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How He Took a Flying Leap of
Faith from a Perfectly Good
Airplane.*

IN MEMORIAM: Air Devil

*By Lt. Col. Don Towse,
San Jose Senior Squadron 80*

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Air Devil!

Having Known Few Fears in 80 Years, Col. Towse Tells Us How He Took a Flying Leap of Faith from a Perfectly Good Airplane

By Lt. Col. Don Towse, San Jose Senior Squadron 80

SAN JOSE—It's a warm sunny early December day in the Santa Clara Valley, and I'm driving down Highway 101 for an appointment to celebrate my 80th birthday at Hollister Airport. They are expecting me about noon, and we will be all finished by three o'clock.

I've been thinking of doing this since I heard that former President George Bush jumped to celebrate his 80th birthday. I tell my family; they think I'm joking, but I keep it up, and word gets around. So now I'm really going to have to do it. "You can still change your mind," I tell myself as I turn into the airport, but pride and curiosity urge me on, and I park next to the skydiving school.

There is a small office, a rack of jump suits, and a large barn-like room where parachutes are carefully folded and packed for use. Not the old-style round parachutes that go where the wind blows them, these are colorful rectangles with thick straps connected to the four corners. The straps at the rear have handles so that the jumper can steer by moving the trailing edge of the parachute.

I watch a video, accept liability for everything the lawyers can think of, and acknowledge that I know that this is a dangerous activity that has no useful purpose. (Okay, a lot of people do nutty things. At least this promises to be a real adventure.)

I meet my instructor, jumpmaster Steve Rafferty. He's a solidly built man in his late thirties, a little less than six feet tall with short-cropped graying hair and a slightly weathered face. He loves to jump out of airplanes and it shows. He's done it almost ten thousand times. During our flight he will be my PIC—Parachutist-in-Command. We share one parachute. Both of our harnesses are attached to it. Students don't solo first jump. He finds a jumpsuit that will fit me, straps me into the almost too-tight harness, and

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Editor's note: As fate would have it, Col. Towse sent me this piece for publication in Eagle Call just weeks before his passing in April. I had already determined to feature it essentially intact when I learned from Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Paul Ward that Col. Towse had died. In a sense this piece, his voice, bears witness and fitting tribute to his spirit. I hope all of us who served with Col. Towse, whether or not we had the honor of knowing him, will cherish in this wry, folksy memoir what I admire: His joie de vivre. Requiescant in pace.





Air Devil

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explains everything.

It's too late to back out now, so off we go. Steve is grinning widely from the time we start out for the plane until long after we're safely back on the ground. You can see he just loves this. They load four of us into a six-place Cessna airplane. We say this is a "perfectly good" airplane, but in reality it's old and only "good enough." This model has no cargo door; the co-pilot seat on the right side has been removed and the modified door with hinges on top has an easy-release catch. The door swings up so we can get out when the time comes. The outside looks good but the interior is well-worn. Only the pilot has a seat; the rest of us, the instructor

and I, a para-photographer to document my adventure, and another jumper along just for the fun of it, sit on the floor padding. The pilot and I have seat belts but everyone else is free to bounce around.

The run-up sounds good and the plane quickly climbs to 10,000 feet, full throttle all the way. We slow to about 90 knots and someone opens the door. The photographer gets out first and is standing on the wing strut outside, waiting for us.

It's windy! What's more, it feels unnatural to sit on the door-sill with my legs outside. I'm supposed to put my foot on a step on the wing strut, but my legs are too short to reach it. Steve says not to worry, the slipstream will help us out! It's cold out here, and noisy,

and I admit that I'm a little bit uneasy looking straight down to the ground 10,000 below. Pilots don't normally have this kind of view—normal pilots, anyway. So I take a deep breath, having finally decided it's too late to change my mind anyway. We adjust our goggles and gloves.

We don't "jump," just sort of step off into the slip stream, and go into free-fall, heading for 4,500 feet altitude. This is where we put out our arms like wings and pretend we're birds, soaring with the hawks and eagles. It looks pretty in the movies—but it's cold and really breezy up here, going about 120 miles per hour. Not good for the complexion or hairdo. From 10,000 feet the earth seems distant. I can actually see the curve of the horizon and all the way from the Sierra Nevada on the east to the Pacific Ocean and Monterey Bay to the west. We continue to turn; the world looks like it's slowly spinning under us, but the ground doesn't seem to be coming up as fast as I had imagined. My PIC has an altimeter strapped to his wrist so we can see how we're doing.

The photographer comes close to take a picture, we smile

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Air Devil

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and wave, and he's off. We see his 'chute open far below us and will meet him again on the ground. Our parachute opens with little jerk. We take off our goggles to drift silently down. This part is pretty nice. After flying along, belly down, it's good to be nearly vertical, enjoying the view. Down there, on a warm Friday afternoon, I can see the hills and fields and the new subdivisions in a more normal perspective. Steve points out a field far below and

ahead of us. There are two parachutes already there, and a van on the road next to them. That will be our landing zone. Steve pulls on the parachute straps to steer us toward it. We are taught to land with our legs straight out in front, using our butts for landing gear. It turns out pretty well for us. We're sitting on a wide strap that cushions the landing nicely.

On the ground we shake hands, hug, and pose for pictures. I get an official certificate attesting to my 10,000-foot dive and a bumper sticker for my pickup

truck: **"I JUMPED FROM A PERFECTLY GOOD AIRPLANE."**

Back home about 4 o'clock, I find my wife waiting, just a little anxiously. She asks me, "Are you going to do it again?"

"I don't feel any need to repeat it," I reply. "Once is enough for now."

Then to myself: It really was fun. Maybe, again, on my 90th birthday.