like that jumper is about to push off!”

Before Ted could answer, it happened. The huddled figure suddenly executed a ragged push-off from the yellow plane. Instead of shoving back from the strut cleanly, though, the jumper seemed to foul the strut and even bounce roughly off the wheel. Ted held his breath until he saw the pilot-chute spring like a white blaze from the back-pack. It was then that he noticed that the jumper wore no emergency chute.

The jumper had never attained a stable body position, and now fell like a rag doll through the air as the chute fed out into the slip stream. And with a sixth sense born of years of jumping and

watching jumps, Ted knew something was wrong—terribly wrong.

“Streamer!” he yelled at Pete, stabbing a finger at the plummeting figure towing the strip of tightly folded nylon like a wisp of smoke. “Dive, Pete! Dive alongside that poor guy!”

“Roger!” the pilot said, moving the controls in a split second reaction that made him the best plane jockey Ted had ever seen. In a foot race Pete would always come out a cheerful last place, but the air was his element. As Ted started aft the Cessna was already matching the death plunge of the ill-fated chutist.

Swinging the special door inward, Ted poised in the opening as the gap closed. The chute hadn't popped; Ted knew it wouldn't. Instead it would follow the jumper like a telltale plume of white smoke marking the way to smashing death on the airstrip far below. Ted checked his own chutes, caught the altitude on his emergency pack, and set the stop watch. Then his jump boots hooked the edge of the floor and he dived into space.

Pete had done a beautiful job of matching the

speed of the hurtling jumper and moving in close. Ted instantly stabilized his position, above and to the right of the other jumper. Then his arms swept back into a delta position that speeded him up to overtake. Close in now, he could see the chutist struggling desperately with both arms, trying to reach over his shoulders to do something with the malfunctioning chute. The face was chalk-white under goggles almost torn free by the blast of air.

Ted changed direction slightly, angling in to intercept. He got a quick look at the altimeter and swallowed hard. They were at 5500 feet, and the ground was coming up fast. Cautiously he edged closer, avoiding the treacherous shrouds of the streamer. Then his left hand closed on the jumper's shoulder desperately. So far so good; but the hard part was just starting.

He got an arm around the jumper just as the other twisted toward him and clawed at him with both hands like a drowning swimmer. Moving as fast as he could, Ted unsnapped his harness and shoved one side under the other's loose-fitting harness. Sucking in his breath and straining

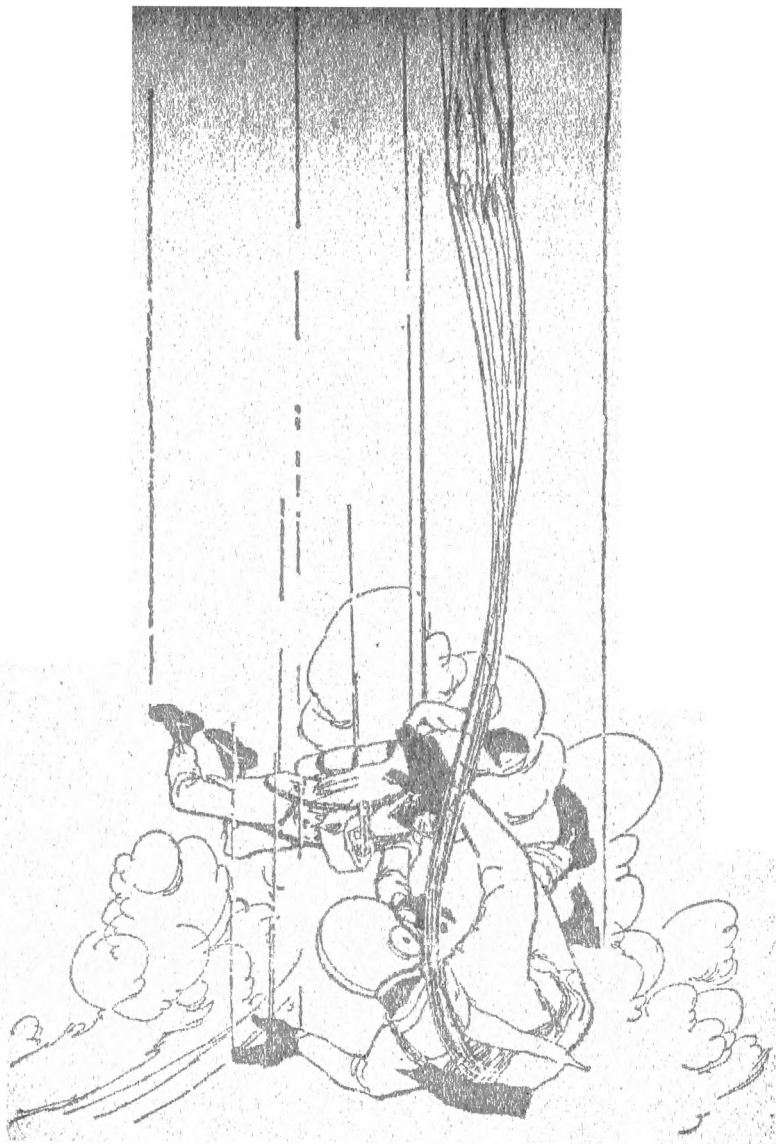
savagely, he managed to resnap his release. He breathed again in relief and yelled at the jumper clinging to him.

“Hang on tight! I’m pulling the ripcord!”

It was a useless warning; the other jumper was already clinging with a death grip like that of a healthy octopus. With an effort Ted got the metal D-ring in his right hand and pulled smoothly. Now if the canopy just wouldn’t foul the streamer above them. He was afraid it would be impossible for him to get at his emergency pack.

Without the sleeve to ease the opening shock, they might not have still been attached to the chute after it bit the air. Even so the jolt threatened to tear the other jumper free, but somehow Ted hung on. Every bone in his body had been wrenched, but it was still the best feeling in the world. He twisted his head back and looked up at the red and white nylon lifesaver spread there like an airy tent and managed a grin. The streamer chute was just slipping from the canopy and slid down past them to hang uselessly below.

Checking the ground, Ted knew they must have opened at about one thousand feet and was thank-



ful that they wouldn't oscillate with the new chute—especially with this much weight. Now there was time to look at the other jumper huddled, head drooping, against him. When they landed he was going to clobber the guy, if they didn't both break their necks. Then he realized it must be just a kid, so he'd have to let it go at a good lecture. But he'd make sure that the jumper didn't get off the ground again for a while!

“Hey, Ted, you all right?” Jim's voice floated up to him, and Ted looked down to see his partner staring up, white-faced. “I saw it but I don't believe it!”

“This guy is going to believe it when I get through with him!” Ted shouted angrily. Now that there was time, he was getting mad clear through. “Stand by to pick up the pieces, Jim.”

By a miracle they were going to land on the field and not in the trees downwind. That was something, but it was going to be a hot landing. He got the chute around so they were slipping into the wind, but still their drifting speed was probably ten miles an hour.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the



Cessna flaring out for a landing at the far end. And the yellow Piper was coming in, too. Maybe the pilot would be a big enough guy to sock! A hundred feet up, Ted began to swing the chute around so they would land facing forward. He would be facing forward, anyway.

“Relax,” he yelled at the jumper clinging to him. There was a slight movement, but no answer. Fifty feet, and they were almost at the edge of the field. He could see the blur of trees as they settled in fast. Thankful for the tough, flexible jump boots, he set himself as best he could. He had jumped before with a hundred-pound load, but then it had been with a big chute. And that load didn’t have a neck to break, either!

He hit solidly with both feet, not flat-footedly, but on the balls of his feet and bent slightly forward. His body was tensed, and at the second of impact he had hauled as hard as he could on the risers to ease the shock. He rolled to the right, his body soaking up the remainder of the force of landing, grunting with the weight of the other jumper. The chute was trying to drag them, but the combined weight anchored them well. Ted

sighed with relief. They were down and apparently okay. Now he could bawl the guy out, but good. Then suddenly, as he started to get untangled he realized it wasn't a guy but a girl. And she was starting to cry!

"Man, I wish I had a movie of that!" Jim Buckley shouted as he pounded up to collapse the chute. "Better yet, let's work out a routine for the next air show we're in! Look, we could—"

"Shut up and get this bawling female off my neck!" Ted snapped.

By the time he got the harnesses unhooked and started to get up Jim Buckley took over with a cool head. He had the girl remain sitting on the ground until he was sure she was unhurt. Except for a scratch across her cheek she seemed to be all right. Ted had a stiff shoulder from the roll, but was sure nothing was broken.

"When are you going to hit him, Ted?" That was Pete rushing up ponderously. "If I had my way—" He broke off at sight of the girl and shook his head in surprise.

"She's in one piece," Jim pronounced at last, helping the tearful girl to her feet. "You want to

turn her over your knee and whale the stuffing out of her now, Ted?"

"I ought to. Who taught you to jump, you little idiot?"

"My—brother," the little jumper wailed. "My boy friend is a jumper and I wanted to surprise him. Oh—here comes my brother now!" She fled toward the lanky youth trotting in their direction.

"Field-pack my chute, will you, Jim?" Ted said and took off at an angry walk toward the two youngsters hugging each other fifty feet away.

"Mister," Ted said crisply as he strode up, "you've got a punch in the nose coming, but I'm so relieved your sister didn't clobber in I'm going to forget it. But I'm reporting you to the FAA, understand, and if I ever see that airplane on my strip again you'll wish you'd never taken up flying."

"Yes, sir, but—" The sandy-haired youth was pale as a ghost.

"But nothing! If you're going to drop chutists, at least learn something about it. We've got a school here; there are others that teach jumping. You don't learn sky diving by just hopping out

of a plane, and don't you ever forget that again! You've got to learn the rules, and you've got to learn them right the first time because there won't be any second chance. Just because you watch some expert sky diving and think it's easy doesn't mean that all it takes is guts! You've got to learn, and then you have to follow the regulations every time you dive. One of those regulations is concerned with the chute itself—where did you get *that one?*”

“From a friend,” the boy said in a scared voice. “Surplus, I think.”

“Probably hasn't been repacked since the war!” Jim Buckley thundered, his voice hot with anger. “What's your name, you young lunatic?”

“Jarvis—Paul Jarvis. This is my sister Hazel. You—you saved her life and that's all that matters. I belong in the nut house for letting her talk me into it.”

The girl smudged away tears and suddenly planted a moist kiss on Ted's cheek. Stepping back in confusion, she sagged to the ground in a faint.

“Pete, help this boy with his sister, will you,”

Jim said to the gawking pilot. "And you, Paul. Don't ever do that again. Please!"

"No, sir," Paul Jarvis said earnestly. "If he thinks Hazel is chicken he can just get himself another girl. Thanks again, all of you."

"Do us a favor and don't broadcast this," Ted said fervently. "I don't want anyone to think we were responsible for that demonstration!"

The three of them watched as the Jarvis boy helped his sister into the Piper. Paul Jarvis tossed the chute in as if it were a deadly weapon he wished to be rid of. A minute later Pete spun the prop and moved aside for the little plane to trundle down the strip.

"I'm getting too old for this business," Ted said softly, shaking his head as they started for the hangar. "I need a good steak, and then I'm going to hit the sack. I need rest."

"You're a blinking hero, you know that?" Jim Buckley said suddenly. "There's not another guy in the world who could have done it, Ted!"

"Nobody else *has* to do these crazy things," Ted moaned. "And keep that hero business under your helmet unless you've got another line of work

for us to go into. Now let's get out of here before something else goes wrong."

Ted got almost through breakfast the next morning before his day was spoiled. He had finished his bacon and eggs and was just starting on his second cup of coffee when the waitress brought him the paper. He unfolded it and caught the headline, FIRES HIT MOUNTAIN AREA. That meant work, he knew. Hard, dirty, dangerous work, but work that Ripcord took in its stride. Then, just as he was about to fold the paper, he saw the pictures at the bottom of the page. They jarred him so he nearly knocked over his coffee.

There were two pictures, apparently shot in rapid sequence. One showed a streaming chute above one parachute jumper, with another jumper diving close. The other photo showed two jumpers hanging to one chute. Somebody had shot pictures of his rescue of Hazel Jarvis!

He was reading the article under the pictures, a detailed article that wasn't going to help the status of parachuting one bit, when the door slammed open and Jim Buckley yelled at him.

“Come on, Ted! Tip that waitress and let’s go, man. We’ve got some smoke-eating to do!”

Any other time Ted would have gulped his coffee, flung a bill at the girl back of the counter and taken off running, but now he sat dumbly staring at the paper.

“Come on, you old fire horse!” Jim said, moving up behind him. “Aren’t you awake yet?”

“Tell me I’m dreaming, Jim,” Ted said, showing the paper at his partner. “Tell me it’s all a terrible nightmare.”

“Ugh,” Jim said. “I see what you mean. There’s a lucky photographer who’ll probably win himself an award for action shots! How in the world—”

“Come on,” Ted said resignedly. “We’d better make lots of money fighting fires. When the FAA spots this it’s going to be the end of sport jumping at our field. Let’s hit the sky!”

### **3 *Para-Scuba Divers!***

Pete Andrews was waiting for them at the field; apparently he had read the paper, too, because the silver Cessna was already rolled out of the hangar. Ted slid from the car and ran to the office with Jim right behind him. Pete grinned from behind the counter where he was helping himself to a cup of coffee.

“I’m tanking up,” he said, nodding at the huge vacuum bottle he had filled to take along.

“I hope the plane is tanked up, too,” Jim put in. “The longer it takes to get there the tougher time we’ll have putting it out.”

“Don’t worry,” Pete said, a hurt look on his round face. “I’ve been racing around like a fire myself getting things set for you two guys. Why



you have to haul all that gear every place we go is something I'll never know—”

“Yours is not to reason why,” Ted misquoted with a grin. “If the Cessna will lift your fat carcass off the runway it will haul the equipment with no sweat. You sure you put in the light fire-axes and the oxygen tanks?”

“Man, I put in everything, including your winter underwear and the skin-diving stuff. Now *there's* a real necessary item for the well-dressed fire fighter,” Pete said in disgust.

“Never you mind, fat boy,” Jim told him as he ducked toward the chute loft. “Ted's working on a new theory that will let us walk right through the flames using the aqualung.”

“You're kidding!” Pete said, his jaw dropping as he corked the bottle of coffee and trotted after them.

“No!” Jim said. “You ought to take up sky diving, Pete. It clears the cobwebs from the brain cells and lets you think up all sorts of new ideas.”

“Knock off the comedy, you two,” Ted ordered. “We'll take two backpacks each, Jim. One emergency. On the double now, let's hit the sky!”

The three of them broke from the hangar on a dead run in a ragged V as Pete managed to stay in front of the loaded-down sky divers. Puffing, he pulled himself into the Cessna and climbed into his seat. By the time the starter whined and the prop churned alive Ted was in the right-hand seat, settling the earphones in place and reaching for the mike.

As the silver plane picked up speed in the still morning air Ted tuned to the frequency the Forestry Service would use to control the fire fighting operation up in the mountains. He shook his head at Jim, crouched behind him. "Nothing but static!" he yelled over the engine noise. "We'll be able to read them when we get some altitude. Meantime, break out those maps and let's get oriented."

Once in the air they could see the pall of smoke to the north, and they could see the flames when they were still forty miles away. It was a bad one; this job was going to be rough.

"Careless camper, the paper said," Jim Buckley said harshly as they studied the scene through the windshield. "I wish they'd catch him and put him

to work with a shovel and a wet sack. Maybe he'd think next time!"

"No point in being bitter," Ted cautioned. "You stay relaxed so that—uh-oh! I've got the air controller now!" He leaned forward to tune the receiver and reached again for the mike. When there was a momentary break in the chatter he punched the button and reported in.

"Fire control, this is Ted McKeever in Cessna one-nine-one-nine approaching the fire area from the south. Jim Buckley and I are suited up and standing by for orders. How does it look?"

"You've got eyes, man!" the tense voice grated in the earphones. "We've got us a mean one this time. Everything's against us—the dryness, the timing, and now the wind's getting into the act, too. Will you orbit over Dome Peak until I get you assigned? Acknowledge, one-nine-one-nine."

"One-nine-one-nine, acknowledge. Will orbit Dome Peak, ready to jump with full gear."

"Roger, McKeever. We're glad to have you fellows aboard."

"You get that, Pete?" Ted asked, hanging up the mike.

“Every cotton-picking word, boss,” the chunky pilot said. “He didn’t sound very happy. You suppose the airstrip near the peak is open?”

“Looks like it,” Ted said, pointing toward a dusty gash cut through the timber below them. “Keep an eye peeled for traffic.”

“Roger,” Pete said, nodding. He swept the sky with a practiced eye as he set up his orbit over Dome Peak a couple of thousand feet below them.

In the back of the plane, Jim was getting their gear ready for the drop they would soon make. He glanced up as Ted watched him and gave a cheerful high sign. Ted read his lips to make out the words, “All set!”

They had made three circles when the word came suddenly through the harsh, dry crackle of static. “Cessna one-nine-one-nine! Ted McKeever, come in!”

“McKeever checking in, control. What have you got for us?”

“Locate Sector G-seven on your map,” the controller said crisply. “We need a backfire this side of Rim Creek to make sure the blaze doesn’t jump across it. Our ground team is held up a

quarter-mile south of there. Got the picture?"

"Roger, control. I'm with you," Ted said as he studied the map propped on his knees. "That wind looks strong from here."

"You ought to be on the ground!" the controller shot back. "When you do land, McKeever, play it safe. Set your backfire and evacuate immediately. There's a trail branching south that'll take you to one of our bases. Your pilot can set down on the strip, unless I give him the word otherwise. Got all that?"

"Affirmative," Ted said, beginning to fold the map. "Jim, are you wired in on this?"

"Roger," his partner responded immediately, checking in on the transceiver built into his helmet. "Let's go, Ted!"

"Roger. Control, we'll sign off now. See you on the ground, soon. Out."

Quickly Ted slid the earphones from his head and shoved the folded map into his knee pocket. Reaching for his helmet, he slapped Pete on the shoulder. The pilot mopped sweat from his forehead and then made an okay circle with a damp thumb and forefinger.

Back by the open door the smell of smoke was stronger; an acrid choking pungence that made Ted's eyes water. Expertly he checked Jim Buckley's gear, then reached for his own emergency chute and snapped it on. His fire-fighting gear was next and seconds later Jim nodded satisfaction and slapped Ted on the shoulder twice in approval.

Goggles in place now, he set himself in the doorway as Pete started the run toward the target. Squinting, Ted picked up the dull shine of the creek through the drifting smoke. Automatically his brain calculated the problem in ballistics. With each jump his mind became more like a mechanical computer, figuring speed of the plane, wind drift, and the steady tug of gravity. Pete was making an excellent approach; they would go this time.

A silent countdown started in Ted's brain. Five—four—three—his hands tightened on the doorway and his legs tensed—two—one—dive!

For a second the gale tore at him so wildly he had to exert every bit of control to maintain a stable position. Then he was soaring down and

away from the plane in a spread position, correcting slightly toward his aiming-point of a huge boulder in the creek.

The sharp engine roar of the Cessna faded, and taking its place was the muffled roar of the fire off to the right and behind them. He and Jim must land smack on target or risk hanging up in the trees; that meant delaying until the last possible second. It had been a well-timed jump. As the realization of his accuracy grew in Ted, the old feeling of pride came, too. He laughed when Jim kidded about the approaching two thousandth jump, but there was a fierce satisfaction in him just the same.

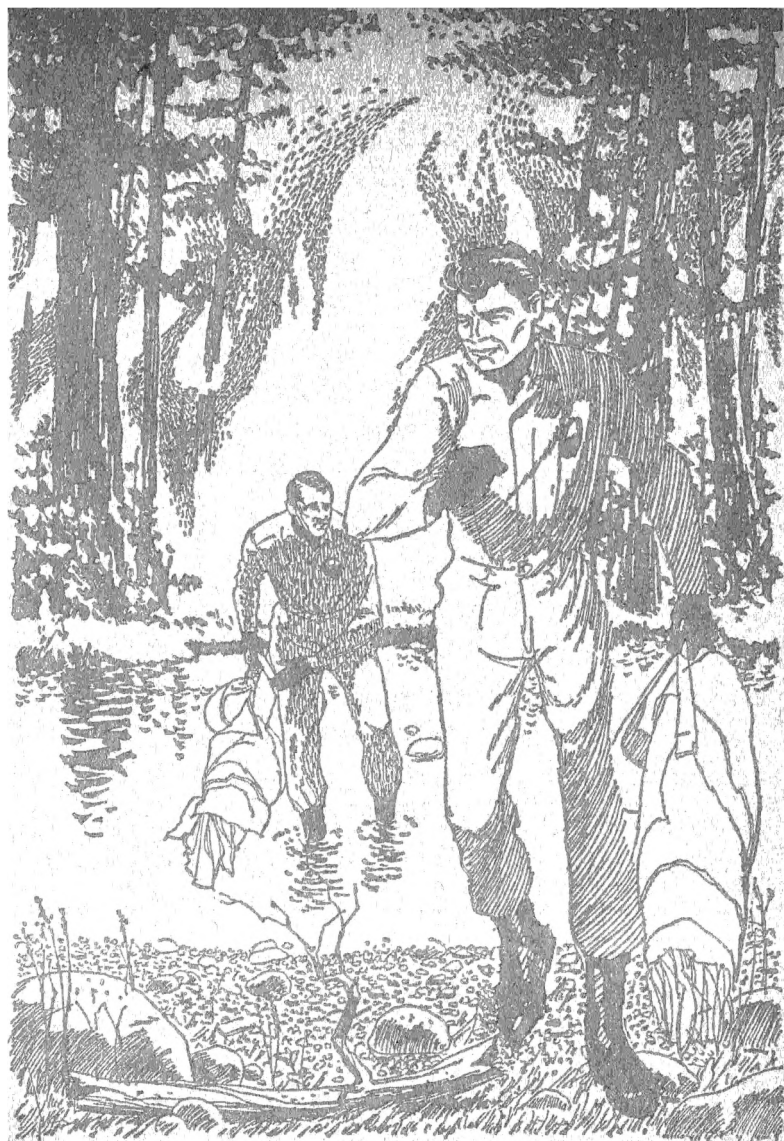
He could pick out individual trees now, and then branches. The boulder in the creek wasn't one, but two close together. Suddenly the red warning-light flashed in his brain and he reached for the ripcord in a smooth inward motion of both hands. In and out, never losing his perfect balance against the gale he soared through. Then the ripple above him, the rustle, and the welcome tug on his body. Almost immediately he could feel the hot wind, and he shook his head in concern.

Cocking his head back, he spotted Jim Buckley riding easily under his own red and white canopy, slowly rotating his chute so he would be facing downwind when he landed.

“Now I know how a toasted marshmallow feels!” Jim yelled to him. “That’s a mighty warm breeze, man.”

“Don’t let it drag you,” Ted warned, and a split second later he touched down in the brush ten yards from the creek and on the right side. Taking no chances, he unsnapped one set of risers on the harness, letting the big chute collapse almost immediately. Jim slammed down with a solid thud a short distance downwind and dumped his chute, too. In less than a minute they had field-packed the canopies and were setting the backfire along the creek. Ripping up a handful of brush, they each fired it with matches and then touched off clumps of brush in several places. The tinder-dry brush flamed angrily, moving slowly back toward the approaching fire. By the time the main blaze reached this section there would be a fairly wide burned-off swath which should hold the fire on this flank.





“Let’s go!” Ted shouted, dropping his torch just before it burned his hands. He was sweating heavily now, and his face was streaked with smoke and dust. With Jim on his heels, he scooped up his chutes and they forded the nearly dry creek. Behind him he heard Jim shout in dismay and then splash to a muddy landing when his foot missed a step on a slippery rock.

Buckley was up and running again immediately, and they soon reached the trail that would lead them back to the airstrip. Jogging easily now, they kept silent to save breath. Over and around them was the smoke and the roar of the fire, and the cries of animals.

“Hello, smoke-jumpers!” The shout made them pivot their heads and slide to a halt. A dozen weary-looking fire fighters waved a greeting from below and to the right. This dusty crew must be the party the controller had said was on its way; Ted dropped his chutes and cut from the trail to meet them.

“Morning, men,” he called as he pulled up, glad for the rest. “We backfired at the creek, in case that’s where you’re heading.”

"We were, friend, but now we won't," said a lean beanpole of a man with a sweatrag around his head. "There's a bulldozer back there in the tall brush cutting a firebreak. We'll go help him."

"Watch yourselves," Jim Buckley put in breathlessly. "That blaze is coming fast. Are you in touch with the controller?"

"You bet," the party leader said, nodding. "Jeff over there has a walkie-talkie. Thanks for the backfire, fellows. You saved us a mean hike."

"That's okay," Ted said. "Maybe we'd all better get back to work, eh? Good luck!"

Fifteen minutes later Ted and Jim spotted the Forest Service van that must be the mobile headquarters for the operation. It was parked near a short strip bulldozed like an old wound on the spine of the hill. The sight of the silver Cessna was a lift to both of them, and some of the tiredness fell away.

Walking now, they rounded the back of the big brown truck and nearly knocked Pete Andrews flat on his back. The grinning pilot got a grip on the van and straightened.

“Never know *who* you’ll bump into these days,” he said good-naturedly. “Hey, you guys better hit the showers; looks like you’ve been wallowing in the dirt!”

“Why don’t you make yourself as useful as you are homely?” Ted suggested, loading the pilot down with his chutes and pointing toward the Cessna. Jim added his contribution and they laughed as they watched Pete stagger back toward the airstrip.

“You McKeever?” a voice called from the cab of the van. They turned to see a weather-beaten face, topped with a khaki cap, peering from the open door. “That was a quick trip you made.”

“Hi,” Ted said, shoving a hand out in greeting to the forestry man. “I’m McKeever, this is Jim Buckley. I don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Terry Nolan here,” the controller said with a grin. “I’ve heard about you crazy guys; it’s a real pleasure to shake hands with a couple of lunatics. Did you see the party we have working down that way?”

“Righto. Said they’d get back with the bulldozer crew and carve on that firebreak. How do

things look to you, now?"

Nolan's answer was drowned in a sudden blast of airplane engines and the three of them swung around at the sound. A twin-engined bomber broke over the tops of the trees, the sight of it adding to the shock of the noise. Ted recognized it for a B-25, and knew at once its mission. It was a fire-fighting ship, a borate bomber, carrying its load right to the flames and laying down a swath of the white, slurry, fire-retardant liquid that would check the fire.

With a shout, Nolan was out of the cab and racing for the strip with both arms waving in warning. As if in response, the B-25 lifted its nose and the flaps cranked up into the wing. In seconds the drab-painted bomber disappeared over the trees to the north. Nolan came back, shaking his head in relief.

"Crazy pilot!" he said. "I bet he figured he could set down on this little bitty strip. He'll have to go back to the airport to get another load. Not that it's going to do much good."

"What's the matter, Nolan?" Jim asked in concern. "Are you losing control of the blaze?"

"You might say we never *did* have it under control," Nolan said in a discouraged voice. "I never—" A squawk from the radio made him swing away from them and hurry toward the van. Ted and Jim followed him, listening eagerly to the two-way conversation. The reception was pretty garbled, but they could hear enough to know why Nolan shook his gray head sadly.

"Roger," he said finally. "You boys pull back in the clear now, you hear? We don't want any dead heroes on this job."

"Not good?" Ted asked, resting a foot on the running board.

"Nope! Not good at all. The blaze is just moving too blamed fast for us. The planes have to go too far to load up with borate, and they can't work fast enough to slow down the front of the fire. What we need is a good rainstorm, and fast!"

"Show us on the map how we stand," Jim Buckley said, pointing to the big map on the wall of the van back of Nolan. "Maybe there's something we can do."

"Not unless you're Indian rain-dancers," Nolan said with a snort. He reached a grimy hand toward

the map, tracing the front of the fire in a wide sweep. "That call you just heard came from here—up Sabine Canyon way. Fire went past those boys like they were backing up. By now it's here."

Ted snapped his fingers suddenly and moved closer to the map. "Would you settle for all the rain we had last winter?" he asked.

"Look, McKeever, we don't have time for fun games," Nolan said in an irked tone.

"The lake," Ted said, jabbing a finger at the blue crescent on the map. "Isn't this Sabine Lake up here?"

"Sure," Nolan said testily. "Sabine Canyon—Sabine Lake. So what does that mean?"

"That's a lot of water," Ted said quietly. "Maybe enough to drown the fire in the canyon."

Jim Buckley frowned and Nolan cocked his head to one side and took off his cap to scratch his head in puzzlement.

"I guess you boys aren't as nutty as I figured you were," he said. "That's a pretty good idea; except for one thing. It would take a party several hours to get there, and even with the gates open it would take the rest of the day to funnel enough

water down there to do much good.”

“How about twenty minutes?” Ted asked soberly. He was studying the map with narrowed eyes. “And if all the water came out in a big rush.”

“That’s it!” Jim yelled as he got the idea. “You got any dynamite, Nolan? And blasting caps and fuses?”

“You mean—*blow up the dam?*” Nolan said in disbelief. “But how could you?”

“We fly up in the Cessna, bail out into the lake, use our skin-diving gear to plant a charge where it’ll do some good, and *blooie!*” Ted said rapidly. “That’s an earth dam, as I remember.”

“I changed my mind again,” Nolan said in awe. “You two really *are* crazy. Just crazy enough that it might work! Let me get on the radio here and check with my boss. Then if we can get you some dynamite—go on. Get into your skin-diving stuff. I wish I could go along and watch!”

Pete Andrews thought they were crazy, too, when they yelled for the rubber suits and aqua-lungs. But he helped them get dressed in the underwater gear and back into chute harnesses.



"You're just doing this to make me think there's a reason for carrying all that junk around in the Cessna!" he protested.

There were half a dozen grimy fire fighters gawking at them by the time Nolan came running up, yelling at the top of his lungs.

"It's okay, McKeever. Give it a try! Hey, Jerry, you and Will get these men two charges of dynamite—fifteen sticks in each—and make it fast!" He leaned against the side of the Cessna, out of breath and shaking his head as he stared at the two rubber-suited divers.

"Who's going to fly you on this suicide mission?" Pete Andrews asked Ted, his face six shades whiter when he heard the word dynamite. He started to inch away from the plane but Ted grabbed him.

"You always bragged about your smooth flying," Ted said, grinning. "Now you can show us."

"Yeah," echoed Jim. "*Please* show us, Pete! Look, Ted, are you sure you still want to go through with this underwater demolition job?"

"With this audience we'll have to," Ted said. "Here comes the dynamite, anyway. Let's go!"

There was time to think as the Cessna lifted gingerly into the air and droned through the smoke. Both Ted and Jim were experienced skin divers; they had done several jobs that called for a parachute drop and an underwater assignment after landing. Ted had been an Underwater Demolition Team expert in the war and helped blast a path in to shore for ships in the Normandy landing. But this would be the first time they had tackled a combination job this rough.

Ted watched Jim moisten his lips and study the packages of dynamite lashed to the jump gear. He slapped his partner on the back and said, "No sweat, Jim. You know you're dying to do this job."

"Please!" Jim said and groaned. "What a choice of words."

Pete Andrews yelled from up front, and the two of them took their stations by the rear door. They were over the raging front of the fire now, and the heat was terrific. The Cessna bobbed like a bouncing cork on the churning updrafts caused by the flames two thousand feet below.

Jim pointed back toward the blackened ruin

the flames had left in their wide swath across the mountains. Below them the fire narrowed in the bottleneck of Sabine Canyon, but beyond the lake it would fan out wide again—unless their plan worked. “It’s got to work,” Ted heard himself say out loud. Seconds later, he took a deep breath and dived into thin, choking air.

They opened at less than one thousand feet, right over the broad earthen dam itself. After that there wasn’t a second to lose. Ted loosened his leg straps and pulled himself up on the risers while he made a sort of seat of the harness. When his feet touched water, he would slide out of the harness, letting the chute drift on past him.

“All set, Jim?” he yelled as loud as he could, not taking time to try to spot Jim.

“Roger!” came the answer from above. “Wonder if the water’s cold?”

Ted slipped out of his chute before he had a chance to answer. It seemed an age before he bobbed back to the surface, but by then he had shrugged into the aqualung, settling the oxygen tanks comfortably on his shoulders. Treading water he turned to face the dam and heard Jim

splash to a landing somewhere near him.

They approached the broad face of the dam towing the dynamite charges alongside. Luck was with them; the fire hadn't reached this area yet. Jim turned to Ted, just as his partner spoke.

"So far so good. Let's plant this stuff about fifteen feet down, eh?"

"You're the demolition expert," Jim told him, nodding. "How far apart?"

"Keep pretty close," Ted said. "It'll be murky down there, and if both charges go off fairly close together we'll have a better chance of cutting a channel in the dam."

"We've *got* to cut a channel," Jim said. "Let's go!"

Together they blew the water from the mouthpieces of the lungs, bit down on the rubber grips and dived. It was dark almost immediately below the surface; Jim was like a shadowy ghost beside Ted. Cautiously they approached the face of the dam, made contact, and immediately began scooping away the mud to plant the dynamite. Five minutes from the time they had dived from the Cessna, they surfaced, carefully paying out

the long fuse that would ignite the charges planted in the dam.

"There's how we get out of this charming lake," Ted yelled after he had spouted water from his mouth. He pointed to a rusty vertical pipe that slanted up out of the water and to the top of the dam. "These fuses are supposed to give us two minutes. Can you get clear in that length of time?"

"I've got news for you," Jim said fervently. "In two minutes I'm going to be halfway back to the airstrip. Light the fuse!"

As the fuse sputtered and disappeared underwater, they swam strongly for the pipe, and then went up it hand over hand, feet helping somewhat on the dirt and rock of the dam. They were almost to solid ground, running along the top of the dam when the blast shook them. Ted looked over his shoulder, stumbled, and went down. Jim tripped over him, and they both lay there watching as the geyser of water and mud settled.

"Did it work, or will we have to claw a channel out with our bare hands, Ted?" Jim asked tensely, and Ted held his breath until they saw the rush of water start. The notch cut wider by the second,

and soon there were tons of water pouring over the breached dam and heading down the canyon to meet and do battle with the approaching fire.

Panting with weariness, Jim flopped contentedly on the ground and began to laugh. "Those guys back there on the airstrip were right," he said. "Congratulations, you lunatic."

"Let's shake on it," Ted said, starting to laugh himself. "That was one for the books!"

## **4 Airborne**

They got back to Ripcord's field on Monday morning, almost afraid of what they would find. The fire was out before Pete Andrews learned that Ted had made the front pages with the Hazel Jarvis rescue story. Now he was as worried as the other two about what would happen next.

The field was deserted when they set down on the strip. Ted turned to look at Jim with a pleased grin on his face, but his partner wore the wary glance of a man expecting a creditor to leap out at him from behind any door.

"That fellow from the FAA—Gentry, wasn't it? He'll be here with padlocks for the door and habeas corpus for the bunch of us," Jim groaned as the Cessna's engine sighed to a stop.

"You don't mean habeas corpus," Pete corrected as he unfastened his seat belt. "That's the writ they'll get us *out* of jail with."

"It's nice to have a good legal mind in the organization," Ted said. "At least we're solvent; that smoke-jumping job will square our debts. Come on, let's unload and start repacking chutes."

Pete pushed into the big hangar as if it were booby-trapped. Back of him, Ted laughed in spite of his own heavy spirits. He was tempted to shout, "Stick 'em up!" but if he did there would likely be parachutes and assorted gear all over the place.

Ted checked the mail and then joined Jim to begin the job of repacking the chutes. They were missing one; it had raced over the dam with the lake water too fast for them to salvage as they had done the other one. If it did turn up somewhere in the canyon it would be badly damaged, and they had written it off and would bill the Forest Service for the cost.

They worked busily, skillful hands separating shroud lines and folding nylon gores neatly into red and white piles. It was an important chore and



it helped to keep their minds off their problems. Outside Pete was tending to the Cessna and from time to time they could hear the engine rev up.

It was near noon when Ted and Jim finished up in the chute loft and washed up for lunch. The aroma of coffee drifted from the lunch counter and they decided that a sandwich would certainly taste good. Ted was feeling safer by the minute, and then as they seated themselves at the counter the door pushed open. He assumed that it was Pete.

“Got all the chores done?” he asked without looking around. “If you have you can join us for lunch.”

“That’s neighborly of you,” a strange voice said. “I think I’ve done all my work—anyway my boss let me off for the afternoon.”

Jim Buckley strangled on his first swallow of coffee and jumped up from the stool. “I surrender,” he said when he could talk. “I’ll go quietly.”

“Don’t mind my partner,” Ted managed, getting to his feet and putting out a hand to the stranger. “I’m Ted McKeever, manager of Rip-

cord. This is Jim Buckley; we think he's shell-shocked."

"I'm Harry Whitworth," the man said, returning Ted's grip with a bear-trap grasp. An inch or two taller than the sky diver, he had crew cut hair and his gray eyes were amused. Whitworth stood straight and poised, a big man with a military look to him. The kind of guy, Ted thought professionally, who'd need a big chute.

"Nice to know you, Mr. Whitworth," Ted said, retrieving his hand. "What can we do for you this fine day?"

"Yeah," Jim chimed in, "we're pretty busy. In fact, we were just getting ready to fly to South America or China or some place like that."

"Oh?" Whitworth said, a frown crossing his face. "That's too bad." He reached in his pocket with an easy gesture and took out a billfold.

Well, Ted thought, this is it. Now Whitworth would tell them he was from the government, and here was a subpoena or whatever it was they used. He shrugged.

"I was hoping I could sign up for jump instructions," Whitworth said disappointedly. "I've got

the money." There were a lot of twenties visible and Jim sounded as if he were going to choke again and had to sit down.

"Instructions?" Ted heard his voice as if it belonged to someone else. "You want to take lessons? You didn't come from the FAA?"

"FAA?" Whitworth frowned even deeper and his look indicated he thought maybe they were both shell-shocked. "No, I'm just plain Harry Whitworth with some time to kill and some money to burn. This sky diving has always looked like fun, and—look, maybe I came to the wrong place."

"No, sir!" Jim Buckley said, recovering now and beaming all over his face. "Sit right down here, Mr. Whitworth, and have a cup of coffee on the house. You came to the best jump school in the world, and Ripcord, Incorporated is glad to have you. How about a ham sandwich?"

"Well—if it's all right to jump on a full stomach, that might go pretty good at that." Whitworth was smiling again, and he put away his billfold and sat down beside Jim. Ted got up and went to the door so he could pass the good

word along to Pete. They'd need the plane that afternoon if their new student was really serious, and something about Harry Whitworth told Ted that the man usually did what he set out to do.

He caught Pete's eye and waved for him to come into the office. The chubby pilot nodded and wiped his hands on a piece of toweling. As he came toward the office he glanced at the car Whitworth had driven up in. It was a black sedan, and apparently Pete hadn't seen it arrive. The pilot's red face paled noticeably as he approached Ted.

"This is Mr. Whitworth, Pete," Ted told him as the pilot came in the door. "He's come to—"

"I knew it," Pete said sadly, shaking his head. "Soon as I saw that car I knew we'd had it. Look, I've got to take a little trip, fellows. I'll drop you a card, *if* they have stamps where I'm going."

"Listen carefully," Ted rasped through clenched teeth. He had to grip the pilot tightly to keep him from bolting. "Mr. Whitworth came to take jump lessons, understand? Get the plane ready for a local hop, Pete."

"You mean he's not going to—he's—" Pete's

smile was sickly as he backed toward the door. "We're still safe?"

"He's not going to hurt us," Ted said patiently. "That's a good pilot now, go get the plane ready."

When Pete was gone Ted tried to explain to Whitworth. "You see, we were up in the mountains on a smoke-jumping job over the weekend, Mr. Whitworth. I guess inhaling all that smoke makes them giddy."

"Yeah," Whitworth said uncertainly. "It surely seems to. Look, let's drop the formality. My name is Harry."

"Fine, Harry. I'm Ted." Smiling, Ted joined them at the counter and reached for his coffee.

"I'm Jim," Buckley said dazedly. "Anyway, I think I am."

"You're going to be fine," Ted reassured him, with a wink at Whitworth. "Now, what do you say we get started on a briefing for our new student?"

The new student was good. For an hour Ted and Jim went over the basic principles of sky diving with him in the hangar, using the black-

board and photographs. Whitworth caught on quickly. He was a commercial pilot on vacation, he told them. So it was logical that he would understand theory as well as he did.

From the classroom session they moved outside to the jump pit and the two sky divers demonstrated parachute landing fall techniques.

“Some wit said that ‘parachute jumping is perfectly safe,’ ” Ted told the student. “ ‘It’s the landing to watch out for.’ And it’s true. So learn how to fall when you make contact with old Mother Earth. A lot of beginners think they’ll be heroes if they stay on their feet the first time, but it’s almost a sure way to sprain an ankle, or even break a leg. Swallow your pride and fall. Like this.”

He mounted the platform over the sawdust-filled pit and demonstrated, letting his legs, side, and shoulder soak up the force of landing. Brushing shavings from his coveralls he had Whitworth go through several practice falls. The man did excellently; so well that Jim Buckley watched him with a vague frown.

“How am I doing, coach?” Whitworth asked



after he had executed a backward roll like a professional. "When do we start making actual jumps?"

"You're doing so well I wonder if you need our help, Harry," Ted admitted. "You go at it like an old pro."

"Well, I did have some tumbling in the service," Whitworth admitted. "I'm just doing what you tell me."

"You keep doing that," Jim said, "and we'll hire you as a jump instructor. When business picks up, that is."

"Okay," Ted said, satisfied that Whitworth was ready to move on to the next step. "Let's fit you with a harness and then we'll go up in the Cessna and Jim will demonstrate a static line fall for you."

"Roger!" Whitworth said enthusiastically. "Now you're talking my language. Lead me to that harness!"

Fifteen minutes later the three of them climbed into the Cessna and Ted gave Pete the high sign for take-off. Ordinarily the classroom work and the fall practice would have been enough for the



first time, but Whitworth was an unusual student. He was eager, too.

“How about just letting me make a free-fall jump?” he suggested as the plane circled for altitude. “Looks pretty simple to me. Just count four slowly and yank the ripcord. We can save a lot of time that way.”

“Nope,” Ted said firmly. “That’s not the way Ripcord does business, Harry. Static line drops first. Maybe next time you can free-fall, but I want you to know how to hold a stable position first.”

“Okay,” Whitworth said resignedly. “But I’m willing to pay you for the whole series of lessons, if that’s what’s bothering you.”

“Look, Harry, this is a business with us and we’ll admit it. If we didn’t get paid we’d be out of business. But we do it the right way or we don’t play at all. Not for any kind of money. Have you got that?”

“Sure!” Whitworth grinned under his white jump helmet. “I got it. You’re the boss, Ted. What’s next?”

“Twenty-five hundred feet!” Pete yelled over

his shoulder. "I'm starting my first run on the target."

"Okay. Get set, Jim," Ted told his partner. He attached the webbed static line to the hook inside the plane and tested it by pulling with all his strength. Then he snapped the hook on the free end through the D-ring of Jim's chute.

"This first time you don't have to worry about hanging onto the D-ring," Ted told Whitworth. "Watch carefully and see how Jim does this now."

Jim pulled his goggles in place and swung a foot out the door of the plane as they approached the jump zone. Steadying himself, he moved his other foot onto the landing wheel, scuffing it to be sure Pete had it braked securely. Then with both feet solidly planted, Jim stood up and placed his hands on the wing strut. Ready now, he kept his eyes on the white cross that was his target.

When it was time, he simply lifted both feet, poised for a second and then shoved backward with both hands. Immediately he was in a good spread position, body stabilized in the slip stream as he fell back and down from the plane. The anchored static line plucked the D-ring neatly

from its pocket and the men in the plane watched the pack open on Jim's back. The pilot snapped open on its springs and began pulling the main chute clear.

"Great!" Whitworth said, nodding his head. "Looks like a lot of fun. How close do you think he'll land to the target?"

"Pretty close," Ted said, grinning. "Don't worry if you don't make a bull's-eye the first time, though. That comes with practice." Whitworth continued to amaze him. At this point, many newcomers went silent and tense. It was an understandable reaction, one that usually stayed with the beginner the first few jumps. Chances were that the big grinning guy who was so ready to jump now would tighten up at the last minute on his first drop.

As they completed their turn and lined up for the second run, Jim touched down within the **X** and Whitworth smiled his approval and made an okay sign with one gloved hand. Then he checked the emergency pack slung on the front of his harness. Ted had hauled in the static line and removed Jim's D-ring. Now he snapped the hook

on Whitworth's ripcord and slapped the man on the back.

"Your turn," he said. "Remember to count four; if you don't feel your chute opening by then, pull the emergency. Try to hold a stable position. Okay?"

"Okay!" Whitworth said, grinning broadly. "Why don't I do a free-fall this time? I can handle it. An extra ten bucks make you change your mind?"

"Forget it," Ted said evenly. "Maybe next time. *If you show me you're ready with this drop. Better get out there.*"

Whitworth moved with ease and confidence, bracing his feet on the step and wheel and getting a good grip on the strut. In position, with the blast of air rippling his coveralls, he glanced quickly at Ted and nodded. Then he gracefully shoved clear of the plane, arms spread wide and body arched. Perfectly stabilized, he dropped away from the Cessna. Unlike most new students, he made no nervous movements of his hand toward the emergency chute—the "praying mantis" position, as Jim called it.

The chute came out as neatly as it had been packed and when it was full length of the shroud lines the deployment sleeve slipped from it. The canopy mushroomed and Whitworth swung beneath it. It seemed to Ted that the man was already studying the target and jockeying his risers to guide himself toward it. For a beginner, Whitworth was pretty polished!

Ted hauled in the static line and stowed it, putting the D-ring in the pocket in the back of one of the seats. Then he leaned over and tapped Pete on the shoulder.

"I don't think I can stand one of your rough landings," he kidded. "Make another run and I'll take the easy way down."

"*Very* funny," the pilot sulked. "Some day I'm going to get mad and go back to my job with the air lines!"

"You're getting too fat to fit back of that ticket counter, aren't you?" Ted asked and then jumped clear of the punch Pete swung at him. "Seriously, I just want to show Whitworth a free-fall."

"Huh! I'd say that boy could show you a few tricks, Ted. You sure he's not a spy from the

FAA? Remember what that Gentry guy did that time.”

“All I know is that he’s paying good money for the lessons,” Ted said. “If he just came out to shut us down would he be going through all this?”

“Beats me,” Pete admitted. “Go on and bail out so I can set this baby down. I’ve got a transmitter to replace before we take on any more jobs. I guess that landing up in the mountains shook something loose.”

“You see why I want to land by parachute?” Ted said, risking the pilot’s wrath again. “See you on the ground, Pete!”

He dived through the doorway, seeing at once that he had delayed a bit too long. Immediately he pulled the ripcord, to give himself a better chance to hit the target than if he delayed to lower altitude. He told himself this would build confidence in their pupil, too, letting him see how fast you could open the chute in free-fall when you wanted to, but Whitworth didn’t seem to need much confidence building. Ted watched the new man touch down on the center of the **X** and got

busy with his own risers. It would be touch and go trying to do that well with his own jump.

Fortunately the chute they had designed gave him a speed of close to ten miles an hour in still air, and moved him back toward the target fast enough that he hit it dead center. Yanking on the risers at the instant of impact he cushioned the landing force but still executed a roll to play it safe. As his momentum carried him back to his feet someone hailed him.

“Bravo, McKeever! That was a good jump. Right on target!”

“Thank goodness for that,” Ted said, shrugging out of his harness. He walked over to where Jim and Whitworth were field-packing the latter’s chute. “We’re supposed to hit the target. New students don’t usually do it though. You amaze me, Harry.”

“That’s what I told the guy,” Jim said.

“Beginner’s luck, I guess,” Whitworth said with a broad grin. “It was a lot of fun, gentlemen. I thank you for the lesson.”

Watching Whitworth carefully put the folded chute into the pack was the last straw for Ted.

Something snapped inside him, and he said crisply, "Don't kid me, *Mr. Whitworth!* You're no straight-legs." He used the old term from the Army jump school almost without thinking.

"That's right," Whitworth said, smiling easily. "And I guess it takes an Airborne man to know one, eh? How about it *Major McKeever? Captain Buckley?*"

"How would you know about that?" Jim exploded. "Look, are you some kind of spy trying to shut us down because of what happened when those crazy kids used our field last week? Because if you are—"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Whitworth protested, holding up his hands defensively. "Get off my back, Jim. I'm out of uniform, but I'm no spy. Not really. It's Colonel Whitworth, actually. Here's my ID card in case you're suspicious, and I can't say I'd blame you."

"Well, what do you know!" Ted said stiffly. "Jim, let's throw the colonel a salute. Welcome aboard, Colonel Whitworth. Nice to meet someone from the old outfit. You're right about us being suspicious; we've been under a good bit of



strain the last few days. Now we're just curious. How about another cup of coffee while you fill us in?"

"It's a deal," the officer said, nodding. "Maybe we'd better wait for your pilot. Pete might be curious, too."

"Some of our top officers have been watching you," Whitworth said, holding his coffee mug in both hands and blowing to cool it. "It was the picture in the paper the other day that finally did it."

"Thank goodness they've got no authority to put us in the guardhouse," Jim said with relief.

"Let's say it's just a request, gentlemen," Whitworth said. "You are both in the reserve; how about taking a two-week tour of active duty with your old outfit? Some of us think it's time we learned a few new tricks in the Airborne."

"You're kidding!" Ted said. "I hear that free-fall is a bad word in the service. You boys use the static line all the time. Colonel, you pulled our leg once. Don't try it again."

"This is no gag, men. Look, I was so sure I

could talk you into this project that I've already had your orders cut. They're in my briefcase out in the car. If you don't agree I'm going to look pretty silly when I report back. I went way out on a limb on this, I can tell you."

"Man, you sure had us guessing," Jim admitted. "What was the reason for going through the classroom stuff, and making that static drop? That took some acting for an old paratrooper!"

"I had to make sure you two hadn't turned into some wild, carnival-type operators, don't you see?" Whitworth said, spreading his hands. "Now I know you're a couple of ramrods. Strictly GI clear through."

"What do you know!" Ted said softly. "Jim, what do you think we should tell the colonel?"

"We probably ought to tell him to go fly his kite," Jim said, laughing. "But you know something? The FAA just might come trooping out here yet. If we're back in the service they won't know what to do. Get it?"

"Sure," Pete put in loudly, "I'll get it. You can't leave me to the wolves, guys!"

"We did a real thorough job of checking you

boys out," Whitworth said, almost apologetically. "So we know you're in the Air Force Reserve, Lieutenant Andrews. You're in on this junket, too, if you can make it."

"It must be that smoke I inhaled," Pete said. "Because I'm on the verge of saying I'll go."

"I figured you would, and I got the Air Force to issue transfer orders for you, so you could join your buddies," Whitworth said, looking a bit sheepish again. "And, I've arranged for a transport to pick us up here tomorrow."

## **5 Jumper in Trouble!**

The three of them, Ted, Jim, and Pete, spent the night right at the field shutting up shop for the two weeks they would be away. Pete “put the Cessna in mothballs” as he called it, somewhat sadly. Ted burned the midnight oil with business correspondence, including more letters trying to stir up interest and backing for a United States team for the International competitions coming up. Then he gave Jim a hand in the chute loft.

Both of them were excited again after the long period of discouragement. Here was a chance to make some points with the Army, and maybe sell them on the Mark I chute! So they checked and rechecked six of the new design, triangular models they had originated. After that they calibrated the

altimeters on the emergency packs and carefully checked the stop watches.

The radios in their helmets worked perfectly, and Ted carefully packed the helmet cameras because there might be a job for them at the Army field. Just before they crawled into their cots in the hangar Jim got out a small brush and a can of paint and created a masterpiece of a sign to leave hanging on the office door. GONE TO VISIT UNCLE, it read. Ted and Pete put their stamp of approval on it and snapped out the lights.

Lying in the dark hangar, listening to the rustle of the breeze on the corrugated iron, Ted clasped his hands back of his head and grinned to himself. It had been a long time since they had been in uniform. He had thought when he left the service it would be for good, but now there was a tense excitement in him. It was a good feeling and he shut his eyes and went to sleep.

The clatter of the alarm seemed to come almost as soon as he was asleep. Ted swung his feet to the floor and yelled, "Up and at 'em, Army!" Jim was up immediately, flipping on the lights, but it

took a flung pillow to rouse Pete. Twenty minutes later they trooped into a nearby all-night diner for breakfast. Halfway through the second cup of coffee Pete cocked his head restlessly.

“I hear a DC-three,” he proclaimed, digging in his pocket for change to pay for his meal.

“Please,” Jim Buckley corrected him. “An L-twenty-three, you mean. Come on, Ted, let’s don’t keep the colonel waiting! You’re in the Army!”

The twin-engined transport was swinging around on a braked wheel at the end of the strip when they reached Ripcord’s field and a billow of dust wafted their way. The Army plane trundled back along the taxi strip, jounced to a stop before the hangar, and the engines coughed. The three-bladed props became visible, jerked to a standstill. Before the dust had settled, the door in the fuselage swung open and a khaki-clad figure swung a ladder down from it. Seconds later the Ripcord crew was shaking hands with Colonel Whitworth.

“All set, gentlemen?” he asked. He looked at home in the uniform and flight cap with its insig-

nia; without thinking Ted snapped a salute to Whitworth.

“Roger, Colonel. We’ll grab our gear and load up.”

“Good, we’ll give you a hand. Gentlemen, this is Sergeant Walt Kruger, our crew chief. Major McKeever, Captain Buckley, and Lieutenant Andrews.”

Kruger touched his cap and grinned. “Glad to meet you, sirs. Heard a lot about your outfit.”

“They’re all on to us,” Jim said, laughing. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Ten minutes after the L-23 had landed, its pilot gunned the engines and lifted it from the short strip. It was an odd feeling watching the ground drop away under the broad, sturdy wing, a different feeling than they had ever experienced in the little Cessna they were used to.

As they settled on course Colonel Whitworth came back from the flight deck and sat down with Ted and Jim. He slammed a fist enthusiastically into the palm of his other hand and nodded his head vigorously.

“I’ve had a successful mission, men. You know,

if you hadn't agreed to come back on active duty my name would have been mud! I think this is going to work out to everybody's benefit."

"How about filling us in on some of the details," Ted said. "This whole thing was so sudden I'm still not sure what we're supposed to do when we get there!"

"That's easy," Whitworth said enthusiastically. "Just sell us on free-fall. If anyone can do it, it'll be you fellows."

"We tried once," Jim said gloomily. "But we couldn't even get the Army interested in our new chute."

"That was last time. Look, I know you're convinced that there is a lot that free-fall techniques can do for the Airborne—"

"*And* the Air Force, *and* the Navy, *and* the Marines," Jim broke in loudly. "There are a dozen advantages. Free-fall can put a paratrooper right on his target, and it can save the life of the flier who bails out in an emergency!"

"That's what I want to hear," Whitworth said, nodding encouragingly. "Tell it to the Army, as the old saying goes. And then to make it really



sink in, show them—the general included. He'll be there at the maneuvers at Arnett Field."

"Oh, boy," Ted said. "Top echelon. We'll have to make it good. But I thought he was dead set against anything but static line drops for you people?"

"When he thinks this is a better way, he'll buy it," Whitworth said. He grabbed at the seat for support as the transport rocked suddenly.

"I wondered where Pete was," Jim groaned. "He must have talked your pilot into letting him fly this machine."

"Good," the colonel said. "Don't want him feeling left out on this tour of duty. And I think that was rough air, not sloppy flying, anyway." He leaned back and looked out the window, then glanced at his watch.

"Maybe we could start to outline a plan of attack for our demonstration," Ted suggested, fishing a small notebook and pencil from his pocket. "I'd say we should leave out the fancy stuff like baton passing, eh? Keep it simple and practical."

"I agree," said Whitworth. "Stable position,

and some turns to demonstrate the control you have. Seems to me there should be some valuable application for emergency high-altitude jumps. Keep the man from rolling up in his chute, or spinning out of control and losing consciousness.”

“Right,” Jim agreed. “Spot landings ought to be important, too. Maybe we can do some selling on our chute at the same time.”

“I don’t see why not,” Whitworth said. “Ted, let’s start listing these things and we’ll have a real program planned.”

The three of them were still busy preparing for the demonstration when Pete Andrews sat down with them. He looked as if he’d been having a good time up front.

“Pilot says to tell you we’re nearing the field, Colonel,” Pete said. “I wanted to make the landing but he chased me out. Said I needed a little brushing up.”

“I’m with them,” Jim Buckley said, grinning as he ducked a roundhouse swing the chunky Pete aimed at him.

“Hey, we’re in luck!” Whitworth exclaimed,

looking out the window. "They're making some jumps now, men. Why don't we orbit up here a while and watch the show?"

"Could we move up to the cockpit?" Ted asked. "We can see it better up there."

"Sure thing, let's go!" the colonel said, leading the way.

Standing back of the pilot they watched the string of paratroopers blossom out behind a low-flying transport. Ted counted the white bulging chutes quickly—twelve, fourteen, and finally there were twenty jumpers in a neat line settling toward the rocky fields below. Automatically he tried to note the drift caused by the wind, and his brow furrowed. There was quite a breeze blowing down there.

"They look pretty good, even for just static line jumps, don't they?" Whitworth asked. There was noticeable pride in his voice, understandable pride, and Ted hesitated before he mentioned the wind.

"I hope they're sharp about collapsing their canopies," he said evenly. "If not, they're apt to do some running."

"They'll make out all right," the pilot put in, looking over his shoulder at Ted. "Old 'Hardhat' Harrison wouldn't have let 'em jump if it was too windy. Eh, Colonel?"

"That's right, Lieutenant. It's safer than roller skating. Watch."

The first chute was collapsing now. The second caught the wind a moment and then flattened. Whitworth nodded his satisfaction. Then suddenly they all knew somebody was in trouble down there.

Apparently a sudden gust caught one of the canopies before the paratrooper in the harness could haul in on the low risers and spill the air from the nylon. Immediately the white parachute took off down the wind like a runaway balloon, the jumper dragged behind it helplessly. In seconds the chute had pulled him onto rough terrain.

"Help him, one of you guys!" Whitworth shouted a warning so loud he must have thought the other jumpers could hear him. But by now the chute had far outdistanced anyone who might have helped collapse it. As the men stood frozen on the flight deck of the transport, watching, the

dark figure of the dragging paratrooper caromed off what must have been a large boulder. Ted heard himself groan.

“Colonel,” he said suddenly, “let Pete take over.” And simultaneously with Colonel Whitworth’s understanding look and quick nod Ted grabbed Pete by the shoulder saying, “You get in the seat and fly this thing. Understand? Come in over that boy straight down the wind at two thousand feet. Jim and I have got to get to him before that chute beats him to a pulp!”

He didn’t have to tell Jim what to do; his partner beat him back into the cabin and was sliding into a chute harness. Whitworth was on the ball, too, taking in Ted’s plan in a second. Before they were ready to go he had the door swung inward and was cautiously peering ahead as the transport came around in a fast dropping turn. Pete was handling the L-23 like he did his Cessna, and Ted grinned in spite of his tenseness.

Standing just back of the open doorway, Ted steadied himself against the sucking blast of the air tearing past it. At first he was afraid the angle was wrong, and that he would be unable to see

the helpless jumper who was his target. Then, leaning his head back closer to the bulkhead, he caught sight of the chute. It was still bulging with wind, still dragging the jumper with the speed of that wind. Ted thought he saw a dark figure stumbling along behind, but he wasn't sure. He couldn't count on anyone reaching the luckless jumper in time; he had to time his dive awfully close if he and Jim were to help the man.

The right second came, the brief interval of time that was exactly correct to put him over his moving target. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Jim, pointed down vigorously, and propelled himself through the opening and into the wall of air waiting for him.

Pete Andrews had done a beautiful job of lining the big transport up on the run; Ted had only a slight correction to make to soar straight for the white bulge below and in front of him. He streamlined his body into a sleek full delta position, knowing he was hurtling through the sky at more than two miles a minute. For tense, breath-holding seconds he wondered if he had ordered Pete to fly too low an altitude. Without

looking at the altimeter just below his chin he knew he was down to eight hundred feet—seven hundred now—six hundred—then suddenly it was all right and his arms came in and out in the fast reflex movement to pull the ripcord at the precise time.

Just as his soaring body overtook the unconscious paratrooper below him—Ted was low enough to see the white face as the jumper was rolled over by a rough spot in the terrain—the big canopy opened above and behind him. Slightly ahead of the runaway chute, Ted drifted with the strong wind to match the speed of his target. What he had to do of course was to land in front of the helpless man and collapse the chute before it got away from him. Then, as the shadow of another chute flicked across him and he realized that Jim had popped his chute downwind, a half-crazy idea came to Ted. It might work, and even as he thought of it he began to maneuver the risers to slow his drift slightly.

“Back me up, Jim!” he yelled with all his strength. If he cut his speed more than exactly the right amount he might land *behind* the man

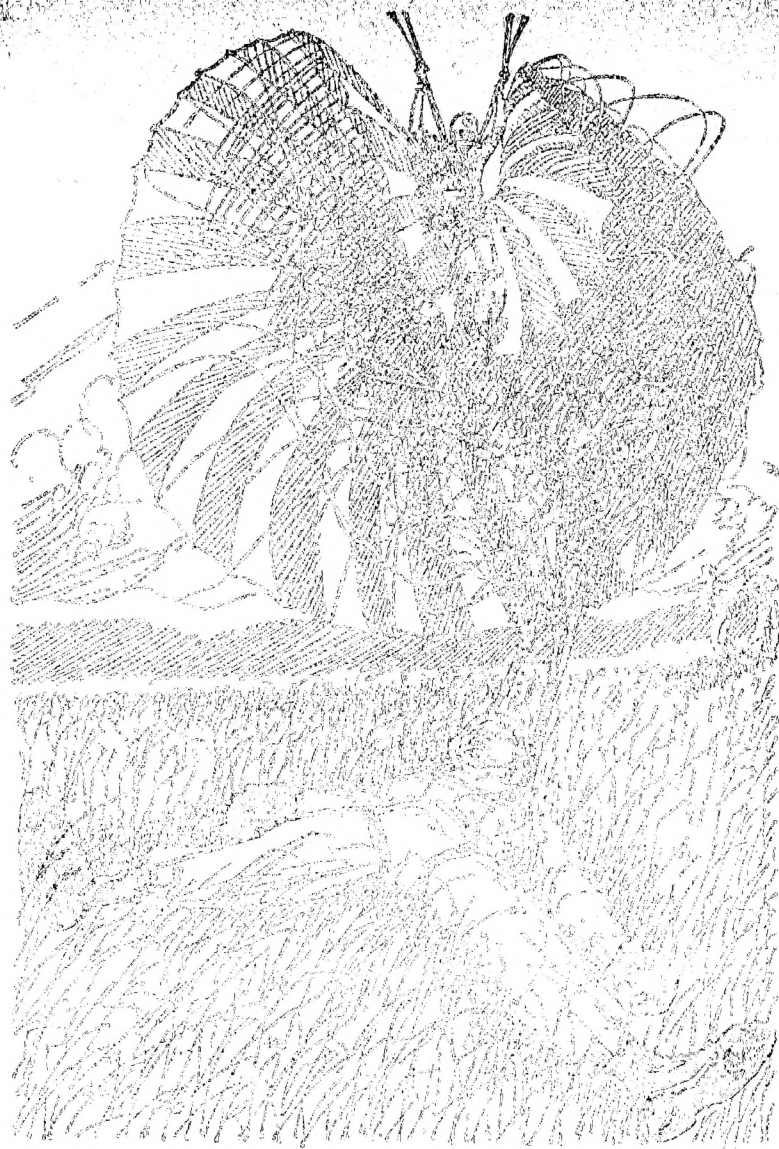
he was trying to help and then it would all depend on Jim. But if he succeeded, they'd save precious seconds and maybe another bruising jolt for the unconscious jumper fifty feet below him.

Suddenly the nylon canopy dragging along the ground was right beneath him. He brought his jump boots together and felt them strike the yielding chute. The roundness of it collapsed and then billowed up about him, swathing him completely so that he had to fight to keep from losing control. He hit the ground and rolled hurtlingly, unable to fall the way he should have because of the strait jacket effect of the other chute.

As his own chute began to tug downwind he had a tense vision of perhaps being strangled in the shroud lines of the chute he had landed on top of, and he fought an arm clear enough to release one set of risers at his right shoulder. Almost immediately the tension ceased and he was able to get to his feet.

"Hang on, Ted! I'm coming," Jim yelled against the wind. "Man, that was the best bull's-eye I've seen. Don't move until I get the poor guy out of his harness!"





It was good advice, and Ted was glad for his partner's cool head. Dropping to hands and knees he anchored the paratrooper's chute with his weight, praying that the man was all right—that they had been in time. As Jim Buckley eased the harness from the unconscious man his jump mates pounded up to help. Their faces were white and strained, but there was another look on them, too. A look of stunned appreciation for what the sky divers had done.

“Hank!” one of them yelled as he neared the fallen man. “Are you okay, buddy?”

“He'll make it,” Jim Buckley said calmly. “Broken ribs, and that cut on his leg needs more than this pressure bandage I'm putting on it. Is there an ambulance in the area?”

“Yeah,” the paratrooper said, dropping to his knees alongside his friend. “It's coming now; back there. I was afraid old Hank had had it. Where in the world did you guys drop from anyway?”

“And what kind of monkey suits are you wearing?” a skinny trooper demanded. “Those don't look like any Airborne uniform I ever saw.”

“You'll get used to it, son,” Ted said, approach-

ing the knot of men as he bundled up the injured man's chute. "Maybe you haven't seen chutes like ours before, either. Or harnesses you can release fast when you have to land in a gale like this."

"Man, that was a breeze," a jumper said, whistling loudly. "And it sure came up in one big hurry. Looked like it was going to beat Hank silly on this rough ground. Hey, here's the ambulance!"

"All right, one side!" A medical officer dropped from the running board of the still-moving ambulance and sprinted toward them, a bag in his hand. "We'll take over now." The doctor was young, and he looked worried.

"These two guys already took over, sir," one of the troopers said. "Hank's breathing all right, but he's sure bruised."

"You can take over," Jim Buckley said, getting to his feet and nodding to the young officer. "We're glad to see you, Lieutenant."

"The feeling is mutual, I can tell you," the doctor said as he knelt beside the still unconscious man. He felt for a pulse and then lifted one of the jumper's eyelids. "I'd hate to be dragged like

that! When I've got more time, mister, I want to find out who you are and how you did it."

"Captain Buckley here," Jim said, grinning. "I was a paramedic awhile back. Your patient is going to be all right; thanks mainly to his helmet."

"I'm Major Ted McKeever," Ted put in. "You were Johnny-on-the-spot with your ambulance, Lieutenant."

"Now I begin to get it," the doctor said, frowning up at them. "Sky divers, right? Seems to me Colonel Whitworth was saying something about you last week. Captain Buckley, you did a good job with your first aid. We'll get this boy to the hospital; I imagine he'll want to see the two of you when he comes around. Hey, stretcher!"

Ted and Jim helped get the injured man onto the stretcher and watched him loaded into the ambulance. Then they accepted the doctor's offer for a ride to the hospital.

"It's close to Headquarters," he said. "And I guess you'll be wanting to sign in, eh?"

"No, sir!" somebody yelled. "They've already signed in, I'd say; good and proper with those red and white parachutes. What a spot landing that

was; right on old Hank's chute!"

The sky divers climbed down from the ambulance in front of the Headquarters building just as a jeep skidded to a stop across the street. Pete Andrews and Colonel Whitworth piled out and called to them excitedly.

"How is the jumper?" Whitworth demanded, glancing anxiously at the departing ambulance. "Is he okay?"

"Sure, Colonel," Jim said, laughing. "You know the Airborne is tough. He's just a little beat up, but he'll make it all right."

"Thanks to you boys," Whitworth said soberly. He put out a hand and shook with each of them, his grip as steady as the look in his eyes. "What say we go see the general? I hope he saw that demonstration. I still don't believe it!"

"Well, don't ask me to repeat it for him," Ted said, grinning. "I don't believe it myself!"

## **6 Air Show!**

The sky divers spent most of the afternoon checking in officially for the two-week tour of duty. Pete Andrews was flown to the nearest Air Force Base to take his physical and was kidded unmercifully when he rejoined his buddies.

“You ought to get rid of that spare tire, Lieutenant,” Ted said, jabbing Pete in the midsection. “When you make a jump you just might bounce so much we’d have to shoot you down to keep you from starving to death!”

“Jump?” Pete quavered, ignoring the insult. “I didn’t sign up for a paratrooper course! Hey, I’m going home.”

“Ah, come on, Pete,” Jim said. “Show us you’ve got the courage.”

"No sir. You've got to take my word for it, men! As long as my plane still has wings on it I'll land the way I took off."

"I get it," Ted said. "He's afraid he'd rip the chute apart at the seams."

"Hmnh!" Pete snorted. "You can't hurt my feelings. Anyone for the mess hall?"

They were assigned rooms in the transient officers' quarters and then Ted and Jim picked up their field-packed chutes and took them to the parachute loft for repacking. Pete excused himself and headed for the theater.

Colonel Whitworth left the sky divers at the parachute hangar. Then he was to go pick up General Harrison in the neighboring town.

"Sorry the general wasn't here to greet you," he said. "But I've set up a briefing for o-nine-hundred hours tomorrow morning."

"Nine hundred?" Jim said, frowning. "Let's see, now. What time would that be in civilian language?"

"Don't believe him," Ted joked as he spread his chute out on the long table. "Jim wears his captain's bars on his pajamas."

"I'll bet," Whitworth said. "See you in the morning, gentlemen. Sleep well so you can put on a good show tomorrow."

"Roger," Ted said, returning the wave. "Will do. And thanks, Colonel."

A parachute rigger came over to watch them, a puzzled look on his face as he studied the red and white canopies. Stowing the standard Army chutes he was carrying, he moved in closer.

"What type of chutes you got there?" he asked. "I heard some of the boys talking in the mess hall, sir. Are we going to have some kind of a carnival on the field?"

"Not exactly," Jim told him. "Let's call it a show, Sergeant."

"Wow," the enlisted man said suddenly, pointing to the missing panel that was the feature of the sky divers' Mark I chute. "That's really going to be a show if you bail out in *that* thing! It's got a piece missing."

"The better to steer with, Sergeant," Ted told him, grinning. "Where do you keep your packing paddles? We've got work to do before we can hit the sack."



The briefing room was a large auditorium and the audience was composed of about fifty uniformed troopers in polished jump boots. Ted and Jim met General Harrison; "Hardhat" Harrison as he was called around the field. He came into the auditorium with his famous hard hat under one arm, and his handshake was as firm and tough as his grizzled face looked.

"Morning, gentlemen," he said to them gruffly. "I hear you did a fine piece of work for us yesterday. You have my thanks for preventing what might have been a serious injury. I've just come from the hospital, by the way, and Private Willis is doing nicely." The general raised his voice for this announcement, speaking to the whole group, and there was a ripple of approving comment.

"I believe everyone is here," Colonel Whitworth said when the general seated himself. "We are glad to have reservists Major Ted McKeever and Captain Jim Buckley with us this morning. They are on the field for a two-week tour in line with our discussion at our meeting last month, and I venture to say you have all heard that their demonstration began yesterday, a little ahead of

schedule and not quite according to plan.”

There was some laughter, and several men applauded. Ted felt the back of his neck getting hot and Jim Buckley squirmed uncomfortably.

“Both of these men were in the Airborne some time ago,” Whitworth went on. “Since then they have made quite a name for themselves as Ripcord, Incorporated. I’m sure you are aware of the technique they use—considerably different from ours.”

General Harrison cleared his throat, and something told Ted that the battle was not quite won. Whether or not “Hardhat” Harrison was from Missouri, he looked like the kind of man you’d have to show. The rescue yesterday had been a start, but only that.

“Now I’m going to turn this briefing over to Major McKeever,” Colonel Whitworth said. He turned toward Ted. “Your slide projector is ready to go, and there’s a blackboard if you need it.”

“Thanks, Colonel,” Ted said, getting to his feet and facing his audience. “It’s good to get back in uniform after so long, gentlemen. And we’re glad of the chance to speak to you on the subject of

free-fall parachuting. It's a different thing entirely from the static line drop we use in the Army, and it was really popularized in Europe."

"As a sport, was it not?" General Harrison interjected, arms folded tightly, his face impassive.

"That's right, sir. In this country it is beginning to catch on now, as a sport, and we've put it to good use in a number of missions we've been called on to do. Diving into otherwise inaccessible areas, smoke-jumping, parading, and the like. Jim Buckley and I believe it has applications to the military; we have tried previously to get our point across without much success."

"Let me point out, for all of us, that the military *has* tried free-fall," General Harrison said, his booming voice filling the auditorium. "Tragically, I might add. That's why we stick to the idea of static line drops from low-flying aircraft."

"Yes, sir," Ted said. "I've made my share of such jumps, and I know they do the job. Today, though, we want to point out some of the advantages we think free-fall has. First, it can give the element of surprise and secrecy. For static line drops, the plane must come in low. For free-fall,

it can be high—very high. The jumper is much less apt to be seen, and this is a consideration when we are sending in pathfinders ahead of regular troops. Second, learning the proper free-fall techniques can save the life of a man who has to parachute in an emergency. Jim, will you show the first slide, please?”

For two hours Ted and Jim talked, showing slides and drawing diagrams on the blackboard. There were plenty of questions, many of them from “Hardhat” Harrison. The two sky divers were sweating when it was over and the audience began to file out. Hopefully Ted sought out the general to find out what his impression was by now.

“Most interesting, Major,” Harrison admitted. “Most interesting indeed. But they say, ‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating.’ What do you say we save it for dessert—after our lunch? You gentlemen must dine with me; Whitworth, you see that they get to my table.”

“Yes, sir,” the colonel said, saluting briskly. He stayed to help the sky divers clean the blackboard

and gather up their slides and other material. He was high in his praise of their presentation, but there was no guarantee, he reminded them.

"The general has a point, you know," he said as they drove back to their quarters. "He has to do what he thinks is best for his mission and his men. But don't worry. He's not hardheaded, even though some people have changed his nickname to that."

Except for their tenseness, lunch was pleasant. The general was a good host, with more of a sense of humor than they had thought. The talk got around to his son, and Harrison put down his coffee cup with a broad smile.

"You know, that rascal joined the Air Force!" He seemed to think it was a good joke on him, and they all joined his laughter and then tried to decide what would make an Army youngster do that.

"Probably the uniform," Jim suggested.

"I suppose so," Harrison agreed. "But we've forgiven him, and let him come home on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Well, gentlemen, my watch

says it's time to get on with your demonstration. Right?"

"Right, sir," Whitworth said, getting to his feet. "We'd all better get down to the flight line."

"I'll see you there," Harrison said. "Incidentally, we've asked all the troops to be in attendance. You'll have a big audience."

There must have been a thousand curious paratroopers lining the jump area when Ted and Jim climbed aboard the small, single-engine plane for their first dive. Whitworth had arranged for a loudspeaker to pick up radio conversation from the plane to keep the audience aware of what was coming up.

Pete Andrews, looking relieved now that he knew he wouldn't be expected to do any jumping, gave them a high sign as he shoved the throttle ahead and the plane began to move down the runway. He had missed the presentation that morning, spending his time getting checked out in the liaison craft the sky divers were using for the actual demonstration.

They climbed quickly to three thousand feet, and as they started the first run toward the target

Jim checked his gear and swung his feet over the side of the empty doorway. Ted picked up the hand mike and spoke into it.

“The first demonstration will be a free-fall from three thousand feet,” he said. “Captain Buckley will demonstrate the proper basic spread position, a diving technique that keeps the body stable and under control at all times. He will open his chute at about one thousand feet and attempt to land close to the **X** target on the field. Stand by.”

There was a crosswind, and Jim asked for a correction in course to the right. Seconds later he pushed off from his perch outside the plane and started his graceful dive toward the white **X** down below.

“As the jumper approaches, you men on the ground notice the position he is maintaining. Arms and legs spread, back arched. This is sometimes called the cross position, and I think you can see the advantages. The jumper has full view of the ground, his body will not go into an uncontrollable spin that might cause him to lose consciousness and when his chute opens there will be no danger of entanglement.”

On schedule, Jim's chute popped open, the pilot chute pulling the main canopy clear of the pack. It looked like a good jump; Jim should touch down close to the target.

"Notice how the deployment sleeve prevents the canopy from opening until the shroud lines are fully extended. Now! The canopy opens with far less shock to the jumper and less danger of ripping the chute itself in a high-speed bail-out."

As the plane banked at the end of the field, Ted watched his partner land about fifty feet from the center of the target. He slapped Pete on the back enthusiastically, pleased with the good start of their demonstration.

"You want me to describe your dive?" Pete asked, shouting over the engine noise. "I'm not much of a public speaker, Ted. That's a mighty big crowd down there!"

"Don't get nervous," Ted told him, checking his chutes and his helmet. "I'll use the helmet radio; Whitworth said he could pick me up with the receiver they have down there. You just fly the plane. Come in a bit more upwind for me, will you?"



The plane made its final turn onto the run and Ted climbed outside. Wind ripped at him and he hoped there would not be too much noise when he spoke. The throat mike should take care of that.

“This is McKeever,” he said, “ready for a push-off when I am lined up on the target. I will open my chute almost immediately and then give you a demonstration of our Mark I model. I’m pushing off now.”

Pushing up slightly with both feet, he shoved backward with both hands against the wing strut. The plane passed over him and out of vision. As soon as he was clear he pulled the ripcord to give himself plenty of time for an effective demonstration of the steerable chute.

“There was very little opening shock,” he said when the canopy had mushroomed with a muffled report above him. “My altimeter reads twenty-six hundred feet. Once I have determined the direction and amount of wind drift I turn the chute to correct for this drift. You will notice that even with violent maneuvers, this special triangular chute does not oscillate. You can appreciate the

importance of this feature for parachute openings very near the ground.”

He was settling slowly now and right for the target. Down below, Jim had field-packed his chute and moved clear of the target area as Ted descended.

“Fifteen hundred feet now,” Ted reported, startled to hear his own voice boom back a split second later from the ground speakers. “You’ll notice there is one panel missing in the chute; this is the steering vent. Air coming through the vent actually guides the chute so that I can move as fast as ten miles an hour horizontally and still maintain a very slow descent. In a strong wind I can work the risers and increase my horizontal speed even more to counteract a drift.”

To show the control he had over the chute he deliberately drifted beyond the target some distance, made a turn to the right and recrossed the **X** at a lower altitude. Then at five hundred feet he entered a slow corkscrew spiral that circled him in ever closer to the target.

In the light breeze it was easy to hit the mark, and he touched down within a yard of the center

of the X. A burst of applause rang out from the watching paratroopers, applause that was music to Ted's ears from such a critical audience.

Five minutes later he and Jim had donned fresh parachutes and boarded the small plane again. Pete took them up quickly, this time climbing to six thousand feet before he leveled off. The two sky divers checked their chutes and instruments carefully; then they were starting on a run toward the target from the higher altitude.

"Captain Buckley will now demonstrate the control possible for a trained diver," Ted said into the microphone. "He will do a series of turns in both directions, figure eights to the right and left, and then attempt a spot landing. We are at six thousand feet for this demonstration."

With a wide grin, Jim pushed off in spread position. Once in stable flight, he started his maneuvers. Ted watched approvingly as his partner rolled out precisely on heading after each movement. The figure eights went smoothly, and right on schedule Jim pulled up and over in a beautiful inside loop, popping his chute as he came level. His landing looked perfect to Ted; right on the

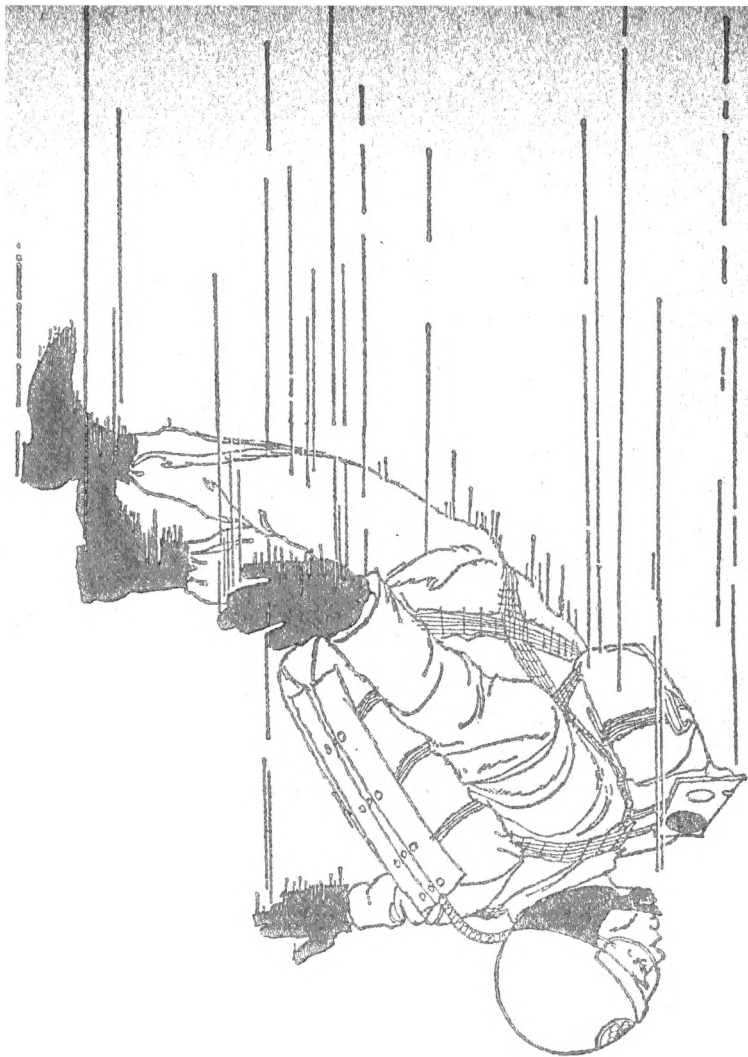
point where the legs of the **X** crossed.

When it was Ted's turn he pushed off smoothly and immediately went into a streamlined full delta position to build up speed rapidly. At two miles a minute he made a smooth turn to the right, a figure eight starting left, and finished with a turn to the left. Then he did a forward loop and three backward loops in rapid succession, coming out at last in a full spread position and opening his chute over the target. He duplicated Jim's bull's-eye and grinned at the applause that greeted him.

Several of the officers walked toward him, and he was surprised to see the general among them. He was nodding approval, but he seemed to have some doubts yet.

"What do you think so far, General?" Ted asked, mentally crossing his fingers for the answer. "We plan to do a double dive next, unless there's something particular you had in mind."

"That would be fine, McKeever," the general said. "I'm wondering if these maneuvers you just did so precisely have any real value, though. What I mean is, what tactical use could I possibly make of them?"



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"I agree," Colonel Whitworth said. "To me it looks like a good stunt—an awfully good stunt and worthy of commendation—but of no particular value outside of being a stunt."

"All right," Ted said, a slow smile covering his face. "Maybe we can show you what value there is in being able to control the body in a dive. Jim, are you ready to go?"

Ten minutes later Ted spoke once more into the mike on the control panel of the Army plane, explaining what would be their last maneuver of the day.

"This time Buckley will dive from the plane carrying a baton," he said. "I will follow immediately, attempt to take the baton from him. After that we go our separate ways, to show you that we don't just spin around without affecting the course of our glide as we maneuver. Buckley will try to hit the target; I'll see how much I can miss it!"

At ten thousand feet the air was thinner and colder, cutting through the coveralls like a keen knife. Jim took his position outside and pushed free into a full delta. As quickly as he could, Ted

dived after him, spreading arms and legs wide to slow himself until Jim was right below. Then Ted started to close the gap, his eyes always on the bright orange baton Jim gripped in his left hand.

Jim had slowed his body now, and Ted increased speed to catch him. At more than a hundred miles an hour he maneuvered precisely with arms and legs, his body a human glider responding accurately to each motion.

He came alongside, slowly overtaking his partner, and reached a gloved hand for the baton that drifted just ahead of him. His fingers clamped solidly around the length of wood and he yelled in satisfaction to Jim.

“Okay, pal! Take off like a big bird now; last man down is a sissy!”

They had aimed at a point far to the left of the target below, and now Jim banked slowly to the right and toward the small white X far beneath them. In a matching, opposite movement, Ted swung to the left and the two of them began to draw apart quickly. Once on the heading he wanted, Ted arched his body for greatest lift and tried to prolong his glide as much as he could. He

crossed the edge of the field still a thousand feet up, and seconds later the canopy boomed out above him.

With satisfaction, he touched down some distance outside the field and was busy packing his chute when he heard the jeep honking as it bounced across the rough ground toward him. It was Whitworth, a pleased smile on his face as he braked to a stop alongside.

“I get the point, McKeever; that was a good show! I clocked the distance here from the target on the speedometer. You’re nine-tenths of a mile from where Buckley landed. This won’t hurt us any with the general!”

“That’s a relief,” Ted said, climbing into the jeep with his chute cradled in his arms. “For a while there I thought you were on his side!”

“Well, he’s my boss,” Whitworth said, grinning as he put the jeep in gear. “The trick is to get us both on your side, and you should have come close with the show you put on today. Now how about some chow?”



## **7 High Dive!**

The top Army officers were impressed by the demonstration the sky divers had put on. There was no question of that. General Harrison himself had congratulated Ted and Jim after the successful jumps they made, and Colonel Whitworth spoke glowingly in the Officers' Club that night.

"You've got half the battle won," he told them. "Most of the men who do our planning had never seen a real exhibition of sky diving before. You've taken it out of the air circus category for them; made them see it doesn't have to be a carnival stunt."

"Great," Jim Buckley said, sinking deeper into a leather lounge chair and reaching for another

handful of peanuts. "That's why we came. When do we get a contract for some chutes?"

"Down, boy!" Whitworth said. "Relax. The wheels turn pretty slow on something as big as this."

"Just so they don't stop," Jim said ruefully. "What's phase two of this clambake?"

"How'd you like to come along tomorrow on a test jump from fifty thousand feet?" Whitworth said evenly. "We've been invited by the Air Force to watch the tryout of a new automatic chute. You might get a chance to spread the word about sky diving as a way of stabilizing the body in a long delay like this."

"Try to keep us away!" Ted said, the prospect straightening him in his chair. "Can *we* dive from that altitude?"

"Not tomorrow," Whitworth said. "Clearance for that would take some doing. But it's a thought, and you can surely suggest it to the Air Force. Shall we plan on you both for tomorrow, then?"

"Unless you want both of us on your neck, you'd better!" Jim Buckley said seriously. "I've never been up that high—I'd go along just for

the ride if nothing else!”

“Fine. Take-off is at twelve hundred tomorrow, from Ranger Field. We’ll have to leave here by o-nine-hundred.”

“Let’s see,” Jim said, screwing up his face in tense concentration and counting on his fingers, “is that including daylight saving or not?”

“I’ll explain it to you at breakfast,” Whitworth said. “That’s at o-seven-hundred, by the way.”

“I’ll listen for the reveille bugle,” Jim said with mock concern. “You’ll have to be patient with us poor civilians.”

“Sure. See you in the morning.”

Pete Andrews decided to stay on the field instead of going with them in the morning. He wanted to get checked out in a twin-engined transport and also put in some time in the Link trainer to build his proficiency in instrument flying.

“Besides, fifty thousand is too high. A guy’s liable to go into orbit at that altitude and starve to death!”

“Not you,” Jim Buckley told him accusingly.

“We’ve got the picture, all right. I saw you making eyes at that WAC lieutenant yesterday. Too bad your chest has slipped so low!”

Just before nine o’clock, Ted and Jim boarded a U-1 “Otter” with Colonel Whitworth and a dozen other officers from the Airborne field. Even though they would not be doing any jumping during the visit, the two sky divers carried their chutes along. As Ted told Whitworth as they lugged the gear into the transport, they would have felt half-dressed without them.

Ranger Field was some three hundred miles distant, so there were a couple of hours for talk on the trip. Ted and Jim recalled experiences in their Airborne days, and the other paratroopers told stories of their jumps. All had watched the demonstration of sky diving the day before and Jim started a half-serious recruitment of members for the team needed for the international jump competition. The talk was interesting, and it was a surprise when the crew chief came back and asked them to fasten seat belts for the landing at the Air Force field.

There was time for coffee in the lunch room

on the flight line, and then they trooped in for a short briefing in Operations. The mission was simply to climb to fifty thousand feet for two parachute jumps by a pair of trained high-altitude jumpers. Ted and Jim were introduced, and then met the two men who would be testing the new automatic opening devices.

“Hi, men,” the project leader, Captain Horton, said. “Glad to have you along. We’ll have to get together and talk about your sky diving before you get away from Ranger Field. Ever jumped from ten miles up?”

“No,” Ted admitted. “Our little Cessna can’t scramble quite that high. We’d like to join you for this jump, but I realize that’s out of order on short notice. Good to be along; I’m sure we’ll learn something.”

“Ready, gentlemen?” yelled someone from the door. “Truck’s here to take us to the aircraft.”

The sleek, swept-wing B-47 looked like all the others the sky divers had seen until they got inside. The bomb bay had been reworked especially for the kind of tests the two officers were making today. Horton and his partner, Captain Grabow,

led the way up into the belly of the bomber and Ted and Jim followed with their gear. The small door closed after them and they strapped themselves in the bucket seats. The jumpers wore suits of brilliant, luminous material.

“We’ve got to be sure to get the right seats,” Grabow said, laughing. “Mine and Horton’s are downward ejection jobs, and we don’t want the wrong men to be shot out of the bottom!”

“Thanks,” Jim Buckley returned. “I’d just as soon watch, to tell you the truth. We didn’t hear much about this new type chute you’re trying out. Is it a pressure-sensitive release?”

“Right,” Horton said, nodding. “But it’s better than anything we’ve ever had available before. There’s a special alloy in the sensing mechanism that isn’t affected by temperature. That way we can preset the chute to open at any altitude we choose, and hit that altitude right on the nose.”

“Amen,” Grabow added. “That’s the theory, anyway. Of course, the device has worked in hundreds of pressure chamber tests, and we have emergency packs. No sweat at all, as far as Horton and I are concerned.”

"We've learned something already," Ted said, his eyes lighting with interest. "Do you suppose we could get a commercial version of this opener? It would be a great safety feature for sky diving."

"I don't see why not," Horton said. "Colonel Whitworth and his boys are interested. I don't see why everyone shouldn't have it. Next to the chute itself, it's the biggest lifesaver I can think of. Even if the jumper passes out, there's no problem. The chute will open. Seems to me I've heard of sport jumpers who delayed too long and clobbered in without ever pulling the handle, haven't I?"

"That's right," Ted said. "Unfortunately for the jumper. And for us, too. That's the biggest obstacle we've had to fight in selling free-fall. I'm sure—"

"Better get your headsets on, men," Horton interrupted. "We're ready for takeoff."

They checked in on interphone—the two jumpers, Colonel Whitworth, Ted, and Jim—while the big jets roared alive. Minutes later the bomber swung onto the runway and they blasted into the air at an angle so steep Ted couldn't

believe it until he remembered that the B-47 was being aided by rockets in its take-off.

As the altimeter on the bulkhead beside him spun toward the mission altitude, Ted checked his oxygen. The green lips on the indicator winked at him reassuringly as he inhaled deeply. Across from him Jim Buckley was grinning like a kid at a circus, pointing out the window at the ground already far below.

There was time to study the interior of the plane in more detail now, and Ted wondered about the bomb shackles that remained in the bomb bay. Pressing his mike switch he asked about it.

“That’s part of another project we’re working on,” Grabow’s voice answered him metallically in the earphones. “We can hook a ring in these ejection seats to the shackle and drop a man at exactly the second we want to, using our electronic bombing-sight. Just in case we want him to come down in a particular area. Works pretty fine.”

“That’s something,” Ted said appreciatively. “I guess we civilians are a bit out of touch, eh, Jim?”



"Roger," his partner said. "And while we're on that subject, take a look at your altimeter, would you? We're almost at fifty thousand feet!"

The needle was moving fast on its last sweep of the dial, and they heard Grabow and Horton talking with the pilot and planning the first drop.

"Colonel Whitworth, will you make sure my seat ejection mechanism is armed?" Horton asked. "I'll be going first. Feels like I've got it cocked okay, but I'd hate to misfire and have to make another pass."

"Looks okay to me," Whitworth reported when he had made a check of Horton's seat. "The safety locks are retracted."

"Roger. Pilot, this is High Dive One, standing by for ejection."

"High Dive One, roger," came the answer. "We are in the drop zone and you are cleared to eject at any time in the next thirty seconds."

"You take the high road, gentlemen," Horton said to all concerned, "and I'll take the low road. I'll be in the Officers' Club afore you!"

"Have a good ride," Grabow called.

The hatch beneath Horton slid back and Ted

felt the icy torrent of air. Then there was a sharp blast and suddenly the seat and the jumper were gone as if by some magician's trick. The hatch closed and Ted stopped shivering.

"Pilot, High Dive One is away in good order." Grabow reported. "Can you see his smoke trail?"

"Roger," came the reassuring answer. "We'll orbit to the right until his chute pops."

Pressing his face to the window, Ted made out the snakelike white trail of smoke that marked Horton's hurtling dive from ten miles above the earth. In spite of himself, he held his breath tensely as he watched. The ground was an indistinct patchwork of brown and green, with scattered cumulus clouds covering some of it. Ranger Field was barely visible to the east.

A minute ticked off on the small clock in front of Ted; then another. Except for the vague, curling smoke trail, Horton's plummeting body had ceased to exist for the men watching from the bomber patrolling at fifty thousand feet. In spite of the cold, beads of sweat formed on Ted's forehead. He mopped across the top of his oxygen mask cautiously, and felt better when he saw that

Grabow was doing the same thing.

"It's a long way down," Jim Buckley said in the tense silence. "Makes our delayed jumps seem fast, eh, Ted?"

"Right. I'd want to take a lunch along from here," Ted told him. "How much longer, Grabow?" he asked, trying to keep the concern from his voice.

Grabow was studying his watch carefully. "He should open in—five seconds now. Four—three—two—one—now! Watch for him!"

"There he is!" Ted cried, pointing in relief. "There's his chute, just above that little cloud. See him?"

"Roger," Grabow said in a taut voice as he mopped at his forehead again. "No sweat, did I say? Man, that was a long time. I won't worry nearly as much on my own jump!"

"High Dive Two, this is the pilot," crackled in the headset. "Ground radar just informed us that Horton opened at twenty-five hundred feet, right on schedule. He should drift close to the edge of Ranger Field."

"Roger, thank you," Grabow said. "High Dive

Two standing by for my drop. Ready any time you are.”

“Drop zone in about two minutes,” the pilot replied. “Let’s have a repeat of that one now.”

“I’ll buy that,” Grabow said, nodding as Whitworth checked his seat for the ejection. Ted studied the Air Force man with respect, knowing the kind of courage it took to plunge into space ten miles above the hard ground that waited far below. Other brave men had taken this kind of plunge and died when they hit the ground, or been dead even before they hit.

A jumper could freeze solid as ice without proper protection, and he could die from lack of oxygen if something went wrong. It had happened before, and death still waited out there for anyone brave enough to challenge it. Men had broken their backs, and frozen their hands and feet. Yet other men, men like Horton and Grabow, had the courage to try again, and each new accomplishment like this made it easier for those who followed.

“Drop zone!” the pilot said sharply. “Ground weather reports the wind from the south is

stronger and recommends you allow a little extra for it.”

“Roger, thank you. High Dive Two blasting off in reverse. Tallyho!”

The hatch opened and Grabow fired his seat into the thin blue emptiness underneath the plane. A freezing wind shivered Ted again and he wondered how the jumpers could take it, even with the special warm suits they wore. He pressed his forehead against the cold plastic window and watched for the telltale smoke that would mark Grabow’s rocketing plunge earthward. Ten miles beneath them, Horton would be watching, too, and likely sweating the way his partner had for him. Grabow had said it right; it was easier to jump yourself than worry about the other guy!

“There he is!” the pilot called. “The smoke—wait, something is wrong! He’s spinning—”

Ted felt his chest tighten in a mighty grip as he watched the spinning body of the jumper falling away from them. Twice in his life he had come close to blacking out in just such an uncontrollable maneuver. Even at far lower altitudes it was possible to spin out of control; in this thin

air the danger was worse. If Grabow should spin faster than 120 revolutions a minute he would lose consciousness.

“I thought they had licked the stability problem!” Jim Buckley said tightly. “Correct with your feet, Grabow! Correct, man!”

“They thought they had it whipped,” Whitworth said. “Something’s gone wrong. Pilot—”

“There goes his pilot chute!” a voice crackled in the earphones. “Look, there’s the main chute. He’s okay!”

Ted let out his breath in a whistling sigh that flapped the oxygen mask. Grabow had managed to stop the deadly spin. But the cost might still be too high.

“How long will it take him to float down from here?” Whitworth asked. His voice was grim, indicating he, too, had thought ahead to the long minutes that could freeze the jumper hanging suspended below the white canopy.

“Too long,” Ted said. “If he doesn’t run out of oxygen he may freeze before he falls ten miles in a chute! Let’s try to raise him on the radio.” He switched the jackbox to Command, and heard the

pilot calling urgently. The Air Force was way ahead of him, Ted thought gratefully.

"High Dive Two, come in," the level voice said. "High Dive Two, acknowledge. Do you read me? This is B-forty-seven, do you read me? Come in!"

"B-forty-seven—this—Dive Two. I—"

The answer was fragmentary and faint. Ted twirled the volume in a desperate effort to hear better. Encouraged, the pilot renewed his urgent call.

"I read you, High Dive Two. What is your condition? Come in, Two."

"High Dive Two here. I'm—okay. Lost my helmet and one glove in that spin. I—I can't remember opening my chute."

"Okay, Two," Whitworth's voice broke in. "The main thing is to get you down now. Is your oxygen tank full, and is your emergency chute still attached?"

"Uh, roger," Grabow said, his voice clearer now as though he was coming out of the fuzziness. "I might make it on the oxygen, but I'm going to freeze in a hurry. Maybe I can partly collapse the canopy and—"

"Negative," Whitworth broke in. "Too risky! Listen! Can you hit your quick-release to get rid of the main chute and free-fall to a safe altitude?"

"I— I don't know. If I spin again—"

"We'll tell you how to keep out of a spin," Whitworth said rapidly. "If you don't lose some altitude fast—" He broke off because it was senseless to tell a man in Grabow's spot what he probably already knew. "You've got to give it a try, okay?"

"Roger. You're right. I'll freeze if I don't get down. I think I'm missing a boot, too."

"Roger. Look, I'm going to put Major McKeever on the radio. He can tell you how to fall in a stabilized position so that you *can't* spin. Stand by."

"High Dive Two, this is McKeever. Listen carefully, and you'll be down in that nice warm air with no problems. What I'm going to tell you is something so simple we have twenty-year-old stenographers doing it perfectly their first lesson in jump school. You ready?"

"Ready, McKeever," Grabow responded, his voice thick and strained now as though he were



clenching his jaws against the cold. "What do I do?"

"First, you'll get rid of the main chute—not yet, wait until I'm through. As you fall clear of the harness, spread both arms wide just like you were a kid trying to fly. Arch your back and get the head up high. Make a V of your legs. Got that?"

"Roger," Grabow said, repeating the instructions.

"Fine; you've got it perfect," Ted said encouragingly. "Then just fall in that position as long as you can. We'll monitor you and call off altitude for you. Hang on as long as you can. Understand?"

"Understand. Jettisoning main chute now. I—" The voice faded and Ted watched tensely as the white nylon canopy slowly crumpled out of shape. The small figure beneath it dropped rapidly, but this time there was no spin. The jumper held a semblance of a spread position as he dropped in ever-accelerating speed through the agonizing cold of forty thousand feet. Ted watched the outside air temperature on the panel

in front of him and bit his lip. It was ten below zero.

Without having to be told, the pilot of the B-47 dropped the nose of the bomber in a dive to match the plunge of Grabow and circled a safe distance away.

“Thirty thousand,” Ted said evenly. “You’re doing fine—twenty-five thousand, now. Hang on.”

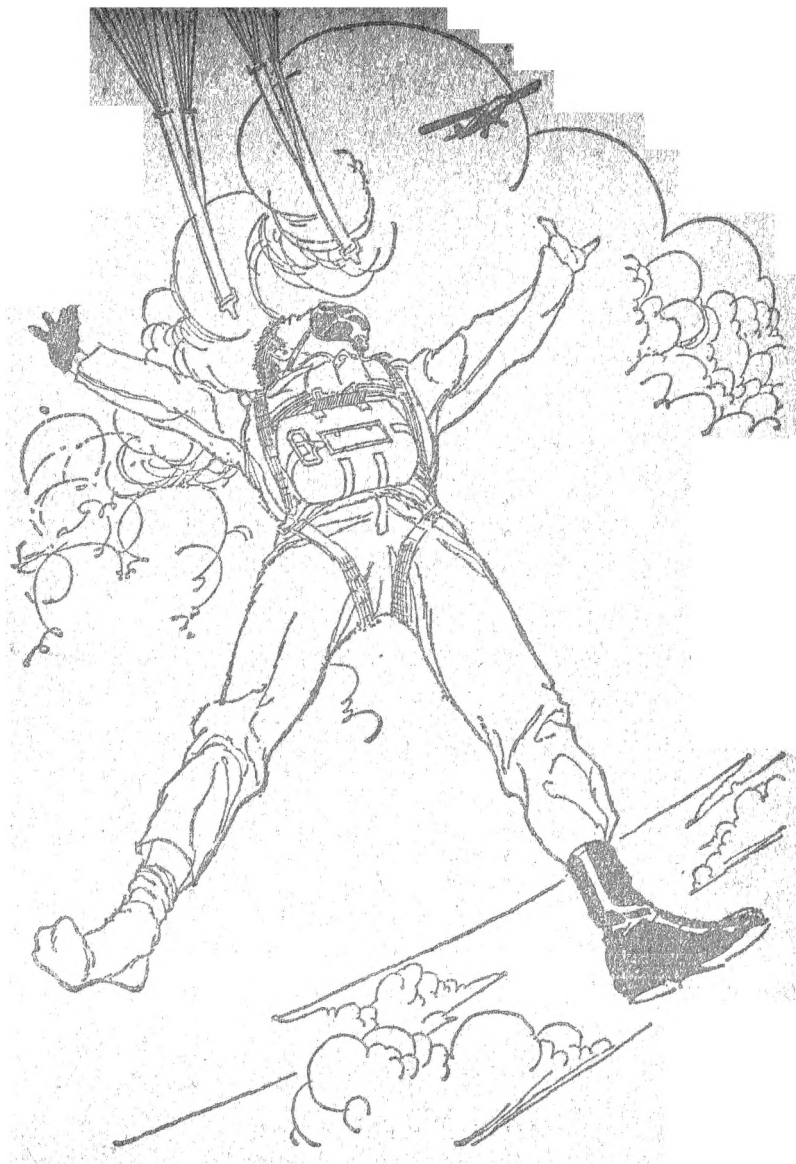
There was no answer, and Ted prayed that Grabow was hearing him and not unconscious. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for him to answer anyway.

“Twenty-five thousand. Excellent, High Dive Two—twenty thousand, now. Warming up fast. Hold it for five thousand feet more and—”

“There’s his chute! He’s pulled his emergency!” Jim broke in excitedly. “He should have waited; it’s still too high.”

“Anyway, he opened,” Whitworth said, relief filling his voice. “Maybe he was afraid he’d pass out.”

“That’s right,” Ted agreed, letting his body go slack for the first time in what seemed an hour of tenseness. “He’s all right now.”



“Except for the lake,” the pilot broke in. “That wind from the south could drift him into it. We’d better warn him to slip his chute.”

Five minutes later they gave up trying to reach Grabow. Circling around him, they studied the limp figure in the harness trying to determine if he was conscious or not. The radio he carried may have been damaged, or it may have been torn free when the second chute opened. Conscious or not, Grabow was not getting the message and now Ted could see the dull blue of the lake coming into view.

The pilot had been busy, and a rescue helicopter was already taking off from Ranger Field. The news relaxed the men in the B-47, and now it seemed all they had to do was fly cover on Grabow for the rest of the descent. They were down to five thousand feet and it was obvious that the jumper hanging limply beneath the reserve canopy was either unconscious or otherwise unable to maneuver his risers to control the chute.

They were low enough now to make out choppy waves on the wind-ruffled surface of the lake when the bad news came. Ted was on interphone,

and it wasn't until the pilot relayed the news that he heard that the helicopter had clipped a guy wire taking off, and been forced to land. Another was being started up.

"We *can't* let him drown!" Jim said harshly. "Not after all he's been through."

"That's for sure," Ted agreed, flipping the catch on his safety belt. "Like I say, that's why we wear these parachutes, isn't it?"

"You haven't got a Mae West, remember," Jim said as he realized what Ted planned. "I'm a better swimmer, too."

"You stand by," Ted told him. "I've got an idea. Get that door open while I clue the pilot in on this operation."

The B-47 was flying as slow as the pilot could manage; a drag parachute normally used for braking during landing was open behind it. Ted dived through the open door a thousand feet over the water, soaring down toward the white canopy below him in a delta position. He pulled the ripcord a hundred feet above the other jumper and his canopy braked his body almost immediately.

He had planned it well, and he had been lucky, too. He admitted that to himself as he watched Grabow slip into the water. Ted was still upwind of the man, perhaps fifty feet in the air. He jettisoned his reserve chute so it wouldn't hamper his movements in the water and set himself for impact with the waves. Holding his breath, he went under the surface. In seconds now he would know if his scheme would pay off or not.

When his head broke water he almost shouted with exultance. The red and white canopy still held its ball of air even though its lower side rested in the water now. The brisk wind was tugging Ted through the water straight for Grabow's head bobbing in the waves!

"Grabow! Behind you, man!" Ted yelled.

Dazedly the Air Force man swung his head, his eyes glassy as he spotted Ted. Ted grabbed for him and caught a handful of wet sleeve.

"Hit your release!" he shouted, and somehow the befuddled jumper managed to free himself from the sinking canopy. Clinging together, they both surged through the water of the lake on a free ride toward the distant shore.

## **8 *Rescue Mission***

Waterlogged and chilled, the two men dragged ashore minutes before the helicopter reached the lake. Ted helped Grabow up onto the grassy bank and the Air Force man sprawled out while Ted went back for his parachute that was now a soggy, hard to handle, mass of nylon. He had a soft spot in his heart for the red and white chute, and he carried it ashore with respect. If it hadn't worked the way he hoped it would, saving Grabow might have been beyond Ted's strength.

He heard the jumper retching as he returned, and hurried to reach him just as the fluttery whirling of rotor blades cut across the air toward them. Grabow was pale, but he managed a weak smile when Ted put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically. “All of a sudden I got sick; kind of a delayed reaction, I guess.”

“How are the hands and feet?” Ted demanded, studying Grabow carefully. “Any frostbite, do you think?”

“I don’t think so. Just weak. I sure thought I was going to turn into an icicle up there, until—”

“Hey, Grabow!” someone yelled, and they looked to see the helicopter touching down close by, its twin rotors spinning to a halt. “It’s me—Horton. Are you okay, buddy?” Grabow’s jumping partner hit the soggy ground running and covered the distance in half a dozen strides.

“I’m fine,” Grabow said, sticking out a hand to Horton in greeting. “Thanks to this Army type here. Looks like I panicked like a green recruit when I went into that spin up there, Horton. Sorry.”

“Forget it, man. The chute may have popped of its own accord. And even if it didn’t, what’s the difference? You had no choice. Am I ever glad to shake your hand on good solid ground again!”

“Better let me check him over carefully,” a medic said, pushing between Grabow and Horton.



“You sit back down, Captain. Somebody get that boot off and let’s have a good look at his feet.”

While the medic and a corpsman poked and prodded at the protesting Grabow, Horton put a hand on Ted’s shoulder and looked at him gratefully. It was long seconds before a grin softened the tense set of his face.

“I’ve only heard bits and snatches of what happened,” he said, “but I figure he’d have bought the farm if you hadn’t dived out of the bomber and towed him ashore. I don’t believe what I saw, by the way. How in the world did you get your canopy to stay open all the way to shore?”

“Beginner’s luck, I guess,” Ted said, grinning. “A Navy flier friend of mine saved his life that way once when he bailed out off the east coast. He said his chute pulled him a good ten miles; clear in to the breakers. I figured it was worth a try.”

“Hey, Captain Horton!” The medic was beckoning to them, and two men with a stretcher were moving toward the helicopter with Grabow. “Let’s get aboard. I want to put this man in the hospital for observation.”

“Humor him,” Grabow told them as they came alongside. “I’m perfectly okay. But we’ve got problems with that wild spinning, Horton. I thought I could control it, but I was wrong. Maybe we better let these sky divers draw us some pictures. What do you think?”

“From what I hear, McKeever already drew you some pretty good ones at fifty thousand feet,” Horton said soberly. “I think you’re right. We’ll see if Colonel Whitworth can lend us these boys for a couple of days.”

“We’d like to,” Ted told him. “Fact is, Jim and I hoped we could do some high-altitude dives. Maybe we’d all learn something.”

“Great,” Horton said, slapping him on the shoulder enthusiastically. “You people go on. I’ll stay here for the salvage team. We want to fish Grabow’s chute out of the lake there, and his main chute ought to come down somewhere in the area. I’ll look you up this evening and we’ll make some plans.”

“Fine,” Ted said. “You take it easy, now. That was a workout you had up there.”

“Like a walk around the block! Take care of

my friend there, will you?"

Jim Buckley was among the anxious men waiting at Ranger Field when the helicopter touched down in a swirl of dust. There was relief on the sky diver's face when he saw Grabow climb out of the helicopter under his own power, and he slapped Ted on the back heartily. "That was quite a stunt!" he said as they dodged the cluster of Air Force people trying to ask them questions. "You think it will replace water skiing?"

"I don't know," Ted answered him, "but it sure made my chute soggy. How about making yourself useful and helping me hang it up to dry for a while?"

"Okay, I've got nothing better to do until the movie starts."

"We'd better skip the movie and rehearse for some more lectures," Ted told him as they entered the parachute loft at the end of the flight line. "Grabow and Horton thought maybe it would be a good idea if we did that."

"I've got news for you," Jim said, plopping the chute down on a long table. "Colonel Whitworth has already sent out the invitations! That's why

I want to see a show. We're working so hard I need some relaxation."

"Well, how about that," Ted said. "Okay, I'll go with you."

A rigger came up to the other side of the packing table and reached for Ted's chute. He was grinning sheepishly, and when he started to speak to them he stammered several times before he got the words out. Apparently he knew them, and was trying to tell them how glad he was to meet the men who had staged the rescue he had heard of just minutes before. But something seemed to be troubling him.

"I'm Sergeant Riley, sir," he said, licking at his upper lip nervously. "Joe Riley, that is."

"Oh?" Ted said. "Well, we're real glad to meet you, Joe." The rigger seemed to think his name would mean something to them, and Ted wracked his brain. Riley—vaguely he remembered a Riley, but couldn't place the man.

"I was afraid you'd want to clobber me, Major," Riley said, and his ears got red as he talked. "You see, I guess it's on account of me Hazel got interested in jumping. It's my hobby, and—"

"Hazel? Hazel Jarvis?" Jim Buckley snapped his fingers. "Are you saying you're the guy responsible for that little gal scaring us half to death?"

"But I didn't know she'd get Paul to take her up, honest!" Riley retreated a step. "I told her to go to a jump school, but I guess people just don't know much about sport parachuting."

"They sure don't, Riley," Ted said heavily. "Your girl friend could have been killed."

"I—I know that," Riley admitted, staring at his boots. "Hazel's my fiancée, and we're going to get married pretty soon. When I heard you sky divers were on the field I wanted to come right over and see you, but I knew you probably wouldn't be too happy to see the guy who caused you so much trouble. Hazel's folks sounded like they could have cheerfully killed me when they called up!"

"That's understandable!" Jim said sternly.

"Well, I'm sure sorry," Riley said. "I guess Hazel won't be jumping any more. I'm grateful to you both, and I hope my officers will let me come to the lecture. I really love jumping."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I'll see that they do,"

Ted said, smiling appreciatively. "Let me know when that canopy is dry, will you? I'll want to repack it myself. No offense to you."

"No, sir! I always pack my own chute, too. If I'm on duty I want to watch how you do one of these Mark I's. Soon's I get me enough money I'm gonna buy one."

"Hey, that's great!" Jim said to the rigger. "We just happen to have a couple hundred or so left."

"Don't mind him," Ted told the rigger. "Drop us a line when you're ready and maybe we can make you a special deal."

"Yes, sir! Sure good to meet you, Major McKeever—Captain Buckley. I'll sure let you know when this here nylon dries out."

They met Whitworth in Operations and learned they were scheduled for ten o'clock next morning. After that they changed clothes, had dinner, and found Pete Andrews in the Officers' Club. Their pilot was hangar-flying with a young lieutenant with wings on his blouse and a vaguely familiar look on his face.

"Oh, hi, slaves," Pete said cheerily from his

soft chair. He waved a hand in greeting and then introduced them to his companion. "This is Jess Harrison, troops. His dad is 'Hardhat'—uh, I mean General Harrison."

"'Hardhat' is right," the lieutenant corrected him, laughing at his discomfort. "Dad's proud of the nickname, in case you didn't know. Nice to meet you, Major—Captain. I've heard of Ripcord, Incorporated, I don't know how many times, but I never knew you were Army men."

"Join the club," Jim told him as he shook hands. "We aren't, usually. We signed up for this hitch because we needed a vacation."

"Jess flies an F-one-o-four," Pete put in enviously. "Man, what a job to get paid for!"

"Yeah," Ted kidded. "I'll bet you'd pay the Air Force to let you fly one—if you could squeeze into that little cockpit. You better stick to Cessnas, Pete."

"I'll fix you next time we're in that Cessna," Pete said, scowling. "Something like hitting an air-pocket just as you get ready to dive through the doorway."

"Who'd help you tie your shoes, chubby?" Jim

said, and quickly ducked the swing that indicated Pete was still in pretty good shape.

“Why don’t you two non-flying types go away and let the fliers talk?” Pete suggested sarcastically. “Jess was telling me about his low-level, gunnery missions.”

“Will do, Pete. We’re going to take in the cinema. Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Harrison. The general was telling us about you just the other night.”

“I’ll bet,” Harrison said, smiling broadly. “I’m the black sheep of the family! Tell Dad hello for me when you see him again.”

“Roger. Let’s go, Jim. Time to find out how good the popcorn is at this airfield. See you, men.”

The popcorn turned out to be better than the double feature. After the show, Ted and Jim took a walk back down to the flight line to check on the parachutes. The friendly rigger had a fan blowing on them, and they spent a pleasant quarter hour talking sky diving.

Next morning they spoke to several dozen Air Force pilots, engineers, and technicians. Before the presentation by Ted and Jim, Captain Gra-



bow got up on the platform and told briefly the story of his harrowing experience after the jumping from the B-47 the day before. Without dramatizing, he made an effective case for the help that the sky divers might be to any jumper.

The session went very well, and there was a long question period afterwards. Grabow and Horton both promised to see what they could do to make proper diving techniques a part of the training. There was a bonus in the meeting, too. Three men asked about the progress being made toward formation of the team to go to the international competition, and Ted and Jim had a chance to do some missionary work for their pet project.

"Well, what do you think, professor?" Ted joked when it was over. "Shall we go on the lecture circuit?"

"Might not be a bad idea," Jim said as they headed for lunch. "I'm getting so I like this speech-making. Say, I wonder where Lieutenant Harrison was. I hoped we'd make a convert of him, too. That wouldn't hurt us with the general, you know, Ted."

He and Ted learned in the chow line where young Harrison was. Pete Andrews and Colonel Whitworth came in with the news, their faces tight with concern.

“He’s down in the mountains,” Whitworth said. “Mechanical trouble forced him to bail out.”

“Did he get down all right?” Ted asked.

“Don’t know,” Pete Andrews said. “His wing man says he thinks Harrison landed safely, but now nobody can find any sign when they fly over. He’s probably down in a canyon.”

“Well, let’s get into the blue!” Jim Buckley said, frowning. “We can’t let the guy down when he needs help. Come on!”

“Better have lunch,” Whitworth cautioned them. “There’s not a thing we can do that isn’t already being done, believe me. They’ll find him, and get him out, if—”

“You mean maybe he didn’t survive the landing?” Ted demanded.

“I didn’t say that,” Whitworth said quickly, urging them ahead in the line. “All I’m saying is that the mountains where he went down are mighty rugged. And it’s going to be one rough

job getting in there when they do locate him.”

“How about the general? Has somebody contacted him yet?” Jim asked. “He’ll want to be standing by.”

“Roger,” Pete said. “I heard the tower talking to General Harrison before I left. He’s flying over right now.”

“Good,” Ted said as they sat down. “Funny how you never can tell. When I met Harrison I thought here was a guy who’d never have any trouble. He looked like the lucky type to me.”

“So it was bad luck today,” Jim said moodily. “Let’s hurry up and get out of here. I don’t feel hungry. We ought to be doing something for the guy.”

There was a commotion over by the main doors, and the word sped through the hall. A lanky pilot at the table next to the sky divers relayed the good news.

“Yeah, Harrison got through by radio—the one in his survival gear,” he said eagerly. “I guess he’s hurt, but the main thing is he’s alive!”

“Come on,” Jim said, pushing back from the table. “I can’t stand the suspense, men. Let’s get

down to Operations and find out what's going on. There may be something we can do to help."

There was a helicopter warming up on the flight line near the Operations office when they piled out of the jeep. A medic was transferring a bag from a truck into the helicopter, and shortly the whirlbird lifted from the concrete and fled awkwardly down the wind, gaining altitude as it went.

"No problem," Ted said. "The rescue boys have the situation in hand. You can relax, Jim."

It wasn't that easy. Two hours later the helicopter was back, not carrying a survivor. The medic was grim-faced as they clustered around him for word.

"He's in Graves Canyon," the officer said. "It took us a long time to find him, and even then we didn't actually see him. Harrison must be right on the bottom, maybe under an overhang. His radio messages are getting weak—says he's lost a lot of blood from a cut he got when he bailed out."

"How come you didn't bring him out?" an indignant voice called from the edge of the crowd.

"There's a gale blowing through that gulley,"

the pilot of the helicopter said, appearing in the doorway. "I couldn't get low enough to lower the winch—and the wind won't let up until dark. We'll try again in the morning, right at the crack of dawn."

"That's no good," someone protested. "What about a ground party? I'll volunteer!"

"You'd never make it before noon tomorrow," the medic said tiredly. "Look, men, we tried. You know what that canyon is like, it funnels all the wind from the valley through it. I hate it as much as you do, believe me."

With muttered protests the crowd broke up. Ted and Jim moved back toward Operations and found Horton and Grabow talking earnestly with the Airdrome Officer. The three were plainly worried.

"Now what do we do?" Grabow asked hopelessly. "That kid may be bleeding to death out there while we stand around like a bunch of clowns."

"There's your next job," Horton told him, pointing to the sky. "Something tells me that transport is the general and he's going to want to

know how his boy is doing.”

“Fine,” Grabow said. “Maybe he’ll have an idea. Somebody’s got to come up with something!”

“Hardhat” Harrison was a tough soldier. Both arms folded, he stood in the briefing room and studied the map of the area where his son had been forced down. His face and eyes betrayed no more emotion than if it had been a routine tactical problem he was faced with.

“That’s as bad a place as a man could pick to come down in,” he said at length as he moved closer to the wall. “A ground party would take maybe a day to fight through that boulder-strewn canyon. Can we talk to him from here?” He looked hopefully toward the radio.

“No, sir,” the Airdrome Officer told him apologetically. “His transmitter is pretty short range, especially considering where he is.”

“Of course, of course,” Harrison said gruffly, as though angry with himself for not realizing the fact. “But I might get through to the lieutenant if I flew over the area, mightn’t I?”

“Yes, sir. It’s quite possible. There’s a rescue

squadron helicopter at your disposal. It was receiving weak signals from Lieutenant Harrison at the time they left the area to refuel.”

“Fine, fine. Have you given any thought to dropping a paratrooper into the canyon? Once below the rim—”

“Impossible, sir,” Grabow told him gently. “Not in the wind that’s blowing. First thing in the morning the helicopter can let a man down on the winch. The flight surgeon will go in then.”

“If there’s anything to go in for at that late hour,” the general said vacantly, as if talking to himself. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, you’ll have to forgive an old man. Sergeant, would you get my parachute from the aircraft? And bring along a static line, too. I believe I’ll fly up to the area for a close look myself.”

“Poor guy,” Ted said. “He lost the other son at Normandy—I can see how he feels.” They watched Harrison stride heavily off.

“Yeah, but there’s no chance in the world of doing any good with a parachute. You heard what the boys who were up there said. Hitting that narrow canyon would be like trying to find

a needle in a haystack.”

“That’s right,” Ted agreed. Suddenly he frowned thoughtfully. “Or like putting a bomb in a pickle barrel.”

“You lost me,” Whitworth said. “I don’t get the connection, but it doesn’t make any difference.”

“You suppose I could talk somebody into a ride in the rescue-copter?” Ted demanded suddenly. “I’ve got an idea that may not be as crazy as it sounds.”

“Not if you think you’re going to jump out along with the general,” Whitworth said suspiciously. “Use your head, man.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Ted told him. “I’ll see you people later.”

“You’re not leaving *me* here!” Jim protested, moving to catch up with Ted. “That’s a wild look in your eye, Ted.”

“You head for Parachute Test,” Ted ordered. “Get our chutes, and then find Horton. We’re going to need a bomber as soon as the sun goes down. Make that two bombers, Jim. And order some luck! Something tells me we’ll need it.”



## **9 Human Bomb**

Ted caught up with the general just as he reached the helicopter and they both climbed aboard. Already inside were the base commander and three other officers, making the trip to decide the best way to proceed.

“General, we’ll get the boy out somehow,” the commanding officer said as he shook hands with the older man. “Your parachute, now—” He stopped uncertainly and the general snorted.

“I’m not a fool, Colonel! But I have a strong interest in this rescue. Let’s say I’m taking my chute just in case the rotors fly off this coffee grinder we’re in!”

“Yes, sir,” the C. O. said, grinning in relief. “All right, pilot, let’s get this thing in the air!”

The ground fell away in a sudden swirl of dust and the helicopter wheeled to the west with its twin blades churning thick chunks of blue sky. Ted settled himself in his seat and let his crazy plan begin to shape itself clearly in his mind. The conversation around him was a faint buzz he hardly heard, but he kept one eye on the terrain below them as they neared the crash area.

Somebody had said the country where Harrison bailed out was rugged, and he had understated it greatly. From the flat to rolling ground surrounding Ranger Field, the countryside quickly sloped up to the slanting foothills at the base of the mountain range. The mountains themselves were jagged and tortuous, a dull gray-brown of light and shadows in the late afternoon sun, the spiny ridges like the backbone of some weird, prehistoric dragon.

“It’s a wasteland,” the C.O. said in explanation. “All that’s down there in those miles of rock are some dummy bridges and other targets we’ve set up for our practice missions. Lieutenant Harrison was doing some strafing prior to his difficulties.”

“Reminds me of Korea,” someone said across the aisle.

“Or maybe the craters of the moon,” General Harrison said heavily. He studied the country below and shook his gray head. Jabbing a finger he asked, “Is that Graves Canyon we’re coming up on?”

“Yes, sir. So called for the fate of a survey party that died in there a long time back. The bottom of that gorge is nearly impenetrable—that’s why it will take the ground party quite a while to reach the spot.”

There were two other drab-colored helicopters hovering over the gash in the mountains ahead of them. Their pilot threaded his way between towering spires jutting skyward from a ridge, and the muffled churning roar of the blades overhead changed pitch as he began a slow, cautious let-down. Even several hundred feet above the canyon the slamming turbulence rocked the big helicopter roughly and Ted had to hang on.

“They’ve spotted his chute, sir!” the pilot shouted, looking over his shoulder toward the men in the cabin. “There’s a headset beside you,

General. I think they're trying to raise him on the radio."

Ted found a second headset for himself and pulled the earphones in place. Flipping the switch on the jackbox alongside he picked up the chatter.

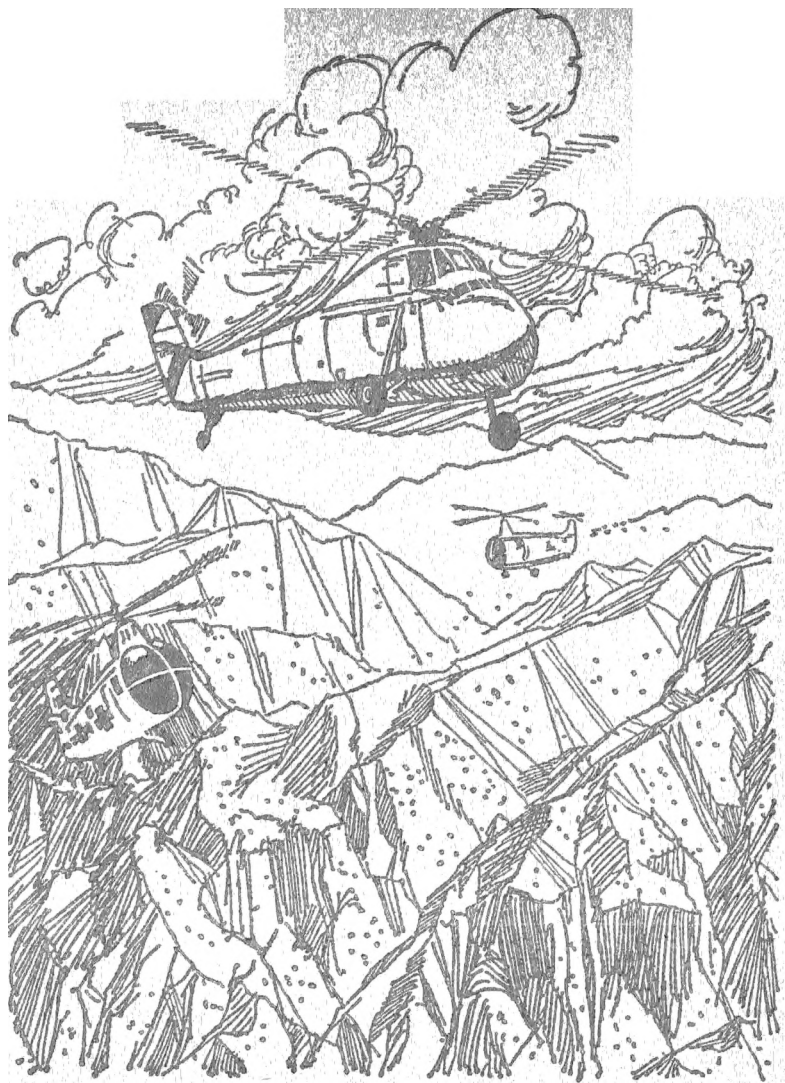
"—please, Harrison. This is Rescue Unit standing by overhead. We have spotted your parachute but do not have you in sight. Come in please, Harrison. Over."

"Jess, son," the general's voice broke in strongly. "This is your dad, Jess. We'll have you out in no time. Do you read me, son?"

Ted strained to hear an answer in the crackle of noise in the headset. Across the aisle he could see the muscles cording beneath the general's jaw as he repeated his urgent call.

Again there was the garbled static loud in Ted's ears as he turned the volume to maximum and then faded it way down. Somewhere in there he caught it—the faint, metallic double click that tensed his body eagerly. Two clicks for okay!

"That must be him!" he yelled loudly. "Did you hear the click of the mike switch? He must be saving his strength, but he's okay!"



"Sure, he's okay," Harrison said gruffly. "No point in a lot of chatter. All right, Colonel, I agree with you it would be idiotic to try a jump into that narrow canyon in this gale. I'm no idiot. What is our next move?"

"We're already moving, General. As I told you, the ground party is coming in from the south. At last word they expected to reach the area by perhaps o-eight-hundred hours. Before then we should be able to lower a team into the canyon from a chopper. We'll do that as soon as we can see in the morning. Say, o-five-hundred hours."

"The wind must die during the night," the general said, taking off the headset and hanging it up on the hook. "Why not come in here then and lower a team?"

"We've considered that, sir," the C.O. said, shaking his head. "If I had just myself to be concerned about, I'd chance it. But it's going to be at least a six-man effort. We can't risk losing six men, and I believe you can appreciate that risk. Trying to get in and out of here in the dark would be a chance in a million."

"All right. I'll buy that. We can't risk six lives

for one that may already—well, let's face it, gentlemen. That clicking could have been anybody's mike, couldn't it?" Harrison blinked and shook his head before he went on. "What I want you to do is get some lights rigged up from these choppers and drop me in here tonight as soon as the wind dies."

"Sir, we've thought of just that, but—" The C.O. was beginning an explanation when Ted broke in on him abruptly.

"I've got a better idea, gentlemen," he said, standing to make himself heard better. "Listen, let's fly back to the field fast so I can get your pilots and bombing officers in on the plan. There are two helicopters standing by—there's not a thing we can do but sit up here and chew our nails, right?"

"What's your plan, McKeever?" the general asked gruffly. "And how much sooner will it get the lieutenant out of there?"

"I can get in to him in a few hours, sir. That's the important thing—"

"If you're suggesting bailing out in the dark, McKeever," the C.O. said sharply, "we can't risk

that either. A flash bomb might light the place up, but it would blind you. Even if it didn't, you'd have no decent sense of height with that glare."

"Your jump people were telling me about using a fancy new electronic bomb-sight to drop a jumper into a particular area, Colonel," Ted said. "Or was that just some bragging?"

"We can hit a pickle barrel, if that's what you mean," the C.O. said defensively. "But—"

"That's just the word I used," Ted said, grinning. "Before I got aboard I started my partner off on this plan. By now I bet he's got two B-forty-sevens on the runway and ready to go."

"Let's head back," Harrison said, his face brightening for the first time since Ted had seen him today. "I don't intend to start chewing my nails now."

"But this is crazy," the C.O. said. "You can't drop a man like a bomb—"

"You can't fly through the air with your arms, either," the general said. "But these fellows do it. Crazy is the right word, but let's get back."

"Yes, sir," the C.O. said. He strode forward to talk to the pilot, and in a few seconds the heli-



copter swung 180 degrees and sped off to the east leaving Graves Canyon and the watchful rescue craft behind.

With the general standing behind him, the pilot managed to get more speed out of the helicopter than its designers had ever credited it with. While they covered the distance, Ted got on the radio with the C.O.'s permission and contacted the field. Jim was standing by in the tower.

"All right," Ted demanded briskly. "What's the picture there? Did you get the chutes and arrange for planes?"

"I got our chutes okay," Jim said. "But there's nobody here wants to be court-martialed today. It'll take orders from the top to promote us the aircraft and permission to pull off the kind of nutty stunt you have apparently come up with!"

"I've got the C.O. and a general on my side," Ted said confidently. "All I want now is a briefing session. Accurate maps—and I mean down to the inch—of this area, plus the group bombardier, pilots, and so on. Horton and Grabow should know—"

"They're right here, Ted. Okay, that's all we

needed was permission to go out on this limb. See you in the briefing room!"

Ted signed off and was hanging up the headset when the general came back from the front end and sat down. There was a look of eagerness and hope in his face now as he spoke.

"I'm going to insist on one thing, Major," he said. "Two of us are going to make this drop. You're not going alone."

"Roger, sir," Ted said, ignoring the general's offer of service. "There'll be two of us making the drop." He knew Jim would want to go.

Jim Buckley was waiting for them when the helicopter dropped to an easy landing in the area next to Operations. Ted vaulted to the concrete, the general right behind him.

"Any news?" Jim asked. "We hear they spotted his chute in the canyon."

"Right. And we heard okay answering clicks that must have been from him," Ted said. "Let's get to that briefing on the double."

"I ought to warn you these guys think we're nuts," Jim said ruefully. "Don't be surprised if

there are a couple of medics in the briefing room with butterfly nets.”

“We inventive types have always had it rough,” Ted cracked. “Did you double check our chutes?”

“Roger. Hey, that Sergeant Riley really gave them royal treatment! Best packing I ever saw. Let’s hire that boy when he gets out of the service.”

“I’ll make a note of it. Come on!” Ted led the way to the building at a brisk run.

“Ten-shun!” someone yelled as the general came into the briefing room, and a dozen men vibrated to attention.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Harrison said. “I’m not sure of the details of Major McKeever’s plan, and I don’t blame any of you for being skeptical. But these sky divers haven’t missed yet, so let’s give them whatever they need. And I’ve already told McKeever to count me in on his operation. It’s your show, Major.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ted said, moving to the front of the room and picking up a pointer on his way to the map. “All I ask is that you keep an open mind and hold off with the strait jackets until I

finish explaining my plan.”

There was a wave of laughter and those present settled back in their chairs comfortably. Ted looked over his audience, pleased to spot Horton and Grabow. The two of them gave him confident high signs with thumb and forefinger, then folded their arms.

“I’ve just come from the canyon where Lieutenant Harrison landed,” Ted said. “It’s a rough place to get into, but don’t forget, he made it. I intend to make it, too—with a lot of help from you people. Here’s the mission. We’re going to drop a couple of bombs from your B-forty-sevens—bombs weighing about two hundred pounds and equipped with that automatic chute opener I saw demonstrated yesterday. We’re going to drop them right here, as soon as the wind dies tonight.” He pointed to the target on the map and listened to the murmurs swell to a roar of protest. They knew he meant human “bombs.”

“All right, all right!” Ted said, stilling the noise with uplifted hands. “Let’s get down to hard facts. Is the bombing officer here?”

“Roger. I’m Major Lane,” a lean six-footer

said from the front row. "You're setting up a rough mission, McKeever."

"I'll bet you've handled rougher ones," Ted said evenly. "What's the accuracy of your bomb sight, Lane? I'm talking about a target fifty feet wide and, let's say, a hundred feet long."

"No sweat there," Lane said with professional pride. "I could plunk bombs in an area like that all day long, and any of my people who can't don't pass their proficiency checks. But you're no bomb, McKeever!" He laughed as he spread his hands apologetically.

"Until my chute opens let's say I am," Ted told him. "You say you can put this 'bomb' we're discussing in this rectangular target area. How about altitude? Can you put me in that area, and about three hundred feet above the canyon?"

"Sure. Three hundred, one hundred, or right *in* the canyon. Whatever you want. You'll have to ask Captain Grabow about the accuracy of his parachute opener, though."

"Fifty feet, plus or minus, McKeever. Just so it won't be 'minus McKeever' for sure, I'm going to say one hundred feet, either way," Grabow said

confidently. "Right, Horton?"

"Yeah," his partner said, getting slowly to his feet. "I see what you're driving at, Ted, but I don't know if I agree. If I hadn't seen you in action yesterday I'd say you were nuts!"

"And I wouldn't be here," Grabow broke in. "Look, I think you can do it, McKeever. In fact, I'll be willing to go along on this hayride!" He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the room.

"We're getting so many volunteers we're going to need a troop transport pretty soon," Ted said, grinning. "If we can set this thing up—and what you're telling me means that we *can* set it up—I'll drop first. Jim Buckley will follow me. Right, Jim?"

"Unless you want to follow *me*," Jim said. "I suddenly remembered something about this next dive of yours, by the way, Ted."

"Look, McKeever, I'm in this operation, too. Remember?" That was General Harrison on his feet and frowning indignantly.

"You're Number Three Man. I mean Bomb," Ted said. "I think you'd better let Jim and me be pathfinders on this one, sir."

"All right, gentlemen," the Commanding Officer said, moving to the front of the room. "Let's get busy and plan this mission. Jones, you and Langdon are excused to get two aircraft ready. Lane, you'll plan the mission. Have we got somebody from Metro standing by? We'll want to monitor the weather like hawks so we can drop as early as possible."

Men began to rise and head for the door as Lane and two others joined Ted. Somebody began shoving a table closer to the wall map and somebody else yelled for a pot of coffee.

"This is more like it, gentlemen," General Harrison said, hanging his blouse over the back of a chair and rolling up his sleeves. "What does Number Three Bomb do in this clambake?"

The word came from Weather at dusk, straightening a dozen men in their seats in the briefing room. It was the word Ted had been hoping for, for an hour now, and he was on his feet and moving toward the door even before the message was finished.

"The wind in the area has dropped down to

just about ten knots," the meteorologist said. "It's still gusty up there, but dropping fast. Estimating five knots and less within thirty minutes. Good hunting, gentlemen!"

Horton was last into the lead bomber, slamming the hatch behind him. Out in the pods slung from the long, tapering wings of the B-47, the jet engines came to life with a whine and the men in the bomb bay pulled earphones in place and reached for hand mikes.

"You all set, McKeever?" It was Whitworth, standing alongside Ted as the sky diver settled himself in the special ejection seat that would drop him into the blackness when the bomb shackle over his head was triggered.

"Roger," Ted acknowledged, his own voice coming to him in the earphones built into his jump helmet. "Oxygen okay. Seat okay. Chute release set for three hundred feet above the canyon—that's seven thousand, eight hundred feet, absolute altitude. Emergency chute okay, altimeter and stop watch okay. Medical equipment and spotlight okay. Standing by."

"Roger. Fine. Your shackle release looks okay.



The bombardier will give us a check.”

“Crew, this is the pilot. We’re ready for take-off. Check in, please.”

“Co-pilot, standing by.”

“Bombardier, standing by. Bomb sight okay. Now checking bomb release. Stand by in the bomb bay!”

Ted felt a click above him, and simultaneously a light blinked on the panel.

“Bomb bay, standing by,” Whitworth said. “Bomb release okay.”

“Pilot, this is Captain Horton. Let’s go do it.”

“Roger, crew. Stand by for take-off.”

Ted’s body tugged at the seat belt and straps as the wheel brakes released and the bomber started its roll. The whistling roar of the jets was a physical thing that became part of him as the acceleration of the take-off plastered him to the seat back. Breathing deep of one hundred percent oxygen, he shut his eyes and tried to relax. He had remembered the number of this jump he’d be making tonight. It was a big one, the two thousandth since the first time he’d hit the end of a static line back in jump school in the Air-

borne! As the altimeter began to spin, Ted managed a grin in the soft darkness of the bomb bay and wondered how he'd look with gray hair. This was going to be that kind of a drop.

In minutes they were at fifteen thousand feet, the altitude it had been decided to drop from. This would keep the aircraft well above the peaks in the area and also give the sky divers time to "home in" on their target during the long free-fall, if necessary.

"McKeever, this is Lane. We're coming up on the drop zone," the bombardier said. "This time we drop the dummy. Everything looks like it's in the green up here. You fall forty-five seconds to an altitude of three hundred feet over the rim of the canyon. Have you set your stop watch and adjusted your altimeter?"

"Roger. Everything is okay here. Standing by for trial drop."

The dummy was in the other B-47, the one that also carried General Harrison who was equipped with the same apparatus as Ted and Jim.

"Bomb away!" Lane relayed the call to the

men in the Number One aircraft, and Ted began a countdown. As he reached zero, Lane called excitedly, "Chute open! There goes the flare, and it's right in the old pickle barrel! McKeever, you're next!"

"Standing by," Ted said, wondering why his voice sounded so far away.

He had done his best to make this mission successful; now it was in the hands of the pilot and Lane with his electronic gear. Without doubt this was the toughest assignment the sky divers had ever tackled, and Ted knew there were things that could go wrong. Plunging at 150 miles an hour through total darkness, with treacherous peaks of jagged rock all around, the slightest error could mean that his string of jumps would end with number two thousand.

But he knew, too, that down there in that blackness a man lay waiting for help. A man with barely strength enough to click the transmit button on his emergency radio, a man who might not live to see the sun again. This was the mission he and Jim had committed themselves to long ago. They jumped not to thrill a blood-seeking crowd,

but to do some good. There was some work to be done tonight, and at last Ted smiled confidently in the darkness.

“Drop zone!” Lane’s voice came sharp and clear in the earphones.

The hatch beneath Ted opened and he switched from the plane’s oxygen supply to his portable tank. One last time he checked his stop watch and altimeter, studying the glowing green dials carefully.

“Five seconds!” Whitworth’s hand touched Ted’s shoulder reassuringly. “Four—three—two—  
—one—”

One second he was in the dimly lit belly of the bomber, and the next he was dropping through blackness that tore at his clothes and helmet. As he plummeted from the bomb bay the intercom plug to his helmet had disconnected; now only the helmet radio kept him in contact. Five seconds later the parachute built into the seat popped open and he slipped clear of the seat. He was on his own—a tiny figure soaring earthward with arms outspread toward a target he could not see, but had to find.

Thankful for all the night dives he and Jim Buckley had made, Ted kept his body stabilized as the long arc steepened. He counted automatically, and at the end of twenty seconds he ducked his head for a quick check with the stop watch. He was right on schedule, and the altimeter read five thousand feet. This was far different from daylight, when you had a reference point, something to aim at and gauge your height. He fought the growing temptation to reach for the ripcord. Opening too soon would place him too far from Harrison's position; opening too late was something he would not think about. It had to be right on the split second, and the automatic opener was the only way to do it.

Counting steadily, he came within two seconds of the time. *One* second—the urge to grab for the ripcord was close to panic. At last he felt the snap of the sensing mechanism, the pop of the pilot chute, and then the wonderful, fast braking as the canopy itself came open!

Quickly he slid the powerful hand torch from its pouch on his coveralls and snapped it on. A pencil of light stabbed through the dark, found

nothing at first, and then flicked across the rim of the canyon. Ted had etched the photos of the area on his brain, and realized in that split second that Lane had put his “bomb” right on target!

“Bomber, this is McKeever. Right in the pickle barrel. Thanks. Thanks a lot! Tell Buckley I’ll see him downstairs.”

## **10 Jump Team!**

Working his risers expertly, Ted centered himself over the canyon. It was a simple task in the light breeze, and he slipped between the walls of the gash in the mountain with no trouble. Playing the beam quickly over the smooth face of rock, Ted directed it downward and began to search for a good landing place. There weren't any.

He remembered the C. O. describing the roughness of the canyon bottom, but he wasn't prepared for the wild jumble of rocks strewn below him. For a second his searchlight played across a patch of white he knew must be Harrison's chute, and he knew he wouldn't have far to go to find the injured man. But his body was tight

now; the dangerous landing ahead dried his throat. Fastening the searchlight to his harness, he set himself for a rugged touchdown.

Twenty feet above it, he spotted a giant boulder at the edge of the only clearing large enough for a safe landing. Desperately he slipped his chute to the right to clear the jagged rock, knowing he was dangerously close to the wall of the canyon now. He had no other choice, and until the last split second, he thought he had made it safely. Then he felt the canopy contact something high overhead, and his rate of fall suddenly increased.

Grazing the boulder, he struck the small clearing far harder than he had estimated, and on his right foot first instead of in good balanced position. Pain stabbed white-hot in his leg and he bit down on the cry that he couldn't hold back. His landing roll was awkward, but somehow he soaked up the force of the fall and got to his knees.

The canopy slithered to earth alongside him with a crisp rustle of nylon. By a miracle the searchlight had not been broken in the rough landing and Ted removed it from the harness and then hit the quick-release. His leg hurt like





fury, and he rolled over to a sitting position and straightened out, fearful of broken bones. Taking a last deep breath of oxygen, he unhooked his mask and took off the helmet. Then he bent forward and felt cautiously along his leg. There was no break, and he sighed his relief. But when he experimentally tried to wiggle his right foot the searing pain was worse. It was the ankle, either broken or badly sprained.

With an effort he got up, putting all the weight on his left leg. Panting with the strain, he swung the beam of the light until he picked up the white chute of Harrison's. Tentatively he hopped one step, then another. He would make it somehow, if he had to crawl every inch of the way.

He found Harrison in a crumpled heap under an overhang of rock that explained why they had been unable to see the man from the air. In the light beam, the right leg of Harrison's flying suit looked stained and matted with black, the black of dried blood. The flier had managed a makeshift pressure bandage on his leg with what looked like a handkerchief and a glove, lashed in place with shroud lines from the chute. Ted's hand came

away wet, and when he played light on the man's face there seemed to be no color in it. Holding his breath, he felt for a pulse. It was a while before he found it.

Harrison was alive. Ted knew that just as he heard a muffled report far overhead. Dropping the flier's hand, he swung the light upward, probing for Jim Buckley's chute. It was there, light and dark alternate panels a welcome sight against the black sky. Ted yelled as loud as he could.

"Nice going, Jim! Harrison's alive!"

"Hello, down there!" came the reply, the words hollow and faint. "Get out the welcome mat!"

"Haven't got one. Watch your landing, Jim. It's rough down here!"

He held his breath as the canopy dropped toward him, splitting the distance between sheer walls. Jim was using his own searchlight now, controlling the Mark I chute delicately as he picked his landing spot. A hundred feet down the canyon Ted caught the impact and heard his partner grunt. He was afraid Jim was hurt until he heard the laugh.

"There was nothing dull about that one!" Jim

said. "Let me contact the B-forty-seven and I'll be right with you, Ted."

"Tell them everything is okay," Ted shouted. "And *don't* drop the general. I don't want him hobbling around on crutches."

"Well, for a couple of nutty sky divers we did all right," Jim said as he squatted beside the figure of Harrison. He reached a hand across to Ted and they shook on it. "Now what do you say we get some plasma into this boy? He looks kinda gray to me."

"He would have looked a lot grayer by morning," Ted said.

"He would, at that," Jim said, opening the package of plasma. "But this will put the color back into him. You don't look exactly in the pink yourself."

"I'm not," Ted admitted. "Somebody poured ground glass in my boot and then set fire to it. Sprained ankle, I guess."

"Clumsy," Jim said as he fitted the hollow needle to the plasma tube. "You want to roll up his sleeve and find me a nice vein? Then I'll take a look at that ankle."

The noise of helicopter engines woke them at dawn. Looking up, Ted saw the towering walls of the canyon and didn't believe they could have parachuted in. It seemed like a dream, until the savage pain in his ankle reminded him of his rough landing.

"We've got company," Jim Buckley cracked, yawning and stretching. "How's the leg?"

"Just great," Ted told him between clenched teeth. "I always sweat like this. Hey, Harrison is coming around!"

Behind them, the flier had groaned. They turned to see him open his eyes and stare at them blankly, then at the helicopters hovering up above the canyon rim.

"Looks like the marines have landed," he said weakly, and a grin touched the corners of his mouth. "I guess I must have missed out on a little of the show."

"Just resting your eyes, weren't you?" Jim said, moving to the flier and feeling his forehead. Checking Harrison's pulse rate, he added, "You were sleeping so nicely it just seemed a shame to wake you."

"Thanks, men," the flier said, his eyes saying more than the words. "I'm not sure how you got here, but thanks."

"Forget it," Ted told him. He pointed skyward toward the helicopter settling slowly into the canyon. "Looks like you've got callers already. I think that's the general coming down on the cable. Vacation's over."

After his ankle stopped hurting, Ted tired of the hospital bed in a hurry. He'd be in it at least a day, they told him, and the nurse was very positive about it.

"Don't try to pull rank, either, McKeever," she said, "because I happen to be a major, too."

"Prettiest one I ever saw," Ted told her, bringing a big, appreciative smile.

"I won't say flattery will get you nowhere," she said, "but it won't get you out of bed. Besides, you've got company coming—starting with the general!"

She ushered the gray-haired Harrison into the room and left them alone, with a final warning to Ted to lie still and not try to move his injured leg.

"You mind the nurse," Harrison said, sitting down by the bed and taking out a cigar. "Smoke bother you?"

"No, sir," Ted assured him. "I'll join you if you have another one."

"Fine. I'll light it for you." Harrison lit their cigars and then leaned back contentedly. "I just get to smoke these on special occasions; Mrs. Harrison isn't particularly fond of the habit. Seems to me I smoked one when Jess was born, though." He was silent a long time before he spoke again.

"I've filed a recommendation that we look into this free-fall technique more completely, McKeever," he said at last. "You'll get a copy of the letter—I hope it's of interest to you. That Mark I chute of yours has some excellent features, too. We're going to have the board evaluate it. No promises, of course, but there may be an order in pretty fair quantity."

"Fine, sir. That's music to my ears," Ted said. "We're trying to show that sky diving isn't a stunt, but a useful technique."

"But sometimes a good exhibition—a good

stunt—can get an idea across,” Harrison said, blowing a stream of gray smoke toward the ceiling. “As the first step in a free-fall program, how would you like to start training a dozen volunteers so that the United States can win that international competition I’ve been hearing about?”

“How would I *like* it?” Ted repeated, sitting straight up and wincing at the pain. “At the risk of making a bad pun, sir, I’d jump at the chance!”

“I’ll forgive you this once,” the general said. “Even Shakespeare made some bad puns. Good, then. As soon as you’re up and around we’ll map out a program. You’ll have jumpers, aircraft, and whatever else I can provide, at your disposal. Maybe from exhibitions we can go to some new military jump techniques. I’ve learned a lot these last few days, and I’m not such an old dog that I can’t learn some new tricks.”

“Wonderful, sir. The nurse gave me some pills to relax me, but I think they must have put me to sleep. I must be dreaming this.” Ted shook his head.

“Just don’t fall asleep with that cigar,” Harrison said, getting to his feet and putting out his



hand to Ted. "Thanks again for what you did for Jess. I'll be looking for you as soon as that ankle is better."

"Yes, sir! And thank you, General. Thanks a million!"

"You're welcome. Now relax and enjoy your cigar."

Ted lay staring at the ceiling after the general had gone. The long, hard battle was finally paying off. With a dozen trained men in addition to those they had already recruited, the sky divers could get together a strong team to make a showing for the United States in the competition. There was only one catch now. They still needed money for the trip.

There was a knock on the door and Ted thought it was Jim come to check in. "Come in!" he called, raising himself up. It was the nurse, and the man behind her wasn't Jim Buckley.

"Major McKeever, you have quite a bit of company. I've told them to stay just a moment so that you won't get too exhausted." She smiled at him. "You celebrities are certainly popular!"

Horton and Grabow came in to shake his hand

and make sure he was all right. They brought the news that the ground party had been located in the canyon but would spend the rest of the day there and be brought out by helicopter next morning.

"Everybody wanted to come see you," Grabow told him. "But that hard-boiled nurse made us draw lots and says only ten can 'bother' you today. How's the ankle?"

"Fine. Especially since General Harrison told me we can get a jump team organized."

"So we hear," Horton put in. "Don't be surprised if that's just the beginning, either. We're going to get you back here to help us if we have to draft you!"

"You haven't seen that partner of mine, have you?" Ted asked, putting out his cigar. "I haven't seen him or Pete for quite a while."

"Seems like I heard him say he was heading for the post office. Maybe you got some mail. Look, we'd better go to make room for the next batch. Nice going, Major. We won't forget it."

There was a steady stream of well-wishers after that and Ted's arm began to ache more than his

ankle with all the handshaking and back-slapping he got. Finally the nurse said she was letting just one more group in.

"You'll be having a relapse if I'm not careful," she told him. "And that would be bad for my record. Sergeant, you may come in now." She beckoned to someone in the hall.

"Hi, Major!" the grinning noncom said. He had an armload of flowers, and the nurse went to get a vase for them. Ted recognized the sergeant as the parachute rigger, Riley.

"Hello, Riley," he said, frowning. "Good of you to stop by, but you didn't have to bring flowers."

"No, sir," Riley said, coloring. "I mean, they're not from me. Hazel—Miss Jarvis—that is—" He returned to the door and called to someone.

Blinking, Ted watched a young girl join Riley. It was Hazel Jarvis, the girl who had tried the jump back at Ripcord's field! With her was her brother, Paul, and behind them came an older couple.

"Hello, Mr. McKeever," the girl said, coming over to the bed. "Oh, I forgot, it's Major Mc-

Keever, isn't it? You seem to be going around saving people's lives!"

"Hello, Hazel," Ted managed weakly. "This is really a surprise. I—won't you sit down?" He looked around helplessly.

"Hazel brought the flowers," Sergeant Riley explained as the nurse began arranging them in the vase. "She's—she's my girl, like I told you, Major."

"I didn't get to really thank you that day," Hazel said. She bent suddenly and kissed Ted quickly on the cheek. "My parents wanted to thank you, too. Mother, Daddy—this is Major Ted McKeever."

"McKeever, I'm surely glad to meet you," Mr. Jarvis said, gripping Ted's hand firmly. "This is my wife—we both want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Hazel is dear to us, and we know we can't ever adequately repay you."

"That's the way I feel, too," Paul Jarvis said, moving to the bed. "Thanks very much."

"I gather that you and your partner aren't the type who'd accept a reward, McKeever," Mr. Jarvis went on. "So we've taken the liberty of getting

up donations for your jump team. I've got a check here for five thousand dollars. Not much, to be sure, but maybe it'll help out. We've been trying to reach you for some time, but you left town so fast and apparently you've been on the move ever since. It took this broken ankle to slow you down enough!"

"Just sprained, I think," Ted said. "Look, I don't know what to say. You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble—but, thanks! It looks as if we'll get to send a team over after all."

"Major," Hazel Jarvis said, her voice apologetic. "I—that is, Tom and I have decided I won't be doing any more parachute jumping. I guess one in the family will be enough, anyway."

"That's right, sir," Sergeant Riley said, his face crimson now. "Hazel and I are getting married pretty soon, but I hope we'll be back from our honeymoon in time for me to try out for the team. Okay?"

"Okay, Riley! And congratulations; she's a beautiful girl."

"You know, I hate to be antisocial, folks," the nurse said briskly, "but that's what I get paid for.

I'm going to have to shoo you all out and insist that Major McKeever get some rest. I've never lost a patient yet, and I don't want him to spoil my record."

"Thanks a million for those sweet words, nurse," Ted said in pretended indignation. "It's so nice to have people care about me."

"Thank you again, Major McKeever," Mrs. Jarvis told him. "And if there's anything we can do for you, don't hesitate to call us when you come back home."

"Thank you, ma'am. You've already done too much, and I surely appreciate it. All of you. Lots of luck, you kids. And, Riley, I'll be looking for you at jump school back at Arnett Field. Good-by."

"You," the nurse told him with a waggle of her finger, "have had it! That is absolutely the last visitor you have today; I don't care how famous you are."

"You're just jealous," Ted teased. "But you're right. All this attention is rather wearing. Hang up the DON'T DISTURB sign and I'll admire this beautiful check the Jarvises brought me."



“Hmhm! I think it’s your head you hurt instead of your ankle,” the nurse said. But she winked at him as she went out and shut the door. Ted propped the check up on the covers to study it, realizing suddenly that he was terribly sleepy. Before he could catch himself, he dozed off and when he woke up Jim Buckley and Pete Andrews were sitting there right beside the bed grinning at him.

“That’s what happens when you get old,” Jim said to Pete, shaking his head sadly. “You require all kinds of sleep. I hear he’ll be carrying a cane, too.”

“I’ll break it over somebody’s head,” Ted said, rubbing his eyes. “My charming nurse must have drugged me. Where have you two been, out having a big time while I’m lying on my bed of pain?”

“That’s a new way of saying goofing off, Pete,” Jim explained, and Ted was too tired to do any more than double up his fist. “Well, Jess Harrison is doing fine. He’s got a peachy gash in his leg, and he’ll be in bed a couple of weeks, but then he’ll be good as new.”

“Fine,” Ted said. “I knew the guy was tough.



Somebody told me you were at the post office. What did we get, a bill from the income tax people?"

"Oh, no," Jim said broadly. "Just one from the FAA. It finally caught up with us." He grinned over at Pete and took an envelope from his pocket.

"I knew it was too good to last," Ted groaned. "Give it to me all at once. Are they going to shut us down right away?"

"Worry a little bit," Jim said. "You've been too cocky lately."

"You better worry about what I'm going to do to you when I get out of this bed," Ted blustered. "I was doing fine until you showed up with bad news."

"So my spies tell me," Jim said. "Sweet young things kissing you and all that. Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

"Pete," Ted pleaded, "you hold him while I hit him!"

"The letter is from our friend Gentry," Jim said. "Ever since he read about you plucking Hazel Jarvis out of the air he's been trying to reach us—to contribute a few bucks to the cause! He also

sends best wishes, and hopes we can win the international!”

“You rat,” Ted said, when it finally sank in. “Worrying me like that! I had some good news for us, but I’m not going to tell you about it.”

“Don’t bother,” Jim said calmly. “My spy tells me everything. Five thousand added to the other donations we’ve had ought to just about do it, eh? And with the help from General Harrison we’ll put together a jump team that will bring that trophy over here where it belongs. Too bad you’ve got that broken ankle and won’t be a member of the group.”

“*Sprained* ankle!” Ted thundered. “And how did you get in here anyway? That nurse said she wasn’t going to let anybody else in.”

“I had to bribe her,” Jim said. “I’m taking her to the movies tonight. You rest easy and let those tired old bones knit. Maybe you’ll mend fast enough to pack chutes for us sky divers. Well, Pete, let’s go and leave this old gentleman. His nurse says he’s the excitable type.”



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Ripcord







“Drop zone!” Lane’s voice cut through the darkness, and Ted McKeever braced himself for the jump. “Four—three—two—one!”

Cold black space hit Ted squarely in the face. A second ago he had been in the belly of the bomber. Now he was diving through a blackness that tore at his clothes and helmet, a blackness where each second counted—where one mistake meant death.

His own life, the life of a helpless man in the canyon below—these were at stake. And even more! Ted knew that the success of his mission tonight was essential to the whole future of RIPCORDER, Incorporated. . . .



# Ripcord



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