**1) Priority Number One: Pull the Ripcord**

Even though I am not religious in the conventional sense, I made a deal with a deity when embarking on the skydiving adventure. “You keep me out of trouble,” I pledged, “and I will use the experience for nothing but self-improvement”. In keeping with the deal, I allowed myself only a single set of pictures from the very first jump in the Accelerated Free Fall course I took in Perris, CA. The deal worked; I completed the course with the A license, and have 66 jumps in my logbook. That is not to say that even the uncomplicated free falls I performed could not provide their share of little surprises. While commenting on this series of pictures taken in 1999, I will describe an example of one such hickup.

You see me here exiting the plane at 12,500ft with two instructors who are to guide me on the trip down. The 8,000 foot free fall takes about 1 minute of scripted interactions; the student consults his altimeter and shouts the altitude at regular time intervals to demonstrate his understanding of the circumstances; the instructors keep the student in proper position and lip-read his reports to see whether, indeed, he is in control(at 100+ mph, you can’t hear anything up there). In addition, the student practices ripcord pulls to make sure he will be able to find it at 4,500ft -- the time of parachute deployment.[Ripcord is the orange handle at the bottom right corner of the back pack; when pulled, a spring-loaded mechanism launches the main parachute. Ripcords are no longer used at the drop zone; instead, a small pilot chute is thrown out by the skydiver and pulls out the main one; more about that in a moment] Instructors observe the student during the whole flight and “fall away” after he has pulled the ripcord (they, in turn, “pull” between 2,000 and 3,000ft).

**2) Priority Number 2: Pull at Proper Altitude**

Notice how much smaller are the instructors’ parachutes. That’s the result of their being lighter (nature endowed me with lead filled bones), and more importantly, able to fly a parachute at much greater speeds. The instructor in the middle of the frame has an altimeter attached to his chest to further aid the student in altitude awareness. We are still high; the buildings and roads on the ground are too small to resolve.

Returning to the ripcord whose significance will soon become clear, it is a piece of wire with an orange handle which becomes completely detached from the parachute once pulled out. A beginner student may simply drop it in the thick of the flight causing the drop zone a loss of about $10 (the drop zone is located on the desert; any damage from the fall of this light object is unlikely). To avoid this cost, starting from the second jump students are reminded to put the ripcord into their suit once the main parachute ($10 is not considered important during the first jump:-). Naturally, I carefully :-) rehearsed every skydive’s move many times before the flight including the stowing of the ripcord into my suit.

The gray ball below the closer instructor’s back pack is the pilot chute mentioned before; when thrown out it inflates and, being attached to the main parachute, pulls the main out to stop the skydiver’s fall. Naturally, once thrown the pilot chute does not have to be thought of; attached to the main, it will be where it’s supposed to after the landing.

**3) Priority Number 3: Pull in Proper Position**

The problem with taking pictures during the first jumps is that looking good is the last thing on your mind. The very strong wind inflates your cheeks twice a second and you don’t even notice it (this condition is not too difficult to control; just keep your lips tight as demonstrated by the instructors). The result is not the handsomest of the portraits, but considering the barrier of fear one needs to be overcome, not too bad.

Of note is the silver handle on the left side of my chest. It is the handle for the emergency parachute. One pulls it out during a malfunction of the main, and only after he or she has completely disconnected the main. That disconnection is accomplished by first pulling out the red handle on the opposite side (not seen here; you can see it on the last picture of this series)

**4) OK, So Pull Then!**

OK, we’re at 4,500 feet, the free fall is over (notice how much larger are the buildings on the ground now). The ripcord has already been pulled and the parachute is in its initial phase of deployment. The arching of the instructor on the right is not accidental; arched position results in the greatest stability during the fall.

On my second visit to Perris (not shown here), the drop zone changed its equipment; instead of ripcords, pilot chutes were used to deploy the main parachute. The student skydiver was now to pull and throw the pilot chute away so that it inflated and pulled the main out. During my refresher jump with one instructor, the old “ripcord” habit kicked in and after pulling the pilot chute I held it in my hand considering whether or not to stow into my suit (as I should if I held a ripcord). The instructor’s jaw dropped (as he later told me). Fortunately, this lasted just a second; I threw the chute away as if it was a burning piece of coal.

**4)**

**We Don’t Want Anything To Do With This Guy!**

My instructors fly away. They have another 2,000ft to fall. Student skydivers “pull” at higher altitudes (4,500ft in my case here) to allow them more time to address problems if they were to arise. Experienced skydivers cherish the free fall and “pull” between 2,000 and 3,000ft. The reason for that preference becomes obvious during the last jumps of the course (not shown). At that stage one has already made a few jumps “solo” and is now ready to learn how to fly in a group. This is the so called “relative work” and the course provides the experience of flights in a group of two – with another instructor. The beauty of flight in the company of another skydiver rests on the fact that evolution did not equip us with instinctive perception of altitude while free falling (hence the need for the altimeter). As a result, you simply feel suspended in the air during the fall, except for the very strong wind from bellow (100+ mph). Another skydiver beside you provides a special frame of reference while in that suspension; by properly deflecting the air you can fly away from her or towards her in what seems like a horizontal plane (in reality you are simultaneously falling down). In effect, for one minute or so you literally become a superman capable of horizontal high speed flight! And who would not want to be a superman for a few seconds longer?

**5)** **The First Steps In an Alien World**

After practice on the ground, it takes 15 seconds to figure out how to operate an inflated parachute in the air. The first of those seconds is about to start for me. Unless you want to do some acrobatics (and as a student you’re not allowed to), the descent is peaceful and lasts about 5-8 minutes. If you judge the winds well (you always land against the wind), your landing will be as smooth as a jump from a two-three foot high step.

**6) Closer to Home**

Different drop zone: Cross Keys, NJ. To keep my A license current, I needed to make a jump at least once in 60 days. Hence every two months I visited this drop zone near Philadelphia, about 1.5 hour of drive away from where I live. I continued to do that until 2003, before lack of time and life interfered. <> I saw an interesting picture in the snack store at the drop zone. It showed the president George W. H. Bush performing a tandem jump on his 80th birthday. <> The previously mentioned red and silver handles for disconnection of the main and deployment of the emergency parachute can be seen on this picture.

**7)** **Learning From the Best**

Skydiving is a beautiful sport albeit not too popular. The membership in United Parachute Associations has held steady at about 40,000 in the last decade (compare that with NRA which has 5 million members). Deprived of the economy of scale, the sport attracts less investments than, say, skiing or other more popular sports. This not most favorable economic realty does have an upside, however. The sport’s luminaries are not millionaires practicing the art in some secluded, gated airports overflowing with luxuries. You can see them at public drop zones mingling with everyone else. And you can take the ride to altitude with a world record holder sitting beside you on the same bench in the plane (drop zones on the South are favored as they offer good skydiving weather whole year round). Skydivers are expected to record every jump in their logbooks with every entry to be certified by somebody who was on the same plane with them. As shown on this page of my logbook, Luigi Cani, a skydiver holding a D-license (the most advanced) certified the described skydive. D-license includes proficiency in skydiving at night, into water, from high altitudes (where oxygen mask is needed) and other skills. A few years after the indicated skydive Luigi Cani established a world record by landing a smallest ever parachute of only 40 square feet in surface area (9x5ft). That the square footage not much greater than that of popular garden umbrellas!

**I rejected the below text after some thought:**

Having obtained my skydiving A-license, I made regular trips to a much closer drop zone located in Cross Keys, NJ. I would jump three times and return in about one and a half month for the next three (having a break of more than 60 days required a paid “refresher” jump with an instructor). Still, I was warned that my skydiving was too infrequent for comfortable reaction times in the air. After 2 years, lack of time and other factors made me end my skydiving adventure.