

STREAMERS

By Richard Schalhamer

Ozuna, Steve, and I sat squeezed together, shoulder against shoulder, butt against butt, with our feet dangling down over the edge of our seat. It was like we were sitting at the end of a wooden dock, jetting out over the water at the old fishing hole, waiting for the fish to bite. However, it was not water below us but 13,000 feet of air, and it was not an old wooden dock but the door of a 310 Cessna. We were not waiting for the fish to bite but for our pilot to let us know when we were over our jump zone.

It was now 0900 hours, but we had been going strong since 0600, with an early breakfast in the mess hall, a lengthy packing session, and safety-checking our chutes. We wanted an early start this morning to squeeze in three jumps before the day ended. The pilot was a friend who had checked out an army plane from the hangar on base. It was an excellent-running plane except for the extra strain from the engines as it tried to get off the ground.

"Nice tin can you have set us up with," Steve said sarcastically.

"Where is the stewardess with my morning scotch?" Steve went on before I could come up with a funny comeback. "I especially like how the smoke comes out of the port engine whenever the pilot pulls on that throttle."

"And Rick, I love what you have done with the interior," Ozuna interrupted with his slight Spanish accent. "Ripping out all the seats and paneling gives it that wide-open feeling."

"And who is your exterior designer?" Steve added in a sophisticated tone. "How you have created this airy feeling by cutting the whole side of the plane out is just fabulous." Knowing he was on a roll, he continued, "And by using a very dull pair of tin snips, you have created that sharp-edged, rustic look."

Ozuna quickly piped in. "And how you have covered the rusted, jagged edges with Army green duct tape is exquisite."

At that point, both Steve and Ozuna broke out into hysterical laughter.

"Very funny," I said, and without really expecting an answer, I added, "At least it flies."

Hearing this whole ribbing, our pilot, Carl, throttled down and dropped the nose, causing us to lose about ten feet in altitude instantly. This forced us all to grab something close to hang onto, and more importantly, it immediately replaced Ozuna's and Steve's laughing with wide eyes of concern.

After Carl and I stopped laughing, I said, "You have to admit that this beats the hell out of those old 172 Cessnas we used to jump from. You know, the ones that had that little wash machine motor. When you jumped, you had to climb out that little door, onto the landing gear, and hold onto the wing strut until you reached the jump zone."

Steve added, "And they had a glide ratio of one, which meant the plane could not drop below 40 miles per hour, or it would drop out of the sky."

"So you had that freezing air in your face, and your knuckles froze by the time you dropped. That's a good point. We are sorry, Rick. This is a very nice plane," Ozuna said.

Steve agreed enthusiastically and continued, "No shit, this is a Cadillac. However, it's not as nice as those 363 Choppers we jumped out of. We could sit nice and comfy like we are now but with no airspeed to beat us up when we jumped."

"Right on, you just hovered over the jump zone and jumped," I agreed, continuing to talk without taking a breath. "The best were by far those 161 Choppers. Remember when we jumped from those big mothers at Fort Benning during our airborne training?"

Ozuna piped in excitedly, "No shit, that goddamn thing was great, they just opened that rear door, and you just ran out. You didn't even see the ground until you were out in mid-air. It felt like you were hanging there, suspended."

I laughed and added, "It was just like Wylie Coyote. You didn't even start falling until you looked down."

We all laughed long because we related so well. Joking around was how we coped with the Army and overcame our nervousness when doing stupid things, like jumping out of airplanes.

It was still early morning, so the air still had a cold bite, hitting our hands and faces. As we climbed higher in altitude, this became increasingly more uncomfortable. To help with the chill, we all blew our warm breath into our hands and rubbed them together.

After a brief silence, Ozuna said, "God, I do love this being a soldier."

Steve quickly said, "You lifer."

Ozuna was from a poor family in Puerto Rico. We all were from poor families, but Ozuna's family was extremely poor. He was raised with six brothers and sisters in a one-room house. He enlisted in the Army to escape poverty and wanted to be there. Ozuna is a great guy; we have been through a lot together. Since I was drafted, the dedicated lifer stuff got to me occasionally. Ozuna is always freshly starched and always the perfect soldier. I try not to hold it against him, but sometimes it isn't easy. Steve also relates as, like me, he was also drafted. I am out of my teaching job in Detroit, and Steve is out of college in southern Georgia. Being draftees, we both have a drastically different attitude about things in the military. We do not take our duties as soldiers very seriously, and we have done our share of general screwing around. We were not always on time for formations, we didn't get our regular haircuts, and we upset most of our commanding officers. We were both much older than our 18-year-old comrades. I am 25, and Steve is 24. The higher-ups seem to tolerate us both a great deal because of this. This was obvious because we both made rank quickly before all the other troops, even the lifers. Steve earned his stripes by doing an extended tour in Vietnam, me by just knowing whose ass to kiss.

Steve broke our long silence by saying, "Contrary to what most of the world thinks, this is a pretty safe sport, isn't it?" Before we could answer, he continued, "The three of us have had pretty minimal brushes with jumping dangers, haven't we?"

After a quick thought, I said, "Remember when the wind blew me off course, and I did a three-point roll in that pinto bean field."

"Yeah, I remember that one," Ozuna piped in. "Your body looked like a pin cushion for a week."

"I had one major problem," Steve said. "Remember when my pilot pin got bent in the eye hook?"

"I remember that one," Ozuna said. "You managed to clear that one in about 3000 feet."

Steve looked at Ozuna and said, "Remember when you landed in that tree?"

Ozuna answered, "How could I forget that one?"

Steve continued, "Landing in the tree was not bad enough, but trying to ride that tree trunk like a wild horse with both legs around each side. What is the main rule when jumping, Ozuna? Oh yeah, always keep your legs together."

I added, "Hitting that tree once with your family jewels was bad enough, but the second time you swung into that trunk and wrapped your legs around it, I thought you were going to die."

Steve said, "I didn't think there was enough ice in the world to stop that swelling."

With a loud laugh, I said, "Instead of the song, Those Brown Spanish Eyes, we wrote you a new song, Those Blue Spanish Balls."

Ozuna, laughing with us, said, "Thanks for reminding me of that one, you two."

After the laughing stopped, Steve added, "You know, outside of my bent pilot pin, I have never had any major jumping problems, and I made it home from Vietnam in one piece. I do believe I am blessed with a lucky-jump-card."

"Yeah, right, short-timer," I said.

Short-timer meant that Steve was out of this Army crap in less than 4 months. This is the only problem I have with Steve. I admit I am jealous. He made it through the Army and Vietnam, and now he has his whole life in front of him to do whatever he feels like doing. You can tell he is pleased about it as he is a bag of jokes most of the time. My jealousy has been amplified recently, as Ozuna and I received our orders for Vietnam last week, and we leave in less than a month. For a week now, two extreme emotions have surrounded us. Steve ponders what he will be doing for the rest of his life without the Army dictating his every move, and Ozuna and I are thinking more about our fate in Vietnam.

We will get three jumps in, so enjoying ourselves is our only thought. The sun is out, the crosswinds are minimal, and we are getting some nice thermal updrafts radiating off the ground.

With the updrafts, we decided to open our chutes right out of the plane for our first jump, have a long ride down, and enjoy the scenery. We would save our free-fall jumps for later.

"Jump-zone in ten! " Carl yelled from the cockpit.

I signaled him a verbal, "Roger that."

After a quick final check of our equipment, Ozuna shouted, "5....4....3....2....1!"

We all pushed off together as hard as we could. Seeing if we could get the plane to rock and roll when we jumped was always fun. Although it was more challenging with a plane than with a helicopter, we succeeded nicely.

We agreed on our way out of the plane to pull our chords simultaneously. 3....2....1 Snap! Swoosh! I never get tired of hearing that wonderful sound of the air filling up my chute or the pull of the groin straps snapping pressure on the inside of my thighs. These two emotions usually mean that my friend, Mr. Air Friction, has fought off the evil, Mr. Gravity, and I will probably survive the fall.

Straight across to my right, I saw Ozuna, so his chute must have fluffed at about the same time as mine. I gave him a thumbs-up and a sloppy salute, and he returned his usual perfect salute. Steve was in between the two of us when we left the plane, so I thought it strange that he was not between us.

I looked up and saw Carl and the plane heading off into the distance. Looking over at Ozuna, I noticed he was also looking to his right and left. We were thinking the same thing. No chute. Together, we looked down, and there was Steve below us. For an instant, I thought that maybe he had just pulled his chord late, but it became apparent very quickly that he had pulled, but the air did not fill his canopy. He had a streamer. A streamer looks what the name implies, looking like the tail fluttering on a kite in a high wind or a tadpole's tail as it swims through the water. Whatever it looks like does not matter as it is not a good thing. A streamer does not slow you down when falling. I gave a quick look away from Steve over to Ozuna. Seeing his eyes peeking from behind his helmet, they were the shape and the size of golf balls. We were now far apart, so we could not hear each other, but I could see his lips move out a "holy shit," and being the good Puerto Rican Catholic he was, he crossed himself.

We helplessly watched Steve fall faster. Even though he was moving away from us at high speed, we could see him frantically twisting and pulling on his chute lines. We knew he was trying to force some air under his canopy. We all had enough jumps under our belts to know that a streamer was a real emergency. We also knew you wanted to be patient when opening your emergency chute. If you opened the emergency chute and your main canopy were also to open, you would start spinning, twisting the two chutes together. This twisting would force the air out of both chutes. Steve had to be moving at terminal velocity by now. Terminal velocity is the top speed you can fall through the air after the air resistance force stops you from accelerating. Terminal velocity for the average human is about 126 miles per hour. It became apparent that he would not get any air under his main chute.

He was about 4000 feet above the ground when I muttered in a low tone, "You need to pull your emergency chute." My next word was a shout. "Now!"

Steve pulled his emergency chord before I got the "Now" off my lips.

It takes little to get air under your canopy when falling at such high speeds. Once the pilot chute leaves the chute bag, it catches the fast-moving air and pulls out the main chute, filling it with air. This is why having a streamer is extremely rare. Having an emergency chute streamer on the same jump as the main chute streamer is unheard of. Steve's emergency chute also went into a streamer. Steve was now falling with a double streamer.

I could still see Steve pulling and tugging at his emergency chute lines, trying to catch some air. He was now running out of time. At his terminal velocity, he was moving 200 feet every second. At his 3000 feet, there were less than 15 seconds before the hard ground would swallow him. When falling through the air, the magic number for your accent is 500 feet. If your chute does not open above 500 feet, there will not be time or enough air under your canopy to allow you to survive. Steve had to be at 1000 feet now, so in less than 3 seconds, he would be at the magic number.

I looked over at Ozuna, who was crossing himself once again. We both felt Steve's panic, fear, and frustration, and the ground was getting closer. I was shouting in my mind, *snap those main lines, twist your body in your harness, jump up, blow on the God Damn thing, shit!!* As my last "shit" left my brain, Steve's emergency chute fluffed up, giving only an instant comfort. Steve had to be below 500 feet when his chute opened. This is especially bad when he is landing with just his emergency chute. The emergency chute is much smaller than the main chute as it is designed to allow you to survive and not slow

you down for a nice landing. The emergency chute also comes out of your front, not your back, so you hit the ground at a strange angle, sometimes even on your back.

Steve hit the ground hard. I could see him hit the ground and bounce at least three times. Even though I was a great distance above him when he crashed, I could still see the indentation that his body made into that hard Georgia clay.

When Steve hit the ground, Ozuna and I instantly exchanged glances. Even though we were far apart, our facial expressions showed what we were thinking. Steve was toast. There was no way that he was going to survive this one.

I watched Steve's emergency chute slowly float like a feather downwind from his motionless body. The air Steve fought so hard to get under his chute was gradually pushed out and returned to the open air. Ozuna and I wanted to speed up our descent, but the updrafts, the thermals we were so anxious to take advantage of a few minutes earlier, were slowing us down. We were falling as slow as a falling oak leaf in autumn, and there was nothing we could do to go any faster. The crosswinds were also taking us farther away from Steve's landing spot. The fickle air friction was not being our friend anymore. People on the ground must have also watched Steve's fall as crowds and vehicles headed in his direction.

Falling slowly to the ground is like driving alone on a cross-country road trip; there is much thinking time. Time for me seemed to be slowing down, but it had exploded in those last few seconds of Steve's fall. When you are falling, the view is like a surreal motion picture. The backdrop is the ground, which also does not seem real. It is all framed by only the toes of your jump boots at the end of your legs. It is like a photo with no depth, contrast, or reference point to your height. Besides the air flowing past you, it is sometimes hard to realize you are falling. I seldom have a lot of fear when I jump because of these deceptive realities. Jumping is not like climbing up the side of a mountain, where the rock face constantly reminds you of your height. The fear while jumping comes when, after a seemingly long float down, the ground suddenly arrives. It seems to accelerate drastically during the last few thousand feet.

During today's unrealistic, slow descent, I started contemplating life. I started thinking about life and death. *If you must go, I guess this is not a bad way. You have a nice view of the world, which is quiet and peaceful. The end will be swift and painless. I hear that you black out before you hit the ground anyway, so you never know what hits you. I suppose it beats the hell out of lying face down in a rice patty with a slow, bleeding gunshot wound delivered by Charly Cong. Steve has just shown us that you do not have to travel to Southeast Asia to die. It can happen anytime and anywhere.*

Ozuna yelled, breaking my deep thought, "Another minute, and we should be on the ground."

I had a final, brief thought: *Thinking is overrated.*

I screamed at Ozuna, "Let's try landing as close together as possible so we can run to Steve quickly."

Even though Ozuna could barely hear me, he knew what I had said and gave me his lifer thumbs-up sign.

The thermals and crosswinds had now carried us a great distance from Steve. By the time we landed, we were over a mile from the original jump zone. We left our chutes and gear where we landed and started running back towards Steve, talking very little between

breaths. What little talking we did was very brief and nervous, as we both were pessimistic about Steve's fate. Ozuna crossed himself as we ran.

When we reached Steve, the medics were already loading him into the ambulance.

I overheard one of the medics say to his driver, "This guy will be gone by the time we leave this....." He stopped short when he knew I was hearing him and turned to me and said, "He is unconscious and broken up, but he is still breathing."

The ambulance and Steve drove away shortly after.

After a long week of waiting and wondering about Steve's fate, Ozuna and I were finally putting on our dress uniforms in the barracks.

"How's that look?" I asked Ozuna as I tied a black ribbon on the upper arm of his nicely pressed dress greens.

"Just fine," He said with a forced grin. "Here, let me do yours."

I added, "I think Steve will like these, as it is a nice added touch."

Quickly, Ozuna answered, "Although, in his condition, I don't think he will really care."

"True," I agreed,

We stopped and picked up a bottle of Steve's favorite scotch and a large bag of pork rinds.

We waited for the other crowds of people to leave the room so we could be with Steve alone. He was our fallen comrade, after all. It was a dark room filled with the overpowering smells of chemicals and flowers. There was complete silence in the room, an ironic quiet like you hear when your parachute opens before the air reaches your ears. Steve did not look like his usual self. His eyes were shut. He did not have the typical, shit-eating grin that he always had on his face. There were no wise comments that always made everyone laugh. Ozuna and I walked past the spot where he had been laid. I forced the bottle of scotch under his arm while Ozuna placed the bag of pork rinds on his chest. We were both silent as there was not much left to say. We stood there without saying a word and looked at Steve, wondering where he had gone.

Minutes passed of this quiet when a harsh, muffled voice echoed from the walls. "It's about God Damn time you guys showed up here! And how did you know that I could kill for a good glass of scotch?"

Steve flashed his big grin and motioned, with his one good hand, to pour him a glass of Scotch.

"You need to keep things down as it is after visiting hours, and I have this old sergeant lifer nurse who does not take jokes very well," Steve said. "And scotch on her shift would really set her off."

Glancing at our arms, Steve laughingly commented, "Everyone on post must think I am dead with those black armbands. Nice touch, you ass-holes," Steve said.

Once laughing stopped, Ozuna asked, "How are you doing, anyway?"

Steve answered politely, with an apparent sarcasm, "I'm not dead if that's what you mean. If you really want to know, it is all written down on that chart at the foot of the bed."

Ozuna fetched the chart and gave it to me to read. It looked like a grocery shopping list.

I read the chart aloud: "Broken right leg, fractured left ankle, removed spleen, right collar bone fracture, cracked neck vertebra, and a broken right thumb."

Ozuna interrupted, "You will do anything to get out of mess hall duty, won't you?"

Then I added, "And at the bottom here, it says that you have used up your lucky-jump-card and signed up for another four years in the Army."

For an instant, you could tell that Steve was unsure if I was kidding, then, with a forced laugh, said, "Not even funny."

Ozuna and I laughed.

Steve smirked and said, "It is not funny; you know I have heard of that happening."

For the next two hours, we did what we did best: talked and laughed about nothing. We finally talked about Steve's fall through the air and the double streamers. Steve was amazingly open to talking about it. I do believe that it proved to be some pretty good therapy. Steve mentioned that he didn't think he wanted to play jumping-out-of-airplanes anymore. No one would surely blame him for that. We talked a lot about Steve's future now that we knew he had one. All of us had some future once again. Steve had a bright future now that he would be out of the Army in a few months. He would once again be back on the college campus, having fun and controlling his own destiny. With the uncertainty of Steve's life-or-death situation, Ozuna and I had forgotten about our orders for Vietnam. We were both electronic radio specialists, but we were also Airborne. Our job was to jump out of planes, usually choppers. Now, the thought of our futures was slightly less certain than that of Steve. We knew that we had our orders for Vietnam, but beyond that, who knew? We did not need to think about anything else with the friendship, the laughs we shared, and the joy that Steve was still with us. It was the farthest thing from our minds. We all realized once again that life was good but was also short. It could end at any time. It could end with or without our help or our control. It could end with or without the help of the Vietcong.... or with or without the help of a double-streamer⁷⁷.