

The skydive from hell

or in other words

"sh*t happens"

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Heck it seemed like it was going to be just another ordinary skydive.

With 560+ skydives and over 5 1/2 hours freefall time under my belt, I wasn't concerned as I strapped on my gear.

I did remember thinking as I was closing the pack on my main parachute, having just packed it, that it seemed hard to close and put the retainer pin in.

This wasn't that unusual as it was a shiny new zero porosity parachute and, as with a new sleeping bag or tent, they are notoriously difficult to push all the air out of to fold up tightly.

I think I had done maybe 20 jumps on this 'Chute. For those in the know, it was a "Triathalon" from Aerodyne Research Corporation.

I also remember thinking at the time "I wonder if I've packed it too tight to open?" but I dismissed it.

After all, me and my three buddies were off to have some fun! I didn't need - "being bothered by equipment/gear worries" in my head.

Nevertheless - it had been there, the thought.

We had all our usual BPA regulation checks at the Manifest area, and everything seemed in order with my kit.

Off we strolled to the plane, laughing and kidding each other in the usual way we did, just before a group skydive.

We knew what we had to do, we had spent 10 minutes earlier rehearsing the jump, and knew who was going to do what, where and when.

So settling in the plane, it was time to relax ;-)

I usually closed my eyes, sat back and visualized the jump in detail about 3 or 4 times.

When I had it "off pat", I turned off the mental wheels, and just repeated my jump mantra - the same as my usual mantra when I do mantra meditation - just I do this in the 'plane ride to altitude as it helps me get calm and

focused. Incidentally it is also fortunate in that it reduces my fear at the same time ;-)

We got to altitude, 13.400 feet if I remember rightly, and the plane slowed as we made the run in to the drop point.

The Jumpmaster started despatching the skydivers in the appropriate orderly manner.

It was time for our four-way.

Two of us climbed out of the door, and hung on, while the other two set themselves up for the linked exit.

I seem to remember the jump went like a "breeze" - pardon the pun ;-). We had jumped together over the last few months many times, and were very familiar with each other's idiosyncrasies.

It went well.

At 4,000 feet we had finished our formation work together, and it was time to wave off, and track away from each other.

To track, you form a wing like shape with your body, cupping air under your stomach, keep the body stiff, and arms by the sides, with palms facing downwards.

This helps you create a little lift, and a good amount of forward movement.

This is what helps each skydiver find a spare bit of sky in which to open their parachute - safely away from others.

All went well for me for the 5 second track, and I had a final look around to see if my airspace was clear. It was.

So I did the usual wave off to indicate I was about to pull and grabbed my throw-away pilot chute handle, pulled it out, and threw it into the slipstream to the side of my body.

I counted my usual 3 second count, expecting my 'chute to be slowing me down and opening behind me. No such luck ;-)

There was no need to do a "Check Canopy" as there was no canopy. There wasn't much else either, except a pilot chute in tow behind me. The parachute pack was still firmly closed. Hmmm...

Bummer.

The pilot chute was a pretty small - about 2 feet in diameter, mini parachute, attached to a 12 foot or so cord.

When the pilot chute hits the slipstream behind your body, it is supposed to pull out the pin on the parachute container, open the pack, and drag out the 'chute in a safe and relatively slow - staged deployment.

This wasn't happening.

I'd done a fair few jumps that summer, and I'd gotten lazy. Instead of throwing the pilot chute well away from my body, to catch the slipstream full force - I'd got into the habit of simply pulling and gently tossing it into the slipstream.

Not good enough ;-)

This simple omission, combined with the very tight pack job I had made, was what had caused this problem.

Serves me right.

However - what to do?

Well the facts are a bit frightening. At 2,500 feet in freefall, you are falling at a rate of 200 feet per second. By now, I was already at 2,000 feet.

If I didn't do something, and very quickly, I was going to be another statistic.

I had just 7 seconds to get a working parachute above me.

Doesn't seem very long does it?

I had been taught according to the then current BPA guidelines and principles.

If you have pulled something, and you think there is something out behind you - you should always go through your full cutaway procedures before pulling your reserve parachute.

This way, you remove any element of chance that the reserve parachute could tangle with your main, which may very well be above you.

Sod that.

I was pretty confident that the main was still firmly in my pack, and that there was little chance it would deploy.

I figured that I'd rather take that risk, than lose the two or so seconds it might take me to go through the full emergency cut-away procedures.

Don't forget this was a high speed malfunction - I was still travelling at 120 miles an hour towards the ground - or 200 feet a second. I had nothing at all above me slowing me down even a little.

So with less than a moments hesitation, I looked for the reserve handle, reached and pulled it as hard as I could.

Thank heavens for Performance Design's terrific reserve canopy!!

I had a beautifully soft opening, that was also very rapid - just what I needed.

If I recall, when I checked my altimeter, I was at about 1,500 feet.

During a regular skydive in the UK, you are supposed to have a fully working functional canopy by 2,000 feet.

I think I overshot that by just a bit.

Not long after the reserve opened, the pressure being released on my parachute container pack, caused the pin to be released on my main, and it slowly flopped out below me and begun to unfurl.

Now was a good time to cutaway the main parachute, before it began to fill with air, and I had even more problems.

Good old Performance Design. The reserve was one of the easiest canopies I have ever flown - stable, smooth, and firm handling. After all, I had just a minute or so to get used to it before I landed. And I'd never flown it before ;-) Perfect.

I now had two spare handles in my hands, and came in for a smooth and sweet landing, touchdown almost flawless and gentle as a feather, just where I needed to be. Right next to the cafe - for a warming restorative cup of coffee.

I think this was about the time my wife insisted I get a Cypress Emergency automatic opening device ;-)

So why am I telling you my story? Well sh*t happens - you just have to deal with it ;-).

At the end of the day, make the best judgement you can, based on what you know or feel. It's your decision, and no one else's. Fortunately I think I made the right one, and if I was in the exact same situation, I would do the same thing the exact same way.

After all, it could be a matter of life or death.

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