

As the Parachute Opens

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It was 1964, and I was in the last year of my enlistment in the United States Army, assigned to an aviation outfit detached to Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey. A rip-snortin' Clerk Typist I was, marching out strings of military balderdash, zinging the carriage smartly from bell to bell, line to line, single, double, even triple spacing, jabbing punctuation in at all the right places. I was so good at it majors and colonels would bring me work and consult with me on the placement of their colons and semi-colons, of which they had plenty.

There are times, however, when even an ace clerk typist must push away from his duty station, get off his keister, and slip into dangerous, unknown territory to give one up for the troops. Those were my orders that morning when the sergeant ran me off to another part of the hangar just to issue a dagnab parachute.

This was Army Aviation, mind you, or what was left behind a decade after the old Army Air Corps had brown-nosed its way up to be a separate branch of the military, with their fancy jet airplanes. We put light planes and helicopters in the air to help our forces on the ground.

Regardless, to a lieutenant sputtering along at low altitude in a single engine plane, a parachute is just as important as it is to a fighter pilot crisscrossing the planet in an F16 jet.

Now there I was in the parachute room, completely out of my element. Leaning in at me impatiently with his belly pushing over the counter was the saltiest old captain in the outfit. He didn't say why he was so anxious to get in the air, but I figured he was hankering to do surveillance of the bikini clad population over at Seaside Heights. But first he needed a dagnab parachute, and I was there to get him one, even though I had never gotten a dagnab parachute before, for him or anybody else.

To the uninitiated, meaning me, a military parachute is a bulky affair with straps and buckles and all sorts of things attached. There is nothing stenciled on it that says "Lift Here." In my defense, there is also nothing on it that says "Do Not Lift Here," and so I had reasonable expectations when I grabbed the son-of-a-chute by what looked like a dagnab handle.

"Sorry, Sir" I later explained to my commanding officer, "but that dagnab canvas lump just popped itself open and spread silk all over the dagnab parachute room." You could never imagine how many bedsheets they could stuff into one dagnab bag. When it happened, the salty captain got himself a laugh, and I reckoned I'd be on dagnab KP for the rest of my life. I had other thoughts, too, which I expressed in language known to every dagnab soldier in the dagnab Army, and it did not include "Oh, no!"