

# MY FIRST PARACHUTE-JUMP

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*The episode, which he relates here, took place in the days when flying in Canada was still a comparative novelty and the RCAF was but two years old.*

IT was back in 1926, when I was a flying instructor in the Royal Canadian Air Force at Camp Borden, Ontario, that I got an urge to do a parachute jump. Parachutes, at that time, had only been introduced in the RCAF about two years previously, and my reasons for wanting to do a jump were twofold. Firstly: to satisfy my curiosity and desire to gain first-hand knowledge of just what a parachute jump was like, and secondly: I felt that, being a flying instructor, such first-hand knowledge would enable me to answer, with more authority, questions on the subject from my student-pilots should they ever have occasion to do an "emergency" jump.

It should be explained that although all personnel, when flying, were now required to wear parachutes, practice jumps or "premeditated" jumps as they were officially termed, were not permitted except by first obtaining special permission from higher authority. The reasoning for this was, of course, that as parachutes had by then become so fool-proof it was considered no more necessary for one to do a practice jump than it would be necessary, say, for passengers on board a boat to do a practice jump into the water with their life-preservers on, in order to insure that they would be able to use them in emergency. So, after applying for and receiving the necessary permission for a "premeditated" jump, all that remained for me to do was to proceed with the arrangements for the flight.

The designated morning was in early April, snow was still on the ground and there was still a decidedly frosty touch to the atmosphere, — which necessitated my wearing full winter flying clothing. I arranged to go up in one of our Clerget-Avro two-seater training aircraft, with Squadron Leader A. A. Leitch as pilot. Having strapped on my parachute over my bulky winter flying clothing, I then climbed into the rear cockpit of the aircraft — the engine of which was already running up. The clouds looked to be about three or four thousand feet high, so I requested the pilot to climb as high as possible, without actually getting into the clouds, as I had tentatively planned to prolong my "free fall" before pulling the rip-cord.

After taking off we climbed steadily in the vicinity of the aerodrome until we were just beneath the clouds at an altitude of 3,500 feet. The motor was then

throttled down and the speed of the aeroplane slowed to a minimum, in order to reduce the strength of the slip-stream, to facilitate my getting out of the cockpit and on to the "step" from which I was to jump. With the cumbersome winter flying clothing I was wearing plus the parachute and its strappings this was not as easy as it sounds. However, having duly accomplished this phase, I was all set to jump just as soon as the aeroplane had reached a position which I judged would insure my alighting on the aerodrome, and not amongst trees or buildings — having made due allowance for the "drift" I would receive from the ten-mile-an-hour wind that was blowing at the time.

My feelings just prior to jumping can best be compared to the "nerves" one may experience when attempting, for the first time, a particularly high dive into a swimming pool. A bit of extra willpower and thought-control is needed at this stage.

Well, the aeroplane having reached the desired position, I waved goodbye to my Skipper (Sqn. Ldr. Leitch) and then, from my standing position on the "step" gave myself a push backwards with my arms and legs in order to insure falling well clear of the aeroplane and avoiding any risk of fouling the tailplane.

My first impression, after leaving the aeroplane, was the sudden tranquillity of everything — the engine noise, with the accompanying vibration of the aircraft, had all ceased, and there was no longer any slip-stream beating against me. My next impression, which is perhaps the most extraordinary part of a parachute jump, was that instead of experiencing a sensation of falling, which, naturally, I was expecting, I found myself floating peacefully and comfortably in space. It was most fascinating, so fascinating in fact that it was easy and pleasant to prolong this new experience of "floating in space" before pulling the rip-cord to open the 'chute.

Ordinarily, one is supposed to allow a minimum of three seconds to elapse after leaving the aeroplane, by counting to three before pulling the rip-cord—in order to insure that when the 'chute opens it will not become entangled in any part of the aircraft.

My next impression was the realization that I was slowly revolving backwards, in a sort of head-over-heels fashion. I found that by manipulating my body in a certain way I was able to stop this revolving motion and to assume a feet-first attitude. I could now look down at the snow-covered ground and take better stock of what was happening. I estimated I was now about 1000 feet above the ground, and as I could now hear the wind whistling past me, I decided it was time to open the 'chute—so giving the rip-cord a pull I waited for results. I had not long to wait for almost instantly something white flashed past my face followed by a loud bang overhead and my descent was halted with such a sudden jerk that for a moment I was slightly dazed. Looking up I saw the faithful parachute above me, a truly beautiful sight, and it now seemed as though I were just hanging motionless in the air.

When I had descended to within about 400 feet of the ground my rate of descent became quite noticeable, and increasingly so each moment. I also noticed that I was drifting sideways in relation to the wind, instead of facing directly downwind—which is desirable for an easier landing, especially in a wind. In order for one to face a particular direction prior to landing, it is obviously necessary that the entire 'chute be rotated. This can be done to a limited extent by pulling down on the shroud-lines on one side while twisting one's body in a series of quick vigorous jerks. In this manner I succeeded in getting myself facing downwind, so that all remained was the final landing.

In accordance with prescribed procedure, in the days before parachutes with quick release boxes were invented, I unfastened the leg-straps of the 'chute, also the chest-strap, so that should I be unable to keep my feet upon landing and to avoid being dragged by the 'chute in the wind, all I had to do was put my arms up over my head and allow the harness to be pulled clear away from me. Also, in accordance with the procedure, (which of course is no longer used) I flexed my legs and held them in a "running" position so that I could run with the wind a few steps on touching the ground, I also grasped the two riser straps by which the 'chute is suspended) ready to pull myself up with a vigorous jerk at the instant of touching the ground — which has the effect of momentarily reducing one's rate of descent.

It will be realized, of course, that a jumper during his descent, is part and parcel of the wind, and when he lands he will be moving over the ground at the same rate as the wind. A comparison could be made, in some respects, to stepping off a car while in motion — one should not only face the direction of travel but be prepared to go forward a few steps on touching the ground. In a parachute landing, the main thing to avoid is a stiff-legged landing — and remember that even if no attempt whatever is made to keep one's feet, if the legs and body are completely relaxed and offering no resistance, there is practically no risk of injury.

Terra firma again! I had landed more gently than I expected, due partly to the cushioning effect of the snow, but I was only partly successful in retaining my feet. I stumbled forward on to one knee and both hands, but by grasping the upper shroud-lines of the 'chute (which was now on the ground although still fully inflated by the wind) and by pulling on these lines I had no difficulty in completely collapsing the 'chute.

The experience was a most interesting one and well worth undertaking, and I now knew from first-hand experience just what a parachute jump was like, and could impart to my student-pilots all desired information on the subject. Moreover, I felt that should an occasion arise in the future wherein I had to do an "emergency" jump, I would have no hesitancy in "bailing out" and would do so with the utmost confidence.

In case you might be wondering whether, after landing, I still had the rip-cord! My answer is, yes. After pulling the rip-cord I had placed the ring securely over my wrist—so was able to produce it readily after landing. To the uninitiated I should perhaps explain that in those early days it was the custom that if a jumper could not produce the rip-cord after landing, he was required to stand "treat" in the Mess afterwards. I presume the custom still exists.

