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1,250 Feet Over Kuwait

Daniel Harrison
College of DuPage

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The screaming of the jet engine and the equally deafening scream of pain are now blocked out by an intense rushing sound. The air in the aircraft is moving. The doors are now open. The two metal doors of the aircraft swing upward to the top of the plane giving us a good view of the outside.

It was dusk when we entered the C-141, and the interior of the plane was illuminated with red light. Now, as the doors are opened, it looks like two black holes. It is pitch black outside. Any sort of objects outside the plane are in a blur of light grey.

"One minute!" Yeah! Time to go out the door. The men begin to get whipped into a frenzy of fear and adrenaline. My panting is shorter and faster. My pulse rate is now rising to match the increase of oxygen in my blood.

"Stand by!" The jumpmaster steps away from the door and points the first stormtrooper out the door. It's only thirty seconds to the green light. Time to meet God. The jets give out a bone-chilling howl as they slash through the air. The men are now high on adrenaline and everyone rattles their hooks on the steel cable in a sort of chant.

"Green light! Go! Go! Go!" The light on the wall goes from red to green, and all hell breaks loose. Every man is shuffling to the door and hurling himself into the abyss. As I get closer to the door, I can hear the hellish rushing sound of the air at 197 mph. I see the man ahead of me disappear into the blackness outside the door. I am only inches behind him, and now he's gone. I hold my breath, and every muscle in my body contracts.

In a C-141, you don't jump out the door. On high performance aircraft, you are sucked out the door by the outside air. As I step through the door, I can feel the hand of the Devil grab me tight and snatch me out into the cold black. The wind cuts throughout my clothes and whistles around my body. The drowsiness and weakness I felt in the heat and dead air of the aircraft are cleansed from me. I am at the apex of attention, and I feel like tempered steel. I am out of the aircraft, hurling my frail bone and flesh through the sky at over 190 mph. The sensation is
much like that of entering the cold water of a pool for the first time from a three-meter diving board on a hot Chicago day in August. As my body spins, I lock my eyes open to keep my sense of reality. I see the bottom of the plane, the earth, the plane, and then—snap! My main chute opens. The sudden opening of the main lift chute yanks me to an abrupt halt. It is the equivalent to a 1.0G shock to my body. The blur of everything is instantly brought into focus. I feel re-born.

All around me are the dark shadows of other stormtroopers on their descent to earth. It is a forty-five second ride from 700 feet to the ground—not that much time. But it seems like an eternity every time. It is an eerie sight—hundreds of Gargoyles on leathery wings descending to the countryside. There is nothing like it. I will never forget how it felt.

Audrey Van Kirk