

# Born

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**W**ith the ground coming up quickly, I tried to execute a proper parachute-landing fall, but I struck the ground in a perfect Superman impression. How hard did I hit? According to the laws of physics, the energy I possessed at the moment of touchdown was equivalent (roughly) to falling off a 60-foot tower. I bounced, uttered a few words I'd never let my mother hear, and landed on my right side. Did I mention I was going about 40 mph?

Thus went my first parachute jump. The wind that day was 10 to 12 mph from the north, and it was about 35 degrees outside as a pilot, a jumpmaster, two other students, and I suited up and boarded a Cessna 182 after safety checks and a quick refresher.

The plane gradually climbed to 3,500 feet, at which point the jumpmaster threw out a 20-foot streamer to gauge wind speed and direction. This information determines the jump point. As the No. 2 jumper, I sat right behind the pilot, facing aft. I was so relaxed during our ascent that

I nearly dozed off while leaning back on my Delta Cloud 5 chute, despite the fact the cramped cabin was freezing. We were flying with the door open the whole time.

When the jumpmaster was satisfied with a jump point, the pilot circled around for his approach, and the first student jumper got the order, "Feet in the door." This means to grab the wing strut with your left hand, place your feet on the platform on top of the right wheel, and brace your right hand on the aft-door frame. Next, the jumpmaster yelled, "Cut" (engine at idle), and the first guy climbed out all the way on the platform, looking inward. He got the signal to go and launched himself backward off the wing strut in a spread-out, back-arched position. After a second or two, I felt the plane jerk, and the jumper's ripcord went taut, indicating his parachute had deployed.

The pilot went to full power and circled back around, while I climbed up to the No. 1 position next to the door. With the wind rushing by, I leaned my head out to get a visual on the first jumper. I spotted the purple rectangle below, with a person hanging underneath.

"Feet in the door!" came my order.

"Better pay attention," I thought. I put my feet and hands in their proper places. This was

# Cling

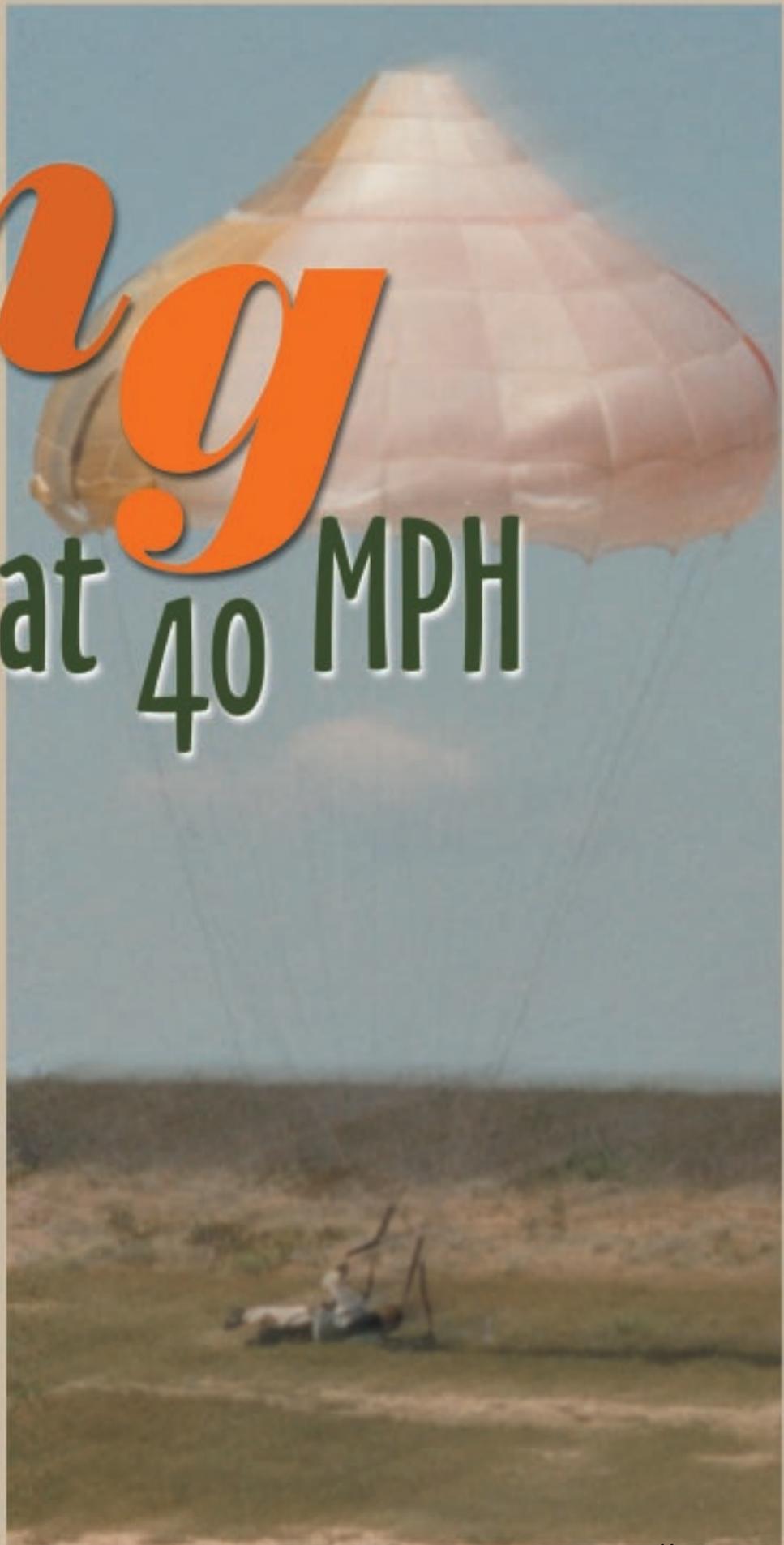
## Along at 40 MPH

the first time I honestly could say I was scared out of my mind. I imagined myself slipping and having the wind suck me out the door.

“Cut!” the jumpmaster then ordered.

“Oh well,” I thought, “I don’t have to like it. I just have to do it.” I carefully edged my way out the door and along the platform to the most outward position, with one foot dangling over the abyss. When I looked in, the jumpmaster pointed to me and yelled, “Go!”

With a “Hooyah!” I pushed off, with my back arched, and, for an awful second, I thought my ripcord wasn’t going to pull my chute. Then, an invisible hand grabbed my harness and tried to yank my groin up into my chest. My head snapped down, and my feet whipped up above my head. The ripcord went over my left shoulder, and both risers came out. Now that both risers were left of my head, the





and right banks to get a feel for my chute. Then, I put my left line in my boot and the right one all the way to the top, exactly opposite the jumpmaster's explicit instructions. I went into a very tight, left spin for a couple of revolutions until I decided to pull out—before everything flew apart. (Yes, I knew that really wouldn't happen, but try to convince yourself of that at 2,700 feet on your first jump.) I straightened out and did the same spin to my right. Now I felt confident I could maneuver myself anywhere—

I went into a very tight, left spin for a couple of revolutions until I decided to pull out—before everything flew apart.

right one moved into its natural position. Unfortunately, my “melon” was in its way, and that didn't feel too good, but I still was good to go.

“Check canopy,” my training reminded me. “OK, good chute, no collapsed cells, and lines look good.” Then, however, I spotted a SNAFU; my risers had twisted two or three times. “That's cool,” I thought. “No problem.” I pushed out on them, kicked my feet, and I soon had spun around to face the right way.

I got hold of the steering lines and gave a good jerk, which brought them down to my legs, then back up even with my head. Now I had steering. Next, I had to find out where I was. I looked down for the position references we had discussed earlier in the hangar.

“Turnpike...ugly building...oil wells...gotcha.” I thought. There was a little, red “X” in the middle of a football-sized piece of land. Now that I knew my location, it was time to have some fun. I made a couple of small left

with less than 1.5 minutes of experience. I got a visual on the landing zone and went right into another set of spins. “What a rush!” I thought.

By this time, I was nearing 2,000 feet, so I verified I still could see the little, red “X.” I could, so I turned away from the landing zone and extended, thinking I would head out, turn back in, make a long, smooth approach, and set down like a leaf. When I was far enough out, I turned back in, but I thought I still was too high.

“What the heck!” I thought. I made another set of spins just for fun and to shed height. I counter-steered and lined back up. My altimeter read 1,200 feet. Thinking I must have read it wrong, I looked again, but it still showed 1,200 feet. “I should be at the edge of the landing zone,” I thought. “Instead, I'm about a third of a mile off, way too low, and feeling stupid. Still no reason to panic.” I knew I was in trouble, but I'd just have to try to make it anyway, so I went to full throttle.

As I looked at the drop zone now, I saw trees and a stream to the left, which meant I couldn't land there. To the right were high-tension power lines—another bad landing zone. Far away, I could see two oil wells, which I knew I couldn't make. In the near distance were a farmer's house, some cows, and a barbed-wire fence. I considered coming down there but wasn't too thrilled about having cows stomp on me or being dragged into that barbed-wire fence.

Ideally, I would be at 1,000 feet with half brakes at the edge of the landing field. I then would need to proceed parallel to a fence until I was at 500 feet, at which point I would have to make a 90-degree turn, make another right at 250 feet, and come into the wind for a fully braked, soft landing on the red "X." Unfortunately, I was only at 550 to 600 feet, going at full speed, when I hit the edge of the landing field. I knew this landing was going to hurt. The only good thing was that I still might make the "X," but I found little solace in that bit of information.

As it turned out, I hit—face first—about 40 yards short of the "X." In landing, I broke my right hand, tore cartilage in my right wrist, smashed everything on my side, and suffered a compression fracture of one vertebra. I can't explain the pain I felt being dragged along on my

back, with my broken hand still caught in the starboard steering line. I had bounced along about 20 yards before I was able to grab the port line and collapse the chute. All through this episode, the only thing I could think of was how ridiculous my landing must have looked. Despite all my pain, I laughed like a maniac about the dirt I was throwing into the air as I bounced along the ground.

Dead men feel no pain, so I knew I was alive. Thankful to be alive, I stood up and started gathering the lines and parachute. I watched in disgust as the rookie behind me landed like a feather 5 yards from the "X" and the jumpmaster 10 yards away. We all walked up to the hangar, dropped our stuff, and I quickly got out of there. I drove straight home and called a friend, who took me to an emergency room, where I got more than a few laughs from the staff. However, I wasn't laughing anymore.

What did I learn from this incident? An aggressive attitude, mixed with inexperience, will get you into serious trouble. Two things saved me from worse injuries: my physical condition and having stayed calm in a crisis. Despite what happened to me, I still recommend skydiving to others. Just land like you're supposed to. 

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