

# THE UNITED STATES ARMY PARACHUTE TEAM “GOLDEN KNIGHTS”

By Roy D. Martin

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Golden Knights is an appropriate time to reflect, regroup and remember the original members. The accomplishments of those 22 men are beyond description. I will attempt to jot down a few notes from my recollection of those Pioneers. I use the word "pioneers" because those 22 men would go where no man has gone. They would accomplish the impossible. They were the most unselfish, self-sacrificing men that I have known.

They never questioned an order. They never complained, and they gave 100% of their energy, money and time. They reported to the team with surplus parachute equipment that they had bought from the family budget. The canopies and harness were modified by them or a friend. The coveralls that they wore were purchased from any number of sources. Also, their helmets, reserve parachutes and instruments were bought from the family budgets.

Who were these men and what were they like. First, they were the best soldiers in the United States Army. Second, they were skydivers from all the STRAC units. Third, they were all volunteers. They came to the team without any promise or thought of promotion. Some of them sacrificed promotion for the chance to live a dream. They all had one thing in common. The desire to excel, win, improve and to be the best of the best.

Our first home was a ward of the old hospital area. It was like so many places we would stay during those first five years. Not much to look at, but it provided shelter and a place [where we could get] away. Our real home was in the air and on the drop zone. Our attitude was if it flies we can jump from it. If it is a parachute we can make it better. If there is a group of spectators, they need to witness a parachute demonstration. If there is competition, we can compete and win. America will be the best and we will win the hearts and minds of the people, including the competition. These men had a "can do" attitude that exceeds the imagination. Never in the history of parachuting was so much accomplished with so little.

It is appropriate and proper that we honor the original members who have passed on to their greater reward.

## Captain James Perry, Commanding Officer

He was an inspiration to all of us. He was a brilliant, futuristic thinker. He was never satisfied with the way things are or the status as is. The first time I met him was when he was a student at the 82<sup>nd</sup> basic Airborne school. I remember he had a tattoo that he had to hide with tape. The NCO instructors made sure that all the officers coming through the course earned the wings. There was no preferential treatment. Everyone earned his wings. He proved that he was made of the right stuff. He did not ask for, nor was he given, any slack. His marine-corps pride came through loud and clear. Apparently, he did not bear any grudges because two of the instructors would become members of the original parachute team.

Captain Perry was a real diplomat. He could sell ice boxes in the Arctic in the middle of the winter. His ability to sell convinced the Army to loan the team a Caribou AC-1 and other necessities: black and gold parachutes, helmets, French jump boots, coveralls and dress suits, complete with blazers, slacks and black and gold ties. It is important to note that prior to our assignment to the Team, we had jumped with what we could afford to purchase out of the family budget. Our original canopies were surplus nylon 1.1 oz orange and white or white parachutes with O.D. [olive drab] backpacks. The new parachutes were 1.6 oz nylon with tan backpacks. The old man made us all proud.

Captain Perry and I had an excellent relationship. I had great respect for him. He welcomed me to the team in a professional manner that made me feel special and accepted from the first day. He signed my log book twice on January 17, 1961. His license number was C-38. We were making 30-second delays from a U1-A aircraft. We were practicing the style series. On July 29-30, 1961, he and I made pair jumps from a C-47 aircraft at the Everett Washington air show. We bonded on that day and celebrated that evening over dinner at the club. The double dry martini was his favorite drink.

He never met a stranger and always found ways to sell the United States Army. He sought out and established professional and mutually respectful relationships with other military and civilian teams. His favorites were the Blue Angels and Thunderbirds. Captain Perry was truly an ambassador for the Team and the Army. He established professional relationships with significant officials in other countries. He had command of our language and he was respected by everyone we met. Since I had the opportunity to be with him I benefited greatly from his wisdom and experience. He loved the team members and went to great lengths to look out for our welfare. We were shocked when he decided to leave the Team at the 1962 World Parachute meet

in Orange, Mass. The United States Army Parachute Team is what it is today because Captain Perry was the first and greatest Commanding Officer. Thank you and farewell to you Sir.

## 2LT James Pearson, the First Team Operations Officer

Jim was a quiet, easy-going, adventurous person. His father was a career military officer. Therefore, Jim had spent most of his life on or around military posts. He was one of the best and most experienced Skydivers on the team. He was one of the first jumpers to pass a baton in North America. He was a team person always willing to share his knowledge with others. Jim was one of the STRAC competition team members, and he earned a position on the USAPT through STRAC competition. Unfortunately, Jim was the Officer in Charge of the demonstration team that crashed in Wilmington, NC. Farewell, my brother.

## SGT Danny Byard

Danny was one of the most serious, conscientious and competitive parachutists on the team. He was always seeking ways to better the team. Danny and fellow team mate, Dick Fortenberry, came up with the team name "Golden Knights". His name appears on many world accuracy parachute records. Danny earned his team slot through competition and was named to the first STRAC competition team. Danny was recommended for and accepted into the Infantry Officers Candidate Course. He earned his 2<sup>nd</sup> LT bars at Fort Benning, GA where he graduated in the top five of his class. After graduation he was assigned to the newly activated 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division Airmobile. The last time I saw him was at a place named "The Oasis" south west of Pleique Republic of South Vietnam. He was the executive Officer of "A" Company 1/12 ABN AMBL AIR ASSAULT. His company had moved into the area to participate in the Ia Drang campaign. LT Byard was still his cool, efficient self. I am proud to report that he still had that serious, happy, take charge, smile on his face. It is my personal observation that Danny is there with General Stilwell and the other Knights, acting as the advance party for the rest of us. Farewell my brother.

## SFC William Edge

"Bill" was in one of the first groups to be trained by Major Merrill Shepherd and M/Sgt John Hollis. He would be one of the first members of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Sport Parachute Club. When Bill volunteered for skydiving training he was a platoon sergeant at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Jump School. He was one of three Jump School Instructors that volunteered for this training. It has been rumored that the three instructors were asleep in formation and all the others took one step backward. Bill was a short, muscular,

tough individual. It is believed that he was one of Captain Jim Perry's instructors. I often referred to him as the "little bear", because his mannerisms and conduct were so much like Captain Ed Stiles, Jump School Commandant who was affectionately, referred to as "the bear".

Bill had a name for everything and everyone. He had a keen sense of humor and always came up with something funny when we needed it most. Some of the names that he cast on his peers were: Sammy Packing Paddle, Napes Britt and on it went. He was creative and never let small obstacles get in his way. Like most of us, he ordered an air force surplus parachute, got a rigger to modify it and he was in business. When one of the cones went missing he replaced it with an aluminum door stop that he modified at home. The problem was that it was not compatible with the steel pens. This resulted in a malfunction that required the use of his reserve parachute. Bill was one of the 82<sup>nd</sup> demonstration team members and came to the team through competition.

After leaving the Golden Knights he went on to serve a tour with MSOG in the Republic of South Vietnam. The last time I saw him was at the funeral of SSM Caro at Fort Benning, GA He had earned the rank of S/MAJ and was still his same mischievous self. Farewell my brother. Enjoy your tour with General Stilwell and our fellow Golden Knights.

## SGT Joe Norman

Joe came to the team from the 101<sup>st</sup> STRAC Team. He was a quiet, sharp soldier. He was a member of the Gold demonstration team. He perfectly fit the role of ambassador for the United States Army.

Joe was selected for the first United States Army C.I.S.M. parachute team, eventhough his normal team assignment was on the demonstration team. He was selected because of his skill, experience and team spirit. The competition team was not available to participate in the C.I.S.M. meet. They were training for the 1964 World Parachute competition. He placed second overall, and the team placed second in the meet.

Joe will best be remembered for his versatility, in that he was a competitor and performed many roles on the demonstration teams. He was a peacemaker and always had a word that smoothed troubled waters. His name appears on several world parachuting accuracy records. Joe was always available, willing and able to serve the team. Thank you for your dedication and team spirit.

Editor's Note: Roy D. Martin is one of the original members of the United States Army Parachute Team, and was its first Executive Officer.